

# A WORD ABOUT POTTERY – PART 1

## Ceramic Containers and How Kentucky's Ancient Native Peoples Made Them



Containers. From the time we get up in the morning until we go to bed at night, containers are a part of our lives.



Coffee cups and wine glasses. Grocery bags. Mixing bowls. Heavy-duty stackable plastic storage bins. Glass bottles filled with herbs and spices. Paper boxes. Teabags. Flowerpots. Garbage cans. Plates. Plastic freezer storage containers. Face cream bottles. Even cremation urns.

People in the 21st century use containers to hold liquids and solids; for foods, perishable and dry. Containers are part of day-to-day activities and are elements of solemn ceremonial occasions.

*Above: Containers. Containers. Containers! Plastic and metal, paper and cloth, ceramic and glass. For storage and preservation; food preparation and consumption; and for ritual and beauty. Below: An incised jar used in ceremonies conducted at earthen mounds.*

In long-ago Kentucky, containers were an important part of Native people's lives, too. Their containers served the same functions modern containers do, but they made theirs from perishable materials: tree bark, wood, river cane, plant fibers, and animal skins. The very first human-made containers had to be portable for these people were hunter-gatherers. Later, Native peoples added heavy, crude, carved stone vessels to their container repertoire.

But around 1000 B.C., as Kentucky's Native peoples adopted a hunting-gathering-gardening way of life, they learned to make pottery by firing clay, just as people living elsewhere in the world had independently discovered this technology. For the next 2700 years, Kentucky's Native potters made ceramic vessels in diverse shapes and sizes. Serving vessels, storage vessels, and cooking vessels – Native peoples used these ceramic containers for daily tasks and in rituals.

For archaeologists, the appearance of ceramics in the archaeological record opens up a wider window on the past.



## How Kentucky's Native Peoples Made Pottery

All of the materials needed to make sturdy, functional, and beautiful vessels were locally available. Native peoples dug out clay from the ground near creeks and rivers. After removing twigs and other organic material, they added **temper** to the clay. Temper prevents clay from shrinking too much while drying and helps prevent heat shock when the vessel is fired.



*Above: A potter shapes a vessel by hand sitting on a mat outside her house. Below Right: A shell tempered jar with handles and incised decoration.*

The earliest temper Kentucky's Native potters used was crushed chert (flint). However, they quickly learned that crushed limestone, sandstone, or siltstone worked much better. After around A.D. 1000, they switched to a mixture of rock and finely crushed freshwater mussel shells. By A.D. 1400, they used only shell temper.

The process of making ceramic containers is an additive one. It is different from the process of making chipped stone tools like spear points, arrowheads, drills, and scrapers. Flint knappers remove flakes from a stone core to make a tool. Potters add to a ball of clay to form a container.

A Native potter shaped a plastic ball of clay into the desired shape, adding coil upon coil to build-up the vessel walls. Then the potter thinned and smoothed-out the walls. Native potters did not use a potter's wheel.

Some of their vessels were plain, while others had a coarser surface, the result of tapping the pot with a cord-wrapped paddle during shaping, and then leaving the distinctive impressions intact. Using a sharpened stick or a thin stone flake, potters decorated the outsides of some vessels with incised geometric designs. They notched the lips of others. After A.D. 1000, they added handles and lugs to jars, and made animal head effigies they attached to the rims of jars and bowls.

Native potters fired their leather-hard vessels outdoors in a large, carefully built fire. They did not use formal kilns, as potters do today. Firing vessels made them watertight and sturdy. Wind and humidity, cloud cover – potters took all of these factors into account before deciding to fire their vessels. It took practice and experience (and broken pots!) to know when the pots had dried sufficiently and were ready for firing.



It took constant vigilance to keep the fire just the right temperature for the required length of time - otherwise, pots would explode. With art and skill, technique and experience, Kentucky's ancient Native potters produced sturdy, serviceable, and beautiful containers.

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