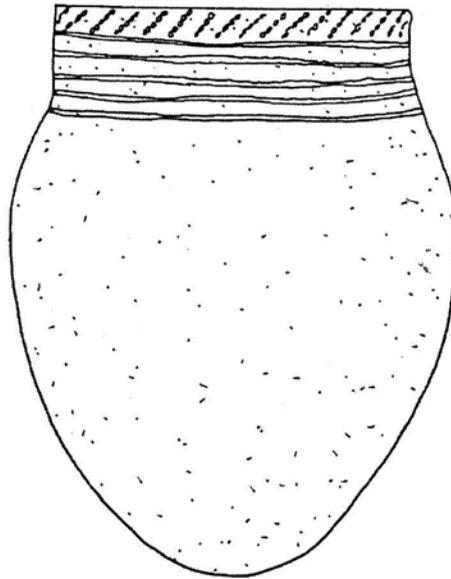


Traditional Potting in Delaware

A Delaware Archaeology Month 2003 Activity



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State Route 24
Millsboro, Delaware



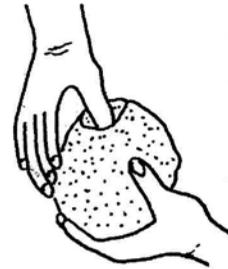
A Public Outreach Activity of the
State Route 24 Improvements Project

The Basic Pinch-Pot Method

1. A ball of clay is formed.



2. The ball is opened with a center hole made with your thumb.



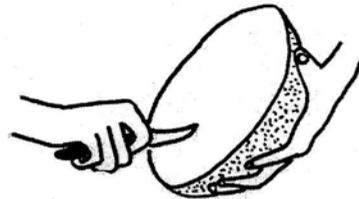
3. By pinching around the center hole, the walls are thinned and stretched.



4. Slowly, the vessel is pinched into shape.



5. After partially drying, the pot is thinned by scraping with a bone, a shell, or a cane knife.



The Basic Coil Pot Method

1. The base is created as a shallow dish, using the pinch pot method.



2. A series of coils is made by rolling or palming, and the first coil is placed atop the base dish.



3. The first coil is melded to the base dish and thinned upwards.



4. The pot is allowed to dry sufficiently, and the next coil is added.



5. The next coil is added and thinned upwards.



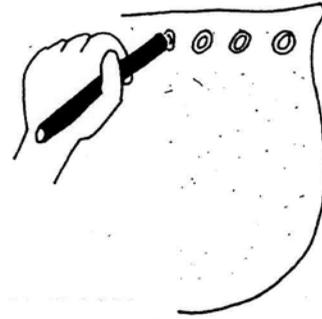
6. After all the coils have been added, the pot is paddled and scraped to define its final shape.



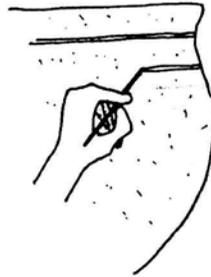
Decorating Pottery

Native Americans of the eastern seaboard used a variety of methods for decorating their pots. It is not always clear if these were purely decorative or if they improved a pot's performance. The major means of decorating pottery are described below.

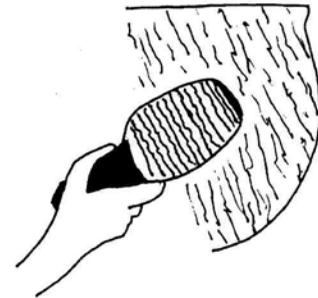
Punctating: a hollow river cane, a bone, a shell, or a piece of wood is pressed into the vessel.



Incising: a bone needle, piece of split cane, or chert flake is used to cut a pattern into a leather-hard pot.



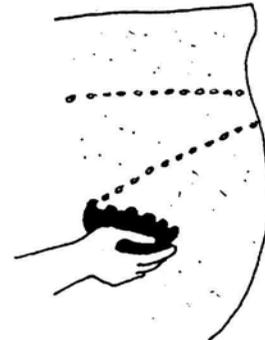
Cord-marking: a cord-wrapped paddle is used to mark the surface



Burnishing: a smooth stone or antler tool is used to compress and shine the surface



Dentate-stamping: a notched tool or shell is pressed on pot leaving trail of small marks



Basics of Native American Pottery of the Eastern United States

Native American potters used natural clays dug from stream banks, springs, or other sources. Among many tribes, clay sources are highly protected and rights to their use are passed generation to generation. For example, the modern potters of the Catawba tribe of South Carolina use the same clay sources that have been used for hundreds of years.

The natural clays are not always perfectly suited for pot-making. Native Americans added a variety of materials (including sand, grit, crushed shell, and Spanish moss) as temper. Temper, when mixed with clay, increases the strength of a pot and its suitability for use in cooking. Among the Nanticoke, for example, crushed shells were added to the natural clay.

Pots were formed either through lump-forming (like the pinch pots made here today) or coil-building (also called snake pots). The pottery wheel was not known in America before European colonization. Typically, women produced the pots.

Pots were decorated by one or more methods including incising, punctating, paddling, dentate-stamping, and burnishing. A general trait of Native American pottery in the eastern United States was symmetry and balance of decoration. Sometimes a pot was decorated over its entire outside surface, but more commonly decoration was limited to the upper portions of a pot. Archaeologists do not understand the full meaning of all decorations, but some decorations seem to signify identity of a family, moiety, clan, or village.

After shaping and decorating a pot, the Native American potter would allow it to air dry for several days. If a pot is fired prior to complete drying, it is likely to explode and be ruined. After the drying, the potter would build up a bed of coals from a camp fire. The pots would slowly be edged up to the coal bed. The potter would carefully turn the pot to assure that all sides were evenly preheated. Eventually, the pot would be eased into the center of the coal bed. At this point, additional fuel (wood, grass, palm fronds) might be added. This stage of the firing reached temperatures of 600 to 800 degrees Celsius, and took less than 30 minutes. Such a firing would make the pot hard and would keep it from melting when exposed to fluids.

Pots were made in a wide variety of forms, and served diverse functions. Pottery was the major cooking utensil for pre-contact Native Americans. Pots were also used to store water, animal grease, nut oil, and other substances. In some cultures of the eastern United States, pots served as burial urns or were offered as grave goods. Ethnographic studies suggest that a typical cooking pot would have lasted about a year.

Pots, whether whole or broken, are extremely durable. Pieces of broken pottery, which are called sherds, are commonly recovered from archaeological sites (locations of former Native American activities) of the Woodland Period. Sherds are helpful to archaeologists because technology and decoration shifted in relatively uniform patterns, and particular styles of pottery can help to date when a location was used.

Recommended Reading

Coiled Pottery: Traditional and Contemporary Ways. By Betty Blandino, 1984. Chilton Book Company, Radnor, Pennsylvania. This book provides a pan-cultural look at coil-built pottery.

Pueblo Pottery Making: A Study at the Village of San Ildefonso. By Carl E. Guthe, 1925. Yale University Press, New Haven. This is a classic study in coil-built pottery making. It is amply illustrated.

Nola Campbell: Catawba Indian Potter. In *Foxfire 9*, edited by Eliot Wigginton and Margie Bennett, pages 238-266. 1986, Anchor Books, New York. This article follows the pottery-making and firing process used by Nola Campbell, one of the traditional Catawba potters in South Carolina.

Last of the Iroquois Potters. *North Carolina Archaeology* Volume 51: pages 55-67. By M.R. Harrington, 2002. This is a reprint of a 1909 article. Despite the title, Harrington documented traditional pottery-making among the Eastern Band of the Cherokee. Good description and photographs of coil-building and firing process.

The Nanticoke Indians – Past and Present. By C.A. Weslager, 1983. University of Delaware Press. Weslager considers the archaeological, archival, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic data to provide a detailed view of Nanticoke lifeways.

Delaware Prehistoric Archaeology: An Ecological Approach. By Jay F. Custer, 1984. University of Delaware Press. Dr. Custer provides a good context for the Woodland II cultures of Delaware.

Chesapeake Prehistory: Old Traditions and New Directions. By Richard J. Dent, Jr., 1995. Plenum Publishing, New York. Dent provides a broad perspective on the various cultures through time in the Chesapeake region.

Various publications by Frank Speck document the Nanticoke of southern Delaware in the early twentieth century:

- 1915. The Nanticoke Community of Delaware. *Contributions from the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation* Volume 2, Number 4.
- 1927. The Nanticoke and Conoy Indians with a Review of Linguistic Material from Manuscript and Living Sources: An Historical Study. *Papers of the Historical Society of Delaware* n.s. 1.
- 1942. Back Again to Indian River. *Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of Delaware* 3(5).
- 1943. The Frolic Among the Nanticoke of Indian River Hundred, Delaware. *Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of Delaware* 4(1).
- 1946. Cudgelling Rabbits, an Old Nanticoke Hunting Tradition and Its Significance. *Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of Delaware* 4(4).
- 1949. A Maker of Eel-Pots Among the Nanticokes of Delaware. *Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of Delaware* 4(5).