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NATIVE AMERICAN POTTERY: BUILD YOUR OWN COIL POT!

Key Terms

Coil Built - The use of long strands of clay to build a pot by molding the coils into the desired shape. This is the primary method that was used by American Indians in Georgia.

Decoration - The embellishments and designs on the surface of the pottery, usually the exterior surface. Pots can be decorated before they are fired or after. Decorative methods used by American Indians in Georgia included punctations, incisions, stamping, fabric impressions, and many others.

Firing - The process of heating soft clay to an extremely high temperature to harden it. Once fired, it is considered to be a ceramic.

Pot - A vessel made from fired clay used for cooking and storage. Pots come in many different shapes and sizes.

Sherd - A fragment of pottery that has broken off of a larger pot.

Temper - Some material in the clay that makes the pot stronger. Temper helps to prevent cracking or breaking when the pottery is fired, and also makes the finished pot more durable. Temper can be naturally occurring in the clay or added to the clay when the pot is made. Tempers include natural fibers, sand, crushed rocks, shell, or other pieces of pottery called grog.

Type - Pottery that shares similar style, attributes, and time period.

Archaic Period – Period from 3,000 to 10,000 years ago when the earliest pottery was made and used by American Indians. The oldest known pottery in North America is 4,000 years old and comes from an Archaic Period site along the Savannah River near Augusta, Georgia called Stallings Island. The temper used for this earliest pottery was fiber.

Woodland Period – Period from 1,000 to 3,000 years ago when American Indians adopted the bow and arrow and began settling into more permanent villages. Pottery during this period was primarily tempered with sand with check-stamped or cord-marked decoration.

Mississippian Period – Period from 500 to 1,000 years ago when American Indian groups peaked in size and complexity. Pottery during this period was primarily tempered with crushed shell and had complicated stamped designs. Effigies, which are human or animal figurines, were also commonly incorporated into pottery during this period.

Experimental Archaeology and Coil Pots

Experimental Archaeologists learn how past peoples made things by using ancient technologies to reproduce their tools, pottery, weapons, clothing, ornaments, and structures. For this activity, you will become an experimental archaeologist by using one of the methods that American Indians used to make pottery before the invention of the pottery wheel. We do not have the exact types of clays and tempers (additives to strengthen clay); however, we can build pots using hand methods and compare the results for strength, durability, and appearance. Using the instructions below, you can build your own coil pot.