

POTTERY: THE KITCHENWARE OF THE ANCESTORS



Pottery, or ceramics, had several important roles for the ancestors, but none was more important than providing the vessels to cook, serve, and store food. Just like ceramic vessels we use today, the pottery used by the ancestors was produced from clay. Clay is a component of soil and is common in most parts of the world. Interestingly, one area clay is relatively rare in south Florida, because the soil is mostly just sand. Yet, the ancestors were resourceful and located patches of soil with enough clay to make sturdy ceramic vessels. They also found a useful purpose for all the sand, adding it to the clay as temper, which made the vessels stronger and kept them from exploding during firing. The process of firing clay transforms it from soft, moldable mud into a hardened permanent vessel.

Soft clay that has been molded into a vessel can be decorated before it is fired by inscribing designs into the clay with a sharp object, pressing patterns into the clay with a paddle, or painting the clay with pigments. Some of the most impressive examples of decorated vessels produced by the ancestors in Florida are referred to as Swift Creek Complicated Stamped vessels. Swift Creek vessels were made and used by ancestors who lived between about 200 CE and 700 CE in what is now northern Florida and southern Georgia, but the vessels were traded and used beyond that region and have even appeared in archaeological sites in south Florida. The ancestors made them by carving intricate designs into wooden paddles that they then pressed into the soft clay before the vessels were fired.

Today, archaeologists use the broken pieces of ceramic vessels, which they call sherds, to help them know when a site was occupied by the ancestors and the kinds of activities the ancestors engaged in at that site.

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Photo: Ashlee Cypress, THPO NAGPRA Liaison, examines a pottery sherd found by the Tribal Archaeology Section. Photo by Adriana Almonte, THPO Laboratory Supervisor

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