



Be a Potter!
(Revised Sept. 27, 2020)
Black Belt Museum
www.blackbeltmuseum.com

Be a Potter!
(Grades 4 and up)

Lesson Description:

Some of the most common Native American artifacts discovered in Alabama and around the Black Belt are pieces of broken pots made hundreds of years ago. Frequently, these fragments are called *potsherds*.^{*} Potsherds provide a wealth of information to help us understand the traditions of the people who created them. By looking at potsherds, we can study the types of material and designs used in making the pot. Styles of pottery change based on region and time period.

Native American pottery was made by hand. People dug clay from river banks and mixed the clay with a temper. *Tempers*^{*} strengthened the container to make it less likely to crack. Sand, shell, and even crushed pieces of broken pots were commonly used tempers. Pots were often formed by stacking clay coils. Sometimes the potter formed designs into the clay before it dried. Pots were fired over hot coals in a fire pit until they hardened. Open-air firing of pots does not reach as hot a temperature as the European method of firing them in ovens or “kilns”. Therefore, Indian pots were less firm and had glassy coatings or “glaze”. The finished pots were used for cooking, serving, and storing food. Some pots were also important in ceremonial and social activities.

In this lesson, students will make their own clay pot and create their own unique patterns and designs.

** In Europe, broken pots are called “shards.” American archaeologists always call them “potsherds” or just “sherds.”*

** Tempers reduce the shrinkage and cracking of pots when drying or firing.*

Standards from Alabama Social Studies Course of Study

4th Grade Alabama Studies

#13 Describe prehistoric and historic American Indian cultures, governments, and economics in Alabama.

- The students will examine the potsherds provided in this backpack. They will be able to describe and understand how American Indian cultures in Alabama made pots.



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Objectives

- Familiarize students with early Native American pottery, its uses, and unique designs.
- Students will gain an understanding of early Alabama peoples' pottery traditions.
- Students will gain an appreciation for what people of the past had to do to cook and store their food.

Materials Needed:

- Air-dry clay (provided) Available in craft stores
- Sticks, animal bones, piece of cane, small bunch of pine straw (not provided)
- Native American Pottery laminated picture cards

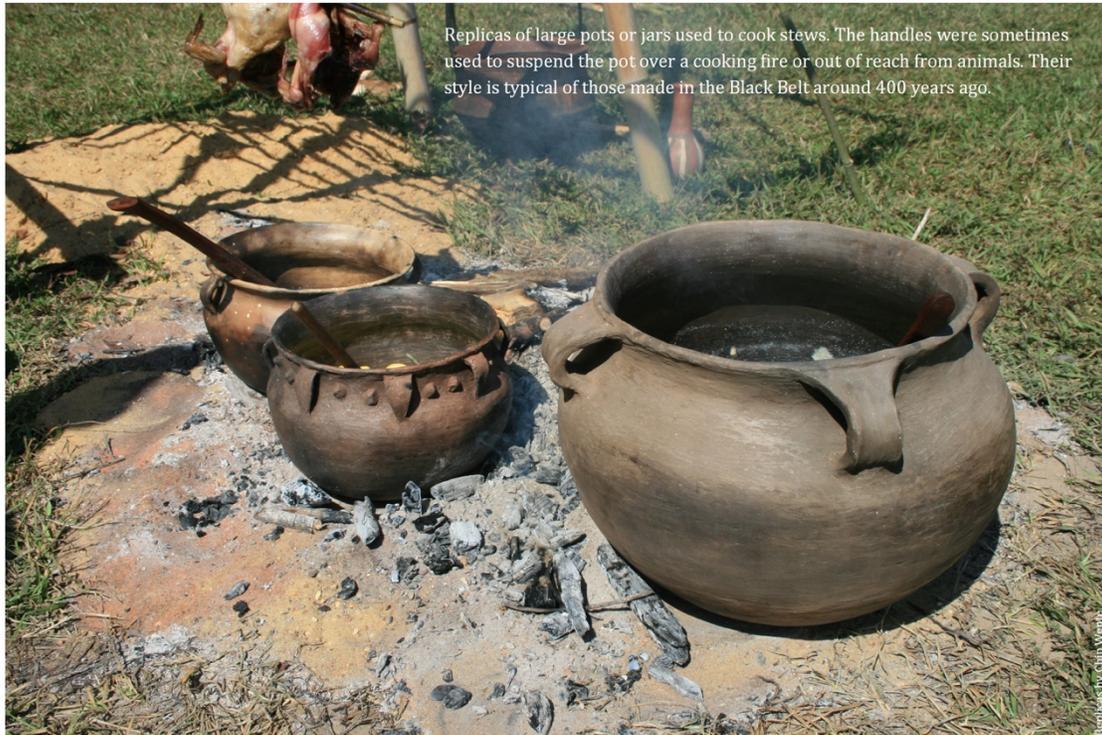
Activity

1. Discuss how pottery was made, reasons why certain designs might have been used, how those designs were created, and what pottery and potsherds tell us about the traditions and daily life of early Native Americans. Pass around picture cards.
2. Ask students what we use to cook and store our food in today. Explain that before plastic, metal, and stores, all people had to make pottery containers.
3. Have students create a pot or bowl out of clay or play-doh:
 - a. Form a ball out of air-dry clay.
 - b. Hold the ball in one hand and use the thumb of your other hand to press the center in about ½ inch from the bottom.
 - c. Slowly widen the hole by pinching up the walls. Turn the container around as you pinch the walls in order to maintain an even thickness.
 - d. Continue drawing in the walls and molding the container into shape. Keep the bottom and walls at about 1/4 inch thick.
 - e. Flatten the bottom of your pot by pressing the inside against a flat surface.
 - f. Use sticks, animal bone, pine straw and cane to design elaborate patterns onto the pot.
 - g. Alternative materials include: plastic spoons, craft sticks, plastic forks, or bottle caps.
 - h. After the pot or bowl has been formed, allow it to dry (2-3 days for a small one to dry entirely).

Evaluation #13 Answer questions and complete activity

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Native American Pottery



Replicas of large pots or jars used to cook stews. The handles were sometimes used to suspend the pot over a cooking fire or out of reach from animals. Their style is typical of those made in the Black Belt around 400 years ago.

Reproduced by Chip Wooten

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Replicas by Chip Wentz

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Native American Pottery

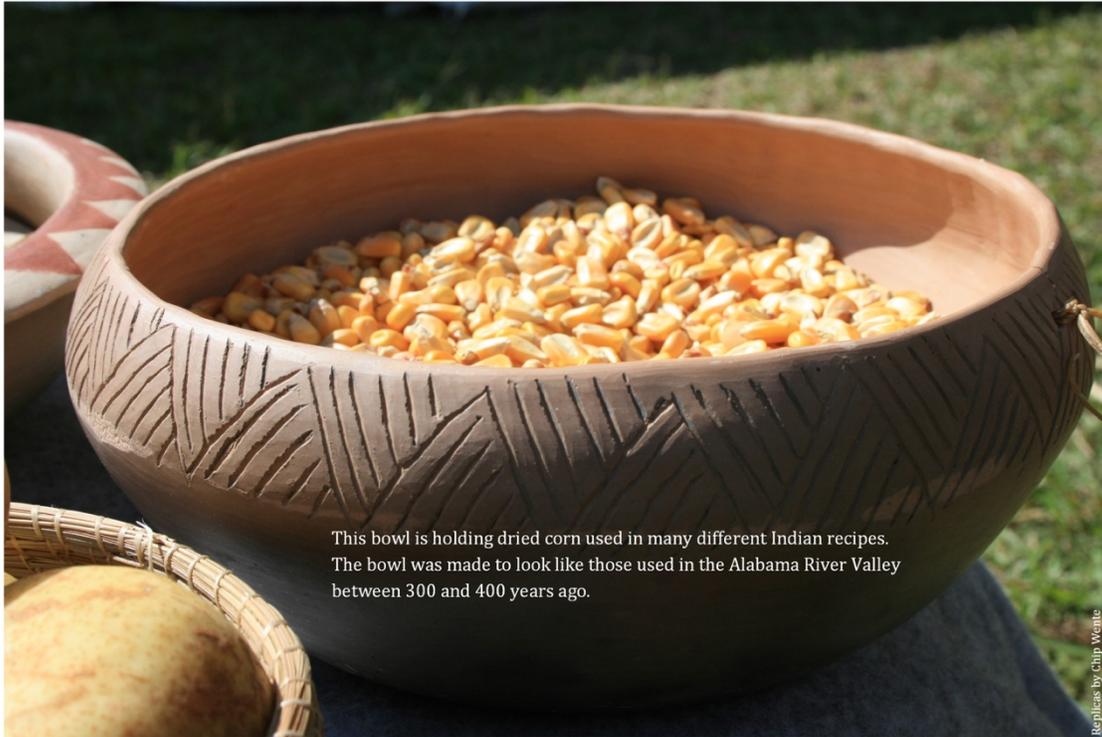


This piece of a broken bowl was decorated by incising patterns with a sharp tool. It was made by Creek Indians between 250 and 300 years ago.



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Native American Pottery



This bowl is holding dried corn used in many different Indian recipes. The bowl was made to look like those used in the Alabama River Valley between 300 and 400 years ago.

Replicas by Chip Weinte

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Native American Pottery



This small pot was made around 1,400 years ago. Its designs were created by rocking the edge of a shell back and forth. Together, all of the shapes form the image of a bird.



Willey, 1949

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Native American Pottery



These are replicas of pots made over 1,000 years ago. They were used for cooking and storing food and water.

Replicas by Tammy Beane. Photo courtesy USA-CAS.