



## Choctaw Pottery in the Black Belt

(Revised March 1, 2020)

Black Belt Museum

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### **Background Information:**

Pretend you do not have access to metal. What natural element are you going to use to make pots to cook and store food? Clay, exactly. The Native American nations in the Black Belt relied heavily on clay pottery to survive. For this lesson we will focus on the Choctaw and their method of production.

### **Choctaw Pottery:**

Creating clay pottery requires a great deal of craftsmanship to complete. To begin the process a good clay deposit must be found. From there the clay must be carefully cleaned of sticks, leaves, or other unwanted objects. After cleaning the clay you can then shape it and use pieces of specific material to mix in the clay to help it hold its shape during the drying and firing process. This material is called temper. Without temper the pottery is much more fragile, even if it is hardened.

After temper is mixed with the clay, it is formed into the desired shape and size. It must dry before firing due to the moisture causing the clay to explode due to the temperature outside so that any moisture evaporates. When it is dry and no longer sticky, it is fired in hot coals until it hardens.

Some of the earliest pottery made by Native Americans in the Southeast was tempered with grass, Spanish moss, or other types of natural fiber. Individual Nations in different regions and time periods used different types of temper.

The ancestors of Choctaw Indians mixed in sand temper beginning around 500 BC (2,500 years ago). Around AD 550 (1,450 years ago), in some places, broken pots got smashed into smaller pieces and recycled as temper. These recycled bits of pottery are called grog. About 1,000 years ago, it became common for potters to make temper from crushed up mussel shells found in rivers. The most recent ancestors of the Choctaw Indians mostly used shell temper. Examining the type of temper in pottery found during archaeological digs are an important window into the individuals who created them.

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### Video of Traditional Choctaw Pottery Creation

A collaborative between the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University described the traditional process of pottery creation. Links to part 1 and part 2 of the videos are listed below. Please view both of these videos as part of the lesson.



(Part 1 – 11 minutes)



(Part 2 - 4 minutes)

### Make Your Own Native American Style Pottery (Activity)

Native American pottery was made by hand. Two traditional methods were used to create the pottery: coil and pinch.

*Coiled pottery* is made by rolling long coils of clay into thin “snake” or tube shapes, which are then stacked on top of each other to make the proper shape. Afterwards the clay is smoothed out before it is dried and fired.

*Pinch pots* are made by pinching the clay into the shape desired. We will be making this style of pottery in the kit.

Supplies in Kit:

- Air-dry Clay in plastic bag (Can use traditional clay, but requires additional steps)
- Tooth pick (Pencil point, pointed stick, anything to make a design)
- Compostable container
- Instructions



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### **Instructions**

1. Open box and remove air-dry clay from plastic bag.
2. Take a few minutes to roll the clay between your hands or on the table if allowed, to form it into the shape of a ball.
3. Take your thumb and push it into the center of the ball of clay. Continue to press your thumb into the clay until approximately one half the way down into the ball.
4. Remove thumb and use your fingers to slightly widen the rim of your pot to get your desired size. Smooth out the clay all the way around to get a proper surface to decorate.
5. Use the tooth pick or tool provided to etch designs into the sides of your pot.
6. Once you have decorated it, place the clay pot in a place to air dry, preferably overnight.