

Pottery of the Caddo Indians

For thousands of years, the land that is now known as Arkansas has been inhabited by native peoples. For much of that time, the Ouachita River valley and much of southwest Arkansas was home to the Caddo Indians and their ancestors.

Archeologists are able to glean a great deal of information about Arkansas's first people by studying their pottery. According to the Arkansas Archeological Survey, pottery can tell us much about the "material, religious, and intellectual life of past societies and their social interactions such as settlements, trade, and conquests."

Extensive archeological remains exist in the upper Ouachita River valley: almost every field bordering on the river contains evidence of Indian presence in the area. Mounds and campsites all along the Ouachita River and its tributaries attracted archeologists and artifact collectors for years. Early explorations by archeologists uncovered a great deal of pre-historic cultural activity and pottery. One early study in the region include M.R. Harrington's 1920 visit during which he found sites that included mounds, cemeteries, and pottery.

Approximately 3,000 years ago, Arkansas's Indian tribes began making items such as bowls, cooking jars, and other containers from materials found in their immediate areas. For example, clay was mixed with other substances such as dried clay pellets, crushed animal bones, ground sandstone, or plants. The items were hand-shaped and baked in fires to make them hard and non-porous. With these new containers, diets changed---ground seeds, nuts, and grains as thickeners for soups and stews emerged as staples of American Indian life in Arkansas.

About 1,000 years ago, the Caddo Indians began to make distinctive pottery, which included new shapes such as plates, bottles, and even effigy vessels. Making such items became a sophisticated art form employing incision and stamping on wet clay, as well as engraving dry surfaces with tools made of stone, shell, bone, or wood. The shapes and styles of these vessels varied from one river valley to the next. Once European settlers arrived in what is now southwest Arkansas with their iron kettles, crockery, and brass pots, pottery-making declined among the Indians.

Today, excellent examples of Caddo pottery are on display at Ouachita Baptist University and Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, in exhibits developed by the Arkansas Archeological Survey. Established by the state legislature in the 1960s, the Survey's mission is to conserve and research the state's heritage and communicate this information to the public. Henderson State University's Archeological Research Station is one of eleven such stations across the state. The HSU Station serves as a research and

resource center for a nine-county region of west-central Arkansas. Archeological research by HSU Station personnel has focused on understanding ancient Caddo Indian life from sites in the Ouachita, Caddo, and Saline river valleys, and learning about how local residents used resources such as Arkansas novaculite quarried from the Ouachita Mountains.