

Clothing in Native America

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In some form or fashion, all human beings clothe and ornament themselves. We consider clothing a necessity of life, along with such things as food and water, shelter, tools, and interaction with other humans. The manner in which people clothe themselves is influenced by many factors, not least of which is the desire to express ourselves, as individuals and as members of groups within our cultures. Let's explore the purposes of clothing and how archeologists learn about the clothing of peoples who lived long ago.

What is the Purpose of Clothing?

The most obvious answer that springs to mind is probably *protection*. Clothing provides protection for the human body, warming us in the winter and shielding our skin from sunburn in the summer. Shoes protect our feet from stones, leggings deflect briars, and scarves can help us breathe in a sandstorm. It is not surprising, then, that the environment in which we live influences the kinds of clothes we wear.

People in cold climates, such as the Eskimos, wear heavy clothes made of warm furs. In wet climates, clothing may be made with water-repellant materials. In hot and humid climates, light-weight and breathable fabrics may be used—or people may wear almost no clothing at all. Protection for our bodies also explains much about special-purpose clothing, such as work gloves, face masks, and steel-toed boots.

Protection, however, is only one facet of the purpose of clothing. Far more interesting is the way that clothing serves as an expression of culture. For example, clothing can signify social status or position. Think about the kinds of clothes a king or chief might wear: beautiful fabrics made of rare and costly materials, bright colors and designs, or even special items like a headdress or crown or elaborate robe. Different occupations also may be signaled by different kinds of clothing. Imagine how a person might dress if he or she was a doctor, minister, police officer, warrior, painter, or an archeologist.



What does clothing say about gender? Do girls and boys wear different kinds of clothes? Can you see whether gender differences in clothing were more or less pronounced in the past or in cultures other than our own? What about age? Do children wear different kinds of clothing from adults? Do different cultures have different attitudes about how much of the body should be covered?

Consider also the part that clothing plays in attracting or discouraging a mate. And don't forget that the style or design of clothing can also be affected by an individual's desire for novelty, and what that might suggest about the idea of fashion, which has become an important industry in our culture.

Materials Used to Make Clothing

Clothing can be made from all sorts of materials, including animal skins, plant fibers and leaves, feathers, and the more modern materials of metal, plastic, and a variety of synthetics.

Some of the earliest clothing was probably made from animal skins. Our ancient ancestors made efficient use of the animals they killed for meat. Besides food, animal parts were used to make oil for cooking or lighting, tools, and clothing. The earliest Native Americans of Arkansas and surrounding areas, known as Paleo-Indians, would have used the warm skins and furs of the large animals they hunted—like the mastodon or mammoth—and may have dressed in a manner similar to the Eskimos.

When the climate became more like it is today, the people used the hides of smaller animals—such as deer, buffalo, muskrat, and beaver—to make clothing. Processing the hide into leather required a lot of work, but resulted in a soft, pliable product. First the hide would be scraped free of flesh and hair. It was then soaked, pounded, stretched, and allowed to dry. An awl would be used to punch holes for sewing, and animal sinew served as thread. The Indians would also dye the hides with various colors—yellow, red, blue, green, or black—that they made from plants and minerals. We still use animal skins today for clothing, mainly cowhide in the form of leather that we make

into shoes, jackets, and other items.

Another animal product that Indians made great use of was bird feathers. We are all familiar with the image of the Plains Indians' long feather headdresses, but feathers were used in other ways too. The

Southeastern Indians designed beautiful feather cloaks, made by attaching feathers in layers—like shingles on a roof—to a netted fabric base. These cloaks made of feathers were not only beautiful, but warm and lightweight as well. Modern clothing does not make much use of feathers, but not many years ago, feathers could be seen adorning hats of both men and women.

People also made use of animal hair to weave or knit into clothes. Early settlers brought sheep for wool, and Southeastern Indians used the hair from buffalos and opossums.

Much clothing, both in the past and today, was made from plant fibers. The one we are probably most familiar with—and undoubtedly everyone is wearing at least a little of right now—is cotton. Another clothing plant is flax, from which we make linen. The Southeastern Indians used fibers from hemp, nettles, and the shoots of mulberry trees.

As the Southeastern Indians didn't have the true loom, they relied on finger weaving, twining, and plaiting to make sashes, straps, and other garments. They used an upright loom to weave *mantles*, which are a kind of cloak or cape. European settlers brought cotton and flax plants and wove fabrics on looms. Other techniques Europeans used to make clothing from threads or cords included knitting, crocheting, darning, and tatting.



A Timucua (Florida) warrior meets Spanish explorers in 1528. All wear traditional clothes for their cultures.



Technology has added modern materials to our clothing. Fabrics and clothing parts may be made of metal, plastic, and synthetics like polyester, rayon, and nylon.

To imagine all the kinds of materials used to make clothing, consider just one simple fastener—the button. Buttons can be made out of almost anything, and you can easily find buttons made from cloth, metal, bone, shell, antler, wood, plastic, and rubber.

How do Archeologists Learn About the Clothing of Ancient People?

Archeologists have a major problem when it comes to learning about clothing or other items made of fabrics, skins, or feathers. Because these materials are fragile and don't survive long in the ground, clothing is almost never found. So there is much that archeologists don't know about how ancient people dressed. Clues are available, however, and archeologists are excited to find them.

Some clothing does, in fact, survive—even after thousands of years. This occurs in special environments that maintain stable and unchanging conditions, such as consistently dry, consistently wet, or permanently frozen. For example, Egyptian mummies, which are carefully treated after death and kept in dry conditions, provide a good environment for fabrics. Discoveries of bodies and objects in northern European bogs, a wet environment, also allow the recovery of clothing. Discoveries of frozen bodies in high mountains, such as the Peruvian Andes and the Altai Mountains of Siberia, or in glaciers (“Ötzi the Iceman,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ötzi>) offer additional opportunities.

American archeologists recently discovered fabrics in Windover Pond, a wet site in Florida. Native American burials from about 7000 years ago, during the Archaic Period, were preserved in the peaty bottom of the pond. The fabrics found with the burials were woven from native plants, probably the palmetto or queen palm. Seven different complex weaves were represented, which indicated that some sort of loom must of been used.

Fabric is also preserved by contact with certain metals. In North America, rare fabrics are sometimes found in excavations when they have been in contact with objects made of native copper. For example, at the site of Pinson Mounds in Tennessee, a person was found buried with a fabric headdress preserved by the copper ornaments that were attached to it.

Artifacts made of various fabrics have also been found in the dry bluff shelters of the Ozark Mountains. Cradles, sandals, fabric bags, nets, and braided cords have been recovered, adding to our knowledge of the materials and techniques used to make early textiles.

Another way to learn about clothing is from images of people on ornaments, pottery, and figurines. Small, carved images of women, called venus figures, were made by Paleolithic Europeans, and these images show fragments of clothing, such as belts, aprons, and knitted or woven caps. Native American artisans depicted people wearing clothing and ornaments modeled in clay or carved in shell or stone.

A surprising way to learn about ancient fabrics is from their impressions on pottery. When Southeastern Indians were fashioning their clay pots, they often decorated or textured the soft clay with sticks and paddles wrapped with string or cloth. These are known as *cord-marked* or *fabric-impressed* treatments. By making casts of the impressions on pottery, archeologists can examine the weaving, plaiting, and knotting used on these various ancient fabrics and cords.

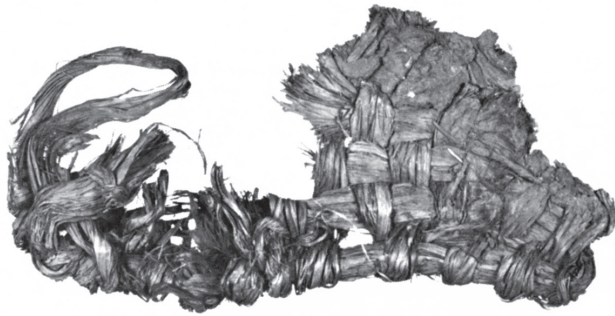
What Kinds of Clothing did Early Arkansans Wear?

Early European explorers who visited the Southeast recorded their impressions of the Native Ameri-



Woven bag from an Ozark bluff shelter. It contained seeds.





A woven grass sandal from an Ozark bluff shelter.

cans who lived here. From their descriptions, we can learn how Indian people dressed during the Contact Period (about the 1600s).

Because it was—and still is—very hot and humid in the Southeast, the native people wore few clothes, especially in summer. The basic item of dress for men was the breechcloth, a rectangular piece of fabric that was worn between the legs, with its ends hanging over a belt and long enough to cover the front and back. The breechcloth could be made of leather, woven grass, or other fiber.

Decorative sashes, probably fingerwoven in a variety of geometric designs and with long tasseled ends, served as belts and chest decorations. A small pouch was often attached to the belt. Deerskin leggings, which looked like trousers, were sometimes worn; they were suspended from the belt and gathered below the knees with garters. In cold weather, a mantle or cloak was worn over the shoulders and extended to the knees. These were made of animal skins, such as bison or muskrat, with painted designs,



Osage hunters wearing deerskin leggings. The Osages inhabited parts of Arkansas during the historic period.

or of feathers attached to a fiber net. Turbans were worn for ceremonies, initially made of bird or animal skins and later European cloth. Moccasins were only worn in cold weather or when traveling. They were made of a piece of deerskin, seamed at the heel and top of the foot.

The basic item of clothing for women was a short deerskin skirt that went from the waist to the knees. In cold weather, they added cloaks of feathers or skin. Women's cloaks were worn to leave both arms free and expose the right breast by wrapping the coat under the right arm and tying its corners above the left shoulder. Women wore the same kind of moccasins as men.

Young children wore no clothing at all. When girls reached the age of 8 to 10, they began to wear a fringed apron. At puberty, girls wore women's clothing. Boys remained naked until they were 12 or 13 years old, when they began to wear men's clothing.

The first European settlers in Arkansas had to be very self-sufficient, since stores and access to European products were harder to come by. Pioneers brought flax and cotton plants, as well as sheep for wool. They spun fibers on spinning wheels and did their own weaving or knitting to make cloth of linen, wool, and cotton. Pioneers also wore buckskin and clothing made of other kinds of leather.

When Native Americans and Europeans met, they exchanged ideas, objects, and materials, and clothing was a part of that exchange. For example, Indians added European cloth to their dress and used it within traditional styles, such as going from animal skin to cloth turbans. The Seminole Indians of Florida



This North Carolina family from the 1850s is mostly dressed in traditional style. The mother wears a fringed deerskin skirt and the father a cape of animal skins. The daughter wears very little.



made a distinctive style of patchwork clothing from European cloth. Europeans also adopted Indian styles, utilizing buckskin clothing and moccasins.

New materials from European technology were adapted to Native Americans' use, too. Colorful glass beads replaced dyed porcupine quills and were sewn in elaborate floral and geometric motifs on clothing, such as that made by the Indians of the Great Lakes or the Plains. Metal was also adapted, such as the thin sheets of metal that were formed into *tinkling cones* and attached to clothing to make a pleasant sound.

People throughout the world respond to their environments and express their cultures through clothing. See what you can discover about clothing.

Creek Indian men around 1838. The man on the left wears traditional finger-woven sashes across his chest and at the knees. Both wear leather moccasins, and have adapted some European style elements into their dress, such as the front-closing coats, a shirt with cravat (necktie), and metal gorget (chest ornaments worn suspended at the neck).



Activity Ideas

Draw a Shirt: Bring in pictures from books and magazines showing different Native American dress, or native costumes from throughout the world. Using butcher paper or art paper, cut out two pieces for each student to be the front and back of a shirt or dress. Poke holes around the edges and sew with yarn. Let students decorate their clothing in a traditional style and then wear them.

Write a Story: Bring in a variety of buttons of different styles and sizes. Let each child choose 1-3 buttons, then write a story about the person who would have worn them on their clothing.

Make an Exhibit: Make a display of various clothing-working tools, both prehistoric and historic. Prehistoric tools could include knives, awls, scrapers, needles, and spindle whorls made from potsherds. Historic tools could include tatting shuttles, needles, pins, knitting needles, crochet hooks, spools of thread, thimbles, darning eggs, lace-making tools, and weaving tools.

Learn a Craft: Teach a class on a clothing-making skill. Indian crafts can include fingerweaving, moccasin-making, or beading and quillwork. Older children can easily learn fingerweaving using dowels and yarn; see the References for a book on this craft. Historic crafts can include knitting, crocheting, or tatting. Contact your county Home Extension Office to find an instructor.

Research Traditional Clothing: Have students research clothing styles of Native Americans from different parts of the country (or different cultures worldwide). Use books, magazines, and the internet to find pictures and information. Write a report on how climate, gender, age, and culture may be reflected in clothing styles.

Think like an Archeologist: Discuss what an archeologist would learn from the clothes you are wearing. Which clothing items might survive thousands of years; which would not? Can you tell from what remains which are girls' or boys' clothes? What can you say about climate, technology, or status differences reflected in the remains.

Collect Fasteners: Younger children can bring in samples of clothing fasteners to compare, such as buttons, shoelaces, ties, belts, zippers, velcro, snaps, or hooks-and-eyes.



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Credits

The title graphic is courtesy of the National Archives of Canada/C-35062. It is an engraved cartouche of traders from the 1777 *Map of the Inhabited Part of Canada, from the French Surveys*.

The image of the woven seed bag on page 3 is from the book *Prehistoric Plies: A Structural and Comparative Analysis of Cordage, Netting, Basketry, and Fabric from Ozark Bluff Shelters* by Sandra Clements Scholtz, Arkansas Archeological Survey, Research Series No. 9, 1975.

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