



# MOUNDVILLE

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL

### PARK

## BACKGROUND ON POTTERY

When visitors tour the Jones Museum at Moundville Archaeological Park, Mississippian-era pottery is, by far, the type of artifact they'll see the most. Pottery found at Moundville is uniquely displayed. Transparent cases form a series of square archways that visitors walk through, able to view each piece from a number of angles, including the bases of many pots.

Clay is the earth's most abundant mineral. It's not surprising then that ceramics – the art and technology of making heat hardened vessels and other articles from clay – is an invention that hallmarks different cultures worldwide. For archaeologists, ceramics form a class of artifacts they can analyze to find out different things about a particular culture. What's mixed into the clay, how a vessel is formed and the method used to decorate pottery are measurable characteristics that vary within a particular society over space and time or serve to distinguish one culture from another.

Generally speaking, any non-clay substances mixed in with clay to help keep pottery from shrinking, warping and cracking while drying and being fired is called "temper". Another advantage of using temper is that it prevents pottery from breaking during thermal shock, a drastic change in temperature that occurs, for instance, when ice cold water is poured into an empty pot that has been heating on an open fire.

Tempers used early in the prehistoric Southeast include plant fibers, sand, grit, ground limestone, bone and grog (ground up pottery fragments). At Moundville, as well as most other Mississippian sites, a potter's primary temper was burned and crushed mussel shell. Unlike most other earlier materials, tempering pottery with shell produces chemical reactions in the clay body. As a result, Mississippian potters had to refine their pottery building and firing techniques.

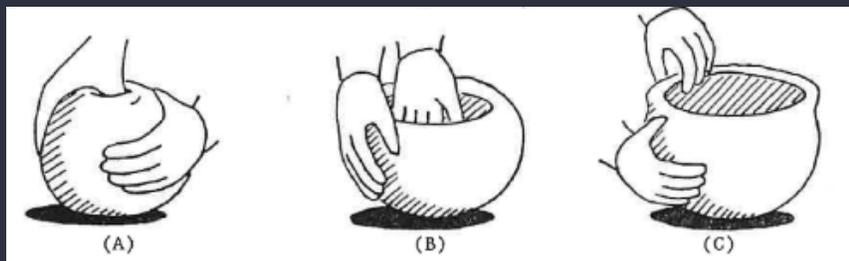
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## PINCH METHOD

Take a lump of clay and form it into a ball. Insert your thumb into the center of the ball, leaving about 1/2 inch of clay on the bottom for a base (A). Gently press the clay into shape using your thumb on the inside of the ball and your fingers on the outside. Press the clay and rotate the ball, slowly repeating this as you work, thinning the base of the pot first, then working gradually up the side wall (B). Try to keep the walls of the vessel the same thickness throughout. An overall thickness of about 1/4 inch is ideal. Using your fingers or a polished stone, smooth the walls of the vessel (C). If needed, trim the top edge (the lip) of the pot with a piece of flint or a cane knife. Decorate using the tools provided.



## COIL METHOD

Take a small ball of clay and flatten it into a round pancake about 1/4 inch in thickness. As you flatten, flip the clay frequently so that it doesn't stick to your work surface. This will serve as the base of your pot. Roll out long "snake" or coil of clay.

Wind the coil around the outer edge of the base, pressing down on it gently so that it sticks to the clay below it. Smooth the coils into one another on the inside and outside of the pot, supporting the area being smoothed with your other hand by placing it on the other side of the vessel wall. The way the coils are stacked determines the shape of the pot. If you stack the coils directly on top of one another the pot will have straight sides (A). By stacking coils leaning outwards the vessel is widened (B) and stacking the coils towards the inside narrows the pot (C). Smooth the vessel and, if necessary, trim the lip. Decorate using the tools provided.

