

ROCKSHELTERS IN THE RED RIVER GORGE

For nearly 12,000 years, people have lived in the Red River Gorge. This beautiful place has everything they need: food, shelter, other resources, and inspiration.



The sandstone rockshelters in the Red River Gorge are very, very special places. Many are dry, so fragile artifacts that decay away in most other places are preserved within them. These artifacts include prehistoric seeds, nutshells, cordage, wood, leather, and textiles. They also include the remains of many historic period industries, like saltpeter mining.

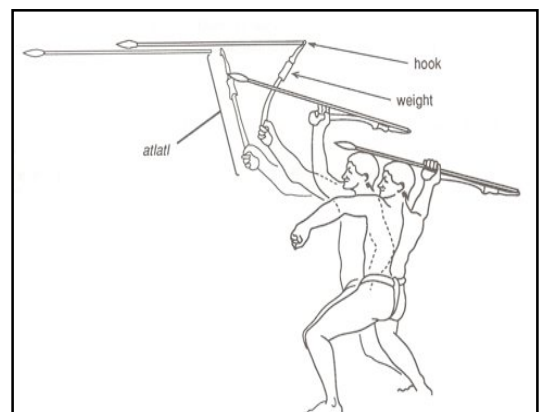
Because of its rockshelters, like the one shown here, people around the world know about “The Gorge.” They know it has played an important role in telling the story of the past. As its most recent residents, we can be proud of this. We have a responsibility to preserve what remains.

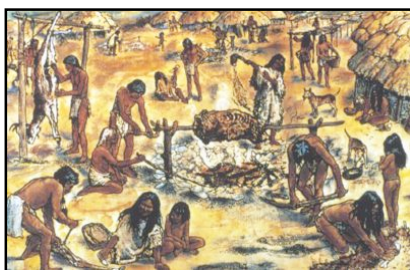
The Native Americans’ Time

Native Americans were the first people to live in the Gorge and use its rockshelters. These peoples did not have written languages. There are no history books for us to read about their time. Archaeology helps fill-in these gaps by studying the places these people lived and the things they left behind. The stories Native Americans tell today also inform us about the lifeways of their ancestors.

The first native peoples, called Paleoindians, arrived in the Red River Gorge area around 12,000 years ago. This was when the last glaciers were retreating. It was cooler and wetter then, so the natural environment was different from today’s. These people were successful hunters and gatherers who lived in small groups and moved their camps often. They hunted animals with distinctive stone-tipped spears and gathered wild plants.

By around 10,000 years ago, the natural environment was like today’s. The Archaic peoples lived in the Gorge, and like their ancestors, were hunter-gatherers. They developed a new weapon, the spearthrower or *atlatl* (at-uhl-at-uhl), shown here. They gathered wild plants for food, medicines, and dyes. These people used ground stone tools, like mortars and pestles, to shell and grind-up nuts. They may have used gourds as water bottles and storage containers.





People set-up their camps in rockshelters, at the base of slopes, and along the rivers. Larger groups lived at base camps for a season. They dug storage pits in the ground at these camps, like the one shown here. Smaller groups camped in different places for shorter periods as they looked for food and other resources.

As the centuries passed, Archaic peoples came to depend on plants for food. They ate sunflower and goosefoot seeds, and squash. Archaic people returned again and again to the same places to collect seeds and fruits from the largest, most productive plants. Over time, their choices changed the plants. This was the beginning of plant domestication.

Through careful investigation, archaeologists found parts of a 3,700-year-old squash rind at an Archaic campsite at Cloudsplitter Rockshelter. The dry, sandy soil had preserved it. They also found chipped and ground stone tools, and pollen grains that showed how the climate had changed over time.

Around 3,000 years ago, the prehistoric gardeners of the Red River Gorge began to make jars from local clays. We call these pottery-making groups the Woodland peoples. Ceramics joined wooden and gourd bowls, and cane baskets as the containers they used for cooking and storage.

Hunting and gathering continued to be important. Woodland peoples hunted with the atlatl until about 1300 years ago, when they replaced it with the bow and arrow. Like their ancestors, they planted seeds in gardens near their camps. With a source of food they could count on, these prehistoric gardeners lived in rockshelters for longer periods. They made short trips to other places for the raw materials they needed.

Archaeologists have identified many important Woodland camps within the hundreds of rockshelters in the Gorge: Cloudsplitter Rockshelter, Newt Kash Shelter, Haystack Shelter, and Rogers Shelters. At these sites, archaeologists found the remains of Woodland peoples' storage pits, trash pits, and the fires they built for heat, lighting, and cooking. They also found pottery, spear points, cordage, textiles, leather items, and grass beds. Even a wooden cradleboard used to take care of a baby. Dried plant and fecal remains prove how important garden plants were to these people's diet.

Archaeologists think the Woodland peoples are the ones who carved or chiseled designs into boulders and cliff walls. These *petroglyphs* are mainly circles and spirals, or turkey, deer, or bear tracks.

Around 1,000 years ago, outside the Gorge, people began living in villages. Called Fort Ancient, these people were farmers. Like their ancestors, they still grew squash and sunflower. But, they replaced most of the old crops with new ones, such as corn and beans. Tobacco became an important crop, too. They continued to hunt with bows and arrows and to gather wild plants.

Within the Gorge, Fort Ancient people lived in rockshelters. The prehistoric farmers of central Kentucky also may have come to the Gorge to hunt at this time. At the William S. Webb Memorial Rockshelter and Raised Spirits Rockshelter, small groups set up temporary hunting camps. They left triangular arrowheads, a grinding slab, and a few ceramic jars, like the one shown here, as well as cornhusks, corn kernels, cut cane, and cordage.



By around 400 years ago, Native Americans were trading with Europeans indirectly for glass beads and metal kettles. European diseases, like smallpox, influenza, and measles, appeared in the late 1600s. Thousands of people died because they had never been exposed to these kinds of diseases before. Today, some people who live in the Gorge area count Native Americans among their ancestors.

The New Americans' Time

People of European and African descent were the next groups to call the Gorge “home.” They arrived around 300 years ago via the Ohio River and the Cumberland Gap. They wrote some things down, but their day-to-day lives do not appear in our history books. Archaeology can help us learn about them, too.

Like the native peoples, most of the Europeans who first settled in the Gorge were farmers. They grew corn, tobacco, hemp, flax, and wheat, and also raised livestock – cattle, horses, and hogs. They used some rockshelters in the Gorge as animal pens.

Not long after they arrived, these people started mining rockshelters for saltpeter. Also known as niter, it is one ingredient used in gunpowder. The miners processed the niter, then shipped it to places like Lexington. They also used it themselves in hunting, curing meat, and treating sickness. In the Gorge, Europeans mined saltpeter at D. Boone Shelter. The vats and crushed rock are still there.

In the 1870s, the iron industry moved into the Gorge region, but the major industry was logging. The railroad came in 1911, making it easier to get people and goods in and out of the Gorge. Afterwards, more people began to work wage jobs in nearby towns and cities.

Over time, it became harder and harder to make a living at farming. One way farmers could add to their income was to make alcohol or “moonshine” from their grain crops (corn, wheat, and rye). The rockshelters in the Gorge were great places to do this. They were isolated, and water and firewood were easy to get. In 1919, Prohibition made it illegal to make, sell, or transport alcohol. The remains of old moonshine stills are present today in some Gorge rockshelters.

In the 1930s, people thought the logged areas of Menifee County were wastelands. So, the U.S. Forest Service began buying up land. It created the Cumberland National Forest and started planting trees. In 1966, the Forest Service renamed it the “Daniel Boone National Forest.”

Tourists first visited the Red River Gorge as early as the late 1800s. But in the mid-twentieth century, more people began visiting the Gorge for recreational purposes. Today, it is estimated that between 250,000 and 750,000 people visit it each year.



A major attraction is its cliffhines, shown here. Some people think the Gorge is one of the five best rockclimbing places in the world. Other tourists visit the area for its hiking trails, camping spots, and scenery. Because of its many nationally important prehistoric sites, particularly its rockshelters, the Red River Gorge District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2003.

With more visitors, disturbance to the Gorge’s fragile rockshelters has increased. Looters dig-up these sites for artifacts to sell or add to their own collections. Overnight camping and the activities of rock climbers also harm these sensitive places.

Today, private citizens own 21 percent of the Gorge. This means they must protect the rockshelters on their land. The Forest Service manages and protects the ones on federal land. In 2004, it closed all rockshelters to camping. Forest Service rangers have caught several men looting shelters in the Gorge and have fined them. To educate people about the Gorge’s important rockshelters, the Forest Service holds Living Archaeology Weekend each year and built the Gladie Cultural and Environmental Learning Center.

The Forest Service is currently exploring how to best protect the Gorge’s natural and cultural resources. They need help from everyone interested in its future. They want to preserve what is unique about the Gorge. But they also want to give everyone a chance to experience this beautiful place for another 12,000 years!

Image Credits Artist Reconstruction of Archaic Village demeter.museum.state.il.us // Late Prehistoric Pottery Vessel www.as.uky.edu/Anthropology/museum.html