

STORIES FROM DRY PLACES: THE RED RIVER GORGE'S PREHISTORIC ROCKSHELTERS



Have you ever visited the Red River Gorge? Ever ridden slowly on that short, but narrow one-lane road through the dark, dripping tunnel? It's the way trains once traveled to The Gorge!

You leave your world behind, and enter a beautiful and special place. Tall hemlocks. Natural stone arches carved by the wind. Steep sandstone cliff lines. Unusual rock formations. Tumbling and gurgling waterfalls.

When you come to Living Archaeology Weekend, you are visiting the Red River Gorge. People have visited and lived and worked and played in the Red River Gorge for a very long time. Nearly 12,000 years, in fact.

And now... it's your turn!

THE GORGE'S ROCKSHELTERS

Tall, steep sandstone cliffs border The Gorge's creeks and streams. Thousands and thousands of years of erosion formed them.

Erosion also formed thousands of large openings in or at the base of those sandstone cliffs, like the one shown above. These cave-like spaces are called *rockshelters*.* Rockshelters can provide shade from the sun and protection from wind and rain - for animals and for people.

The Red River Gorge's rockshelters come in many sizes and shapes. Some are tiny. Only one person can crawl inside for just a few feet. Others are big - enough to fit a whole house inside! Some are wet or damp. Water trickles in from above or wind blows rain deep inside. Others are dry, and always have been so.

Certain Red River Gorge rockshelters provide better shade and protection than others. Some face east, away from the hot afternoon sun. Others face south, away from the cold winter winds. Big or small, dry rockshelters facing those directions were the best. They were very comfortable places to live in. And so, prehistoric people did!

Just like in our homes today, people divided the space inside their rockshelter homes into living areas. Along the back walls, they often put their beds of twigs and grass in shallow pits. There were *hearths* (small fires for cooking and warmth) throughout.

*when new words appear in this essay, they are *italicized*.

While they lived there, the people brought in many things. They brought in plants, tools, tool-making materials, containers, food, rocks, and firewood. In some rockshelters, living conditions were perfect! People used these rockshelters for centuries, or even longer.

Over time, these rockshelters slowly filled-up with the trash the prehistoric people left behind. In some of them, the deposits became very thick. After the people left, dust and leaves blew in. Chunks of rock fell from the "roof" of the rockshelter.

SUCH SPECIAL PLACES

The dry rockshelters in the Red River Gorge where people once lived and worked are special places. The dry soil preserves things that rot away in otherwise wet or humid places. Think of them as tiny Egyptian deserts.

Preserved objects can be natural things, like leaves blown in by a summer storm. But they also can be what people left behind. These things might include ancient seeds, nutshells, *cordage* (string/rope), wood, leather, or *textiles* (cloth). They might include fragments of long-ago industries, like *saltpeter* mining (an ingredient in gunpowder), farming, or moonshining (making corn liquor).

Scientists have studied the Red River Gorge's dry rockshelters for a long time. *Archaeologists* are scientists who study the places where people lived and the things they left behind. Archaeologists have found the things people left in The Gorge's dry rockshelters. These things show us how people lived long ago.

Because of archaeological research, we know people visited and lived in The Gorge's dry rockshelters from the very beginning of human history. Let's find out more about them.



THE NATIVE AMERICANS' TIME

Native Americans were the first people who lived in the Red River Gorge rockshelters. They passed their history down by telling stories to their children. They did not write down their history for us to read.

The stories Native Americans tell today also teach us about these long-ago people. They are their ancestors. Archaeology helps fill-in the gaps.

The Hunter-Gatherers

The very first people arrived a long, LONG time ago. Around 12,000 years ago, when the glaciers were melting!

The Gorge's natural environment was different then. It was cool and wet, like Canada's. The forests were mainly evergreen trees like spruce and fir.

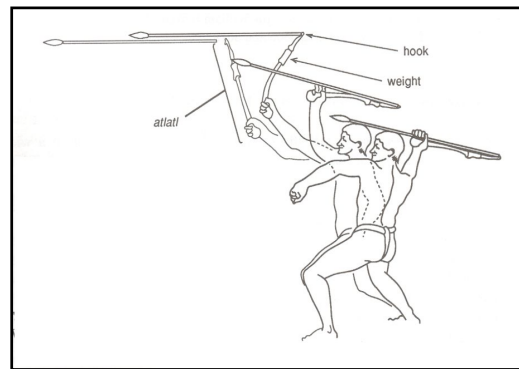


These first people were hunters and gatherers. They lived in small groups and moved their camps often. They hunted animals with stone-tipped spears. Some animals, like mastodons, are now extinct. The people also gathered wild plants.

It was a long, long time ago, and so very few people. Archaeologists have found only a few rockshelters where these people lived.

By around 10,000 years ago, the natural environment had changed. Oak and hickory trees filled the forests, like the forests of today.

The people living in The Gorge were still hunter-gatherers. They knew all about The Gorge's rich natural environment. These people set-up their base camps along creeks and the Red River. They set them up in rockshelters, too. Larger groups lived at base camps for a whole season. They dug storage pits in the ground at these camps, like the one shown above. Smaller groups camped for shorter periods in many different places during the year.



These hunters used a new kind of tool: the spear thrower or *atlatl* (at-uhl-at-uhl), shown here. 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.

They gathered wild plants for food, medicines, and dyes. They ate sunflower seeds and *goosefoot* seeds (see picture on left, and squash.

As the centuries passed, some people began to depend on certain wild plants for food. They returned again and again to places where the largest and healthiest plants grew. And they collected the seeds. Over time, their choices changed the plants. This was the beginning of plant *domestication*.

Archaeologists working in The Gorge have found many rockshelters where the hunter-gatherers lived. At Cloudsplitter Rockshelter, they found *rind* (outer skin) fragments of a 3,700-year-old squash. The dry, sandy soil had preserved it. They also found chipped stone

tools (spearpoints, knives, scrapers) and ground stone tools. Tiny plant pollen grains showed how the climate had changed over time.

The Hunter-Gatherer-Gardeners

Around 3,000 years ago, the hunter-gatherers living in the Red River Gorge began to make pottery. They collected clay from along the creeks for their pots. Clay jars joined wooden and gourd bowls, and cane baskets as cooking and storage containers.

These pottery-makers camped in rockshelters longer than did their ancestors. They made short trips to other places for the raw materials they needed.

They planted seeds in gardens near their camps. The plants produced *nutritious* (good for human health) seeds. Sunflower and marsh elder plants had oily seeds. Other plants, like goosefoot and maygrass, had starchy seeds. Along with squash, these garden crops were a source of food people could count on.

The gardeners hunted animals and gathered wild plants like their ancestors. They hunted with the atlatl until about 1300 years ago. Then they started to use the bow and arrow.



Archaeologists have studied many rockshelters in the Red River Gorge where the gardeners once lived: Cloudsplitter Rockshelter, Newt Kash Shelter, Haystack Shelter, and Rogers Shelters. Inside were the peoples' storage pits and trash pits. There were traces of the fires they had built for heat, lighting, and cooking.

They found pieces of broken jars, spear points, cordage, textiles, leather items, and grass beds. Even a baby's wooden cradleboard! Parts of dried plants and *coprolites* (dried-out pieces of solid human waste) prove how important garden plants were to these people.

Archaeologists think the hunter-gatherer-gardeners are the ones who made the *petroglyphs*. These are carved or chiseled pictures on boulders and cliff walls in The Gorge, like the one shown here. Designs are mainly circles and spirals, or turkey, deer, or bear tracks.

The Hunter-Gatherer-Farmers

Around 1,000 years ago, people living outside the Red River Gorge turned to a farming way of life. Like their ancestors, they grew squash and sunflower. But corn and beans replaced the other crops. They still hunted with bows and arrows and gathered wild plants.

These farming groups lived in villages. They arranged their bark-covered houses in a circle around a plaza. They held their ceremonies in the plaza. People did not live in villages within The Gorge. Small groups of people set up short-term hunting camps in rockshelters.

At the William S. Webb Memorial Rockshelter and Raised Spirits Rockshelter, archaeologists studied these farmers' hunting camps. The people had left triangular arrowheads, a grinding slab, and pieces of a few pottery jars, like the one shown here. They also left cornhusks, corn kernels, cut cane, and cordage.



By around 400 years ago, native farming people were trading with Europeans. They traded deer and animal skins for European-made glass beads and metal kettles.

European diseases, like smallpox, the flu, and measles, appeared in the late 1600s. Thousands of native people died. They had never had these kinds of diseases before.

Today, some people who live in the Red River Gorge area count Native Americans among their ancestors.

PRESERVING THE ROCKSHELTERS

Because of its dry rockshelters, people around the world know about "The Gorge." They know this beautiful place plays an important role in telling the story of the past. Since 2004, people have visited the Gladie Cultural and Environmental Learning Center to learn about The Gorge's long history.

The Forest Service is exploring how to protect The Gorge's natural and cultural resources. They want to preserve what is unique about it. They also want to give everyone a chance to visit this special place. Just like you!



As Kentuckians, we can be proud that this special place is in our state. We can be glad we can visit it.

The Gorge needs help from everyone interested in its future. Everyone needs to do their part to help preserve and protect it for others to enjoy.

And now... it's your turn!

Revised Sept 2012

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