

ANCIENT STORIES FROM DRY PLACES: Rockshelter Sites in the Red River Gorge



A famous Red River Gorge rockshelter.

When you come to Living Archaeology Weekend, you are visiting the Red River Gorge. It is a beautiful and special place.

Tall hemlocks. Natural stone arches carved by water and wind. Steep sandstone cliff lines. Unusual rock formations. Tumbling waterfalls.

People have visited, and lived, and worked, and played in The Gorge for thousands of years.

The Gorge's Rockshelters

Years of erosion formed the sandstone cliffs that border The Gorge's creeks and streams. That erosion also formed thousands of large openings in or at the base of those cliffs, like the one shown here. Some local people call these recessed spaces *rockhouses*. Others call them *rockshelters*.¹

Rockshelters can provide shade from the sun. They offer protection from wind and rain – for animals and for people. They come in many sizes and shapes. Some are wet or damp. Others are dry, and always have been.

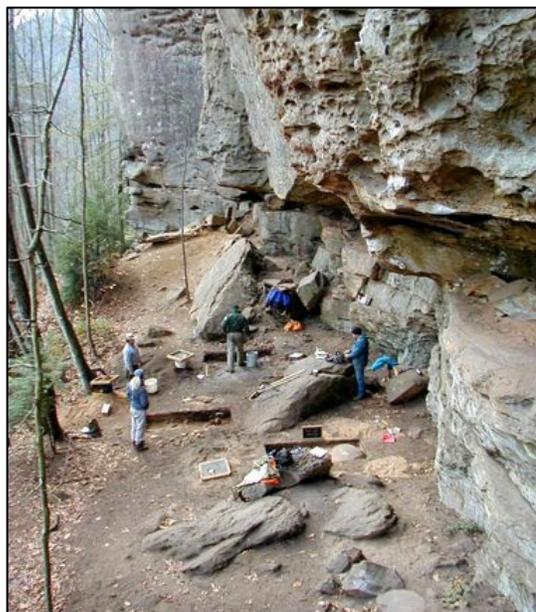
As in our homes today, people divided the space inside their rockshelter homes into living and working areas. Along the back walls, they often put their beds of twigs, grass, and woven mats. They built *hearths*, small fires for cooking and warmth, throughout.

While they lived there, the people brought in many things. They brought in plants, containers, and food. They brought in tools, tool-making materials, rocks, and firewood. Over time, the rockshelters slowly filled-up with the *artifacts* the people left behind. In some shelters, the deposits of soil and artifacts became very thick.

Such Special Places

These long-ago peoples' rockshelter homes are special places. The dry soil preserves things that otherwise rot away in wet shelters or in Kentucky's humid climate.

Preserved objects can be natural things, like leaves blown in by a summer storm. They also can be things the people left behind, such as ancient seeds and nutshells. They could be *cordage* (string/rope), wood, or leather; even *textiles* (cloth, baskets, and netting).



Archaeologists investigate an ancient hunter-gatherer campsite in a Gorge rockshelter.

¹ Key vocabulary terms are *italicized* in the essay.

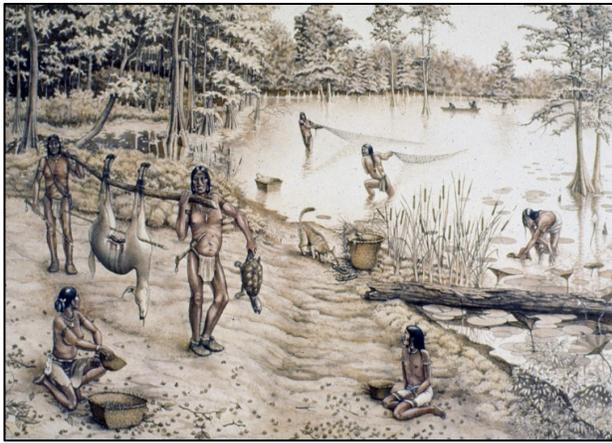
The scientists who want to know about The Gorge's ancient peoples are called *archaeologists*. They study the rockshelters where people used to live and the artifacts the people left behind. Because of their research, we know people visited and lived in The Gorge from the very beginning of human history.

Native Americans in the Gorge

The Hunter-Gatherers

Native Americans were the first people to live in the Red River Gorge's rockshelters. They arrived around 12,000 years ago, when the glaciers were melting. The natural environment in The Gorge was different then. The forests were mainly evergreen trees like spruce and fir.

These first people lived in small groups and moved their camps often. They hunted animals with stone-tipped spears. Some of these animals, such as the elephant-like mastodon, are now extinct. The people also gathered wild plants.



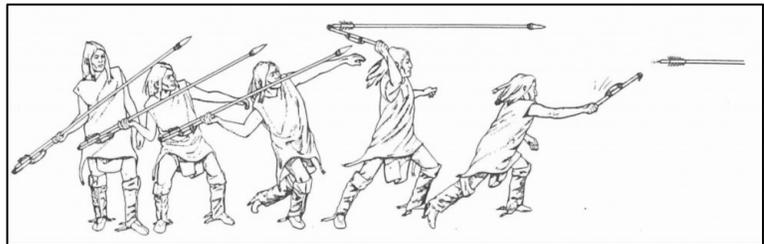
A group of hunter-gatherers camping near a pond.

By around 10,000 years ago, the natural environment had changed. Like today, oak and hickory trees filled the forests. Many of the big-game animals were gone.

The people living in The Gorge were still hunter-gatherers. They 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. Smaller groups camped for shorter periods in many different places during the year.

Hunters used a new kind of tool: the spear thrower or *atlatl* (at-uhl-at-uhl), shown here. They also used *ground stone* tools – granite axes to chop wood, and sandstone mortars and pestles to grind-up nuts. They may have used gourds as water bottles and storage containers.



Throwing a spear using an atlatl or spear thrower.

They collected wild plants for food, medicines, and dyes. They ate nuts, fruits, sunflower and *goosefoot* seeds, and squash.

As the centuries passed, some people began to depend on certain wild plants for food. They collected the seeds. Over time, their choices changed the plants. This was the beginning of *plant domestication*.

The Hunter-Gatherer-Gardeners

Around 3,000 years ago, hunter-gatherers living in The 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 for longer periods. They made short trips to other places for the raw materials they needed. They planted sunflower and marsh elder, goosefoot and maygrass seeds in gardens near their camps. The plants produced *nutritious* seeds (good for human health). Along with squash, these garden crops were a source of food people could count on.

Like their ancestors, the gardeners also hunted animals and gathered wild plants. They hunted with the atlatl until about 1,300 years ago. Then they started to use the bow and arrow.

Archaeologists think the hunter-gatherer-gardeners are the ones who made the *petroglyphs* in The Gorge. These are carved or chiseled pictures on boulders and cliff walls. Petroglyph designs are mainly circles, spirals, and animal (turkey, deer, bear) tracks.

This Lee County turtle petroglyph carved into sandstone rock inspired the LAW logo.



The Hunter-Gatherer-Farmers

Around 1,000 years ago, people living outside the Red River Gorge turned to farming. Like their ancestors, they grew squash and sunflower, but corn and beans replaced the other crops. These farmers still hunted with bows and arrows and gathered wild plants. They made new forms of pottery.

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



Jar made from local clays by the region's first farmers.

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

European diseases, like smallpox, appeared in the late 1600s. Thousands of people died of diseases they had never had before. But not everyone. 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 Center to learn about region’s long history.

The Forest Service has an important job: to protect The Gorge’s unique natural resources and priceless archaeological sites. As Kentuckians, we can be proud that this special place is in our state.

The Gorge needs help from everyone interested in its future. All of us need to do our part to preserve and protect it.