

Home Grown: Appalachian Crafts from the Past

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Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn about the origins of Appalachian crafts.
- Participants will explore the various types of crafts traditional in Appalachia.
- Participants will find out where to learn more about various Appalachian crafts and have ideas for sharing their knowledge with the next generation.

Appalachia stretches through 13 states, from southern New York to northern Mississippi, with West Virginia as the only state entirely within its borders. While the mountainous terrain, rivers and forests may have limited the interactions of early settlers, it also forced a certain level of self-sufficiency on the earliest settlers. They utilized

their resources, heritage and skills to create the things they wanted and needed – quilts, baskets, candles, soap, and more. Today, many of these skills, including sewing, weaving, woodworking, candle making, glass blowing, etc., are seen as crafts from the past, with only a select few people maintaining the skills and expertise to carry them out. However, they are a vital part of Appalachia's heritage that should be shared.



History of Appalachian Crafts

Appalachian art and crafts were a result of need. In non-industrialized Appalachia, people were self-reliant, making do with materials at hand. They crafted the cabins they lived in and all the furniture in them in order to make a house into a home. Handmade quilts, coverlets, pottery, wood carvings and woven baskets were often displayed in the home. However, they also served a more functional purpose, such as warmth in the winter, a cover in the warm months, a cup to drink from, or a basket for gathering and carrying things. While the men of the household spent time making household implements, women were growing, weaving, spinning and sewing their clothes. Children were even included, as they were often responsible for dipping the candles.

Natural resources provided the ability to make items more colorful, as dyes were made from materials such as walnuts and indigo. Then,

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households would add an artistic touch to their everyday items by weaving intricate designs or creating detailed patterns for their quilting. Some even created “showoff” quilts that were only used for special occasions such as weddings or burials. As other craftspeople moved into the area, they infused new skills, techniques and artistic directions into Appalachian crafts.

Technology and market demand influenced what people made, as mass production allowed crafts to be recreated quicker and cheaper by machine. Factories began to replace workshops. This resulted in the growth of the “Craft Revival,” which focused on the impact of machine creations on the overall quality of the craft and the economic impact on the craftsmen.

While factories would ultimately prevail, in the 1920s, there was a push to preserve traditional Appalachian crafts. The 1950s and 60s brought about efforts to educate youth in these skills, but the crafts once viewed as necessary to the mountain people were now considered art.

Popular Appalachian Crafts

Many of the crafts we consider Appalachian actually have origins in the home countries of the settlers in the region. The crafting methods and techniques used by each household were adapted to the availability of materials. Due to the isolation of the mountains and valleys of the landscape, each household needed to be self-sufficient. Crafts continued to be practiced only if they met a need and the materials were available.

The Appalachian crafts that have prevailed and remained popular through sustained economic, industrial and cultural changes all have something in common. The opportunity to socialize and item function are key reasons traditional crafts are still engaged in today.

Quilting, for example, could bring women together from the next mountain or valley over to work together on a large project, usually for a special occasion like a wedding or in preparation for winter. When they came together, these women got to exchange fabric scraps, patterns and news. Still today, Quilting Guilds and groups are a place for people to come together to share techniques, show off their skills, learn new methods, and generally socialize.



Knitting and crocheting are typically thought of as solitary crafts, something you would do sitting by the fire or rocking on the porch. Both of these crafts are easy to pick up and set down. They are also easily transported in a pocket or handbag. But both have evolved to having social group get-togethers much like quilting.

Pottery, soap making and woodworking are all crafts that have sustained their foundation of function while adapting to material availability, artistic license and hobby. These crafts have seen a resurgence in popularity mostly because of their ability to be adapted for fashion as well as function.



Ultimately, Appalachian crafts were made for use, not appearance. When machinery, mass production and other modern manufacturing practices started to permeate the Appalachian Mountains, the need to be fully self-sufficient shifted. Skilled craftsmen and craftswomen began to dwindle and stop passing on their knowledge and trades as it became easier and less expensive to purchase manufactured goods.

Today, we often engage in Appalachian crafts to preserve our heritage and stay connected to our ancestors. Whether it be socializing or creating functional objects, learning, practicing and teaching others traditional Appalachian crafts has become a popular hobby and even career for many.

How and Where to Learn Crafts Today

The best way to learn a craft is from a master who has learned from another master, and so on. If you have a family member or neighbor who already knows an Appalachian craft, ask them to teach you. Most Appalachian and heritage crafters who have carried on the tradition love to share what they know and help the tradition carry on.

Check with your local library, community building, or church if any craft classes are being offered. Crafts are often used as a fundraiser, so you can also ask the person who made the crafts if they would be willing to teach you.

If you don't have family, a neighbor, or other community resource, here are some other options:

- The Augusta Heritage Center, located in Elkins, West Virginia, has themed weeks during that summer that offer Appalachian craft classes as well as crafts from other regions.
- Another college well known for teaching Appalachian and heritage crafts is Berea College in Kentucky. No matter what your craft interests, the town of Berea will have something for you to learn.
- Two locations in Tennessee offer quality Appalachian craft classes, Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts and the Appalachian Arts Craft Center.
- Perhaps the best location for hands-on, in-depth learning of popular Appalachian and heritage crafts, as well as try your hand at 'lost' crafts, is the John C. Campbell Folk School in North Carolina.



If you are unable to travel or do not have a local crafter to learn from, there is always the internet. With the use of YouTube and written tutorials, there is nothing you can't learn. There may even be online classes available so you can still have one-on-one instruction without leaving the comfort of your home. If technology is a challenge for you, invite a younger member of your family to join you and share in learning a traditional Appalachian craft.



Sharing Crafts and Their History

Appalachian crafts honor skill and the importance of self-sufficiency. There are many ways to share the knowledge and appreciation of Appalachian crafts in your community.

- **Education of the Arts for Youth** – Teach a class at a local school on a traditional craft. Students will not only learn how to make a craft but also learn the role of crafts in Appalachian culture.
- **Take a Class Yourself** – If you are new to the craft scene, try finding a class in your community to learn a new skill! Or if you are an expert in one craft, try your hand at another.
- **Quilt or Craft Show** – Sponsor a show or display of local artisans and craftspeople and encourage the community to join and exhibit their skills! Shows and displays can happen in a variety of venues such as libraries, county fairs, town halls, or schools.
- **Craft Trails** – Showcase artisans in the area by creating a craft trail. This is when you compile a list of artisans and shops within an area and encourage the community to shop or view along the trail.

Keeping Appalachian Crafts Alive

With the development of mass production, many Appalachian crafts were lost. Families no longer passed down the traditional skills they used when developing their creations. In recent years, that preservation effort that arose a century ago has again become apparent. People recognize the hours of labor that go into a quality handmade craft. They know there is a story and heritage behind those pieces, and they want to be a part of that!

However, in order to protect these crafts, those with the skills and expertise must share their knowledge, and those with a desire to preserve must take advantage of those opportunities to learn. Whether as a teacher or student, be part of those efforts!

Reflection Questions

- What craft did you learn from your grandparents or parents?
 - Do you still do it today?
 - Have you taught someone else how to do it?
- How might your CEOS club preserve Appalachian crafts in your community?

Resources

Rein, Owen (2003). White Oak Baskets. Woodwork. <http://www.owenrein.com/baskets/w83-baskets.pdf>
<https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/appalachian-decorative-arts/>
<https://www.blueridgeheritage.com/itineraries/high-country-the-heart-of-the-high-country/>

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