

Baskets in Kentucky

History, Construction, Collecting, Care & Preservation

The weaving of baskets is as old as the history of humankind. Traces of baskets have been found in the Egyptian pyramids, and woven basket liners have left their impressions inside the fragments of ancient pottery. As soon as men and women were able to plait fibers together, they began to experiment with structures for baskets.

As explorers traveled to new lands and traded goods that were carried in baskets, they likewise carried the influence of their native country's basket weaving techniques. The Native American Indians wove symbols and stories into their baskets. There is general agreement that Native American Indians have created some of the finest baskets in history.

Basket making has been an identifiable part of human society for centuries, although the techniques have changed slightly during this period of time.

A traditional basket teaches respect for our past and for our ancestor's slower, more natural rhythms; their attention to small but practical details; and their unwavering desire to integrate beauty and utility.



The form and construction of a basket often reflect its function. This egg basket was made by Paul Rich.

Before today's castaway items like paper bags, tin cans and plastic containers, our forefathers relied on baskets of all sizes and shapes as utensils essential in the daily routines of an agrarian society. The form and construction of a basket often reflected its function. Example: egg baskets with their various shapes distributed the weight of the eggs so they wouldn't break. The shape was also made so the basket would fit on the horse's neck, in front of the rider, when taking surplus eggs to town to exchange for food staples.

As each different ethnic group settled Kentucky, it brought with it the basket traditions of its heritage as well as the knowledge they had gained from the Indians. As they settled in various regions, pioneers learned to use materials grown locally for making a basket that was essential for daily function, whether it was gathering eggs or carrying feed to the animals. As one examines early Kentucky baskets, one may find willow, dogwood, a variety of vines, cattails, corn husks, oat or rye straw, broom sedge, river cane, hickory, and maple used as a medium. White oak (*Quercus alba*) was the most popular material because it was so plentiful and durable and because its qualities made it easy to split.

Basket Making as a Tradition

There are isolated cases where early pioneers learned to make baskets on their own or learned from neighbors, but the majority of traditional basket making was perpetuated through family networks.

Basket making was a way to bring in extra money or goods to rural families. Some families would peddle their own wares or bar-

ter for services or goods. The value of a basket as a barter item kept many families actively making baskets. As the profits of the basket business increased, many families made it their primary business, and farming became secondary. As basket makers made surplus baskets, some people developed basket wagons and became long-distance basket peddlers. They would buy or take baskets on consignment and travel to Chicago, Illinois, or Cleveland, Ohio, or other large towns. Consequently, the old oak basket traveled far. When Routes 31, 27, and 127 were primary routes through Kentucky, many families would set up stands along the route. However, interstate travel caused these stands to disappear.

As competition increased, families experimented with new shapes and materials. Basket makers in the North Carolina mountains were credited with the introduction of coloring basket splits with native dyes. Families began making fancy and novelty baskets to appeal to tourists.

In addition to competition, the consumer and the baskets that were brought into Kentucky contributed to experimentation. As early as the 1930s, basket makers were making styles of baskets that varied greatly from traditional styles. Basket makers would receive photos from northern patrons,—like elaborate fern stands, for example—and they would make baskets by these photos for those patrons.

During the 1920s and 1930s the U.S. Department of the Interior formed several national parks in the eastern United States including Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. The formation of these parks resulted in the relocation of many families. Many of them gave up basket making due to lack of timber and other supplies.

By the 1940s basket making was in decline. Economic and social changes during and following World War II changed traditional work values and family structures. Some families said they gave up their trade

because they could make more money on relief and from the W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration).

This wasn't true of all basket making families. Several families continued to supplement their income with basket making. Their skills and dedication have brought them much deserved recognition. The Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen and the Kentucky Folk Life Program have honored many of them. Their work has been featured in books, magazines, and upscale stores across the United States.

The Mammoth Cave Basket Makers Guild has had central stage with its displays and demonstrations at the Kentucky Arts and Crafts Juried Show in Louisville. Besides the recognition many of them have received, the guild has established a museum and archives of basket making in south central Kentucky. Guild members teach and demonstrate their skills, and the guild encourages research and a level of excellence in work for basket makers. The guild is a resource for basket makers, historians, and preservationists and assists in developing markets for the sale of baskets.

Key patrons and collectors have contributed to the continuation of the basket making tradition. Dr. Jim Middleton of Munfordville, is a prime example, having founded the White Oak Competition at the Hart County Fair, an annual event that draws the finest basket makers in south central Kentucky.

Materials

A wide assortment of materials are available today for the basket maker. As basketry grows in popularity, commercial suppliers are stocking a wide range of prepared and imported materials needed to make many different kinds of baskets. Some materials available today:

- **Reed** is easily available and relatively inexpensive. Reed is the product of rattan palms from the jungles of Asia and Africa.

This vine can grow in excess of 600 feet. There are 200 varieties, but only a few are used for reed. The circumference can range from the size of a pencil size up to 3 inches. The circumference does not change as it grows and is consistent along its length. This characteristic makes it particularly desirable for basket weaving. Reed is made from the solid, pithy core. This fibrous material is cut into a variety of shapes and sizes.

- **Cane** is the traditional weaver for Nantucket Lightship Baskets. It is also used for lashing and weaving many styles of baskets. Cane is the inner bark of the rattan palm. Because it is a bark, it has a smooth, hard, shiny side and a dull fibrous side.
- **Hardwoods** are used to make baskets. Two of the most common traditional basket woods are black/brown or white ash from the north and oak from the south. The oak log is usually split into eighths, then split several more times using a froe and mallet into billets, from which handles, ribs, rims and finely prepared splits are rived. Ash splints are made by cutting trees and pounding repeatedly along the length to loosen the growth rings so that those growth rings can be lifted off. Today one may purchase prepared hardwood to make baskets. Some other woods used in basketry in Kentucky are poplar, pine, hickory, maple, beach, birch, and dogwood.
- **Fiber Splint** is a heavy craft paper that has been formed to simulate flat-wood splint. It has a smooth, waxy finish and is very pliable.
- **Rope, Sisal, Seagrass, Etc.** – A wide variety of rope-like products are available to add textural interest in making baskets. Seagrass is made of tall native salt marsh grasses that grow along the coast of China. It may be labeled “Hong Kong” or “Taiwan.” Sisal is a sharp, strong fiber.

- **Bark** can be gathered from many trees most times of the year, but spring and summer are most desirable. Stripped lengthwise it makes very strong splints. Hickory, willow, and poplar are good examples.
- **Branches and bushes** are best cut when the sap is down - November to March. Fruit tree branches are best used green. Branches are used for ribs, rings, frames, and handles.
- **Roots** can be harvested anytime the ground isn't frozen. Split roots produce fine weavers.
- **Willow** is very popular in today's basketry. Dream Willow Farm at Edmonton, Kentucky, is one of the largest willow producers in the United States.
- **Vines** in many varieties make a very attractive basket when woven. Fine varieties are great weavers, but thick ones must be split lengthwise. Unsplit, they make ribs, handles, and rings. Some varieties that we see in Kentucky are grapevine, honeysuckle, ivy, kudzu, woodbine, periwinkle, and wisteria.
- **Marsh Plants** are popular. Sedges have edges, and rushes are round. Cattails can make beautiful cordage with which to weave.
- **Leaves of Spring Bulbs, Grasses, Yucca, Iris Leaves, Corn Husks, Straws, Yarns, Strips of Fabric, Cords, and Horse Hair** are other materials that may be added to a basket to add interest.

Terminology

Due to the influence of many cultures, availability of materials, techniques of construction and creativity of the basketmaker, a wide variety of basket styles have emerged. Most authorities have agreed that there are three basic weaves from which there are endless variations and styles.

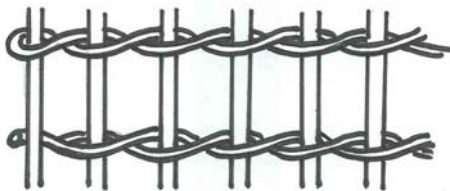
1. Coiled – a group of needles, strands, or

rods is stitched together in a spiraling round or oval form with a thin flexible material such as raffia or synthetic sinew.



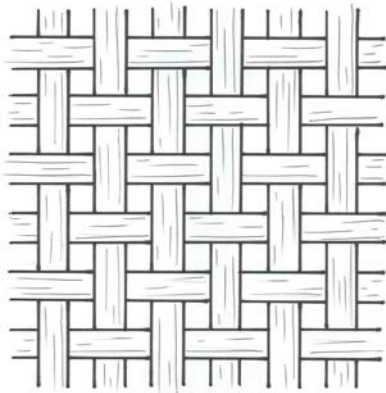
Coiled construction forms a spiral.

2. Twining – may be the earliest type of construction. Spokes or rods form the upright of the basket and two or more flexible fibers (weavers) are twisted around the uprights. There are many patterns to weave.

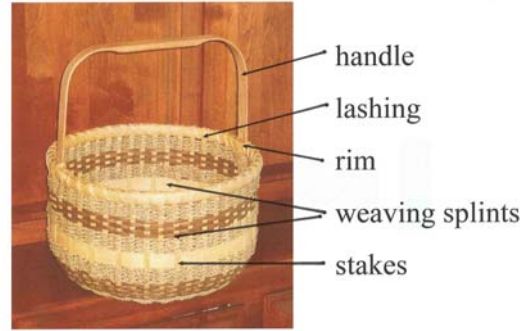


Twining involves weaving flexible fibers through upright spokes or rods.

3. Woven and/or plaited – made from splints or weavers, which form the major component in making the woven basket. The spokes or stakes form the frame or shape of the basket.



In woven construction, splints or weavers are follow and over and under pattern.



This picture shows the different parts involved in making a basket.

Collecting

By recording and analyzing basket construction, structural details, basket styles, and geographical origin, it becomes possible to link baskets to specific makers, regions, and ethnic traditions. When a particular basket style or technique is repeated it might signify that it was preferred by a basket maker or basket user. The style may reflect features of a cultural group to which the basket maker belongs.

An example is the set of specific characteristics of Gibson-Curry White Oak Baskets. Other makers use a similar style basket. Marks of the Curry/Gibson basket are:

1. Carved handle with a center grip
2. Herringbone base
3. Lasher crossing on the inside of the handle
4. A special “twist” ending for durability



The Gibson-Curry White Oak Basket is easily recognizable by its construction.

With Kentucky's rich heritage in basketry, a collector is offered a wide and fascinating range of forms, structures, materials, sizes, decorative styles, and cultural influences from which to choose. There are baskets to suit any interest or decor. A collector may choose to collect a utilitarian or decorative basket, a plain or fancy basket, a simple or complex basket, a woven or coiled basket, a painted or unpainted basket, a large or miniature basket, an antique or modern basket, or a creation by a certain artisan. One may find handmade baskets for a few dollars or pay thousands for a rare and extraordinary example.

Collecting baskets helps to connect a person to history as well as gives them an appreciation of an artisan's talent. When starting a collection one must decide what he or she wants in the collection. By establishing standards, the collection will have more appeal. When collecting, do research and learn as much as possible before beginning. Taking a class from a craftsperson who has researched traditions of a particular style such as Kentucky White Oak is a good way to start.

When collecting, there are a number of factors one should consider before making or purchasing: craftsmanship, design, ornamentation, originality, and condition of the baskets.

As a collection grows, one must consider the care of baskets as they display their treasures. The finest baskets are works of art and should be handled as such in display and use. Also, the value of the collection should be considered. A rider on an insurance policy may be needed to cover the baskets.

Care and Cleaning of Baskets

Whether one collects antique or contemporary baskets or makes his or her own baskets, they should be cared for so they will last. A basket will last indefinitely if treated properly; even if it is used for its intended purpose. An antique basket is identified by the

patina, so it should be carefully preserved. Consider the following:

1. If the basket material is unfinished, use a gentle vacuum cleaner; one-inch paint brush, feather duster or cloth to remove dust and dirt. When dusting, be aware of any mildew, cracking of fibers or paints, change in color, or damage by insects or rodents who love to eat plant fiber. If insect damage is evident, a few mothballs near – not touching – may help.
2. Unfinished wood baskets should not have water applied directly, as this can cause staining. Wood always enjoys humidity, so if the basket is in a dry environment such as a heated house, one may mist it with warm water to evenly moisten the inside and outside of the basket. Avoid excessive water. Baskets may be put in a shower room to add humidity.
3. Any finished surfaces of baskets can be gently cleaned with a wood cleaner product.
4. Reed or other grass baskets can be cleaned with water or gentle vacuum.
5. If a basket is damaged or badly soiled, consider what effect repair will have on the value. Unless it is done professionally, the value of the basket may be lost.
6. Handle old baskets gently. Handles and rims are particularly vulnerable and should be treated so. Never pick up an unfamiliar old basket by its handle or one side. Use both hands, placing them on each side of the basket and lifting it carefully.
7. Shellac and varnishes applied to old baskets will completely destroy the value and make them brittle.
8. Linseed oil will imitate the effects of age by darkening and adding a pleasing sheen to a basket in the short term, but over time it will attract and retain dirt until the surface is black. The use of linseed oil is largely irreversible.
9. Some add mineral oil to willow baskets.
10. Exposing baskets to direct sunlight will bleach and dry out materials. Dry baskets can become brittle and fragile.

Popular Basket Styles

Contemporary basket makers are fortunate that many resources, workshops, and supplies are readily available, allowing them to work with a variety of basket teachers, styles, techniques and materials. Some examples may be pine needle, antler, bark, willow, leather, honeysuckle, wisteria, and fabric.

A. Shaker

According to Martha Wetherbee, nationally recognized authority on Shaker basketry, the Shaker basket was originated in New York with knowledge learned from the Algonquin Indians. However, a member of the Shaker community in Kentucky is credited with developing the style. Listed below are characteristics of those baskets made by the Shakers.



This is an example of a Shaker "cathead" basket.

1. Most Shaker baskets were made of black/brown ash. There was not a ready supply of black/brown ash in Kentucky, so Kentucky Shakers usually used straw, poplar and oak. There are examples of these at South Union. There are some Shaker baskets at Shakertown at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, made of black/brown ash.
2. They have a carved outside rim instead of

a splint.

3. Baskets were made on a mold, insuring a perfect shape.
4. Baskets were light in weight.
5. Shakers strived for perfect order (creation of beauty) and neatness in their baskets.
7. Majority of Shaker baskets have square bottoms and round sides.
8. Shakers did not make oval baskets.

B. Bushwhacker

Another style of basket that people called Shaker was the bushwhacker. This style was made by the groups of Dutch Hotalings and German Propers in the mountains of West Taghkanic in New York State around the turn of the century.



The bushwhacker basket was often mistaken for a Shaker product.

C. Nantucket

Although the Nantucket did not originate in Kentucky, it is a very popular style being taught by many shops and guilds in the state. This basket was unique to the island off the coast of Massachusetts. The Nantucketers learned to make baskets from the Indians; however, these baskets were fragile and not useful for farmers. They began making baskets with wood bottoms with wooden ribs nailed to the bottom. The nails were abrasive, so they began making a groove in the bottom,

and the ribs were pounded into the groove. Many types of baskets today use this technique. The Nantucket basket was perfected by the whalers on lightships.



The Nantucketers developed a basket style that is sturdy and beautiful.

In 1945, Jose Reyes settled in Nantucket. In 1948 he began to put lids on the basket and introduced the Nantucket purse. The Nantucket Lightship basket is not simply a basket or handbag, but an emblem that says “Nantucket.” It is a usable collector’s item that increases in value as it takes on a golden patina that comes with age. The label on a basket made by an early basket maker, Mitchie Reyes, used to read: “I was made on Nantucket, I’m strong and I’m stout, Don’t lose me or burn me, and I’ll never wear out.”



The sturdy Nantucket purse is popular but costly.

Summary

Historically, baskets were made for an intended and everyday use. These humble utilitarian objects often reveal history, artistry, and integrity that have outlasted and transcended their original function. Their forms, materials, techniques, and decoration all reflect the personal and cultural identity of their makers and often embody the spirit of the ethnic and regional traditions in which they were made and used. It should be a challenge to those who love baskets to attempt to reconnect historic baskets with their traditions and to link aesthetic, functional, and cultural appreciation. By researching, making, or collecting baskets, one will have a greater appreciation of how a deceptively simple object has carried significant meaning throughout history.

The following basket weaving organizations and groups have contributed to the resurgence in basket making:

- Kentucky Basket Association—meeting usually held in July
- Woven Together in Western Kentucky Guild—held in February
- Bluegrass Area Basketmakers Seminar—held in June

This publication has been reviewed by well known Kentucky basketmakers:

Charlotte Haney—Paris
Beth Hester—Scottsville
Kay Lee—Mt. Sterling

References

Books

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Neal, Julia. The Kentucky Shakers, Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982.

Eaton, Allen H. Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands, New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973.

Shaw, Robert. American Baskets, New York, NY: Clarkson Potter, 2000.

Law, Rachel Nash and Cynthia W. Taylor, Appalachian White Oak Basketmaking – Handing Down the Basket, Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991-2001.

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Kennedy, Gerrie; Galen Beale and Jim Johnson. Shaker Baskets and Poplarware, Stockbridge, MA: Berkshire House, 1992.

Daugherty, Robin T. Splint Woven Basketry, Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 1986.

Siler, Lyn. The Basket Book, New York, NY: Sterling Publishing Co., 1988.

Lawrence, Martha R. Lightship Baskets of Nantucket, West Chester, PA: Schiffer Publishing, LTD, 1990.

Wetherbee, Martha and Nathan Taylor. Shaker Baskets, Sanbornton, NH: Martha Wetherbee Basket Shop, 1988.

Irvin, John R. Basket & Basket Makers in Southern Appalachia, West Chester, PA: Schiffer Publishing, LTD, 1982.

Stephenson, Sue H. Basketry of the Appalachian Mountains, Cincinnati, OH: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1977.

Information Sheets

The Fine Art of White Oak Basket Making by Ollie & Lester Childress.

White Oak Split Baskets by Willard & Frances Glass.

Appalachian Crafts by Robin & Mary Reed.

[URL:kentucky.gov/Newsroom/kentuckyartisancenter/robinreedbarkbaskets.htm](http://kentucky.gov/Newsroom/kentuckyartisancenter/robinreedbarkbaskets.htm) .

[URL:www.mammothcavebasketmakers.com/BM31W_Report.htm](http://www.mammothcavebasketmakers.com/BM31W_Report.htm) by Tony Van Winkle.

Other Resources

History, Preservation and Marketing of Oak Baskets

Tape contains two segments—total time of 28 minutes

Segment 1—KET presentation of Lestel Childress, a fifth generation basket maker from Edmonson County

Segment 2—Tips on collecting and preserving oak baskets. Beth Hester, Allen County basket maker, discusses how Kentucky baskets have become nationally recognized.

Produced by University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, available in VHS And DVD. (Contact your local County Extension Office)

For Rent: actual baskets and video – cost, \$25.00 for 1 month

Suitcase of Basketry, Kentucky Museum of Arts and Crafts

Attn: Robyn Slein

715 W. Main St., Louisville, KY 40202

(502) 589-0155 Ext. 231

Display of *Steps of Basket Making* - Kentucky Historical Society and Kentucky Arts Council

Contact Bob Gates, Kentucky Folk Life, Agencies of the Kentucky Commerce Cabinet

(502) 564-1792, <http://history.ky.gov>

Some Places to View Kentucky Baskets

Appalachian Museum – Berea, KY

Artisan Center – Berea, KY

Kentucky Historical Society – Frankfort, KY

Shakertown at Pleasant Hill – Pleasant Hill, KY

Shakertown at South Union – South Union, KY

Western Kentucky University – Bowling Green, KY. Contact Lynne Ferguson (270) 745-6082

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