

Making Cordage or Rope

Introduction

Rope is the product that was essential to daily life in a Powhatan village. It was used to make fishnets and lines, baskets, ceramics, and was used in clothing and the manufacture of textiles. Most importantly, rope was used during the house building process to lash together the yehakin's wooden frame and to sew the woven mats onto the wooden frame.

Rope, also called cordage, was made of the inner bark of trees, animal tendons, and plant fibers. Powhatan women probably gathered most rope-making materials and made most of the rope needed in their own work. The use of rope in a Powhatan village would have been extensive and rope making may have been an activity that occurred throughout the year, possibly even on a daily basis.

Most of the documentation that we have about Powhatan rope comes from the written accounts of the early seventeenth-century Englishmen. Because the material used to make rope is natural and decomposes easily, it usually does not survive archaeologically. Rope is, however, archaeologically documented in the form of impressions on ceramics, which survive from the time period.

Primary Source Accounts of Rope Making:

Betwixt their hands and thighs, their women use to spin, barks of trees, deare sinews, or a kind of grasse they call Pemmanaw, of these they make a thred very even and readily. This thred serveth for many uses: As about their housing, apparel, and also they make nets for fishing, for the quantity as formally braded as ours. They make also with it lines for angles.

John Smith, *A Map of Virginia* (1612). In *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580-1631) Vol. I*, p. 163-164.

...their Cordage, which they make of their naturall hemp and flax together with their Cunning dressing of that and preserving the whole yeare great Litches or bundells of the same to be used upon any occasion; and of their girdells, which they make of silke grasse, much like St. Francis Cordon [the girdle used by the monks of the Franciscan order is of twisted cord, and knotted].

William Strachey, *The History of Travelle into Virginia Britania* (1612). (Wright & Freund, eds.), p. 75.

Objectives

In this lesson, students will learn through participation about the materials, manufacture and uses of Powhatan cordage.

Materials

- Raffia (this is not native to Virginia, but is the most similar commercially available plant material)
- Piece of cordage
- Discussion Questions handout
- Optional: examples of baskets or other material culture made with rope

Strategy

1. Describe the importance of rope to the Powhatans using the introductory material and any outside research.
2. Arrange students in small groups. Allow students a few minutes to read and discuss the questions. Students should take notes on the Discussion Questions handout.
3. Review the questions with the class.
4. Demonstrate Rope Making Method 1 for students, then allow students to attempt to make rope using this method on their own.

Method 1:

Fold a long piece of raffia in half. The two lengths of fiber extending from the fold should be twisted separately in the same direction. This can be done by twisting each fiber separately with the fingers, or by asking two visitors to each twist one end of the raffia while the third visitor holds the center loop. Then carefully twist the center loop in the same direction as the previously twisted fibers. This will twist the two separately twisted fibers into one single cord. Continue down the length of fiber. Additional raffia may be spliced into the piece of rope by folding the new piece and placing the center at the point where the two fibers separate, then continue the twisting process.

5. Demonstrate Rope Making Method 2 for students, then allow students to attempt to make rope using this method on their own.

Method 2 (thigh rolling):

Fold a long piece of raffia in half. Lay the two folded lengths on your thigh. Using your hand, roll the two lengths on your thigh until the two lengths twist into the cord. This is the most historically accurate method of rolling cordage.

Discussion Questions

1. What materials would the Powhatans have used to make rope?
2. What do we make our rope from today?
3. What can the rope be used for once it is made?
4. Do we use rope today? How?
5. Look at a piece of cordage carefully. How do you think this was made?
6. Do you think rope was important to the Powhatan Indians' lifestyle? Why?