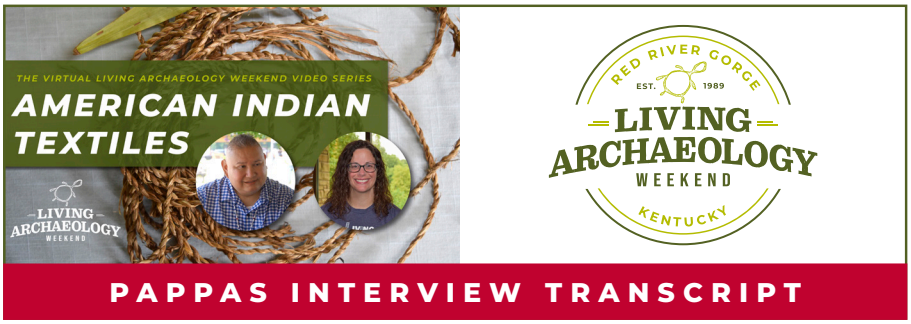

PAPPAS INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee: Ms. Christina Pappas, Archaeologist, State Cultural Resource Specialist, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Kentucky Office, Lexington, Kentucky

Interview date: August 16, 2020

Subjects: Archaeology, American Indian textiles, botany and Living Archaeology Weekend

Interviewer: Tom Law, Producer, Voyageur Media Group, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio

Location: Gladie Visitor Center, Red River Gorge, Daniel Boone National Forest, Kentucky

Notes: This transcript only covers the interview portion of the shoot. The sandal demonstration portion was not transcribed.

Q. Could you please introduce yourself in the context for Living Archaeology Weekend?

A. "Okay. My name is Chris Pappas and I'm an archaeologist. I work with the USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service. I have been an archaeologist for almost 20 years and in that time, I really spent most of my research focusing on the Native people's textiles, traditions of the southeastern US, and specifically Kentucky."

Q. What are you going to be demonstrating?

A. "So today, we're going to take a look at specifically slippers - the types of footwear that Native peoples would have been wearing in the past when they were exploring rockshelters or caves or just kind of, you know, stomping around through creeks and whatnot."

Q. How long have you been working with Living Archaeology Weekend?

A. "I've been working with Living Archaeology Weekend now for almost seven years and I think it's really important because it's this opportunity where we can show folks and really connect them to the technologies and the material culture of the past, and kind of help them really build a relationship with this environment and the world around them, to show them why it's important to study it, to preserve it, to protect it, to be a part of it."

Q. Can you repeat the way you introduce the subject to students at Living Archaeology Weekend?

A. "Okay. Let's play a little game. Let's take a moment and think about what Native peoples were wearing in the past. What was a Native person 2000 years ago wearing? They're home with their family. What does that look like? What does that home look like? Are they sitting by a campfire hanging out by a creek? What time of year is it? Is it the middle of winter? Are they wearing leathers? Or what if it's the middle of summer? What if it's a hot, humid, Kentucky, July afternoon? What do you see them wearing?"

Q. Chris, what is a common misconception about the clothing that ancient American Indians wore in the Woodlands of the eastern United States?

A. "Most people think that ancient Native peoples primarily wore skins. That was it, and Hollywood has really helped feed that image to us, but that's just what a lot of people envision. And skins were definitely part of the wardrobe, especially in the winter, hides, things like that. They were really important, but most places, especially in the Southeast, summertime, hot, humid, sticky - you're not going to be wearing heavy leather or shirts and pants and britches all the time. And we know that Native peoples were modest, just like us, so they also wanted something else."

"We needed that kind of other option and that's where plant materials come in. Everyone has this kind of sense of modesty. You want to keep your private parts private and in the middle of a hot summer, wearing a heavy leather skirt is probably not going to make that a very comfortable thing, both for a man or a woman. So, when we start bringing in these plant fibers, like milkweed or singing nettle, you turn it into skirts, to kilts, to breechcloths and (indiscernible) maintaining the (indiscernible) protection, but also giving you breathability, comfort. It's just a much more pleasant experience for everyone involved."

Q. What variety of textiles did ancient American Indians make?

A. "Looking back through the archaeological record, looking at stuff that we have found fragments of from different sites and different types of sites, we know that ancient Native peoples were making kilts, skirts. They would make mantles, which kind of look like ponchos or shawls. We also know that they made slippers and different types of footwear."

"Looking at some of the early historic paintings, images, we see very colorful clothing. We see lots of feathers. We see painting and design in beadwork. We see open-mesh, lacy fabrics and structures; but again, still kind of in that shawls, mantles, kilt - things like that. We see that they would manufacture decorative straps and sashes that they would wear and incorporate into their dress."

Q. What types of plant fibers were used for these textiles?

A. "So, depending on what textiles they were going to make, kind of dictates what kind of plants they were going to use, and probably vice versa, to a certain extent. So, your very fine gauzy fabrics, your lacy shawls or mantles - you're going to use

something where you can get a very fine fiber, something like milkweed or stinging nettle. You can actually get very fine, delicate fibers out of it. Your more utilitarian stuff, maybe, you know, stuff - more utilitarian fabrics, things that you might wear as a kilt that you were going to be kneeling on the ground a lot. You might go for a more heavy-wearing fiber like a dogbane or you can just go ahead and make a thicker cord with your milkweed or nettle."

"Your slippers - that's going to be a type of textile that's going to take a lot of use. That's your footwear for climbing rocks and exploring caves and stomping through creeks. We're going to use something that has a very strong fiber: rattlesnake master, those long-leafed fibers are very strong and very durable and very flexible. So, the plants that Native peoples had available to them presented a huge opportunity and diverse array of materials that they could make, really, any variety of textile that they could come up with."

Q. We've also had invasive species. Could you talk about indigenous plants versus the plants that might be around that aren't indigenous to this region?

A. "Right. At historic contact with pioneer peoples coming into Eastern Kentucky, they brought with them all manner of different plant fibers. They brought with them linen. They brought with them hemp. So, those have qualities that are very similar to what Native peoples were already using. So, linen is actually a really good comparison to a milkweed, even very finely processed dogbane, definitely nettle, and stinging nettle is also an Old World fiber."

"So, when we look through some of those early historic accounts of the first European explorers going through the Southeast, they talk about the types of textiles that they encounter. And they talk about the types of yarns and threads and compare them to fine Portuguese lace, which at that point in time, was the be-all and end-all of good textile manufacture, and they were - you know, there are quotes of them saying they were making these lace yarns that were as fine as the finest Portuguese lace."

"So, we can know that the Native peoples were expert spinners, expert weavers, and they were really adept at their craft of manipulating these fibers. [edit] So, we know that from these comparisons, both from what the historic Europeans were reporting, but also what we see in some of the archaeological examples, that Native peoples were making extremely fine, well-crafted threads and yarns and were capable of producing a wide variety of textiles. They were able to make both very fine, delicate lace and heavy-duty utilitarian fabrics."

Q. How do archaeologists know what textiles American Indians made?

A. "So, archaeologists know about the different types of textiles through a couple of different lines of evidence. First is - and in very rare examples, actual, physical remains of textiles - different preservation environments from burial mounds, dry rockshelters, sometimes even bogs, will actually preserve textiles so we can see the material, the fibers, the actual structures, the weaves, sometimes even complete garments."

"Another line of evidence that archaeologists rely on is textile-impressed ceramics. So, we can actually see, again, the same thing: the structures, the weaves. We can't see the actual materials, but we can see the impressions of them and we can see how finely processed they were, how they were making their knots, how they were splicing in new materials, how they made their ends, how they made their selvages and their fringe, on even some impressions."

"Another line of evidence archaeologists rely on is early historic accounts. So, based on some of that information, they would actually describe what the Native peoples that they met were wearing. Some of them would also provide paintings and etchings and sketches that would show, in some instances, extremely great detail. You could see fine weaves of lace. You can see fringe hanging off different fabrics. You can see how the sashes were finger woven and how different colors would work through the yarns. So, through those different lines of evidence, archaeologists were able to piece together the textile traditions of Native peoples."

Q. Why is the archaeological evidence of these ancient textiles so rare?

A. "So, the environments that actual textiles are preserved in are really specific and therefore really rare. So, burial contexts - you have to have very specific soil pH, anaerobic environment, stuff that's just going to stop the degradation, the decomposition; those little microbes that want to chew up your fibers and turn them into dust. You need a way to stop those. So, those types of anaerobic contexts are extremely rare. Sometimes you are able to encounter those in burial mounds."

"Another way you'll sometimes get that is contact with metal. So, we actually do find preserved textiles on copper."

"Another environment that tends to have good preservation of textiles are dry caves and rockshelters. So, when you have that lack of water getting easily into the deposits and you have very, kind of, dry soils, what that means is that the decomposition of textiles is very slow, very minimal. So, you will end up with these - well, what you will end up having is, in these dry caves and rockshelters, that the soil will slowly build up. It stays dry and the textiles are preserved. So, when archaeologists are able to encounter them, they're intact. They're in pretty good shape. We're actually able to recover large pieces and sometimes intact objects."

"In Kentucky, Mammoth Cave actually has really fantastic preservation - not just for the historic materials that you will see on the tours, but also for ancient materials. So, way far back in the cave, you'll find intact slippers, bowls, torches that are 2000 years old that look like someone set them down yesterday. [edit] So, in these dry, stable environments, those materials are able to be preserved for millennia."

Q. Chris, why is it important that we understand the textile technologies of ancient American Indians from this region?

A. "Textiles are a class of material culture that are very sensitive to change, to idiosyncratic changes, to how the wind blows on a given day; and they reflect all of that. They encompass all of that. They capture all of that. Textiles are an additive technology. Stone tools - you are removing material. Making a pot - you are removing

clay and shaping it. But a textile has every single step of the production process captured in that object. So, by studying textiles, we can learn what season folks were doing this in. We can look at them and understand how Native peoples were using them. Were they repairing stuff multiple times with different types of raw materials, because that's what they could get? Were they using these materials to signal their affiliation with different clans? Were they using it to indicate status? These materials were also really important for wealth, for trade, but they are also utilitarian objects."

"Studying textiles is really important because we know that as much as 90 percent of material culture in the past was a perishable type of culture. It was a textile. It was made of wood. It was made of grass. That's stuff that's just not preserved well in the archaeological record. So, when we have an opportunity to study these things, we have to jump at it, because it's a way that we can really understand the past."

Q. What can viewers learn from these ancient technologies?

A. "I think it's important that folks learn about these materials and these traditions because it's a way of connecting everyone to their distant past. Whether you are of European descent or American Indian descent, we all need clothing. We all need textiles for our everyday lives. It's a way that we can connect to that distant past. Our concerns - about being warm, having something soft to wear, having something that makes you look good and feel good - those were the same considerations that folks in the distant past had. So, by studying these materials, we can go ahead and connect ourselves to them. We're able to put ourselves in their shoes and understand what their life was like, and take that information into our everyday lives; use that as a way to understand our neighbors, understand people, understand different cultures."

"Regardless of where you're from, of where you go, everyone uses textiles in everyday life. So, by understanding not just textiles from the past but why they matter and are important to everyone, you can build these bridges and you can connect yourself to other people who can be very different from you. That's one of the great things about Living Archaeology Weekend. We build bridges through technology and that's something that we can do with textiles."

"So, regardless of where we come from, where we go in our everyday life, we're all using textiles. And by studying the textiles from our past, it allows us to make these connections with people - no matter how different they are from us - and that's what Living Archaeology Weekend does. We use technology to build bridges, to connect with other people and that's the same thing with studying textiles. We use it as a way to connect to other people."

Q. Why is it important to preserve this knowledge and these articles?

A. "So, it's really important that we all are good stewards of the past, that we all are respectful. We preserve. We protect. So, in the future, we are able to share the information. We want everyone to be able to learn about this, because this is a way that we are connected, not just to each other, but to our past but also to our future. So, I think it's really important that we all work together to be good stewards of this material and these sites in this wonderful area."

Q. So, after years and years of demonstrating ancient textiles and other technologies to students, how does it make you feel when you can see in their eyes that it's resonating?

A. "That is probably one of my favorite moments at Living Archaeology Weekend, when you're talking to some student - who just 30 seconds ago had all of these stereotypes and all of these misconceptions about what Native peoples were like, what they dressed like, what they wore, what they did - and you start showing them that there's this other, this whole other world that was going on and that was completely different from what they ever thought possible, what they ever knew about. To see their eyes light up, to see that moment of connection, of realizing, one, that these people in the past were just like them, had the same needs they had, the same concerns they had, the same goals they had."

"They wanted to be warm. They wanted to be loved. They wanted shelter. They wanted a good meal. They wanted a warm shirt on a cold day. And then to realize that they can go ahead and connect to their past through this material. That this home - this area, the Red River Gorge that they are standing in - is part of the story that's been going on for thousands of years. To see that kind of light up in their mind, that moment when they become stewards of the past, of when they take ownership of the story, it's one of the best feelings ever."

- End -

This transcription was edited by producer Tom Law for spelling, extraneous conversation, false starts and noise interruptions. The text may be used for research and educational purposes only. All additional uses require the expressed, advanced permission of the Living Archaeology Weekend Steering Committee, and the interviewee.