

USES FOR CATTAIL



CATTAIL MATS AND BARK SHEETS COVERING A WIGWAM AT PLIMOTH PLANTATION, PLYMOUTH, MA.

Aside from many food products and medicines, Native Americans used cattails for a variety of types of weaving. The different uses for cattails (*Typha latifolia*) have been well chronicled in the early historic documents of New England. Before European contact, the Native Americans of New England apparently did not make use of conventional looms for weaving. However, New England tribes did weave reeds and other materials into mats, baskets and other items using hand-held finger-weaving and braiding techniques. Woven bags, belts and straps, shoes, military equipment, and even dolls were made from reeds like cattail. Specialized weaving beyond hand-held twining (using a formal loom) did not appear in part because birchbark was readily available in New England for containers and coverings.



CORDAGE MADE FROM INDIGENOUS PLANTS.

Blankets and mats were traditionally made on a suspension loom from rushes or inner bark. In 1524, European trader Verrazzano noticed that Native Americans preferred indigenous hide and woven cloth to European counterparts; early attempts to exchange these items were unsuccessful. By the mid 1600's however, the Fur Trade expanded and woolen trade blankets began to replace aboriginal textiles and clothing. Weaving and other everyday use of cattails by Native Americans continued until the early 1900's by many tribes from the Mesquakie of the Western Great Lakes to the Kickapoo of Mexico.

Cattail and bulrush reeds, Indian hemp (dogbane) and wormseed plant inner fibers, the inner bark of basswood and cedar, and roots of evergreen trees were bundled or twisted into cords for weaving mats, bags, baskets, belts, or other items. Europeans were impressed with the industrial application of indigenous hemp found growing in the 'New World'. In 1634, William wood remarked on Native American made fishing lines "... made them of their owne hemp more curiously wrought, of ftronger materials than ours, hooked with bone hookes..." Cord several yards long was made by first shredding or pounding fibrous plant material, soaking in water, and then twisting two-ply on the thigh with the palm of the hand. Preparation of inner barks is more complicated and includes boiling the material in wood ashes to soften and separate the fibers.



MY FRIEND JIM DINA IN CONNECTICUT HAS MADE BEAUTIFUL MATS FROM CATTAIL LEAVES, CENTER STALKS, AND PHRAGMITIES REED

A 1622 account by a European in New England describes aboriginal mats used to cover the outside of the round, framed Native American houses, or wigwams; in an abandoned Native American village "There was nothing left but two or three pieces of old mats, and a little sedge". Weaving Mats Types of mats woven by Native Americans in New England in the 1600's include mats woven for the exterior, interior, door flap, chimney coverings and partitions of wigwams, mats for sitting, sleeping or eating upon, and mats used for burials.



DETAIL OF THE CATTAIL MATS ON THE OUTSIDE OF A WIGWAM.

In 1634, William Wood wrote about Native American women gathering flagges in summer to make mats for their wigwams and he describes the wigwams of New England as: "very strong and handfome, covered with clofe-wrought mats of their owne weaving, which deny entrance to any drop of raine, though it come both fierce and long, neither can the piercing North winde find a crannie, through which he can conveigh his cooling breath, they be warmer than our Englifh houses."



DETAIL OF THE SELVAGE OF A SEWN CATTAIL MAT.

The double-thickness sewn cattail mats used for house coverings, combined with the finely woven rush mats (more detailed in their construction and decoration) hung from the inside walls, were quite effective in keeping out the weather. Cattail mats for the wigwam exterior were sewn using a bone needle, a thinly split and polished

curved deer rib, perforated near the center to thread the string through. The needle was passed through the stalks, and across the mat, at intervals of about six inches.



SEWING A CATTAIL MAT WITH A DEER RIB NEEDLE

The woven reed or bark mats for the interior used the suspension loom where the ends are braided to form an even edge and then hung from a crossbar between two posts; and a finer weft is twined or woven in with the fingers. The interior mats of wigwams in the 1600's were decorated with several colors, including black, blue, red, and yellow. Roger Williams, in 1643, describes that the inside walls of Narragansett wigwams were lined with Munnotaúbana or woven hangings that were dyed and embroidered. Native Americans living in the Great Lakes region traditionally generally have geometric woven patterns, but zoomorphic designs, such as the thunderbird, sometimes appear on small mats used as wrappers for ceremonial bundles.



WOVEN INTERIOR MATS ON BOTTOM WITH SEWN EXTERIOR MATS SHOWING BEHIND ON TOP FROM A WIGWAM AT PLIMOTH PLANTATION.



EXAMPLES OF TWINED WOVEN INTERIOR BULLRUSH MATS AT PLIMOTH PLANTATION