

Lenape Feather Mantles or Capes

by Jim Rementer
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Much has been written about the clothing of the American Indians, but not much was written about the capes or mantles of feathers worn by many tribes in the eastern and southeastern United States. Perhaps this is because most tribes stopped making them by the early 1800s, and also because the material from which they were made was very perishable and subject to insect damage. Early written evidence for use of capes made of turkey feathers, as well as other types of feathers, has been documented for the Lenape or Delaware Indians. They continued to be made into the late 1700s or perhaps early 1800s as recorded by the Moravian missionaries and memories of them were passed down through oral tradition.



Artist W. Langdon Kihn's concept of Pocahontas wearing a feather Cape was in a publication by National Geographic in 1955. The original painting was dated 1945.

In recent times there has been a renewed interest in these feather capes, and there is at least one book out that shows a possible construction technique. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of early writing that details not only the construction but also the size of the feather capes or even the feather blankets.

Early Accounts:

What follows is early writing about the use of these capes among the Lenape arranged in chronological order. These accounts began as early as 1610 with the following:

FROM "THE THIRD VOYAGE OF MASTER HENRY HUDSON," BY ROBERT JUET, 1610

"This day many of the people came aboard, some in Mantles of Feathers, and some in Skinnes of divers sorts of good Furres. Some women also came to us with Hempe. They had red Copper Tabacco pipes, and other things of Copper they did weare about their neckes."

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LEITER OF ISAACK DE RASIERES
TO SAMUEL BLOMMAERT, 1628

Their clothing is [so simple as to leave the body] almost naked. In the winter time they usually wear a dressed deer skin; some have a bear's skin about the body; some a coat of scales; some a covering made of turkey feathers which they understand how to knit together very oddly, with small strings. They also use a good deal of duffel cloth, which they buy from us, and which serves for their blanket by night, and their dress by day. The women are fine looking, of middle stature, well proportioned

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DeVries 1642

They also wear coats of turkey's feathers, which they know how to plait together; but since our Netherland nation has traded here, they trade their beavers for duffels cloth, which we give for them, and which they find more suitable than the beavers,

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Author Unknown, 1647

They seem to despise all the torments that can be inflicted on them without once uttering a sigh - go almost naked except a lap which hangs before their private parts and on the shoulders a deer skin or a mantle, a fathom square, of woven Turkey feathers or peltries sewed together. Journal of New Netherland

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Lindestrom, 1655

Lindestrom wrote, "(A) quilt of turkey feathers (is worth) one ell of white sewan, a quilt of painted feathers, two ells of white sewan, or one ell of blue sewan" and, "They also make very fine and beautiful quilts of painted bird feathers. In the first place they tie them with meshes like nets, yet very fine, then fasten the feathers in the meshes, so neat and strong that not one feather can come loose from it; it would sooner go clear off. " - Peter Lindestrom, 1655.

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The feather mantles were "to be found even at the present day among the Indians and these in winter are a better protection against the cold than the best European blanket" - David Zeisberger, 1772

A possible Lenape name for a feather mantle or feather blanket turned up in a manuscript by Moravian missionary David Zeisberger dated 1772. The word is Tschuppiwei – a feather blanket. (Perhaps from chp- or chëp-separate + -puwe, type of feather – JR). – *E-mail from Ray Whritenour who has worked extensively with Moravian missionary writings.*

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The blankets made from feathers were also warm and durable. They were the work of the women, particularly of the old, who delight in such work, and indeed, in any work which shews that they are able to do their parts and be useful to society. It requires great patience, being the most tedious kind of work I have ever seen them perform, yet they do it in a most ingenious manner. The feathers, generally those of the turkey and goose, are so curiously arranged and interwoven together with thread or twine, which they prepare from the rind or bark of the wild hemp and nettle, that

ingenuity and skill cannot be denied them. They show the same talent and much forethought in making their Happis, the bands with which they carry their bags and other burdens; they make these very strong and lasting. - History Manners and Customs by John Heckewelder, ca. 1780

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One of the more recent accounts of making items of feathers is from 1834:

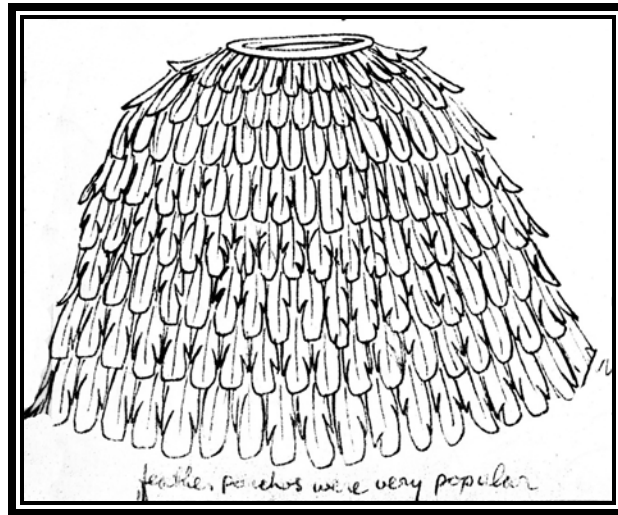
Nov 22, 1834 - "Blankets were made by sewing any kind of furred skins together which made a light and warm blanket. Some who were fond of curious blankets would construct one of feathers. This must have appeared singular enough. Were one to see a person at this day in the woods and they with a blanket on made of feathers, one would be at a loss to determine what kind of an animal it was." **Delaware Traditions From Kansas, Nahkoman to Isaac McCoy**, by Jay Miller.

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The blanket of today's dancer is, of course, the modern descendant of the beaver fur robes and turkey feather mantles used by the Delaware in their eastern homeland, or the buffalo robes which they employed later in the Midwest and on the Plains. - James Howard in Ceremonial Dress of the Delaware Man

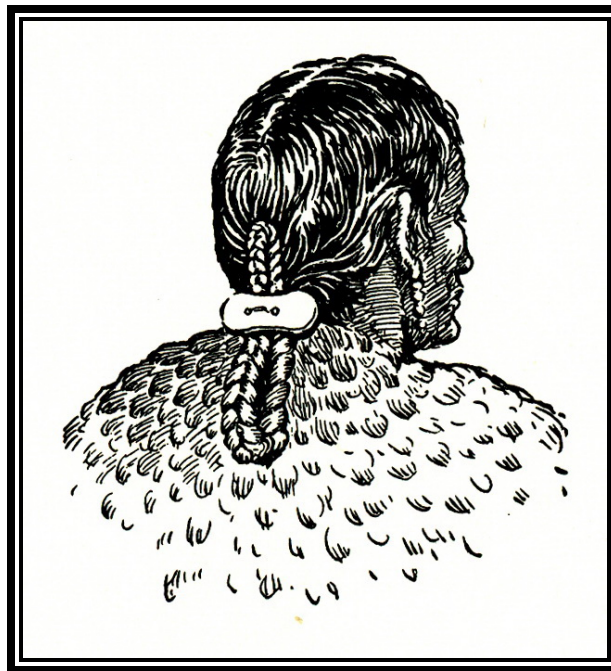
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"The enclosed description of the Lenape woman clothing is based upon an extensive file of ethnographic data pertaining to the Coastal Algonquian tribes. Only the poncho is a reconstruction; there are no early pictures of women with the upper part of the body covered, nor have any specimen been preserved. By 1750 the women had adopted blouses of colonial American origin, covered with silver brooches. However, there are several vague references during the 17th century to a poncho-like upper dress, and in this connection it is probably of some value that the Seminoles, also a tribe on the east coast, still wear poncho-like upper garments and separate skirts. Featherwork ponchos and mantles were very popular among the Delawares and their neighbors. . ." Ted Brassler, letter 22 Dec. 1967



Sketch of a possible form of a feather poncho done in 1967 by Ted Brassler.

Unfortunately, since no examples of these early capes seem to exist in various museums throughout the world, we cannot be certain of the technique used to create these beautiful garments. It is only in the 1960s that some effort was made to revive the manufacture of these Capes. Interestingly, such a revival occurred not only among the Delaware, but also among several southeastern tribes such as the Cherokee and Chickasaw.

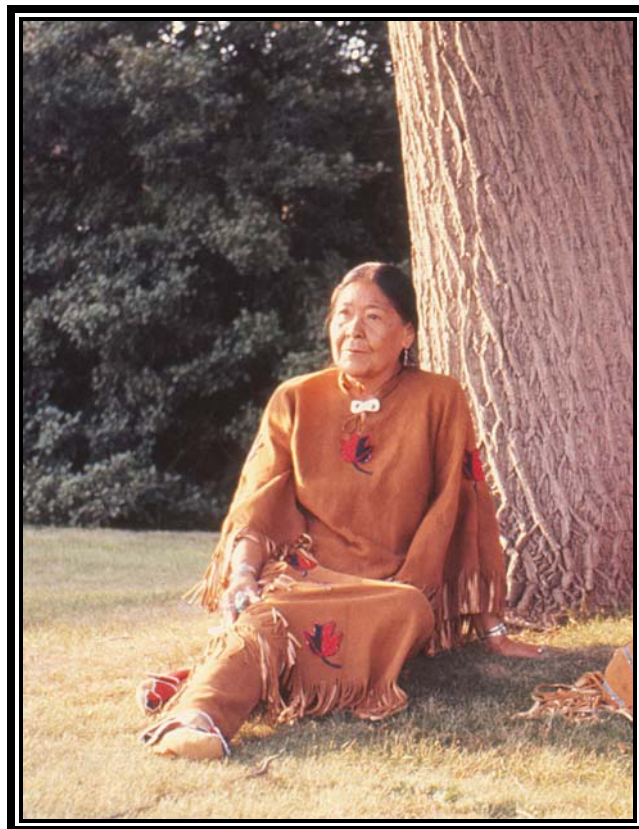


*Drawing of a Lenape woman wearing a feather cape from the book, *Dickon Among the Lenapes* by M. R. Harrington*

One Delaware tribal member who made an effort to revive early day Delaware deerskin clothing was Touching Leaves Woman (Nora Thompson Dean). Little concrete evidence was available and contact with professional people who had studied the material culture of the Delawares brought forth little in the way of descriptions of the clothing. Even less reliable illustrations were available.

Even deerhides were very difficult to find in the late 1800s and early 1900s by which time the main group of Delawares had been moved to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. Deer hides and deer meat were used as part of the main religious ceremony among the traditional Delawares but as Nora wrote in an article about the traditional religion: "In my day I used to see the elderly women cry and wipe the tears from their eyes with their aprons because there were no deer anymore. Every place the hunters went there were "No trespassing" signs. Nevertheless, the hunting songs were still sung." - A Remembrance of the Big House Church by Nora Thompson Dean in *The Lenape Indian: A Symposium*.

Fortunately, a source of deerskins was located and she was able to reconstruct her two-piece deerskin dress.



Other tribal members liked the look of the deerskin clothing and also made their own dresses as in this photograph of Louise Dean, Betty Skye, and Mary Louise Watters at a powwow in Dewey, Oklahoma.



Years later a friend was asking me about the feather Cape that Nora had been making and I wrote to him: "When her feather cape was only partly done Nora could no longer get the type of turkey feathers needed so she was only able to do about six rows. This cape was based on oral traditions that Nora had heard of the old Lenape ones, and on written descriptions. The one in the Museum of the American Indian photo had feathers going in all directions, but the writings said they could turn water; the drawings showed them to be arranged like shingles; and that matched what Nora had been told, and that is how she was doing. She wove 7 - 8" Bronze Turkey feathers into dark burlap-like cloth (she couldn't find a proper type of netting). These were arranged like shingles, overlapped about 1/2 of the exposed feather. I wish we could have finished it for Nora to wear, but it was just not to be." - *Letter to Claude Medford, 9 May 1986*



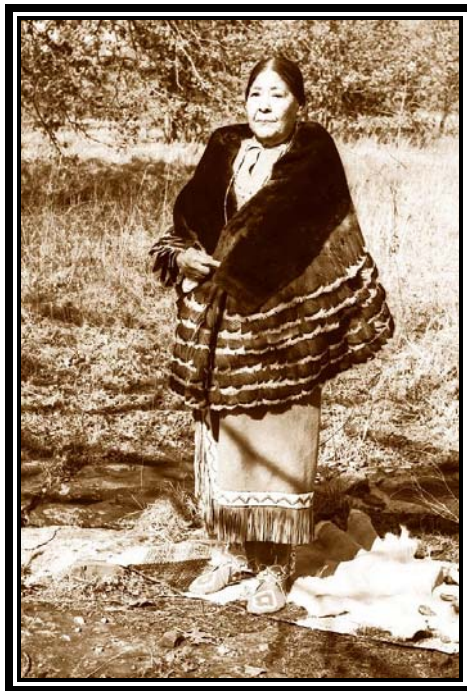
Pom-mah-pun-aqua born in Kansas about 1850. She was Nora's great-aunt and told her much about the older clothing styles.



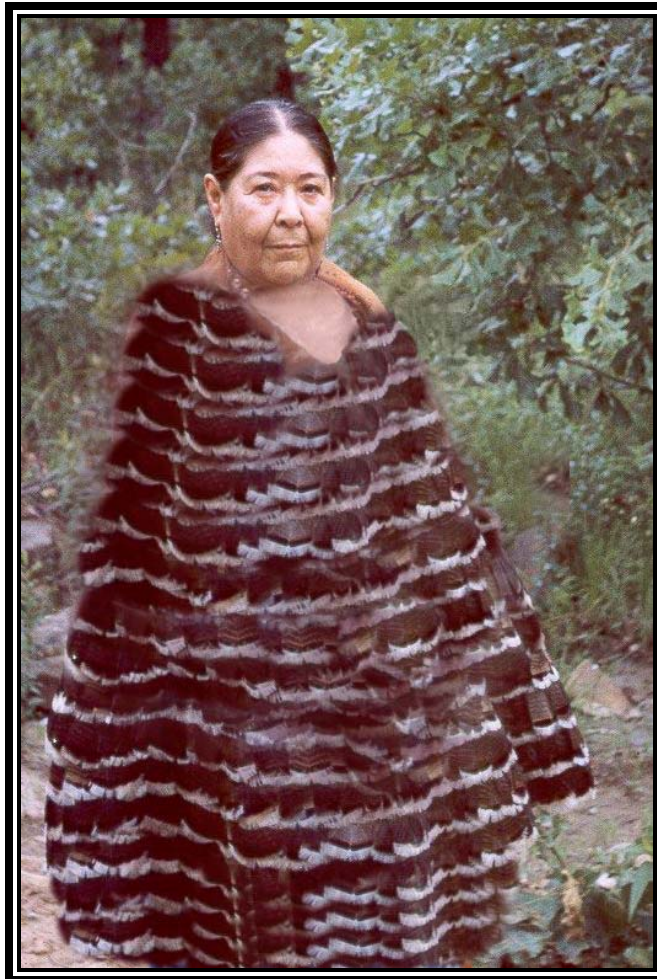
The feather cape Nora had just started with only two rows completed.



This is as much of the Cape as Nora was able to finish before she could no longer find a supplier of this type of turkey feather. The commercial producers of turkeys had switched to raising turkeys with white feathers.



For this photo Nora covered the unfinished part with some fake fur to make it look complete.



For the image above an editing program was used to make it look like the feathers went full-length.

Although Nora had been unable to complete her own feather cape she was able to make one eventually. Someone had contacted her to ask if she made dolls, and she said that she could. One thing that she said she would not do was to put real human hair on the doll because that was what was done with the dolls used in the Delaware Doll Dance Ceremony. Since turkey feathers were obviously too large to put on the doll standing 11 inches tall she substituted small feathers from a type of pheasant. Here is the date on which she began work on the doll from a letter I wrote to a friend:

“Nora just recently finished a doll for a collector, and is now about to start on another, in hide dress this time, and perhaps with a miniature feather cape.” - Letter to Ken Mynter, 29 December 1968.

This is the doll that Nora made in 1970. The doll sold for the grand price of \$35. The Doll has a miniature feather cape and is now in a private collection.



These are photos of the doll after Nora had just finished it.





This is a photo of the doll in a recent museum exhibit.



This has been a look back at an early style of clothing used by the Lenape at the time the Europeans arrived. We hope that more information about the feather cape style and technique will be found in the future.

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