

Basketry of the Wabanaki Indians

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The Wabanaki

The Wabanaki (People of the Dawn Land) are living Algonquian-speaking indigenous Native North Americans whose traditional homelands comprise what is today northern New England in the United States as well as Southeastern Quebec and the Canadian maritime provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. In the United States, there are five federally recognized Wabanaki tribes, all of which reside in the state of Maine: the Penobscot Nation (with a reservation in Penobscot County, Maine), the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Pleasant Point or Sipayik (with a reservation in Washington County, Maine), the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Indian Township (also with a reservation in Washington County, Maine), the Houlton Band of Maliseet (in Aroostook County, Maine), and the Aroostook Band of Micmac (also in Aroostook County, Maine). The Wabanaki also own trust lands (property with federal status owned by the tribe or tribal members) and fee lands (taxable property owned by tribal members but for which a tribe regulates use) in other parts of the state of Maine (Fig. 1). As of 2014, there were approximately 8,000 people on the membership rolls of the five Wabanaki tribes in Maine, with a far greater number in Canada.

A note here on terminology is important to avoid confusion. Today there are groups of people in Northern New England and Canada called “Abenaki,” historically a part of the larger Wabanaki Confederacy of Algonquian-speaking groups. In discussing basket making, we focus on the five federally recognized Wabanaki tribes now residing in Maine (as well as their kindred in Passamaquoddy, Mi'kmaq, and Malecite communities in Canada), not the US or Canadian Abenaki. Note that all groups have alternate spellings and pronunciations, including those that differ across the US-Canada border (e.g., Micmac or Mi'kmaq, Maliseet or Malecite). We will use Anglicized spellings that are in use and commonly accepted today in Maine. We will also use the terms “Indian,” “Native American,” “Native,” and “indigenous” interchangeably in referring to the Wabanaki people more generally.

History of Wabanaki Basketry

While historically Wabanaki baskets have been made from a variety of materials including birch, basswood, maple, spruce, and cedar, it is brown ash – also known as black ash (*Fraxinus nigra*) (Fig. 2) – that figures most prominently in Wabanaki basketry today. The place of ash basketry in Wabanaki life runs deep, as far into the past as collective memory can recount the story of how Gloosekap (alternately spelled Glooskap, Gluskabe, Gloosecap, Glooscap, or Klooskap) shot his arrows into the ash trees to create the Wabanaki people. Prior to European contact, the Wabanaki people in Maine were hunters and gatherers, who moved seasonally and utilized bark, wood, and tree roots from the forests along with aromatic sweetgrass and cattails from the coastal wetlands to craft utilitarian bags, boxes, and other containers (McBride & Prins, 1990). The Wabanaki people also utilized types of woven baskets for

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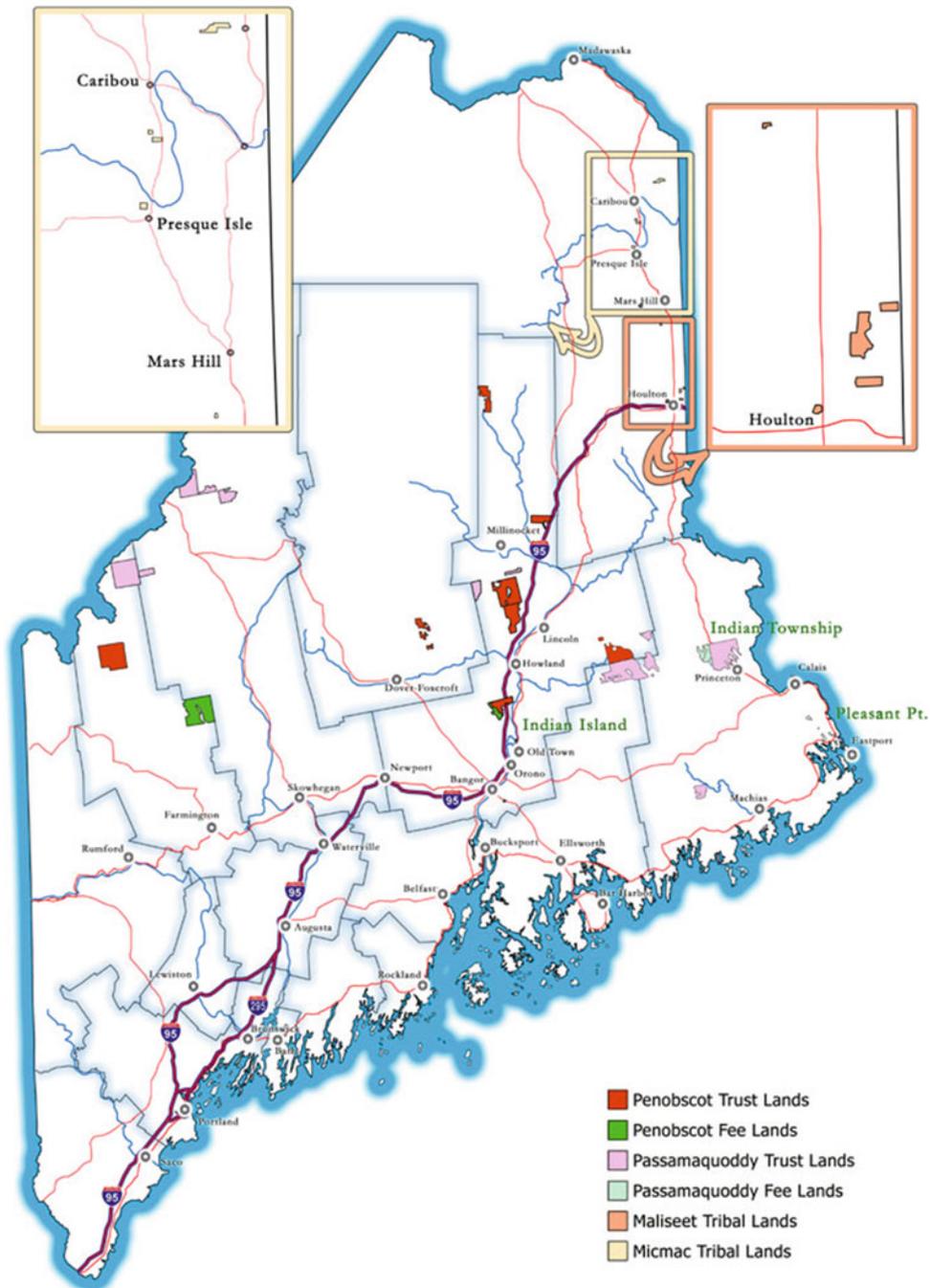


Fig. 1 Map of Wabanaki territory. Showing tribal reservations, trust, and fee lands in Maine (Courtesy of James Eric Francis, Sr.)

washing corn, sifting, and carrying supplies. Some evidence suggests that the arrival of Europeans and their roles as trading partners may have accelerated Wabanaki production of splint basketry – that is, baskets produced using thin uniform strips of wood braided or woven together – from forest resources like ash, cedar, spruce, and maple (McBride & Prins, 1990). It is clear that splint basketry – especially that constructed from the versatile brown ash – is central to Wabanaki cultural and spiritual life.

Historically a skill passed down within families, basket making took on new economic, cultural, and social meanings for Wabanaki communities beginning in the eighteenth century, as traders, tourists,



Fig. 2 Black ash trees. They can grow 60–70 f. in height and reach a trunk diameter of 8–24 in., producing a small cluster of branches high off the ground (Courtesy of Jennifer Neptune)



Fig. 3 Penobscot women and girl weaving outdoors on Indian Island, Maine, early twentieth century (Courtesy of Hudson Museum, the University of Maine)

museums, and basket makers helped shape a consumer market for Wabanaki baskets (Bourque & Labar, 2009). As non-Native vendors and collectors sought out Wabanaki baskets as consumer goods of artistic value, indigenous basket makers traveled to major cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia along the Eastern seaboard to sell their products (Neptune, 2008a). Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Wabanaki families set up encampments in well-known resort towns such as Kennebunkport and Bar Harbor on Mt. Desert Island, Maine, to sell their baskets and other crafts to wealthy summer residents and vacationers (McBride & Prins, 2009). New styles of ornamentation and decorative weaves accompanied



Fig. 4 Penobscot women and boy making baskets in their living room, early twentieth century (Courtesy of Hudson Museum, the University of Maine)

the introduction in the 1860s of labor-saving commercial aniline dyes, which allowed for a brighter and more varied basket color pallet (Neptune, 2008b; Whitehead, 2004). By the mid-1880s, new technologies improved the manufacturing of tools like wood splitters, gauges, and blocks for holding a basket's shape, which helped Wabanaki basket makers create even smaller and fancier decorative baskets (Mundell, 2008). For example, Penobscot men who worked at canoe factories in Old Town, Maine, used factory lathes to create new shapes and styles of basket blocks. By the turn of the twentieth century, tribal census data reveal that almost every Passamaquoddy and Penobscot household had at least one member whose primary occupation was basket maker. Making baskets was a communal and intergenerational activity (Figs. 3 and 4). Women would often host sweetgrass braiding parties in their homes, and children could observe the work of adults and sometimes make their own miniature baskets.

During the twentieth century, several historical events profoundly affected Wabanaki basket makers. A decline in tourism due to the Great Depression and the onset of World War II (in which many Wabanaki men and women served) and postwar Wabanaki migration to southern New England (spurred by new job opportunities and the desire to escape racial prejudice back home) led to a decline in the number of Wabanaki basket makers during the middle part of the twentieth century. From the 1950s to the 1980s, competition from foreign imports and the development of plastic containers, coupled with changes in the potato and fishing industries that led to less demand for Wabanaki utility baskets, promoted further decline in the number of basket makers. Moreover, during this time period, coastal development and changes in land use restricted Wabanaki access to traditional ash and sweetgrass gathering and selling sites. The northern extension of the interstate highway system I-95 during the 1960s diverted traffic away from the Penobscot reservation in Old Town, Maine, taking with it potential customers for basket makers. By the 1990s, it is estimated that there were fewer than one dozen Wabanaki basket makers left under the age of 40 (Neptune, 2008b).

In 1993, Wabanaki basket makers created the nonprofit Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA) to help market their baskets, educate the public about tribal issues, revitalize aspects of traditional Wabanaki languages and cultures, and pass on basket-making skills to younger generations through apprenticeships with elder basket makers. Wabanaki basket makers have written a number of books about Wabanaki basketry, including the styles of Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Micmac, and Maliseet basket makers (see Sanipass, 1990; Soctomah, 2003; Nichols, Francis, Francis, & Soctomah, 2008). Basket makers display and sell their baskets at a number of venues, including the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor,



Fig. 5 Emerald Ash Borer emerging from an ash tree (Photo by Jennifer Neptune. Courtesy of Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance)



Fig. 6 Splitting black ash splints with a wooden tool known as a splitter (Photo by Jennifer Neptune)

Maine, as well as seasonal basket shows at locations around the state of Maine, which also provide opportunities for extended families and friends to socialize (Neuman, 2010). Wabanaki basket makers also have a presence in larger international Native American arts markets, such as Santa Fe Indian Market, with weavers receiving first place and best of show ribbons. Today, museum-quality Wabanaki baskets made by well-known basket makers can fetch as much as a few thousand dollars apiece – a far cry from the pocket change that early twentieth-century tourists would often pay for baskets. For most weavers, basket making provides a modest income and may supplement other forms of employment. Moreover, for many Wabanaki people, basket making signifies a process of decolonization, as the production of baskets is inseparable from assertions of tribal/band sovereignty, land use rights, and indigenous identities in twenty-first-century America and Canada (Sockbeson, 2009). However, Wabanaki basket makers face new twenty-first-century threats, including co-option of their intellectual property rights by



Fig. 7 Gauge for cutting splints (Photo by Jennifer Neptune)



Fig. 8 Picking sweetgrass for weaving (Photo by Jennifer Neptune)

non-Wabanaki people, restrictions on access to their traditional brown ash and sweetgrass harvesting sites, and an invasive species of ash-destroying beetle: the Emerald Ash Borer (*Agrilus planipennis*) (Fig. 5).

Procuring and Preparing Materials

Brown ash possesses unique characteristics that make it an ideal material for making baskets. Brown ash is strong enough that it can be woven into sturdy utility baskets, yet it is flexible enough to be woven into highly detailed, intricate, and delicate ornamental baskets, known as “fancy” baskets. Its growth rings can be pounded and split into fine splints that are ideal for weaving. However, not all brown ash trees – which tend to grow in wet areas – make good basket trees. Basket makers who harvest brown ash carefully select



Fig. 9 Utility baskets by Peter Neptune (Passamaquoddy) (Courtesy of Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance)



Fig. 10 Fancy baskets by Passamaquoddy weavers Clara Keezer and Theresa Gardner (Photo by Jennifer Neptune)

individual trees based on a set of complex technical criteria for matching individual trees to their basket-making needs. For example, by notching a small section of the trunk with an axe, a harvester can tell yearly tree ring growth and its suitability for a utility or fancy basket.

Once an ideal basket tree has been identified, it is cut into lengths of 4–12 ft. A spiritual offering may be given at the time a tree is cut. After removing the bark, harvesters use the blunt side of an axe to pound down the length of the log, which separates and releases the growth rings into layers. This produces long straight splints of 4–12 ft in length. As the ash is being pounded, the splints may be split into thinner segments using a splitter (Fig. 6).

Once a growth ring is divided into two parts, it may be split into even finer segments that can be paper thin in some cases. Splitting the ash creates new thinner segments that contain the original rough sides and new smooth surfaces. The rough sides may be smoothed with a knife in a process called scraping. The smooth thinner segments are ideal for delicate fancy baskets. At that point, the splints can be coiled and stored for later or they can be pulled through a sharp-toothed instrument called a gauge (Fig. 7), which cuts them into the desired widths.

Along with brown ash splints, basket makers harvest a highly aromatic marsh-loving grass called sweetgrass, which is integrated into the weave. In addition to being highly prized as a weaving material,

sweetgrass plays an important role in spiritual and cultural practices (Fig. 8). Sweetgrass became more prominent in fancy baskets during the mid-nineteenth century, as Wabanaki traditional summer village sites on the Maine coast began to overlap with the growth of summer resorts and a new tourist market for baskets.

Weaving Baskets

Now the weaving process begins. Wide splints (called standards) are woven to form the base of the basket, and smaller splints that have been gauged into narrower widths (called weavers) are woven to form the sides and the bottom of the basket. Many basket makers use a wooden form called a block, which is tied to the base to help shape the sides as they are being constructed. After the sides have been woven, the block is then removed. The rim of the basket is then bound by tucking in the standards and finishing the rim's edge with materials, like sweetgrass, that strengthen it and add a decorative touch. Basket makers may weave covers or carve handles for their baskets.

There are two major categories of Wabanaki baskets: utility baskets and fancy baskets. Heavier and sturdier utility baskets are generally used for gathering, transporting, processing, and storing food and other items. Two of the most recognizable styles of utility basket are the pack basket (often used in canoes) and the potato basket, which was essential for agriculture in Maine. Function, and not ornamentation, governs the production of utility baskets (Fig. 9).

On the other hand, fancy baskets are defined by and sought after for their ornamentation. Weavers will manipulate the ash into curls, twists, and points. Brightly colored and sometimes whimsical fancy baskets in the shapes of foods like blueberries, strawberries, pumpkins, pinecones, and corn are a hallmark of the Wabanaki style of basketry (Fig. 10).

Economic, Environmental, Social, and Cultural Dimensions of Wabanaki Basketry Today

The Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance has succeeded in bringing together the technical knowledge and specialized skills of various basket makers into one organization dedicated to the preservation of the craft. The MIBA's program of pairing master basket makers with apprentices, with the explicit goal of preserving traditional knowledge (including Wabanaki language) and increasing the number of younger basket weavers, has been extremely successful. Today, there are approximately 200 Wabanaki basket makers in Maine. The MIBA has also been successful in marketing Wabanaki basketry and promoting its status as an art form among collectors; this also has helped raise consumer demand and prices for baskets.

Yet, Wabanaki basket makers in the twenty-first century face several threats. Access to traditional ash and sweetgrass gathering spots has been diminished due to coastal development, changing landowner attitudes concerning access, and new regulations imposed by large-scale landowners such as paper companies. Basket makers also must contend with infringement on their intellectual property rights: some businesses and individuals copy their unique styles and attempt to sell baskets as "Wabanaki" that are not made by Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Micmac, or Maliseet artisans. It is no wonder that many basket makers link their practice of making baskets to cultural survival and decolonization – that is, their continuing struggle against the effects of encroachment on their lands and traditions by outsiders.

However, perhaps the most pressing issue for Wabanaki basket makers today is the environmental threat posed by an invasive insect known as the Emerald Ash Borer. Discovered in 2002 in Michigan, the Emerald Ash Borer is believed to have traveled to North America on shipping pallets from Asia. This

small beetle kills all species of ash trees and has destroyed millions of trees since its arrival. Adult beetles lay their eggs on the bark of the tree, and the hatching larvae bore into the tree to feed on the inner bark. As the larvae feed, they create “S”-shaped galleries, which eventually girdle the tree, effectively killing the tree from the inside out. Infestations can be hard to detect, as symptoms often are not visible for three or more years. The Emerald Ash Borer has rapidly spread from the Great Lakes region of the United States to other areas, moving into the central, southern, and eastern United States as well as the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Emerald Ash Borer on its own would spread over the landscape fairly slowly; however, humans have accelerated its spread by transporting infected firewood, logs, and nursery stock hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles. While natural predators help keep the Emerald Ash Borer in check in Asia, it has no natural enemies here. Left unchecked, it threatens to destroy virtually all of the ash trees in North America.

The Future of Wabanaki Basketry

Basket makers have adopted a number of proactive strategies to ensure the future of Wabanaki basketry. Since 2010, Maine has banned the importation and transportation of firewood into Maine from other states. Wabanaki basket makers and Wabanaki scholars testified before the Maine Legislature and played a major role in the enactment of this legislation. Wabanaki basket makers – along with policymakers, forest service employees, and scholars from around the country – have formed black ash task forces to prepare for the arrival of the beetle, held symposia dedicated to preserving and sharing vital information about ash trees, and collaborated on cross-country field trips to learn how to identify the Emerald Ash Borer, to recognize damage and signs of the beetle, and to share strategies and knowledge about coping with the damage that will be caused by the beetle. Basket makers and conservationists are also saving seeds to preserve the ash trees for future generations.

Cultural knowledge is being preserved as well. Wabanaki ash harvesters are creating filmed records of tree identification, processing, and basket making so that this knowledge can be archived for future generations of Wabanaki basket makers. Some Wabanaki basket makers are also diversifying the materials they are using to craft baskets, returning to other traditional materials like basswood, birch, maple, and cedar, which are protected from the threat of the Emerald Ash Borer. In 2013, the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, the Penobscot Nation, and the Bangor Museum and History Center pooled their resources to purchase a rare woven antique Penobscot basswood bag from an estate auction. Now housed at the Hudson Museum at the University of Maine, this basswood bag has the potential to inspire future generations of Wabanaki basket makers.

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