

BASKETS

OF THE

DAWNLAND PEOPLE



1200

Baskets of the Dawnland People

Revised and Updated 2008

Produced by Joseph A. Nicholas

Edited by Stephanie Francis and Scott Francis

With assistance by
Tribal Historic Preservation Office, Donald Soctomah

The Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA)

The MIBA is a nonprofit, Native American arts service organization dedicated to preserving the ancient traditions of ash and sweetgrass basketry among the Maliseet, Mic Mac, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes in Maine.

MIBA was created in 1999.

Please visit MIBA at www.maineindianbaskets.org
or Main Street, Old Town, Maine
207-827-0391

CREDITS

Robert Abbe Museum of Stone Age Antiquities
for the two pictures of old baskets on page 11.

Indian Township Bilingual Program for the black and white sweetgrass pictures.

Most other photographs are courtesy of
Clara Neptune, Peter Neptune and Donald Soctomah.

Baskets of the Dawnland People



Fancy and utility baskets are made in all sizes, shapes and colors by skilled basketmakers.

One of the oldest and finest of the Indian crafts is basket making. Each tribe of the Northeast has a preferred pattern or design which, like their language, distinguishes them from other tribes. In this book, we would like to preserve some of the skillful work that has been done, and continues to be done, by the Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Micmac and Maliseet Nations.

At one time, some Indians made their living by producing baskets to sell. All the materials used were obtained from nearby forests and marshes and prepared for construction by hand. As many skills of the Indian have been adopted by the white man, so has the art of making baskets. Large businesses have taken over the market on the basketry business. They can produce baskets quickly and cheaply using materials obtained in bulk, man-made, or imported, whereas the Indian spends many hours on just one basket. At one point, so few of the Indians were making baskets that it was feared the skill would be lost. Today, there are hundreds of basketmakers following in the footsteps of their grandparents, and some who are creating new and exciting designs. This booklet represents a small example of these baskets and the new generation of basketmakers.

The Bilingual Program at Indian Township School established a class on basketry into its curriculum. The class was taught by one of the few experienced basketmakers left at the time. Title IVA at Indian Township also had a program that taught some classes on basket making. It was the hope of this program that all the Indian schools in Maine would have regular classes available to the students on their Indian heritage.

Some of the materials used are ash, sweet grass, and birchbark. It seems certain that the first ash baskets were square or rectangular because they were easiest to make and store. The first round baskets had square bottoms and probably have only been made for a century and a half.

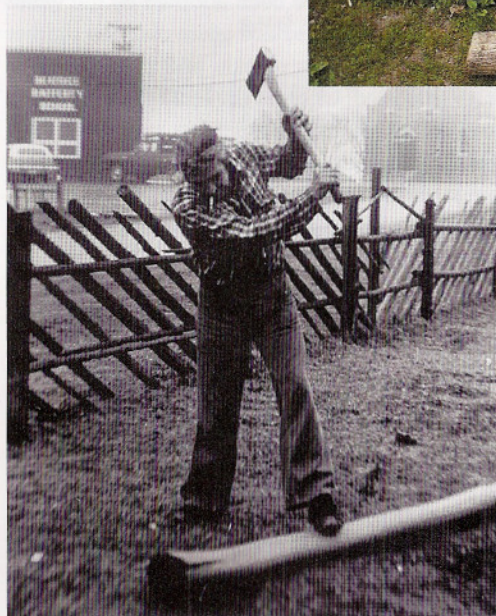
Brown ash is the only kind of ash used. Black ash is too brittle and white ash dries too quickly and is too coarse. It has been said that black ash and brown ash are probably the same tree, but the difference in the wood comes from the areas where they grow. Black ash grows on ridges where it would get less water, thus changes the texture of the wood. White ash was used a great deal for ax and hammer handles or anyplace where a good strong straight piece of wood was needed.

An ash tree is cut and the log is laid on its side and pounded with the back of an ax or a mallet to loosen the layers so it can be peeled into strips. It probably would take a good sized man about eight hours to prepare a medium sized log. Out of this log, a good worker could produce about ten scale baskets.

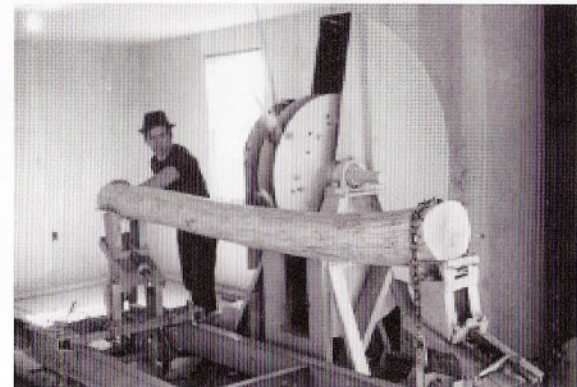
Because of the need for a quicker and easier way of preparing the baskets, in 1969, Tony Thomas, a VISTA worker, incited the invention of an ash pounding machine at the University of Maine at Orono. The machine was used for awhile, but the sale of baskets kept decreasing. Finally, the machine was dismantled and put into storage.



Ash logs cut and ready for peeling and then pounding.



Precision strokes are used in order for the layers to separate properly. After several hours of pounding, the layers begin to separate.



Billy Neptune uses the ash pounding machine developed by the University of Maine.

After the ash is peeled from the log, gauges are used for cutting strips of ash into different widths for different types of baskets. These gauges and many other tools are handmade to suit the need for which it will be used. At right are a drawknife, basket knife and splint gauge.



This basketmaker, a Micmac woman, uses a gauge to cut the strips of ash into suitable widths to make the potato baskets. The fingers toughen after a while, but in the beginning the hands get very sore and splintered if protection isn't worn.

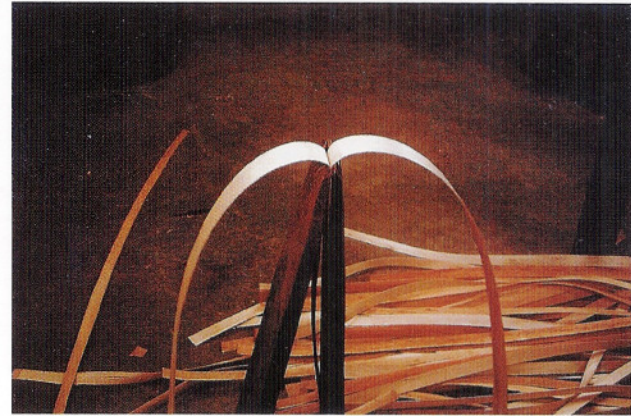


Left, various basket molds, these are over 100 years old. Below, basket molds used by today's basketmakers.



Basket molds and tools.

Basket workhorse with gauges.



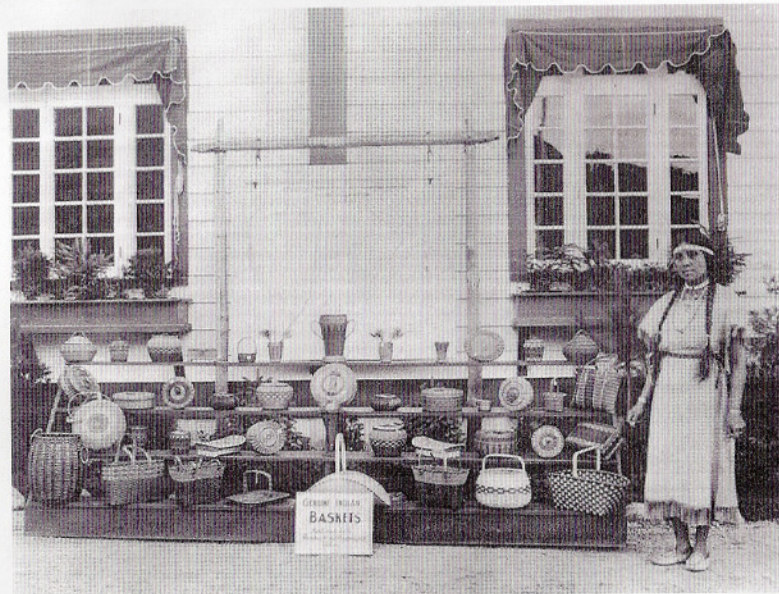
Above, close-up of splint being separated on a workhorse, and right, with splints ready to weave. Below, display of baskets and tools at the Waponahki Museum.



Basketmakers Then and Now



One of the earliest pictures of basketmakers, taken on Feb. 22, 1907 at the Rockland Food Fair.



This photo of baskets being sold was taken in New Hampshire in 1934.



Left, Eugene Francis, a former tribal governor, uses a draw horse. A piece of ash is put in a clamp and held secure with a foot pedal. Right, Eugene with two unfinished scale baskets sometime in the 70s.



William Altwater, of Pleasant Point, with a nearly completed scale basket. A different tool is used to make the handles.



Delia Mitchell makes one of the fancy baskets. These multi-purpose baskets were mainly made by women, and the same tools and procedures are used to make the larger baskets.



Here James Neptune uses the standard mold to make a scale basket.



Molly Neptune Parker learned basketmaking from her mother as a child and continues the Passamaquoddy fancy basket tradition at her home on the shores of Lewey Lake in Indian Township. Molly is very active in the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance and has served as President. She is the recipient of the 2008 Maine Art's Commission Fellowship Award for Traditional Arts, received the High Spirit Award from The First People Fund, and the New England Foundation for the Arts Native Arts Award.



One of the renowned Neptune family of basketmakers, Peter Neptune is known for his skillfully crafted work baskets, drums and sweetgrass braids. At the age of eight, Peter learned basketmaking from his father. For the past twenty years, he has specialized in rugged, functional work baskets. As a Master Basketmaker in the Maine Arts Commission's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, Peter has taught basketry and drum making.



At left, Clara Keezer and Mary Moore, also a noted basketmaker. Above, Clara continues fancy basketmaking.

Clara Neptune Keezer grew up on Passamaquoddy tribal lands at Pleasant Point in Perry, Maine. As a child, she learned to make baskets from her paternal grandmother, using techniques that have been handed down for generations. Today Ms. Keezer is one of a very small group of individuals who are keeping alive a centuries-old art. Using brown ash and sweetgrass, sometimes dyed brilliant colors, Ms. Keezer weaves baskets that are contemporary and innovative but at the same time honor long-standing tribal traditions. She is considered one of the leading basket makers in the country; and in 2002, she was honored by the National Endowment for the Arts with a **National Heritage Fellowship**.



Mary Mitchell Gabriel, a member of the Passamaquoddy tribe, has spent more than 60 years perfecting the art of basket making. She works to preserve this important cultural tradition by teaching her two daughters how to make the baskets. She also teaches others through the Maine Cooperative



Extension Service and the Maine Basketmakers Alliance. At right, Mary Gabriel with Congressman William Cohen.



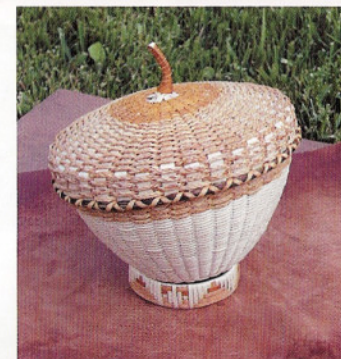
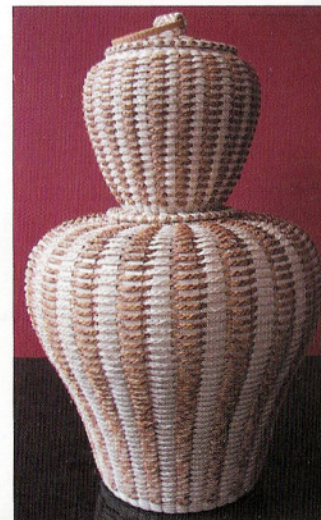
Cordel Hold, grandson of Molly Neptune Parker, continues the family tradition of basketmaking.



Above and right is the famous pie basket. Frances (Neptune) Richards, Passamaquoddy, below right, gifted in making this basket, was contacted by the state of Maine to produce pie baskets. They were filled with Maine-made products, and officials presented them as gifts to dignitaries who visited the State.



Jeremy Frey, Passamaquoddy, is one of the new generation of talented young basketmakers who continues to create beauty from ash, sweetgrass, birch and other natural materials.





Left, a Peter Neptune backpack and above, a Tomah backpack



Clara Keezer's award-winning strawberry basket.



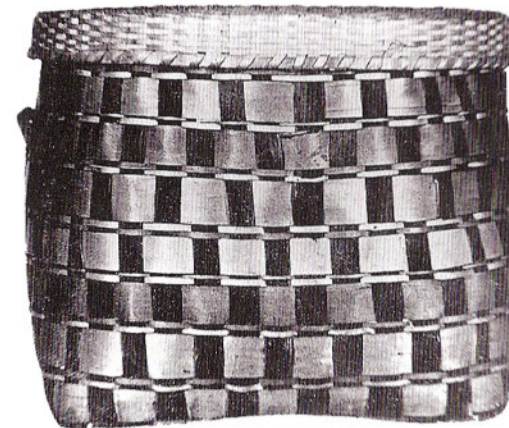
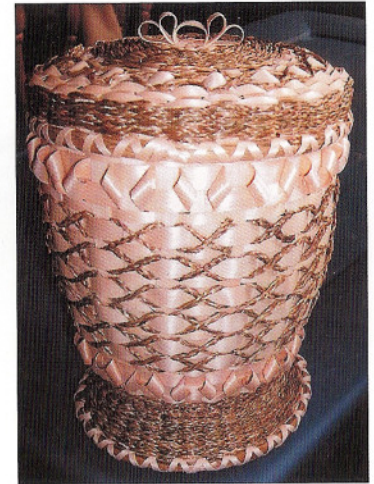
Photo courtesy Peter Neptune

At right is a finished scale basket, along with shopping baskets and a miniature scale basket.



Melon basket

This fancy basket is made with natural ash and sweetgrass.



The square bottom and round top of this Penobscot basket indicates a date of about 1835.

This Penobscot basket is probably one of the two oldest baskets in the Robert Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine. It is brown with age and polished with use, but close examination of the interior shows traces of color. When new, it had a loop bail.





Dyes

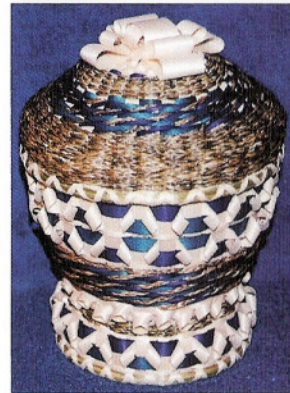
Years ago dyes were made from vegetable products. All colors were made from plants found locally except blue which was made from indigo. About one hundred and fifty years ago, they started using copper and alum to set the dye.



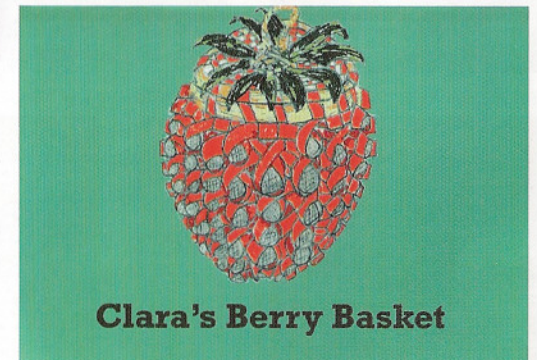
Blue came from steeped indigo. If a darker shade was wanted, a stronger brew was used. Red came from various berries. Yellow-green shades came from white cedar twigs and elm bark boiled together. Yellow was made from the root of golden thread, and brown was made from steeped alder bark. Today, almost all dyes are commercially produced.



Baskets are useful as well as decorative.



The skillful hands of Passamaquoddy basketmakers can weave many different designs and shapes.



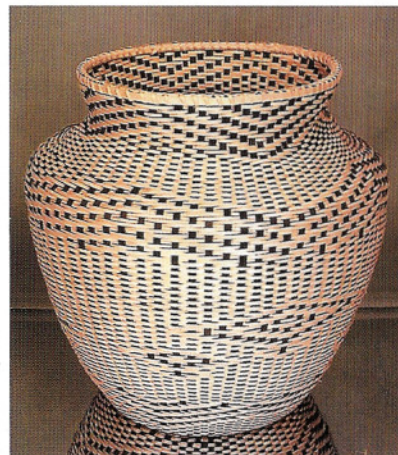
Clara's Berry Basket



Stephanie Francis created this illustration of the award-winning strawberry basket made by Clara Keezer.



Fancy baskets by various Passamaquoddy basketmakers.



Baskets by Fred Tomah, Maliseet. Left, the **Eagle** basket is designed with a large eagle figure in the center, with small eagles on the sides. This basket is approximately 2-1/2 ft. tall and took over 40 hours to weave. At right is **Eagle in the Clouds** basket.



Sweetgrass usually grows in marshy, salty areas. Here Dianne Apt is harvesting the sweetgrass.



This basket cover made by Molly Neptune Parker features sweetgrass.

Sweetgrass

The sweetgrass that stirs a boy's senses and imagination with delight is not exclusive to Maine. Our sweetgrass, *hierochloa borealis*, is one of the eight species found only in northern Europe and North America. Common names, other than sweetgrass, are vanilla grass, Seneca grass, and holy grass. It is found from Newfoundland to Alaska, south to New Jersey, and west to Colorado.

In northern Europe in olden days, peasants sold bunches of sweetgrass to be hung in bedrooms because it was believed to have a mysterious power of inducing sleep. In religious festivals, Europeans scattered sweetgrass before churches and placed scented sheaves on the paths leading to shrines of the saints; hence its name "holy grass." In the ancient Scottish marriage rite of handfasting, a couple sat before their friends with the right hand of the man tied to the left hand of the woman with sweetgrass.

Here in Maine, sweetgrass has so long a history that stone knives excavated from Indian sites sometimes glisten on the cutting edge. The polish has been determined to be an overlay of silica granules, the substance which strengthens and hardens the stems of grass, deposited perhaps one thousand years ago on stone knives used by Maine Indians for cutting sweetgrass.

Mitchell Francis, at the age of 96, was one of the last men among the Passamaquoddy to occupy himself exclusively with gathering sweetgrass and did so until his death. George Bailey followed in his footsteps until his own death, now many younger tribal people are following George Bailey's steps.

Sweetgrass combs are rare. Made of hardwood, they are used to comb down through hanks of sweetgrass to remove weak culms, spidelets, and roots. The comb is pulled energetically through the sweetgrass, trimming it until the whole thing becomes silky smooth, ready to be braided. Among some of the old combs one will recognize the

same deposits of silica upon the comb that have been seen at some of the Indian sites near Pleasant Point.

The sweetgrass leaves a waxy stain upon the fingers which causes the fingers to be soft and fragrant for a long time. No matter how old and dry the grass, all one has to do is just wet it with water and the aroma comes back strong, even on the oldest baskets.

Sweetgrass is found most abundantly out in the salt water marshes on points where white men first settled. Later, their descendants fled away over single team roads; the isolation, the harshness, the grubbing existence was not for them. Alders and gray birch quickly closed the roads behind them. Farm buildings became mounds in the grass, orchards prospered for the deer, and the white man's roses escaped the foundation stones and ran downhill to meet and mingle with Indian sweetgrass.

It is possible that a time will come when one will no longer see hanks of sweetgrass drying upon clothes lines at Pleasant Point Passamaquoddy Reservation or at Peter Dana Point Reservation in Princeton. Competing imported baskets have forced the price of Maine Indian baskets down. Until now, only a few of the older people find it economically feasible to make them of sweetgrass.

But sweetgrass is a part of Passamaquoddy poetry repeated through countless generations as sentimental fingers move gracefully on baskets that mysteriously hold the smell, sound, and feel of summer as long as the cords of sweetgrass endure. The Indians cling to their sweetgrass legend as tenaciously as its touch lingers on their fingers; no matter how long and cold winters may be, summer shines and spreads its fragrance over the marshes beside Passamaquoddy Bay.

The "People of the Dawn" are proud and believe in using the talent provided by the Great Spirit. Basketmaking is one element of their heritage that still makes their lives harmonious with nature.



After it has been cleaned and thoroughly combed, sweetgrass is tied in bunches and hung over a line to dry.



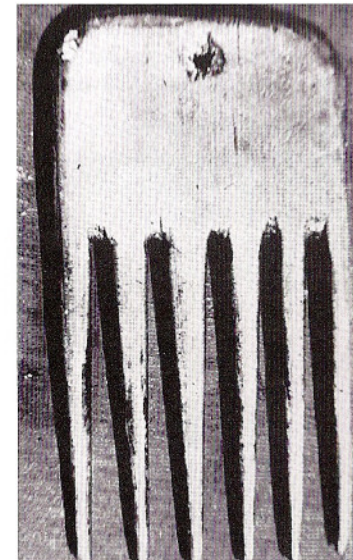
Left and below: sweetgrass before it has been cleaned and combed.



Combing



Sweetgrass comb



Sweetgrass is sometimes braided before it is woven into a basket.



Mitchell Francis at age 96

In Loving Memory of
Joseph "Cozy" Nicholas

July 17, 1925 - July 2, 2008

Without the dedication and passion of Cozy this updated version of *Baskets of the Dawnland People* would not have been possible.

Joe, with Mary Neptune Moore, was involved with the Passamaquoddy language and culture for many years. Since 1990, he produced a yearly calendar featuring old family photos from both Pleasant Point and Indian Township Reservations.

Joe developed a Passamaquoddy dictionary and a series of language learning tapes with David Francis and the Bilingual program.

He was instrumental in getting the dance group together in the 1960s, and they still perform traditional dances in full regalia during Indian Days in August and at other special and ceremonial events.



Joe at one of his many lectures.



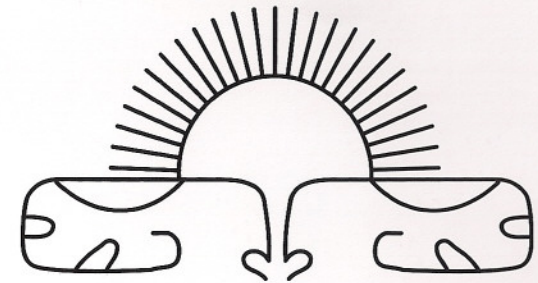
Cozy ready to drum for the dance group.

Joe was on the Maine Legislature as a Passamaquoddy representative for 12 years. He was a sailor during WWII. He was a curator of the Waponahki Museum at Pleasant Point.

With humor and commitment to the Passamaquoddy people, Joe made the culture and language his lifework.

He was a father, grandfather, and mentor. He was a teacher, a guide, and a beacon. He was loved, and will be greatly missed.

Woliwon, Cozy.



For more information on the Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Maliseet and Mic Mac tribes, please go to:

www.wabanaki.com 207-853-2600

www.passamaquoddy.com 207-796-2301

www.penobscotnation.org 207-827-7776

www.maliseets.com 207-532-4273

www.micmac-nsn.gov

equinoxpetroglyphproject.com

www.mainememory.net (search: Indian)

The Abbe Museum focuses on Maine's Native American History, culture, art and archeology.

Abbe Museum

26 Mount Desert, Bar Harbor, Maine

207-288-3519

www.abbemuseum.org



Molly Neptune Parker

PASSAMAQUODDY

Molly Neptune Parker learned basket making from her mother as a child and continues the Passamaquoddy fancy basket tradition at her home on the shores of Lewey Lake in Indian Township. She specializes in flower baskets, barrel baskets and acorns. She also makes a wide variety of traditional styles including flats, strawberries and bowls. Her work is well known in private and museum collections and is much sought after by collectors across the country.

Molly is very active in the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance and currently serves as President. She is the recipient of the 2008 Maine Art's Commission *Fellowship Award for Traditional Arts*, received the *High Spirit Award* from The First People Fund, and the New England Foundation for the Arts *Native Arts Award*.