

PMM Goes to the Birchbark Canoe Flotilla

By Cipperly Good, the Richard Saltonstall Jr. Curator of Maritime History



*The 19'10" birchbark canoe built in Searsport by Aaron York, Gwenhuwhet, and Hugga Dana in 2016 participates in the Thoreau-Wabanaki Trail Festival on Moosehead Lake in late July 2024. [PMM#2006.12.1](#).
Image courtesy of Ryan Ranco Kelley.*

On Wednesday and Thursday, July 23 and 24 of this year, one of the birchbark canoes in the care of the Penobscot Marine Museum ventured north to Moosehead Lake. There it joined 17 other birchbark canoes at the Thoreau-Wabanaki Trail Festival. On Wednesday, it



Aaron York (stern) and Hugga Dana (bow) at the launch of their birchbark canoe on September 9, 2006 in Searsport Harbor. Image courtesy of Wayne Hamilton.

underwent an inspection for watertightness, and then went on to participate in an exhibit of its contemporaries. On Thursday, it launched into the waters of Moosehead Lake, to the beat of a Penobscot drumming circle, to join the Birchbark Canoe Flotilla.

In 2006, the Penobscot Marine Museum commissioned Abenaki canoe builder Aaron York, with assistance by Penobscot canoe builders Gwenhuwhet and Hugga Dana, to build the birchbark canoe with funds from a 2006 NEH Grant. Although part of our permanent

collection, its stated purpose is to get wet. This spring, we were honored to be invited to the Thoreau-Wabanaki Trail Festival in Greenville Junction to participate in the Birch Bark Canoe Gathering & Exhibition and Birch Bark Canoe Flotilla!

Our journey to Moosehead Lake had an auspicious start on Tuesday, July 22 after we loaded the canoe onto its transport vehicle. While visiting the Searsport dock with the canoe ready to roll, we met one of its builders, Hugga Dana, who recognized it in an instant. He reminded us that it uses pegs to hold the railings to the bark and ribs, rather than spruce root lashings. This reflects the canoe building evolution as Wabanaki builders transitioned to using metal nails in the late 19th century and early 20th century.



Sealing the spruce root lashings and seams on the birchbark canoe. Note the pegs used to lash the railing to the canoe, with the occasional spruce root lashing to hold the thwarts in place. Image courtesy of Cipperly Good.



The Museum's birchbark canoe (foreground) on exhibit with its contemporaries. Notice the variations in bow curvature, rail lashings, and decorative panels. Image courtesy of Travis Otis.

The canoe arrived at the West Cove wharf in Greenville Junction on Wednesday, July 23 and was joined by 17 of its contemporaries, ranging in size from a foot-long model to full-size canoes. Most of the others were in the 16-18' range. It was fascinating to compare and contrast the birchbark canoes on display. The bow curvatures varied slightly. As mentioned before, the lashing versus pegging of the rails and thwarts varied. Ours, built for the tourist

market, lacked the traditional design. Two canoes featured the Passamaquoddy and Maliseet sea serpent Aputamkon whose wriggled body formed the major river systems as it pushed inward from the sea.

Our canoe had the distinction of being the longest at 19'10". Finding a birch tree large enough to accommodate the length and breadth of the canoe provided difficult, hence the number of panels stitched together to create the skin of the canoe. It was also the heaviest. Luckily helping hands were plentiful anytime we needed to move it.



Steve Cayard, who guided the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy team of builders who built two other birchbark canoes on the Museum grounds in the early 2000s, applies a sealant of pine rosin, beeswax, and lard to the birchbark canoe. Image courtesy of Cipperly Good.

We joined the queue of birchbark canoes getting inspections before launch. Our birchbark canoe got a fresh coat of sealant on its underwater seams. The traditional sealant mixture of spruce gum, beeswax, and bear fat has been updated to include commercial pine rosin, beeswax, and lard.



Curator Cipperly Good applies a fresh coat of sealant to the guards on the bow and stern. Image courtesy of Travis Otis.

Wednesday evening, we heard from Penobscot river guides, and cousins, Jim and Jason Pardilla and Ryan Ranco Kelley, about their time on Maine's rivers and beyond. They provided insight into the patterns of canoe building unique to each Native Peoples while honoring the ties we all have to our waterways. As Jim said, we all have canoe smiles when the boat touches water.

Thursday was time to take to the water. The Penobscot Nation Drummers provided the cadence as 15 boats from New Hampshire to New Brunswick launched into West Cove. The brisk breeze emanating from on shore made for interesting conditions as we circled the cove and tried not to cross paths. Despite being low to the water, the freeboard of the canoe turned into a sail as we came side to the wind. As we heard from the Pardillas and their cousin Ryan the night before, crossing lakes is best accomplished with a sail and a following breeze. This day however, we stayed close to shore.

While our canoe required two to three paddlers to power through the wavelets and wind, the experienced Wabanaki paddlers in their 16' canoes were doing it single-handedly. We may have started off on our knees in the proper manner, but we soon nestled down in the canoe to create more stability. Some of us in the canoe may have been taking notes on new canoe paddle strokes and sitting techniques.



The sealant dries quickly, so we just HAD to try out the canoe in the gorgeous West Cove with Mt. Kineo as our backdrop. Image courtesy of Ryan Ranco Kelley.

When the time came to return to the dock, this curator and the canoe felt a little sad to be leaving the water and the company of graceful, yet seaworthy birchbark canoes. We thank the Thoreau-Wabanaki Trail Festival for the invitation and hope to see the other birchbark canoes on the water soon!



The Canoe Flotilla explored West Cove of Moosehead Lake. Image courtesy of Cipperty Good.