

The Mi'kmaq

Mi'kmaq people of Eastern Canada resided in a territory called *Mi'kma'kik*. The territory bounded the lower half of the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Gaspé Peninsula), New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, mainland Nova Scotia, Cape Breton Island, as well as parts of southern Newfoundland. This territory covered as much as 47,000 square miles and offered easy access to aquatic fauna, sea mammals, waterfowl, invertebrates, and land mammals which were basic to their survival.

The English term 'Micmac' has been replaced in everyday usage with the terms *Mi'kmaw* (singular) and *Mi'kmaq* (plural). The *Mi'kmaq* called themselves *L'nu'k* meaning 'the people.' The term *Mi'kmaq* comes from their word *Nikmak* meaning 'my kin-friends.'

Dwellings

Shelter took the form of the wigwam which stems from the *Mi'kmaq* word 'wikuom' meaning a dwelling. The poles were lashed at the top with split spruce root and spread from the bottom to the desired perimeter. Long strips of birchbark were then laid over the frame of the wigwam overlapping from the bottom to its top. These bark sheets were over-sewn with spruce root. Extra

poles laid over the outside helped hold the birchbark down. The top was left open for fireplace smoke to escape. A separate bark collar covered the top in bad weather. The floor was lined with fir twigs, woven mats and animal furs and a large hide acted as a door cover.



Wigwams were painted with figures of animals and birds. The largest conical wigwams housed 12-15 people; for bigger families, a longer style with two fireplaces was built. Birchbark made a good cover for a wigwam since it was waterproof and portable.

The word 'tipi' or 'teepee' was never used by the Mi'kmaq as it comes from a different native language and usually refers to a tent covered with skins, not bark.

Fibres and Textiles

Native fibres and textiles were highly complex. *Mi'kmaq* women developed a range of weaving techniques that allowed them to use numerous raw materials that could be easily found on the land. Materials used included the inner bark of white cedar, rushes, cattails, nettles, hemp, sweet grass, roots of spruce, wood splints, and many animals including the eel. From these materials, they made bags, baskets, and mats. The skins were

tanned using animal brains, bird livers and oil, and by smoking. A process of stretching and scraping produced beautiful fur and leather.

Bone awls were used to make holes in the leather for sewing. Animal sinew, separated into fine strands, served as thread.

Before the 17th century, men's garments included a loose robe of fur or skin worn blanket-like over the shoulders, open in front and falling to the knees. Leggings of moose, caribou or seal hide were tied at the hip to a leather girdle. The leather girdle also supported a loin cloth of very soft skin.

Moccasins of moose or seal skin, and various accessories completed the clothing.

Women wore similar robes, wrapped around the body under the arms. These robes were belted at the waist and fell to below the knees.

Thongs over the shoulders acted as suspenders. Both sexes often wore a pair of sleeves of fur or leather, resembling two halves of a bolero jacket cut down the middle and tied together at center back and front.

Women also wore leggings and moccasins. Children wore a smaller version of the adult costume. Babies were wrapped in the softest skins of fox, swan or goose.

Clothing was decorated with geometric patterns and designs. Pigments made from red and yellow ochre, charcoal and ground white shell were mixed with fish roe or bird egg yolks and used as paint. Animal teeth,

claws, bone and quills were sewn onto clothing as ornaments.



When Europeans came to North America the Mi'kmaq traded with them, receiving cloth, ribbons and beads. They found new ways to use quills and moose hair on cloth, and worked ribbon and beads into traditional designs. By the 19th century the woman's costume included a beaded peaked cap and a woolen skirt. The man's coat reflected European military uniforms.



Tools

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Mi'kmaq made their own tools. Axes, adzes and gouges were made from stone and shaped by pecking and grinding the stone to a sharp edge and smooth surface. These tools were used to cut and carve wood. Spear points, knives, arrow points, drills and scrapers were made from special stones like chalcedony. This rock fractures in a way which "peels" the stone away in flakes, creating a razor-sharp edge. Bone points were used to harpoon sturgeon and porpoise, and on fish spears. Awls, painting tools and sewing needles were also made of bone. Copper was sometimes worked into needles and fishhooks.



Transportation

Canoes, snowshoes and toboggans were invented by Native peoples and played a large role in the everyday life of the Mi'kmaq. They were quickly adopted by European colonists. The canoe most impressed the newcomers. Canoe forms varied by group. The classic Mi'kmaq style birchbark canoe used on rivers, lakes and along the coast had gracefully rounded bow and sterns. They had a raised (hogged) centre gunwales. The average length ranged from 5-6 meters, but larger models of 10 meters were also made. These canoes were very versatile and designed to navigate rough coastal waters, shallow streams, and rough waters. They can carry large heavy loads and were light enough to be portaged from one river to another. In the winter people travelled by foot, and used toboggans to carry their household goods. If the snow would bear their weight, they fastened to their feet snowshoes fashioned like large rackets used to play tennis. These were made of beech and ash.



Birchbark

Birchbark has often be called the 'all purpose' material. It was not only used to make wigwams, and canoes, but also containers such as bowls, boxes, baskets, bailers, cups, dippers, plates and torches. Bark was very elastic, waterproof and peels easily from the trees in the heat of the summer. After European contact birchbark containers were replaced by metal pots. By the mid-eighteenth century many birchbark containers and boxes were made for trade or sale. While quillwork mosaics were the usual form or decoration used on bark, moose-hair embroidery was as popular.

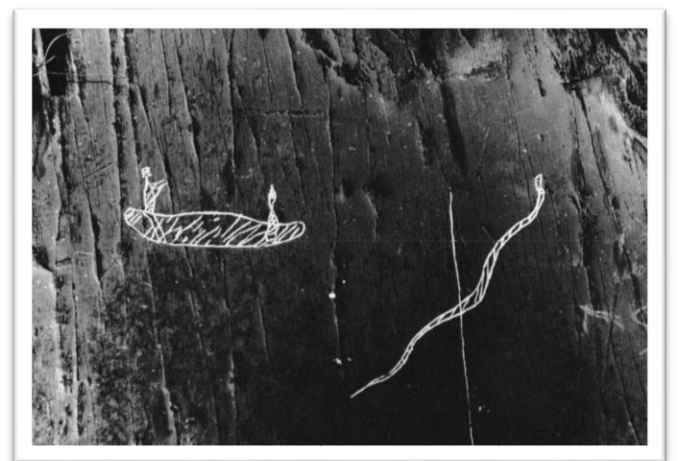
The women also sold settlers an enormous variety of baskets, now being made of wood splints. Bead-work items were for sale, too, and examples of lavishly beaded and appliquéd tea-cosies, purses and men's vests still survive in museums.

Basketry

Ash splint basketry emerged in the late eighteenth century among the people of the northeast as a hybrid of the original technology. In pre-European times a weaving technique known as plaiting was adapted to traditional European wood-splint basketry. The most common eighteenth century baskets were rugged fish and produce baskets. Fancy baskets remained an important craft throughout the twentieth century. Individual basket makers specialized in certain forms and designs. The evolution of basketry grew with demand and specialized baskets could be ordered.

Diet

Fish of all kinds, including salmon and sturgeon, plus porpoises, whales, walrus, seals, lobster, squid, shellfish, eels and seabirds with their eggs made up the bulk of the Mi'kmaq diets. They also ate moose, caribou, beaver and porcupine, as well as smaller animals, like squirrels. Berries, roots and edible plants were gathered during the summer. Meat and fish were dried and smoked to preserve them. One of the most common techniques used to harvest fish was designed around the use of stone fish weirs. These were stone structures placed within a river channel and designed to impede the movement of fish for capture.



Pastimes

The Mi'kmaq entertained each other with story-telling. Stories often lasted several days, and included singing, dancing and feasting. The dice game 'waltes' was a favourite game, and is still played today, as was 'wapnaqn' which was thought to be a men's game. Youth games were common such as 'kinte'juaqn' (a girl's game), and 'koqa'ltimk' (a boy's wrestling game).

The Mi'kmaq frequently held feasts and celebrations to acknowledge births, to welcome seasons, to celebrate weddings, and to honor the life of a community member. They performed different dances such as the 'snake dance' and 'friendship dance'. These celebrations and dances are still held and performed today.

Present

Today, the Mi'kmaq live throughout the province. Nova Scotia has 13 Mi'kmaq First Nations with community populations ranging from 283 in the Annapolis Valley First Nation to 4,314 in the Eskasoni First Nation. There are approximately 16,245 registered Indians in Nova Scotia and of these, over 6000 reside off-reserve (Source: Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) Indian Registry System, December 31, 2014,).

The majority of Mi'kmaq people in Nova Scotia are represented through a series of 13 band council governments and two tribal



councils - the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq and the Union of Nova Scotia Indians. The thirteen Mi'kmaq Chiefs comprise the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq Chiefs. The Mi'kmaq Grand Council is the traditional and spiritual government for the Mi'kmaq nation.

Other First Nation organizations in Nova Scotia are the Native Council of Nova Scotia, the Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre and the Native Women's Association who also provide a wide range of programs and services to women, principally to those people residing "off-reserve" in our cities, towns and rural communities.



The watercolour shown on this page was painted circa 1790 by H.N. Binney, a Halifax customs official. It is the original from which a wide variety of copies have been made. It is signed "H. N. Binney fecit," and was presented to George Ramsay, ninth Earl of Dalhousie, in 1821. Several artists have copied parts of this painting to use them in their own works of art. The man, the woman and sometimes the whole family are often added to landscapes as varied as Charlottetown, Quebec City, and even in non-Mi'kmaq settings such as Virginia. The painting itself has sufficient detail to be ethnographically correct for the late eighteenth century.

