

PLYMOUTH, NH

## Of Baskets and Borers: The Past, Present, and Future of Indigenous Basketry in the White Mountains

Museum of the White Mountains



**W**HAT MAKES THE brown or black ash tree (*maahlakws*) so important to Algonquian peoples is its unique ring structure. Like any tree, each year brings a new growth ring. But this tree, which prefers wet, forested areas and has a range along the U.S.–Canada border from Newfoundland to west of Lake Superior—basically matching the homelands of northeastern Algonquian-speaking peoples—can, with both care and some force, be stripped apart to make the long, thin strips that have been the raw material for basketmaking for time immemorial.

“Black ash is the only tree that you can pound and separate the year’s growth. A year’s growth is this year’s inner bark ... will be next year’s splint. And depending on the nutrition that the tree gets will depend on the thickness of that next year’s splint,” explains tribal elder and Mi’kmaq Nation vice chief Richard Silliboy (Mi’kmaq). “And when you pound

that, it breaks the fibers between the years’ growth and each splint will separate. And that’s what we use to make our baskets out of.”<sup>1</sup>

The inclusion of the interview with Silliboy, from a lovely short film that is part of the *They Carry Us With Them: The Great Tree Migration* project produced by *Emergence Magazine*,<sup>2</sup> illustrates the collaborative, multidisciplinary approach of *Baskets and Borers*.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition weaves various specialties and collections to capture an expansive, symbiotic tale of a tree and its peoples: a story of loss, survival, and a new threat.

The exhibition grows concentrically, at its core inspired by a recognition of unfamiliarity and absence, expanding to tell an eclectic tale spanning distinct human specialties, cultural and biological adaptations, and migration. It does so using historic and contemporary baskets, the tools for making them, raw wood, videos, maps, photos, scientific material and equipment, and information about the

emerald ash borer (EAB), the invasive species now a mortal risk to the *maahlakws*.

As Museum of White Mountain Director Meghan Doherty explains in the accompanying introductory label, the spark for the exhibition was an old postcard that is “the only representation of Abenaki peoples in the White Mountains in our collection [which] led me to learn more about the Abenaki and their long-standing connections to the region.”

For two primary reasons, those connections are much diminished today. First, the northern White Mountains, like the neighboring Northeast Kingdom of Vermont and Maine’s Lakes and Mountains region, is a rugged place to live. It’s full of granite precipices and thick forests. To mash up some lines from *Game of Thrones*: “Winter is coming and full of terrors.” Even mitigated by climate change, winters in northern New England still feature dead car batteries, frozen water pipes, and evenings that start in the afternoon. It’s never been a place where humans have lived densely.

Second, during the 18th century, the region’s Algonquin tribes—already under demographic pressure due to the impact of European diseases—allied themselves first with the French against the British and, later, the British against the rebellious American colonists. This led most Western Abenakis to migrate north to Canada, where today’s Odanak First Nation and Wôlinak First Nation reserves are nestled south of the St. Lawrence River in Quebec (no Western Abenaki are federally recognized in the United States).<sup>4</sup>

The long and the short of it is that Doherty’s interest in the Abenaki, whose presence in northern New England has been radically diluted, led her to Daniel Nolett (Odanak Abenaki), general director, or Kin8dokawawinno, of the Abenaki Band Council of Odanak. This led her to the Musée des Abénakis in Odanak, which provided several of the basketry pieces and lore for the exhibition.

1. Jeremy Seifert, “They Carry Us With Them: Richard Silliboy,” *Emergence Magazine*, November 4, 2021, video, 7:39, web.

2. “They Carry Us With Them: The Great Tree Migration,” *Emergence Magazine*, web.

3. “Of Baskets and Borers: The Past, Present, and Future of Indigenous Basketry in the White Mountains,” Museum of the White Mountains, web.

4. Mark Bushnell, “Then Again: As Americans Fought the British, Abenaki People Were Caught in the Middle,” *VT Digger*, September 25, 2022, web.

Which circles back to that postcard. The image, printed in 1920, is of an Abenaki family from Odanak at their summer camp in Bethlehem, New Hampshire, about 45 miles north of Plymouth. They traveled to it—175 miles south of their home—to sell baskets to summer tourists in an echo of earlier seasonal migrations. Other Abenaki families of the era did the same in various locales, with a label explaining that “Between 1870 and 1920, basketmaking was the primary source of income for many families in Odanak.”

Prior to air travel becoming commonplace, northern New England was where many urban dwellers from down-country (and some Montrealers) spent their summers, usually traveling by train for extended stays. Known hereabouts as flatlanders, today they travel by car and continue to bring disposable income to the region as skiers, mountain bikers, and craft beer connoisseurs.

One of the most recently created pieces in the exhibition links to this heritage. *Sun Basket with Basketmaking Family Names* (2023) by Annette Nolett (Odanak Abenaki) includes the names of Odanak’s basket weaving families. She includes 23 names, and three—Wawanolett, Benedict, and M’Sadoques—are represented in the eight individuals from that 1920 postcard. The piece also features one blank space, with the label informing: “Nolett said she plans to add her daughter’s name, Thompson, as she is continuing to make baskets and keeping the tradition alive.”

Although pride and endurance are themes of the exhibition, anxiety and loss course through it. Not only the absence of the Abenaki in the contemporary culture of this specific place, and the material holdings of a museum dedicated to it, but the dire risk of emerald ash borer to the trees that are deeply entwined with the Eastern Algonquian peoples. Like Europeans flooding the eastern seaboard, it is an aggressive invasive species wreaking havoc on longstanding ecosystems. And like last century’s chestnut blight fungus—another “global economy” import from Asia that wiped out what was once one of the primary trees of eastern North



**ABOVE** Installation view of *Of Baskets and Borers: The Past, Present, and Future of Indigenous Basketry in the White Mountains*.

**OPPOSITE** Three Abenaki black ash baskets with dye, two with sweetgrass.

America—the borer is now swinging its scythe after first being detected in Michigan in 2002.

But *Of Baskets and Borers* is also a call to action. The exhibition includes a wealth of forestry materials about identifying at-risk ash trees and ongoing mitigation efforts—though it’s clear these are rearguard actions at this point. The best hope is the “lingering ash,” the very few individual trees that have survived where the borer has killed every other mature tree in an area. These are now serving as source material for selective breeding programs. It is a current, scientific approach to a current reality taking its place in a very old story.

“Working with the brown ash is very spiritual. When I’m working on a basket, you know, I’m using something that is very sacred to all the Wabanaki people. The climate change, or the emerald ash borer, will totally wipe out the brown ash,” says Silliboy in the *They Carry Us With Them*. “It would be very devastating for the Wabanaki people of the Northeast. They’re saying that 50 years from now there will be no ash in this area because everything is just moving north. We’re collecting seeds; we’re going to store ‘em and preserve them, and hopefully, at some point in time we’ll be able to replant.”

—Peter Letzelter-Smith