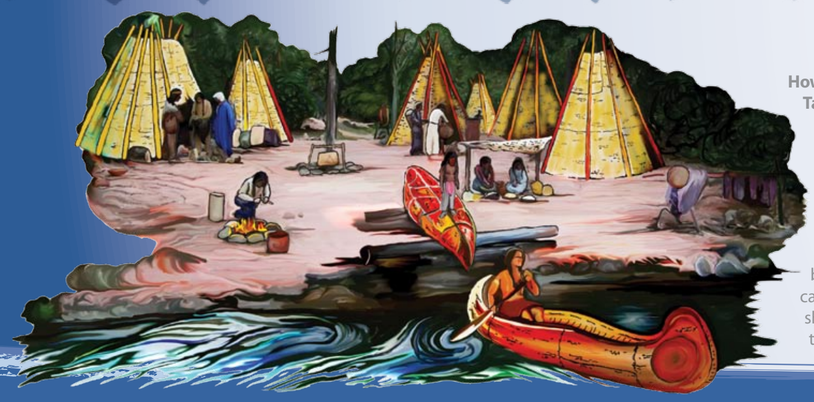
MI'KMAQ

WIKEWIKU'S 2009 HISTORY MONTH OCTOBER 2009

L'nuey Maskwiey Pqa'w Kwitn • Mi'kmaw Birchbark Canoe



How the Mi'kmaq Live in Mi'kma'ki
Ta'n Telo'ltipni'k L'nu'k Mi'kma'kik

Archaeological evidence found in Debert, Nova Scotia, shows that people lived in Mi'kma'ki as far back as 13,000 years ago. These ancestors and the generations that followed knew how to live by what nature provided. This picture of a Mi'kmaw encampment shows how birchbark was used in wigwams and canoes. The Mi'kmaw ocean-going canoe shown here had higher sides and ends than river canoes.

Making the Bark Shell • Ta'n Tuju Poqjitun Maskwiey Pqa'w Kwitn

Pieces of bark are laid out "upside down" (white side up) under a wooden form shaped like the bottom of the canoe. This form is weighted down with rocks so the bark won't move. (In the photo below, cinder blocks are used for this purpose.) The bark is bent upward to form the sides, and held in place with stakes.

The overlapping pieces of bark are sewn together with the roots of spruce trees. Up to 150 m of root are used in the making of a canoe. Todd Labrador (below) places a length of root in the seam to make the joint stronger.

To give the canoe its shape, two long strips of wood, called gunwales, are lashed inside the upper edge of the birchbark shell.

Tools & Materials
Ta'qowey Ta'n Eweymnn

Following Mi'kmaw tradition, when you take something from nature—like using bark or roots from a tree—you offer it a gift of tobacco, to ask permission for its use and to give thanks for what you are receiving.

To make a canoe, bark from the paper birch (white birch) is used. The tree must be straight and free of knots and branches for the length of the canoe. Today it's hard to find a tree wide enough to make a whole canoe, so bark from several trees is used. The fallen tree shown here, yielding bark five feet across, was a rare find.

Spruce roots—stripped of bark and split into layers—are used to sew pieces of bark together and lash the frame (gunwales) to the birchbark shell.

Traditionally, only an awl, an axe, a crooked knife and a drawn knife were used in canoe-making.

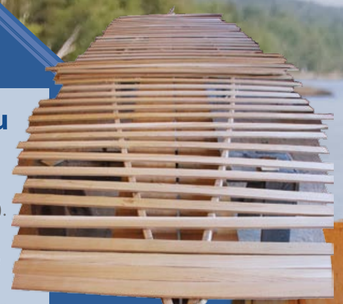
Making the Ribs • Ta'n Tuju Eltunl Kmu'jel Pi'kaqnl

When the birchbark shell is done, the canoe is ready for the ribs and the cross braces (thwarts).

Over 30 ribs are needed, each planed to 3/8" (close to 1 cm) thick. Soaking and steaming the ribs allows them to be bent into shape.

The last step before the canoe is ready for water is to seal all joints and seams with a mixture of spruce gum, bear fat and charcoal.

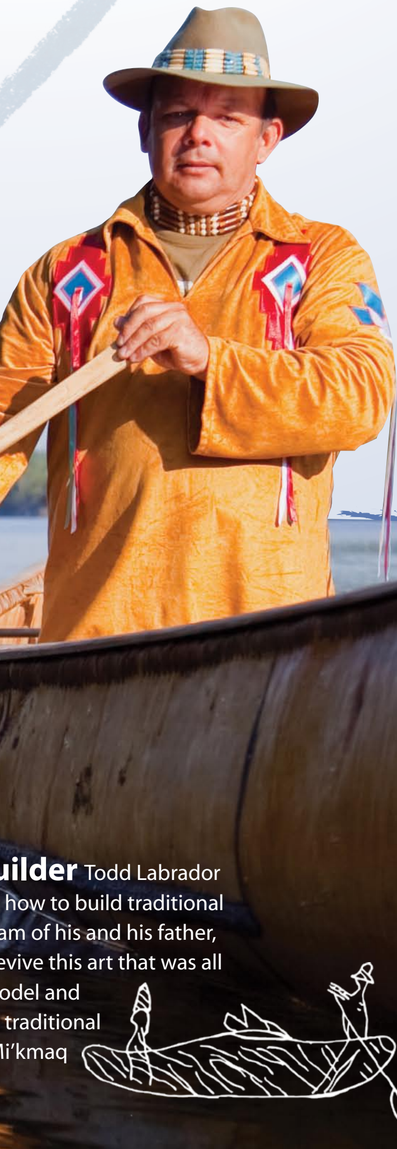
Watermark patterns are samples of decorative details found on old Mi'kmaw canoes. Decorated canoes were used mainly for trade.



The Partridge and the Loon
Plawej aqq Pkwimu

In Glooscap's day, the loon and the partridge competed for the honour of becoming the official canoe builder of the Mi'kmaq. Loon's canoe was too big and heavy, and just like the loon, sat low in the water. Partridge's canoe was round and sank. However, partridge tried again and again and succeeded in building a fine canoe, and thus won the contest. Today, you can hear the loon's mournful cry of failure and see its eyes red from tears. The partridge's drumming—which is said to sound like a Mi'kmaw at work building a canoe—is a sign of the honoured profession of partridge's great ancestors.

This is one of several legends about Glooscap and the first Mi'kmaw canoe. For others, search for "Glooscap Legends" at your local library or on websites like www.mns-firstnet.ca



Birchbark Canoe builder Todd Labrador spent about 20 years learning how to build traditional Mi'kmaw canoes. It was a dream of his and his father, the late Charles Labrador, to revive this art that was all but lost. Today Todd builds model and full-sized canoes and teaches traditional birchbark canoe building to Mi'kmaq young and old.

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