Celebrating Abenaki Culture: Wearing Our Heritage

Published by Vermont Abenaki Artists Association and Abenaki Arts & Education Center.
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Introduction

In 2011 and 2012, the state of Vermont officially recognized four Abenaki tribes: Elnu, Nulhegan, Koasek, and Missisquoi.

“History books, museums, and schools in New England often present Native culture as if the Abenaki disappeared in the 18th century,” says Vera Longtoe Sheehan, director of the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association. “After we received Vermont state recognition the Abenaki people created the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association as a forum to showcase our artists and our vibrant culture. Now we are trying to bridge the gap between the Native and Non-Native communities through the ‘Wearing Our Heritage’ project. Our goals are to reclaim our place in New England history, to make connections between our shared past and the present, and for our art to be accepted on the same terms as art from other cultures of the world.”

Although there is little mention of the Abenaki in nineteenth-century history books, Abenaki people continued to live in their homelands, and maintain strong oral histories and traditions from earlier times. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Abenaki people undertook a systematic cultural revitalization that involves a return to traditional lifeways and skills. Ironically, for many years they were not recognized by federal or state government because they had never entered into a treaty that surrendered their territory to the United States.

Lacking federal or state recognition, Abenaki artists were unable to sell their work as Native American art under the Indian Arts and Crafts Law of 1990. To aid in the economic development of Abenaki artists, the leaders of four tribes (Elnu, Koasek, Nulhegan, and Missisquoi) applied to be recognized by the state of Vermont. Applications to the State Legislature provided family oral histories spanning hundreds of years and traditions that can be traced back through several millennia to prove the continuity of the Abenaki community in their homelands in Vermont. The applications also included military muster rolls, maps, newspaper articles, and historic accounts.
Think About It…

Who were the first people to live in Vermont?

Name four tribes that are recognized in the State of Vermont

1. ____________________________________________ 3. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________ 4. ____________________________________________

Why do you think the Abenaki people would have to prove who they are to the State?

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Can you think of a time when someone questioned something that was true about you? How did that make you feel?

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Birth of the ‘Wearing Our Heritage’ project

Many family photographs show that Abenaki people continued wearing traditional clothing and accessories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These photographs, together with the outstanding workmanship of clothing and regalia worn during family celebrations and community events helped to inspire the multi-year project called “Alnobak: Wearing Our Heritage.”

The presenters in the project “Alnobak: Wearing Our Heritage” draw on recent scholarship combined with cultural traditions and personal experience to provide a Native perspective on the history and cultural traditions of Vermont and New England. Many participants in the resurgence of making and wearing clothing and regalia like those of earlier generations, often with a new creative twist, have generously shared their photographs, regalia, and recollections. We are grateful for their help in assembling and sharing this tribute to the resilience and resistance of the Abenaki people, and proof that we are still here.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, many Abenaki people have chosen to make and wear 18th-century styles of Abenaki clothing and regalia at living history events.

FUN FACT

The Double Curve is a symmetrical design with special meaning to the Abenaki people. The Double Curve is a symmetrical design that has been used by Abenaki people for many centuries. Many people add this design onto their special clothing (Image: Courtesy of Jim Taylor).

On the Cover

Sarah Jackson Somers, a St. Francis Abenaki born in the village of St. Francis, Quebec in 1823, became a renowned medicine woman and basket maker who lived for more than a century on the Vermont shore of the Connecticut River. Her remarkable story of life in a time of profound change for the region’s Native people was preserved as oral history until written down by her great-niece, Trudy Ann Parker in the book Aunt Sarah, Woman of the Dawnland, the 108 summers of an Abenaki healing woman. (Photo: Private Collection)
George Larrabee’s bark canoe

George Larrabee is regarded by many as the Abenaki Grandfather of Living History, in which participants wear the clothing of an earlier era to form a deeper connection with their own ancestors, for both spiritual and educational purposes.

In 1999, Larrabee took part in a demonstration class making a birch bark canoe with instructor Bart Howe at Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.

The canoe was completed and launched at the Museum’s Rabble in Arms Weekend, in which replica vessels are used to recreate historical events of the Revolutionary War era. Larrabee wore 18th-century style work clothes during the construction of the canoe, and more elaborate regalia for the launching.

Think About It…

What do you think can be learned from wearing traditional clothing and participating in historical activities?

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First Navigators Project and Champlain Quadricentennial Canoe

Lake Champlain’s First Navigators was a special program at the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum developed with the Abenaki community in anticipation of the 2009 Champlain Quadricentennial that commemorated the 400th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's arrival at the lake that now bears his name.

Demonstrating the construction and operation of a replica birch bark canoe in the style used in 1609 provided a focus on the region’s Native American heritage. The launching of the canoe in August at the culmination of the First Navigators project was planned and attended by representatives of Abenaki communities all over Vermont.

Aaron York, the Abenaki artist who constructed the Quadricentennial bark canoe for the First Navigators project, has traveled extensively learning the arts and skills of the Wabanaki nations. Aaron makes fine regalia, however he preferred everyday work clothes during the month that he demonstrated canoe construction. (Image: Courtesy of Lake Champlain Maritime Museum)
Abenaki Heritage Weekend

On the third weekend in June every year, the Abenaki community gathers at Lake Champlain Maritime Museum for family fun and cultural sharing that is deeply rooted in local Native American heritage. The event is organized by the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association with members of the Elnu Abenaki Tribe, the Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk, Koasek Traditional Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation, Missisquoi Abenaki Tribe and guest artists. 

Visitors can see drumming, storytelling, craft, and cooking demonstrations, browse an Arts Marketplace, take part in special children’s activities, and enjoy presentations by guest artists including Black Hawk Singers Drum Group, and storytellers.

Wabanaki Confederacy Conference

Among the most significant recent developments for Vermont’s Abenaki tribes was the invitation to host the 2015 Wabanaki Confederacy Conference. The Wabanaki Confederacy is an ancient alliance of First Nations and Native American nations consisting of five principal allies: the Mi’kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki, and Penobscot. Tribal leaders and delegates from all over New England and Canada met to discuss issues like the environment, international trade relations, and other important topics and to strengthen old tribal relationships.

This was first time in over 200 years that the Wabanaki Confederacy Conference was hosted by Western Abenaki people. The Wabanaki Confederacy has been in existence since before European contact and included Algonquin tribes in territories that are now in both the United States and Canada. The last conference held below the Canadian border was hosted in 2008 by the Penobscot Nation in Maine.
Think About It…

Why do you think visitors want to attend the Abenaki Heritage Weekend? Do Native American people attend the event for the same reasons as people who are not Native American? Why or why not?

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Define what a confederacy or alliance is and explain why alliances are important?

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What are some international alliances that the United States belongs to?

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Educators Learn about Abenaki life

Presenting Abenaki Culture in the Classroom. Professional Development for Teachers & Workshop for Adults. Held annually in August at Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.

Music, history and archaeology, weaving, social justice issues, and heirloom plants . . .
Through a combination of lectures and experiential learning, Vermont Abenaki Artists Association scholars, historians, and culture bearers present this vibrant regional culture that reaches back nearly 13,000 years and continues today.

*Presenting Abenaki Culture in the Classroom* provides teachers and homeschoolers a deeper understanding of how indigenous culture continues into the 21st century. Sessions include history and stereotypes; new resources being developed for use in classrooms; age-appropriate activities; and how teachers can better support Abenaki and other Native students while presenting American history and additional academic content areas. The program includes a gallery talk and exploration of resources in museum exhibitions.

This rich learning experience provides educators in all settings with new resources and techniques to help students learn about Abenaki culture, and a forum to discuss the “Flexible Pathways” initiative.

Presented through a partnership between the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association and Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.

Participants from the 2018 teacher training enjoyed learning culturally appropriate activities to share with their students while being immersed in the Abenaki culture for 2 ½ days.
Think About It…

Do you think it is important for teachers to learn about Abenaki culture from Abenaki people? Why or why not?

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What would you still like to learn about the Abenaki?

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What are some good ways to find out more about the Abenaki people?

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Examples of Original Abenaki Outfits

Abenaki scholar and activist Frederick M. Wiseman gathered original garments and accessories to assemble representative outfits like those worn by Abenaki men and women before 1850, as well as outfits for a man and a woman in the 1900s through 1920s. The items in his collection were brought together through a decades-long process of research and discovery, and they reveal a fascinating combination of local and international origins.

For example, a necklace from a Central Vermont estate has a beaver pendant with the hallmark of Montreal silversmith Robert Cruickshank, suspended from a necklace of early nineteenth-century trade beads that probably came from Africa. These items were exhibited at Lake Champlain Maritime Museum in 2016.

Very few examples of work clothes are found in collections because they were worn out by heavy use, then handed down, and even the rags were re-used. Little remained to be discarded, much less preserved. The man’s outfit from 1780-1850 (at right in the photo) included a long, tunic-like linen shirt from Central New Hampshire with brass buttons dating from the War of 1812 era; eighteenth-century moose hide leggings converted into trousers ca. 1810 from a farm at Eden Notch in Lamoille County, Vermont; a striped wool trade blanket from Stowe; and an Assumption sash of finger-woven linen in an “arrow sash” pattern popular in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. The woman’s outfit of this early era includes a hand-stitched linen chemise; an “arrow sash” of finger-woven wool from Machias, ME; an early/mid-19th-century mirror case of deer hide with porcupine quill and bead decoration; and an 18th/early 19th century “Montreal Cross” pendant necklace.

The outfits at left in the photo include a man’s jacket and leggings of cotton cloth and velvet ribbon-work with Niagara style glass bead decoration, used by a family of Abenaki basket makers who lived in Essex Junction, and a woman’s dress from White River Junction made of cotton cloth and ribbon-work with geometric applique and cut-cloth fringe decoration. Both outfits date from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. These rare examples of actual garments and accessories help us to better understand the outfits that can be seen in paintings, prints, and photographs of earlier times.
Some of the Abenaki artists who helped to create the exhibition *Wearing Our Heritage*: (left to right) Pat Leno, Michael Descoteaux, Rhonda Besaw, Willow Green, Vera Longtoe Sheehan, Chief Don Stevens, Jan Medor, Liz Charlebois, Denise Pouliot, John Hunt, Aaron York. Photo courtesy of Diane Stevens.

**Think About It…**

This study guide has shown you many pictures of Abenaki people. Do you know why they have such a great variety of different styles of clothing? If you don’t know, take a guess.

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**Learn more about the Abenaki people by visiting our websites.**

Vermont Abenaki Artists Association  
[http://abenakiart.org](http://abenakiart.org)

Elnu Abenaki Tribe  
[http://elnuabenakitribe.org](http://elnuabenakitribe.org)

Koasek Traditional Band Of the Koas Abenaki Nation  
[http://koasekofthekoas.org/](http://koasekofthekoas.org/)

Koasek Traditional Band of the Abenaki Nation  

Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi – St. Francis/Sokoki Band  
[https://www.abenakination.com/](https://www.abenakination.com/)

Nulhegan Abenaki Tribe  
[http://abenakitribe.org/](http://abenakitribe.org/)
Alnobak: Wearing Our Heritage is a special project of the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association in partnership with Lake Champlain Maritime Museum. The exhibit, which has traveled to venues in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, brings together garments and accessories made by contemporary Abenaki artists with family photographs including rare images of previous generations. On view at New England museums from 2017-2020. The exhibition and related programs were partially funded by the Haymarket Peoples Fund and the Vermont Humanities Council.

Our Education Team

Melody Walker Brook is an Adjunct Professor at Champlain College and formerly taught the Abenakis and Their Neighbors and Abenaki Spirituality at Johnson State College. She is currently serving her second term on the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs. Additionally, she is a traditional beadworker and finger weaver.

Liz Charlebois is an Abenaki culture bearer. She is a powwow dancer, traditional bead worker, ash basket maker, bitten birch bark artist. She has served two terms on the New Hampshire Commission on Native American Affair and is the former Education Specialist at the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum in Warner, NH.

Francine Poitras Jones retired from a thirty-year career in marketing and copy editing to pursue a second career as a substitute elementary school teacher. For the past five years, she has been teaching grades K through 5th grade, and she presents educational programs to elementary students. Additionally, she is a painter that finds inspiration in her culture and everything around her.

Lina Longtoe is certified for the Growing Up Wild program that is administered by Project Wild and sponsored nationally by the EPA and Fish and Wildlife Department. Her area of study is concentration is in Environmental Science and sustainability. She is the official documentarian of the Elnu Abenaki Tribe and makes short documentary films about Abenaki culture.

Vera Longtoe Sheehan has a background in Museum Studies and Native American Studies. She has been developing and implementing educational programs and consultation with museums, schools, and historic sites for over twenty-five years. As the Director of the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association, she leads the education team in the development of study guides and educational programs. Additionally, she also has training in Wilson reading program. The focus of Vera's art is in traditional clothing and twined woven plant fiber bags.

Portions of this study guide appeared in the History Space, Burlington Free Press. June 2018.

Vera Longtoe Sheehan, director of the Vermont Abenaki Artists Association, and Eloise Beil, director of Collections and Exhibits at Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, have worked together with members of the Abenaki community to develop exhibits, events, and educational programs about Abenaki culture in the Champlain Valley for more than a decade.