

The Abenaki



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I. Description of Culture

A. Demographics

- There may be 100 Abenaki families living off the reservations throughout Maine.
- The Abenaki are one of many Native American cultures living in Maine today and not recognized by the State of Maine or the federal Government. Those specifically identified are the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Micmac and Malisset.
- Many of the Native Americans living on the reservations recognized as Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Micmac and Maliseet, also have Abenaki bloodlines due to marriages.
- Most Native Americans in Maine may be identified as Wabenaki due to the mixed blood lines from marriages.
- Were known as nomads traveling from place to place in order to make a living.
- Have assimilated to the European cultures that started settling this territory since the 1500s.

B. Brief History

- Living in the Maine territory since before 1500, discovered when French and English came to North America to claim lands for their countries.
- Numbered about 3,000 in the year 1600.
- Inhabited the area south of the St. Lawrence River and north of the English settlements in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine.
- In 1621, Samoset, a Pemaquid sachem from Maine, hunting in Massachusetts, was the first Native American to welcome the Puritans from the Mayflower, who settled in Plymouth, Mass. He spoke in perfect English "Hello Englishmen."
- Fought with the French against the Iroquois (1643)
- Wabanaki Confederation was formed in 1650 as a response to the attacks by the Iroquois.
- Wabanaki Confederation encompasses not only eastern and western Abenaki, but also the neighboring Passamaquoddy, Penobscot and Maliseet of eastern Maine and New Brunswick and the Micmac of Nova Scotia.
- Watched the English and French divide Abenaki lands.
- Gradually withdrew from Maine to Canada after King Philip's war (1676) causing the French and English to call the Abenakis Canadian Indians, which they were not.

- Abenaki name means ‘Dawn Land’ or simply ‘easterners’ because they lived nearest to the rising of the sun.
- Lived in small bands made up of linked families of grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, children all traveling, hunting, trapping, and settling together.
- All of the family members within the bands were responsible for raising and teaching the children.
- The family bands often congregated in larger villages to fish, to plant fields, to hold ceremonies or to mobilize for war.
- Eastern Abenaki lived mainly in what is now Maine, in distinct bands usually known by the names of the rivers they settled near. (Penobscot, Androscoggin)
- Within Abenaki groups, delegates of each *people* had equal influence in the councils, so there was no one chief.
- With the European contact came the loss of lands, diseases such as smallpox, tuberculosis and syphilis and depletion of food resources.
- Considered part of the Bear Clan.

C. Foods

- High meat eaters of wild game, moose, deer, turkeys, pheasants, elk, but not bear.
- Planted and ate corn, squash, & beans.
- Gathered wild bird eggs.
- Freshwater fish and saltwater fish including, lobster, clams, mussels, squid, and scallops.
- Wild berries, apples, seeds, nuts, and collected sap in birch bark containers to make maple syrup.
- Rabbit stews and soups were cooked in birch bark pots.

D. Dress

- Beaver, deer and moose hides were used for clothing and moccasins. Felting was made into hats, blankets and robes.
- They did not wear big feathered headdresses as depicted by the Europeans.
- Pointed hats and robes were made of colorful dyed fabrics.
- Today, European clothing replaced skins and furs.

E. Language/Communication

- All speak the Algonquin dialect. Abenaki and Penobscot dialect nearly the same. Passamaquoddy and Maliseet nearly the same.
- There is no ‘r’ in their language. If anglicized the ‘r’ may have been replaced by ‘l’ or ‘n’.

- Possibly as little as 20 people left who can speak and understand fluent Abenaki.
- “*Ohn-Honh*” or “Uh huh” means “yes.”
- “*Alnobak*” means “human beings.” This is what the Abenaki would call themselves.
- “*Ne-Do-Ba*” means “friend.”
- “*Kwai*” means “hello.”
- “*Sacmo*” means “chief.”

F. Holidays

- Observe Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Birthdays, Fourth of July and Halloween as French and English would.
- Lent and Holy week if part of the Catholic Religion, which many are.
- Most work and have paid holiday time off for each holiday our State recognizes, however, Columbus is not seen by the *people* as a great discoverer and Columbus Day would not be celebrated as told in our history classes in schools today.

G. Religion

- Spiritually they believe the creator organized the world as it should be and we should leave things as they are. There is no need for man to classify and organize people in order to understand them.
- Many different religions have been accepted by the Abenaki. Much history is written about St. Jean the Baptist ministering to the Abenaki and many of the *people* became missionaries and took Catholicism back to their bands. Protestant religions were also adopted. The Christian rites subordinated aboriginal beliefs, but did not eliminate them.
- High respect for everything in nature. All has life and a meaning for existence and everything is to be respected.
- Similar ideals align with the teachings of Freemasonry and some belonged to Masonic Lodges.
- Beliefs focused on numerous supernatural beings like the god of the forest and the god of thunder and lightening.
- A prominent god was *Glooskap* (abbreviated from *Gelowasid-skidup*, meaning “good man”) who was believed to have created man by shooting at ash trees with his bow and arrow: the Indians came out of the bark of the trees. The Abenaki believed that Glooskap was capable of doing extraordinary good things for them and bad things to the evil spirits. They believed that he was an example for them of how they were to live, much as Christians believe in Jesus Christ.

- Animal tricksters were in the form of badgers, rabbits, raccoons, wolverines, foxes, and lynxes and prominent in Abenaki mythology.
- Legends had a meaning and a message about life.
- Abenaki people were deeply devout. Abenaki saw themselves as part of a pattern of existence that included the natural world.
- Abenaki people believe that they are simply Alnôbak-Wabanaki People-human beings that belong to the Dawn Land.

H. Family, Relationships, and Roles

- Family members were close and unity was vital.
- Children raised by parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents.
- Children repaid the debt by caring for their elders when they got old.
- Families shared food, clothing, possessions, good times and hardships.
- *People* ran by a council, not by a chief.
- “Indian Princess” was not a role in Abenaki culture. A seven month old might be considered a princess due to her crying demands being able to “rule a house.” By two years old, she was no longer considered a princess.
- Powwows were families banding together similar to the Europeans’ family reunion where traditions and history are shared. Powwows are still held today and are most traditional on the reservation lands where Wabanaki dance to ancestral drum and flute.
- Concern for others should always be shown. A selfish person had no place in the Abenaki community.
- Adults were teachers and not punishers.
- Boys were taught to hunt, fish, and provide for the family.
- Girls were taught to take care of babies, cook, and make clothing.

I. Legends/Work/ Play

- The Abenaki considered themselves as descendents from animals, and animal relations as ‘persons of other than human forms.’
- Hunters apologized to the animal’s spirit after killing an animal, disposed of the bones properly, and did not waste any of the meat.
- Family bands kept sacred totems or handmade emblems that showed their special relationship with a particular animal and its spirit.

- The *people* believed that members of the group inherited some of the characteristics of the animal of its totem.
- Two types of early dwellings:
 - Wigwam which was conical in shape, made from hides or pieces of overlapping birch bark and could be easily dismantled by a family on the move;
 - Long House which was larger, sturdier and more permanent, and could house 30-60 persons – built when the Abenakis congregated in villages.
 - Some villages were enclosed in palisades with each containing a large, oblong, council house.
- Today Abenakis who have assimilated to the European culture live in houses of all kinds on their own property throughout Maine.
- Made snowshoes out of wood and leather.
- Built canoes and baskets out of birch bark. Abenakis used the underside of the birch bark because it shed water better.
- Sold beaver pelts for the fur business.
- Grew and sold tobacco.
- Sold beads, baskets and pouches to tourists.
- Worked in tourism businesses.
- Worked as guides.
- Fought in wars.
- Today, the *people* (male and female) work in all trades.
- In Abenaki tradition, the *people* would gather in a circle around the fire to listen to the storyteller know as N'datlogit, "He who carries the Stories." The strength of the stories, passed down from generation to generation, serve to instill cultural values and preserve traditions.
- Stories served three purposes: entertained the people, especially on long winter nights; they preserved ancient memories; and above all, they offered instruction (helped teach people right from wrong and helped to explain why the world worked as it did.)
- Toys and Games
 - Dolls were fashioned from corn stalks, cattails, corncobs and other indigenous materials.
 - Girls decorated and beaded cradleboards and dolls' clothing. They also constructed dolls' mats and tiny wigwams.
 - Boys had small bows, slings, spears and fishing equipment to play with.
 - Amusement toys were:
 - The Buzzer - A circular piece of bone or antler with two holes in the center. It was threaded with a piece of sinew (tendon, ligament,

muscle.) The sinew was attached to small pieces of bone or wood that were used as handles. The child would grasp the handles and alternately pull and relax the sinew making the circular piece spin and buzz.

- Lacrosse
 - Canoe Tilting
 - Snow Snake
 - Cat's Cradle
- Gambling was enjoyed by adults with betting on games of dexterity and game-bowl & dice gambling.

II. Health and Wellness

A. General Information

- Family members make own decisions about healthcare.
- Purchase healthcare insurance through work.
- Some may still use willow tea (acetaminophen) for headaches.
- Elders may still use a salt-pork poultice to draw out poisons from cuts.
- A sweat lodge or sauna is still used to cleanse and refresh the body. This was traditional for men, and for women who were not menstruating.
- Menstruation or “moon time” was a natural cleanser for women.
- Dementia, Alzheimers, Diabetes and Heart Attacks are common illnesses of the Abenaki.
- Meat is a major part of the Abenaki diet. Today, beef and pork have replaced much of the wild game that used to be eaten. The fats on these meats can increase cholesterol.

B. Healthcare Medicine People

- Molly Ockett—Her Indian name was Singing Bird. Her Christian name was Marie Agathe. She probably pronounced it ‘Mali Agget’ which sounded like Molly Ockett to the English settlers. Molly is undoubtedly the most well known Abenaki who ever walked in the forests of Western Maine. She was once referred to as “Androscoggin Valley’s Florence Nightengale” Molly was an Abenaki healing woman She wandered throughout the upper Androscoggin River and collected her healing medicines and provided for herself as she had been taught by her ancestors. Molly was a fine hunter. Molly was the only doctor available to most of these early settlers. Molly has been described wearing the pointed cap that would be appropriate for an Abenaki woman. Molly was well known in Poland where she often visited the springs. Molly

claimed the springs had medicinal powers. Molly was also known for her beautiful baskets and other small crafts that she sold to the locals. Molly lived a nomadic lifestyle. Molly died in Andover and a head stone was placed on her grave that reads: “MOLLOCKET Baptized Mary Agathe, died in the Christian Faith, August 2, A.D., 1816 The Last of the Pequakets.”

C. Challenges to Healthcare

- Possible lack of trust with non-native American culture.
- Family members want to participate in a patient’s health care plan.
- Some Abenaki still use homeopathic medicines that can interfere or interact with herbal medicines.
- Abenaki feel significant bond with nature and his/her impact on the environment and desire to pass into the next world naturally instead of prolonging life with modern interventions.

D. Suggestions for Healthcare Providers

- Remember to treat Abenaki as individuals and ask a lot of questions, offer sincere and useful information and provide patients choices for health care.
- Ask who else in the family the patient wants to have involved in health care planning.
- Ask if the patient is using any homeopathic medicines and inform them about contraindications.
- Ask about their end of life care and if they have any preferences in their health care plan if terminal illness.

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