

# The Penobscot



*Basketmakers on Indian Island. 0061-07,  
Maine Historical Photographs Collection,  
Special Collections, Fogler Library, University of Maine.*

“Part of our struggle today is to bring to light that our culture is very much alive, that we exist as a people, with feelings, aspirations, joys, and disappointments.”

Wayne A Newell, Ed. M.  
Director of Cultural Programs &  
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Indian Township School

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# The Penobscot;

“People of where the river broadens out” or  
“Where the rocks open out”

## I. Description of Culture

### A. Demographics, Population, and Territory:

- **Penobscots**- 1 of 4 Maine tribes that make up the **Wabanaki confederacy**:  
The Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac are the other three tribes.
- **Reservation** –Indian Island, Old Town, ME
- **Population**- Second largest minority community in Maine (All Native Americans, .5%)  
Penobscot: 400-500 members on reservation, 2000+ members in No. America
- Largest population sector at 25-45 yrs (48%)
- Maine Native American – 6, 392 members (four tribes)  
Compared with  
The Navaho- 10,000-12,000 members
- **Total land** 115,987 acres includes 146 islands  
**Reservation land**- 4,841 acres  
**Trust land**- 55,278 acres  
**Sea land**- 55,843 acres
- Occupied Northern New England at least 10,000 years ago, both sides of Penobscot bay, extending far inland along Penobscot River
- The Penobscot River watershed drains 1/3 of the state of Maine: includes thousands of miles of rivers and tributaries
- Also know as: Abenakis (Etchemins), Pentagoets, Easter Abenakis, Panawamske, Canibas (Tarratines), and Eastern Indians

### B. History

- **1616-1619**, 90% of the Penobscot died during epidemics
- **1790**, Non Trade/Non Intercourse Act- No state was allowed to make a treaty without vote of congress
- Penobscot and Passamaquoddy received some recognition for service in American Revolution -3 small reservations were established in northern Maine. This action was in violation of the Non-Intercourse Act.  
Also, guaranteed health care was established “Trust Responsibility”.
- **1820**, Maine became a state, Massachusetts had not ratified the treaties, and Maine did not uphold them.
- **1823**, Granted representation in Maine legislature, to vote only on Native American issues.
- **1924**, Tribal members allowed to vote in state elections
- **1950**, U.S. Government Health care began
- **1970**, Fought to retain ownership of Maine state lands from treaties that had been violated. The Penobscot had originally thought they had given permission for white settlers to share the land

with them. The Penobscot do not traditionally have a concept of ownership. White people in Maine and the State of Maine were prompted to settle these legal matters because this action by the Penobscot held up land transactions.

- **1980**, Maine Indian Implementation Act: Land Claim Settlement – Won \$81.5 million from Federal Government for lands taken without compensation. Purchased land from paper companies.
- **Presently**- “**Maine Indian Tribal State Commission**”- formed to go over land claim documents and make corrections and interpretations. Includes Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, former government officials and lawyers
- **Current Governor** or Chief- Barry Dana

### **C. Food**

- Currently most of the tribe now consumes a traditional Western Diet.
- Agriculture consisted of corn, beans, squash – Pride in growing your own food.
- Traditionally hunted wild game and fished. Gathered wild berries, roots, herbs, maple syrup, and fiddleheads
- A relationship of cooperation exists between the hunter and animals. Both respect the importance of one another.

### **D. Language/Communication**

- Mostly English speaking, due to past discrimination of their native tongue.
- The last fluent native speakers of Penobscot language have died and the reservation is working to revive their old language through Native Studies programs.
- Not much written in old language as stories were formerly passed verbally from memory rather than written word.
- Language was based more on a description of an object rather than a label.
- Words were not pluralized using suffix –s.

### **E. Holidays & Other Celebrations**

- Community gatherings occur for celebrations of family members, harvest, festivals, traditional drumming-dancing-singing, and the New Year.
- Wabanaki tribes congregated to celebrate St. Ann’s Day through socializing and Catholic Rituals.
- Funeral/Wakes last several days to allow friends and family to come from afar and reaffirm their ties.

### **F. Religion:**

- **1662**, French trader Baron de Castine settled with the Penobscot and married the daughter of the tribal leader, or Sachem. Soon after a mission was formed by Abbe L. P. Thury.
- Presently many are Catholic and Baptist. It is not uncommon to mix either of these beliefs with Traditional Native American beliefs.
- Resurgence of traditional Native spirituality with noted similarities between Catholicism and Native beliefs such as incense and praying to ancestors.
- Self-described as a very thankful people
- Mount Katahdin – elevation 5,273 ft. has a spiritual significance for the Penobscot.

- Historically buried in a fetal position, with belongings; believed they need these things in the after-life.
- Belief of potential negative spiritual impact if hunting and fishing are restricted by environmental pollution.
- Have served in wars without question.

## **II. Family, Relationships, and Roles**

- At minimum a family consisted of mother, father, and children.
- Marriage is considered a strong bond and this relationship is highly cherished.
- Children and the elderly are regarded as the Penobscot's greatest resource because the children hold their future wisdom and the elders possess wisdom and knowledge of their past.
- The households might include grandparents, brothers and sisters of parents, cousins or others.
- A Sakon, Chief, or Saugma (leader or advisor/a woman has never held this role) along with a Vice-Chief and 12 elected tribal members (6 new members are elected every 2 yrs.) make up the governing body of the Penobscot Community. Male dominated society in political areas.
- Men: Considered the protectors. They hunted, trapped, and gathered food.
- Women: Primary role is care giving.
- Children: Helped with responsibilities of adults. Adult community shared the care giving of children so children were responsible to far more people than just their parents. Different generations often raising the children; this is determined by whoever is available or has the resources to raise the children. Penobscot community is very protective of their children.
- The Penobscot value their separate identity as a Native American people and want to maintain it.
- Boundary between Canada and the U.S. has imposed an artificial division of territory and their people; the Jay Treaty states that this tribe is to have free passage to and from the country borders. Penobscot state that the U.S. often does not recognize the Treaty and tries to question or even confiscate eagle feathers, peace pipes, medicines, sage, and tobacco.
- The greater the number of extended family and friends the more numerous people upon whom one could rely on, and to whom one owed love and support.
- On Indian Island community members watch out for one another and are aware of strangers on the island.

## **III. Work and Leisure**

- Life should not be hurried. Historically work did not dominate their lives.
- Crafts: Maine Indian Basket Makers Alliance formed; Purpose: Preserve and document the tradition of basket making among the Wabanaki tribes, expand markets for baskets in Maine and beyond, ensure a supply of high-quality brown ash and sweet grass for present and future generations, provide outreach, education and apprenticeships to younger members of the tribes in an effort to ensure continuation of traditions.
- War clubs, birch bark baskets, bead and quill work are current craft products

- Dancing: Both formal and free spirit dances
- Festivals occur annually on the reservation and at Bar Harbor (July). Maine Indian Basket maker's Holiday Show is the second Saturday in December where basket demonstrations are given.
- Canoe Tours: Eagle Watch Canoe Trips: 1-3hr. or 4-6hr.; leave from the Penobscot Nation Museum on Indian Island.
- Penobscot High Stakes Bingo- 8-9 times a year on the reservation.
- Casino in Maine is being considered between the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribe.

#### **IV. Health and Wellness**

- Current Penobscot Nation Health Department located on Indian Isle. Can be described as a one stop-shopping atmosphere. Here you can get a physical, pick up your medication prescription, see a counselor, and get your teeth cleaned all in the same day. They also have a Department of Environmental Health.
- Most use traditional Western Medicine approaches to health.
- High incidences of cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, addictions; tobacco, alcohol, and obesity. The research does not support whether there is a genetic link to susceptibility of these illnesses.
- High rate of smoking habits within Penobscot Community.
- High incidence of pre-diabetic symptoms in teens and pre-teens.
- Health is increasingly getting better due to more knowledge and information about health resources.
- Average age of death is 60 yrs.
- Current concern of Indian Isle community is the Penobscot River with high rates of Mercury & Dioxin due to paper mills. Dioxin attacks the immune system making people more susceptible to all sorts of illness. It affects the reproductive organs of both male and female. Poor water quality has affected fishing, plants esp. fiddleheads, and animals. Radon has also been found on the island.
- Tribal members are looking into expanding into Old Town for elder assisted living housing.
- Decreased teen pregnancy rates due to sex education and free access to birth control devices.
- No cultural bias against homosexuality. Community has a role for them and often considers them to be blessed or special because they possess traits of both male and female.

#### **V. Challenges for Health Care**

- Lack of transportation
- Low income - Medicaid offers little choices of providers.
- Many are uncomfortable with any group services like smoking cessation because of fear of discrimination.
- Language barriers for some of the elderly as well as fear of asking questions of Doctors and persons in authority roles.
- High unemployment rate – many people want to work in their own community and for their own people but the island has limited employment opportunities.

- Lack of college education
- Addictions; tobacco, alcohol, and other substances beginning at an early age.
- Obesity
- Low self esteem
- Mental Health issues
- Experience with prejudice, discrimination, injustice, and past bad experiences with other cultures.
- Feelings of being dependant on public assistance and attributing the blame of this to government.
- Limitations to Health Care Services provided on Indian Isle, as well as a shortage of qualified personnel.

## **VI. Suggestions and Tips for Health Care Providers**

- Include the man (Head of Household) in the family in health care services for all family members.
- Be aware of the Smudging Ritual used as a means to bring about change or purification. This includes the burning of sage, sweet grass, or cedar.
- May want to wear medicine bags when sick.
- May want to carry a feather or symbol in hospital.
- Life is not hurried and Penobscot may be offended if their care is hurried or time is too constrained.
- Show respect for their culture as they value their differences and their Native American Identity.
- Some women after childbirth may want to take home the placenta and bury it.
- May be afraid to ask questions of authority figures. Try asking the individual if they would like another Native American present to hear and acknowledge medical instructions or advice.

“Cultural sensitivity is just a fancy term for people treating one another with respect. That’s it”.

Pat Knox-Nicola,  
Penobscot Nation Health Department,  
Director of 24 years,

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