



Maple Sugaring Among the Abenaki and Wabanaki Peoples

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NULHEGAN BAND OF THE COOSUK – ABENAKI NATION

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Maple Sugaring:

Indigenous people throughout the Northeast have been sugaring for thousands of years. Each year, we waited for the perfect time to start tapping maple trees. Although all Senomozia (maple trees) can be tapped, Sugar Maples are ideal as they generally have a sugar content of 1.5 – 3% sugar in their sap.

Signs each year for the preparation of Pkwamhadin (gathering maple sap) start when winter temperatures rise above freezing during the day, and fall below freezing at night. This cycle of freeze and thaw causes the sap and the sapwood itself to contract and expand, causing pressure, which forces the sap up the tree and out of the taps. The cycle typically lasts from 4 – 8 weeks throughout New England.

Traditionally, we would have tapped the tree by cutting a diagonal gash just below the bark layer and inserting a flat spile made of cedar or slippery elm. In later years, these spiles would also be made from Salônakwam (sumac twigs) with the center pith removed and hammered into a hole drilled into the tree.

The sap would run down these spiles and was collected in Maskwaijo, sap buckets, made of folded birch bark placed on the ground at the base of the tree. Unlike the finely decorated Maskwainoda (birch bark basket), these were quickly put together and had no rims or decoration.

Often times the ice that would form on top of the sap buckets was discarded, or eaten by the children, as this would reduce the amount of water in the sap that needed to be boiled. Once the sap bucket was full, it would be poured into larger carrying buckets and carried or transported on a Odahôgan (sled/toboggan) over to the fire and poured into clay pots. These pots would either be put in the fire pit with the coals or hung over the fire to boil the sap. Multiple pots could be used for the various stages of the sap reduction process and the contents of one pot poured into the other when the timing was right.

Now, there is an inaccurate story that is told at sugar bushes across the northeast that the sole or major way Indigenous people boiled the sap was in large hollowed out logs, and hot-stones would be taken out of a fire, and placed them over and over again. This, in this author's opinion, is not only inaccurate but also insulting! It insinuates that we were "primitive" and lacking the technological advances necessary to properly boil food until the settlers arrived with brass and cast iron pots. This could not be farther from the truth! Indigenous people throughout the northeast have been boiling soups, stews, sap, teas etc. in clay pots which were placed in or over the fire for over 3,000 years! Why would one assume that we would ignore the available, tried and true, technology we had of clay pots and instead, risk ruining our efforts by putting rocks with ash on them into the sap?

I am not saying that it cannot be done however. Boiling using hot-stones can and was done on a small scale basis, usually by hunters or those on the move on the trails. But it would not be advisable to do so on a large scale basis, such as to boil and reduce hundreds of gallons of sap to syrup or sugar. To do so would introduce large amounts of ash causing the sap to become so high in alkaline that it would create a poisonous, inedible product! Even if one was to brush off the hot-stone and quickly dip it in a water bath to remove some of the ash, there would still be enough left on the stone that after using the 30, 40, 50 stones necessary to reduce the sap you would still end up with an inedible product.

Since the storage of Mkwakbaga (Red Water) maple syrup was more difficult than storing sugar, any syrup that was made was used relatively quickly. One favorite treat of many children is "sugar on snow" in which the syrup is poured onto packed snow and as it cools, it creates a chewy texture similar to taffy. The taffy is then rolled onto wooden sticks similar to a lollypop.

The majority of the sap would be boiled down to make sugar. Once the sap was boiled down to the correct thickness and texture it would be poured into a wooded trough, often made of basswood or walnut. Once in the trough a wooden stirring paddle would be used to rub and mix the sugar mixture continuing the evaporation process. Once the mixture was to a point, where it was starting to get clumpy, then a sugar spoon/ladle would be used to continue working the mix and creating granulated sugar.

One other method was to pour the "hot sugar" into sugar molds of small birch bark cones, the sugar would harden into sugar cakes to be stored and used later.

Today the Nulhegan Abenaki keep this tradition alive in our Tribal Forrest in Barton, VT. The process looks much different, using plastic taps and plastic tubing to collect the sap, reducing it in a metal evaporator inside a sugar shack and storing the syrup in glass bottles. However, the end result is still the same as it has been for thousands of years, delicious world famous Maple Syrup!

Abenaki Records:

1. Father Sebastian Rasles, a French missionary among the Abenaki wrote in 1689, "It is curious to know that the method of extracting the bayberry wax and making maple sugar, articles of considerable importance to us, has been learned of the aborigines". Source: Sebastien Rasles, *Lettres edifiantes et curieuses* (Paris, 1726), p. 252.
2. Stephen Williams, a 10 year old, who was a captive from the 1704 Deerfield Raid was taken by Sagamore George (Wattanummon). He was first taken to Fort Chambly and then by an Abenaki /Pennacook family to a village in Cowass and Northeast VT. In his account of his captivity he remarks on the large quantity of sugar made that year. "Whilst I lived here I made about fourscore weight of sugar with the sap of maple trees for the Indians. My mistress had a mind to go to Sorel, and because there was a barrel of sap to boil she sent me to the sugar place over night to boil it, so that we might go in the morning. I went and kept a good fire under the kettle, little thinking of its coming to sugar, till it was spoiled for want of stirring. For the manner is to stir it when it comes almost to sugar. For which they were very angry and would not give me any victuals." Source: *What Befell Stephen Williams in his Captivity, from The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*. Northampton, MA: Hopkins, Bridgman and Company, 1853, p. 7.
3. Jesuit Sebastien Rasle, who was among the Kennebec Abenaki, wrote on October 15, 1722 "...my only nourishment is pounded Indian corn, of which I make every day a sort of broth; that I cook in water. The only improvement that I can supply for it is, to mix with it a little sugar, to relieve its insipidity. There is no lack of sugar in these forests. In the spring the maple-trees contain a fluid resembling that which the canes of the islands contain. The women busy themselves in receiving it into vessels of bark, when it trickles from these trees; they boil it, and obtain from it a fairly good sugar. The first which is obtained is always the best." Source: *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents. Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France. 1610-1791. Vol. LXVII*, p. 93.
4. Jemima Howe and her six children were taken captive on June 27, 1755 from Bridgeman's Fort in Hinsdale, NH. She was taken first to Crown Point, then on to Fort St. John's and on to the Abenaki mission village of St. Francis. At the arrival in St. Francis the usual ceremonies were performed and Jemima and her infant were claimed by an Elder Abenaki woman and her family. They soon went off with a hunting party to a place called "Messiskow" at the lower end of Lake Champlain. In the spring they soon moved on again and "travelled eight or ten miles upon the snow and ice, came to a place where the Indians manufactured sugar, which they extracted from the maple trees." Source: *North Country Captives*. Colin Calloway, p. 91-93.

Wabanaki Records:

5. Marc Lescarbot in 1606 describes the collection and distillation of sap from the trees in Port Royal by the Mi'kmaq. Source: The history of New France. Originally published as Champlain Society Publication, 1911-14 3 vols. Toronto.
6. Jesuit Paul Le Juene in 1634 notes "When they are pressed by famine, they eat the shavings or bark of a certain tree, which they call Michtan, which they split in the Spring to get from it a juice, sweet as honey or as sugar; I have been told of this by several, but they do not enjoy much of it, so scanty is the flow." Source: Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents. Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France. 1610-1791. Vol. VI, p. 273.
7. Nicolas Denys in 1672 described the tapping of maple trees "That tree has sap different from that of all others. There is made from it a beverage very pleasing to drink, of the colour of Spanish wine but not so good. It has a sweetness which renders it of very good taste; it does not inconvenience the stomach. It passes as promptly as the waters of Pouque. I believe that it would be good for those who have the stone. To obtain it in the spring and autumn, when the tree is in sap, a gash is made about half a foot deep, a little hollowed in the middle to receive the water. This gash has a height of about a foot, and almost the same breadth. Below the gash, five or six inches, there is made a hole with a drill or gimlet which penetrates to the middle of the gash where the water collects. There is inserted a quill, or two end to end if one is not long enough, of which the lower extremity leads to some vessel to receive the water. In two or three hours it will yield three or four pots of the liquid. This is the drink of the Indians, and even of the French, who are fond of it." Source: Histoire naturelle des Peuples, des Animaux, des Arbres & Plantes de l'Amerique Septentrionale, & de ses divers Climats. Paris, 1672, Vol. II. The Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America (Acadia), Toronto, 1908, p380-1.
8. Jesuit Chrestien LeClerq in approx. 1691, while among the Mi'kmaq notes "As to the water of the maple, which is the sap of that same tree, it is equally delicious to French and Indians, who take their fill of it in spring. It is true also that it is very pleasing and abundant in Gaspesia, for through a very little opening which is made with an axe in a maple, ten to a dozen half-gallons may run out. A thing which has seemed to me very remarkable in the maple water is this, that if, by virtue of boiling, it is reduced to a third, it becomes a real syrup, which hardens to something like sugar, and takes on a reddish colour. It is formed into little loaves, which are sent to France as a curiosity, and which in actual use serve very often as a substitute for French sugar." Source: New relation of Gaspesia with the customs & religion of Gaspensian Indians. C. Le Clerq. Originally published as Champlain Society Publication V, 1910 Toronto, p. 122-3.

Wabanaki Sugaring Artifacts

Stirring Paddles:



Abenaki Stirring Paddle
Nicolas Panadis. Odanak, QC

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian



Abenaki Stirring Paddle
Odanak, QC

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian



Penobscot Stirring Paddle – Lincoln, ME

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian



Mi'kmaq Stirring Paddle

Eskasoni Reserve - Cape Breton Island, NS

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian

Sap Buckets:



Abenaki Sap Bucket – Northeast Kingdom, VT

Photo Credit Vermont Indigenous Heritage Center



Penobscot Sap Bucket – Chief Gabe Paul. Old Town, ME

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian



Mi'kmaq Sap bucket – Pictou Landing, NS Canada

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian

Sugar Molds:



Penobscot Maple Sugar Mold – Collected 1909, Maine

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian

Sap Spiles:



Penobscot Sap Spile – Collected 1909, Maine

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian

Sugar Spoons/Ladle:



Abenaki Sugar Spoon

Mary Jane Nagazoa - Odanak, QC

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian



Abenaki Sugar Spoon

Odanak, QC

Photo Credit National Museum of the American Indian

Abenaki Maple Syrup Origin Story:

Gluskabe Changes Maple syrup (Mkwakbaga)

Long ago, the Creator made and gave many gifts to man to help him during his life. The Creator made the lives of the Abenaki People very good, with plenty of food to gather, grow, and hunt. The Maple tree at that time was one of these very wonderful and special gifts from the Creator. The sap was as thick and sweet as honey. All you had to do was to break the end off of a branch and the syrup would flow out.

In these days Gluskabe would go from native village to village to keep an eye on the People for the Creator. One day Gluskabe came to an abandoned village. The village was in disrepair, the fields were over-grown, and the fires had gone cold. He wondered what had happened to the People. He looked around and around, until he heard a strange sound. As he went towards the sound he could tell that it was the sound of many people moaning. The moaning did not sound like people in pain but more like the sound of contentment. As he got closer he saw a large stand of beautiful maple trees. As he got closer still he saw that all the people were lying on their backs under the trees with the end of a branch broken off and dripping maple syrup into their mouths.

The maple syrup had fattened them up so much and made them so lazy that they could barely move. Gluskabe told them to get up and go back to their village to re-kindle the fires and to repair the village. But the people did not listen. They told him that they were content to lie there and to enjoy the maple syrup.

When Gluskabe reported this to the Creator, it was decided that it was again time that man needed another lesson to understand the Creator's ways. The Creator instructed Gluskabe to fill the maple trees with water. So Gluskabe made a large bucket from birch bark and went to the river to get water. He added water, and added more water until the sap was that like water. Some say he added a measure of water for each day between moons, or nearly 30 times what it was as thick syrup. After a while the People began to get up because the sap was no longer so thick and sweet.

They asked Gluskabe "where has our sweet drink gone?" He told them that this is the way it will be from now on. Gluskabe told them that if they wanted the syrup again that they would have to work hard to get it. The sap would flow sweet only once a year before the new year of spring.

The People were shown that making syrup would take much work. Birch bark buckets would need to be made to collect the sap. Wood would need to be gathered to make fires to boil the water out to make the thick sweet syrup that they once were so fond of. He also told them that they could get the sap for only a short time each year so that they would remember the error of their ways. And so it is still to this day, each spring the Abenaki people remember Gluskabe's lesson in honoring Creator's gifts and work hard to gather the maple syrup they love so much. Nialach!