

A KEY into the
LANGUAGE
of
WOODSPLINT
BASKETS



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Joan Lester

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A KEY into the **LANGUAGE** of **WOODSPLINT** **BASKETS**

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With essays by: Joan Lester, Tom McFeat, Sarah Peabody
Turnbaugh and William A. Turnbaugh, Gladys Tantaquidgeon
and Jayne G. Fawcett, Ann McMullen, Trudie Lamb Richmond,
Russell G. Handsman, Mark P. Leone

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A CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATIONS

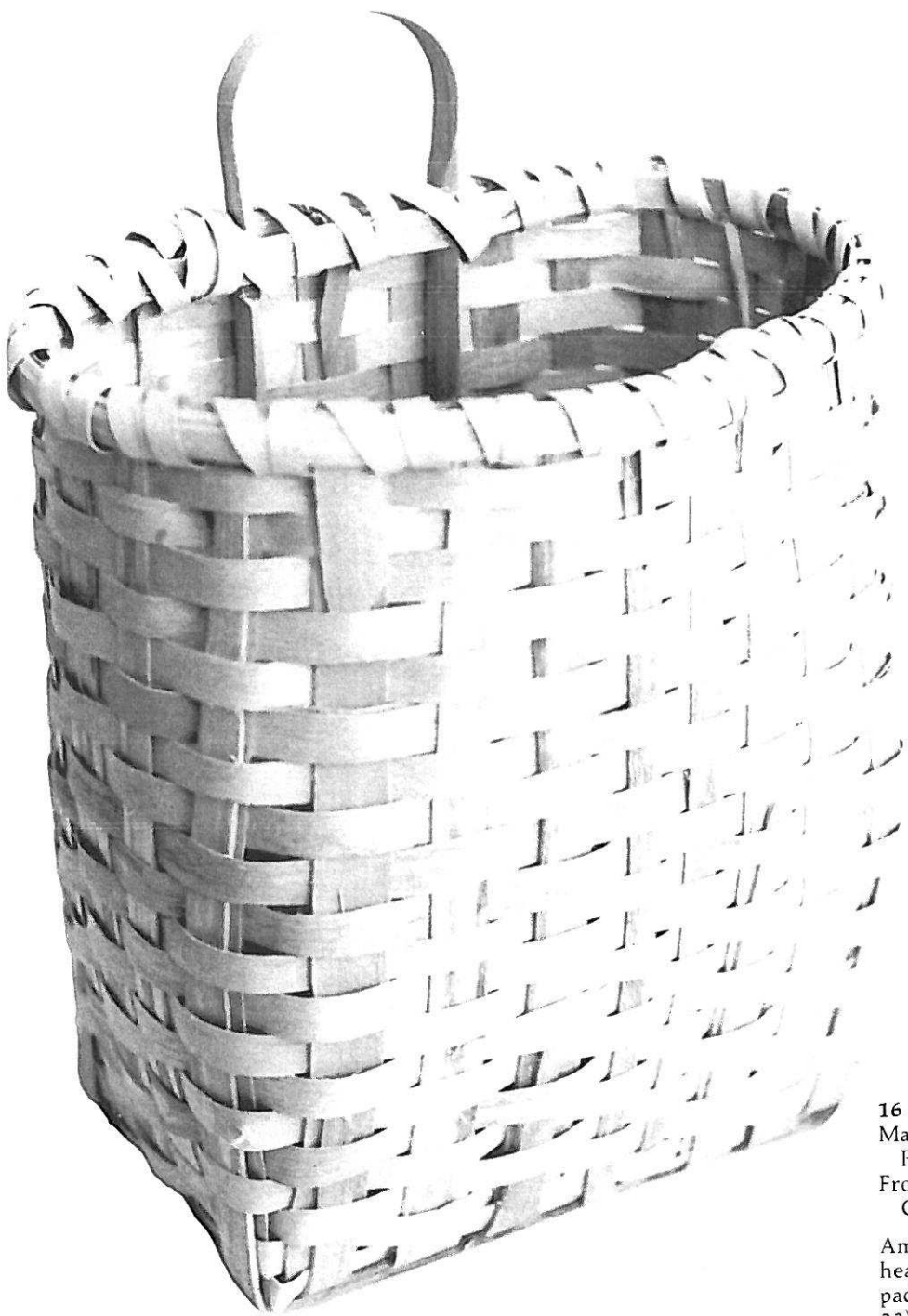
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16 Child's Pack Basket
Made by William Altvatar,
Passamaquoddy, 1977
From the collection of The Boston
Children's Museum

Among Northeastern Native Americans, heavy-duty utilitarian baskets including pack baskets and bushel baskets (see Cat. 33) were commonly woven by men using thick, relatively coarse splints. This contemporary example by Billy Altvatar, a Passamaquoddy fisherman and sometime basket maker, was shaped on a special composite mold he made. Earlier work baskets were woven freehand.

"We Didn't Make Fancy Baskets Until We Were Discovered": Fancy-Basket Making in Maine

Joan Lester

The emergence of fancy-basket making among Indian peoples in Maine was made possible by the introduction of two new basket-making tools—blocks and gauges—and was nurtured by the growth of the tourist industry in New England.

Today in Maine, Penobscot and Passamaquoddy basket-makers weave two types of splint containers: heavy utilitarian work baskets with thick, wide splints, almost always woven by men (Cat. 16); and smaller, delicately shaped "fancy baskets" with narrow splints, embellished with "curly work," dyes, sweet grass and/or Hong Kong cord, and woven primarily by women (Cat. 17). Contemporary basket weavers use special basket-making tools to save time and ensure uniform production. A device known as a gauge slices splints into more narrow uniform widths, and a solid wooden

form, referred to as a block, serves as the shape around which a basket is measured and molded. Work baskets may be prepared with or without these tools. Fancy baskets are almost always made with the aid of blocks and gauges.

The large work baskets have been produced and sold in New England for at least two hundred years; fancy baskets have not. Until the mid-nineteenth century there was little demand for fancy baskets, and they were made infrequently, primarily as novelties. Fancy baskets began to be produced in quantity by the 1870s as a market for them appeared and blocks and gauges were introduced to facilitate their production.

In the early part of the last century, when utilitarian baskets were in demand, Indian peddlers traveled from house to house and town to town sell-

17 Covered Work Basket

Random wefts dyed blue and brown using a commercial dyestuff. Splints in varying degrees of white add to the decoration

Made by Eunice Crowley, Penobscot, 1985
From the collection of the Boston Children's Museum

Miniature Barrel Basket

Random wefts dyed brown using commercial dyestuff

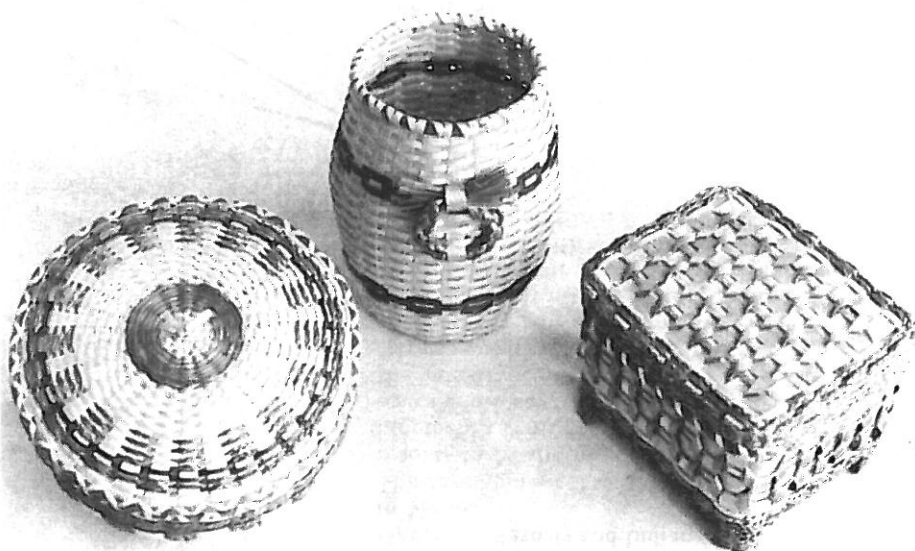
Made by Chief To-me-kin
(Leslie Ranco), Penobscot, 1983
From the collection of the Boston Children's Museum

Footed Jewelry Box

Curlicue detail, dyed fuchsia using commercial dyestuff

Made by Chief To-me-kin
(Leslie Ranco), Penobscot, 1983
From the collection of the Boston Children's Museum

These examples of Penobscot fancy baskets include well-known forms, many of which have been made continuously throughout the twentieth century. Although women ordinarily wove fancy baskets, men also began to weave during the late nineteenth century in Northern New England.



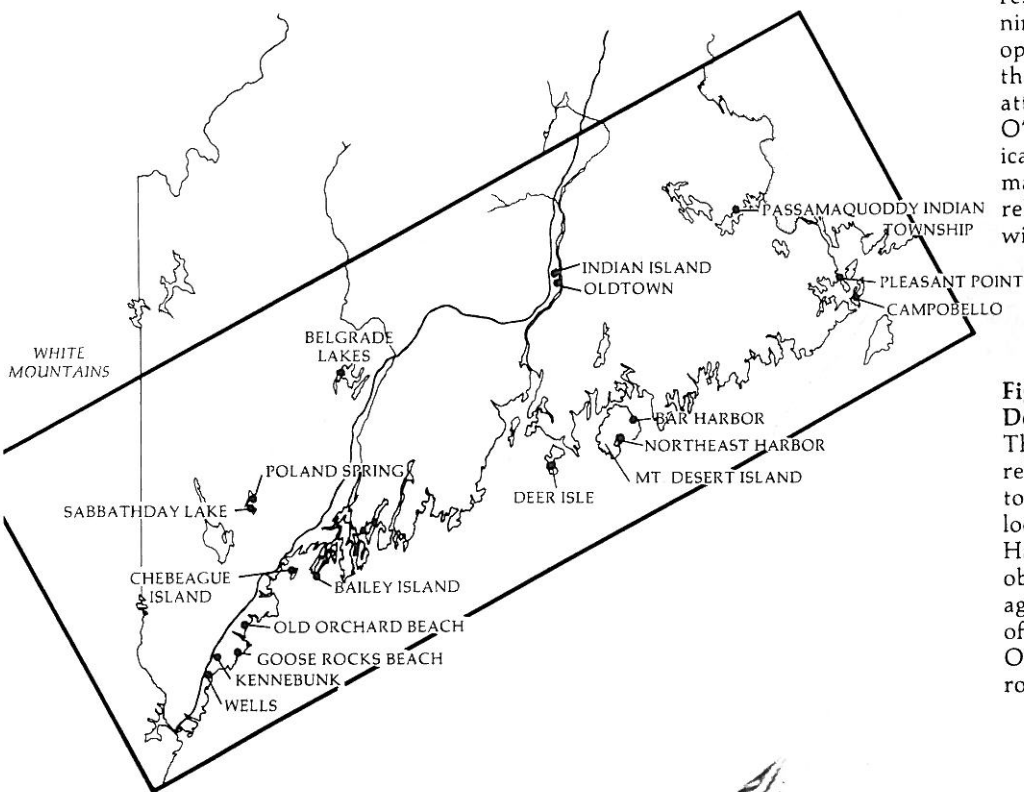


Figure 17. Resorts and Indian towns in Maine.

The development of seaside and lakefront resorts in Maine began during the late nineteenth century. Both outside developers and local residents participated in the industry, constructing large hotels to attract wealthy tourists (Helfrich and O'Neil 1982; Nowlan 1975). Native Americans took advantage of this increased market for their products by forming relationships with visiting families or with shopkeepers in Bar Harbor.

Figure 16. The St. Saveur Hotel, Mount Desert Island.

The St. Saveur hotel, built in 1870 and rebuilt after a fire in 1882, housed visitors to Mount Desert Island until 1945. Its location on Mount Desert Street in Bar Harbor was said to be "entirely free from objectionable surroundings" and encouraged the attendance of "a very smart set of guests" (Helfrich and O'Neil 1982). One of the smaller hotels, it had only 150 rooms.





18 Covered Storage Basket

All warps swabbed with blue
(Prussian blue in an oil medium?);
random wefts swabbed with green
(blue and Patent yellow)
and dyed brown using a vegetable dye
Penobscot?, circa 1835
From the collection of the
Robert Abbe Museum

Covered storage baskets and other utilitarian forms have been produced in New England for at least two hundred years. Early basket-makers peddled these wares from house to house and town to town. The storage basket illustrated is typical of nineteenth-century basketry in New England, and like many baskets made before the adoption of the basket gauge and other labor-saving devices, was woven freehand (without a mold) using swabbed, hand-cut splints of slightly irregular widths.

19 Basket

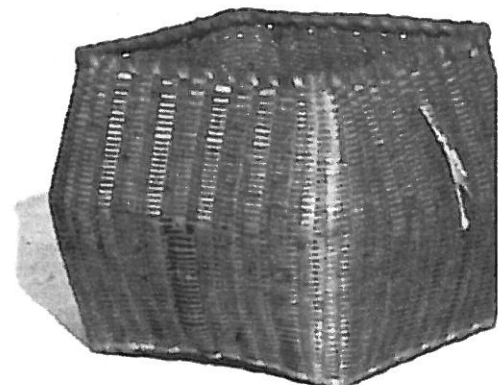
Odd warps swabbed with blue
(Prussian blue?)
Penobscot?, circa 1890
From the collection of
Mr. and Mrs. Peter Goodman

Miniature Pack Basket

Odd warps swabbed with Indigo blue
Penobscot?, circa 1840
From the collection of the
Robert Abbe Museum

Although baskets made with narrow splints were more common after the introduction of the basket gauge, baskets with very narrow weft splints were produced before 1850.

Small pack baskets, often used for berry picking, were a common form in Maine during the nineteenth century. Each of these examples is very simply decorated with swabbed warp splints. Since they were woven without the aid of molds, their forms were highly varied.



ing their wares. Covered storage baskets (Cat. 18), harvesting baskets (Cat. 19), and work baskets were all eagerly acquired by non-Indian consumers. Later the opening of seashore and mountain resort areas in New England created a market for fancy baskets as well.

By the 1870s in Northern New England, the era of the great summer resorts had begun. In 1873, for example, Bar Harbor on Mount Desert Island was described as a "first rate resort," with eleven luxury hotels on Main Street, each able to house five hundred guests (Hale 1949:132; Fig. 16). By 1880 the Campobello Company had built three resort hotels on the island of Campobello (Nowlan 1975:90), and there were similar establishments in Kennebunk, Old Orchard Beach, and Poland Spring, Maine, and the White Mountains of New Hampshire (Rinhart and Rinhart 1977:122-27; Fig. 17). Altogether these resorts attracted and accommodated a large tourist market.

The early vacationers were well-to-do Victorians who chose to leave the cities and endure the hardships of travel to get closer to nature. The summer population included those families who built mansions (the so-called cottages) by the sea as well as those who flocked to the great hotels (Morison 1960:47-50). These residents prided themselves upon their choice of an unspoiled natural environment, and in their commitment to the area, felt a kinship with the Indian people who also lived there. Some families knew and considered themselves to be friends with a particular Indian craftsman or guide.¹ It is not surprising that these visitors were receptive to and actively sought out local Indian crafts as furnishings for their "cottages" and as souvenirs that would be expressive of their choice of vacation area (Cat. 20).

The Indian people of Maine, rather than the Victorians, were really the first to discover the so-called resort areas. Historically, Indian people spent their summers on the coast—fishing, clamming, and gathering oth-

er seasonal riches. Apparently, Indian families were drawn again to these places as the areas grew into non-Indian resorts. In Bar Harbor there was an identifiable Indian settlement by 1881 (Harrison 1881:199). While both men and women created baskets and other crafts, men also served as hunting, fishing, and canoe guides (Hale 1949:172).²

Indian basket weavers responded to tourist interest by revising the forms and functions of their splint basketry, by introducing tools to speed up production, and by altering their marketing procedures.

The Effect of Tourism on Style and Production

Basket weavers were already accustomed to accommodating their craft to non-Indian tastes and styles. By the 1860s, round, covered ash-splint storage baskets with splints of varying widths, swabbed with color, were being made by Penobscot weavers (Cat. 21). Modeled after hat boxes and bandboxes, these baskets were sought after for their practical (Eckstorm 1932:29) as well as aesthetic qualities. And the weavers seem to have understood what would appeal to this new tourist market. While continuing to weave utilitarian baskets, they also began to produce baskets that were smaller, more portable, and highly decorated. Recognizing and responding to the Victorian fondness for elaboration, weavers embellished baskets with elegant handles, decorative weaves, dyed splints, and sweet grass. These baskets began to be referred to as "fancy baskets," a term probably deriving from Victorian references to "fancy goods" and "fancy work" (Cats. 22, 23).

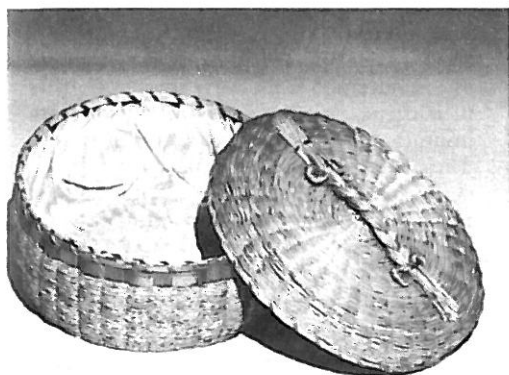
Basket makers sought their inspiration in the wide range of Victorian forms already in use by non-Indians. Whether an item was made of cloth, china, or glass, a skilled weaver could transform it into basketry, and in so doing often created a lighter and more appealing souvenir. Cloth-covered work boxes; leather

glove boxes (Cat. 24); metal, horn, and bone napkin rings; leather scissor cases; silver creamers; canvas creels; leather and celluloid collar boxes; wire and metal comb and brush cases; metal trays; cloth needle cases—all were transformed into graceful ash-splint containers. Ideas for new baskets also came from vacationers. A Bar Harbor author reported that the Indians, "quick to imitate forms and combine colors, have copied a number of models given them by summer visitors to Mount Desert" (Harrison 1881:199; Cat. 25).

There were changes and innovations in basket types. As some went out of fashion, new styles were introduced. When, for example, the motor car became popular, a compartmentalized Running Board Basket, with pockets for two thermoses, was invented.³

The weaving of substantial quantities of these smaller, more intricately shaped fancy baskets to meet tourist demands would not have been possible without the incorporation of gauges and blocks into the basket-making process. Until these tools were introduced, only a knife was used to prepare splints; baskets were woven freehand. Cutting splints with a knife was a labor-intensive process that could result in splints of slightly unequal widths, and crooked edges. In contrast, gauges with steel blades quickly cut one splint into several, more narrow ones of equal width, reducing the time required to prepare splints and assuring the weaver of a greater quantity of uniform splints (Fig. 18). A set of gauges, with differently spaced teeth, provided the weaver with quantities of splints of varying widths. Gauges also made it possible to cut splints into extremely narrow widths, a task that simply could not be accomplished with a knife.

Like the gauges, blocks (or molds) facilitated the expansion of basket weaving, making it easier to predict and control the form of a basket, to weave more quickly with the block as an internal guide, and to produce



20 Covered Sewing Basket

All warps dyed green using commercial dyestuff. Lined with pink-flowered silk moiré

Northern New England, circa 1930

From the collection of the AIAI, 82-4-3/17

Round work baskets, made of a combination of dyed splints and flat or braided sweet grass, were among the most common forms produced in Northern New England. Those with cloth linings or additional basket pockets inside brought a much higher price than a plain basket.

22 Basket

Odd warps dyed red using commercial dyestuff; wart weave overlay

Abenaki?, circa 1900

From the collection of the New

Milford Historical Society, 1939.25

Basket

Random wefts swabbed with Indigo blue; wart weave overlay

Penobscot?, circa 1900

From the History collection of the New York State Museum, 40.2.6

Native American basket weavers clearly understood what would appeal to their new tourist market. While continuing to make utilitarian baskets, they also began to produce baskets that were smaller, more portable, and highly decorated. Recognizing the Victorian fondness for elaboration, baskets were embellished with elegant handles, decorative weaves, dyed splints, and sweet grass. They were referred to as "fancy baskets," a term that probably refers to Victorian "fancy goods" and "fancy work."



21 Covered Storage Basket

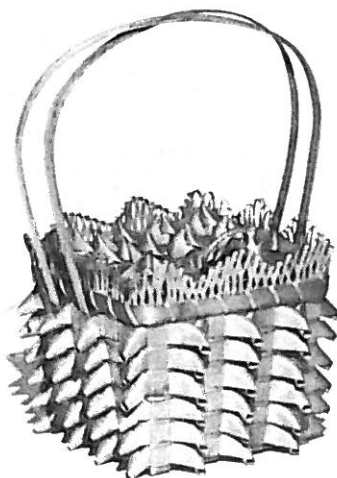
Random wefts swabbed with green (Prussian blue and Chrome yellow) and dyed brown using a vegetable dyestuff

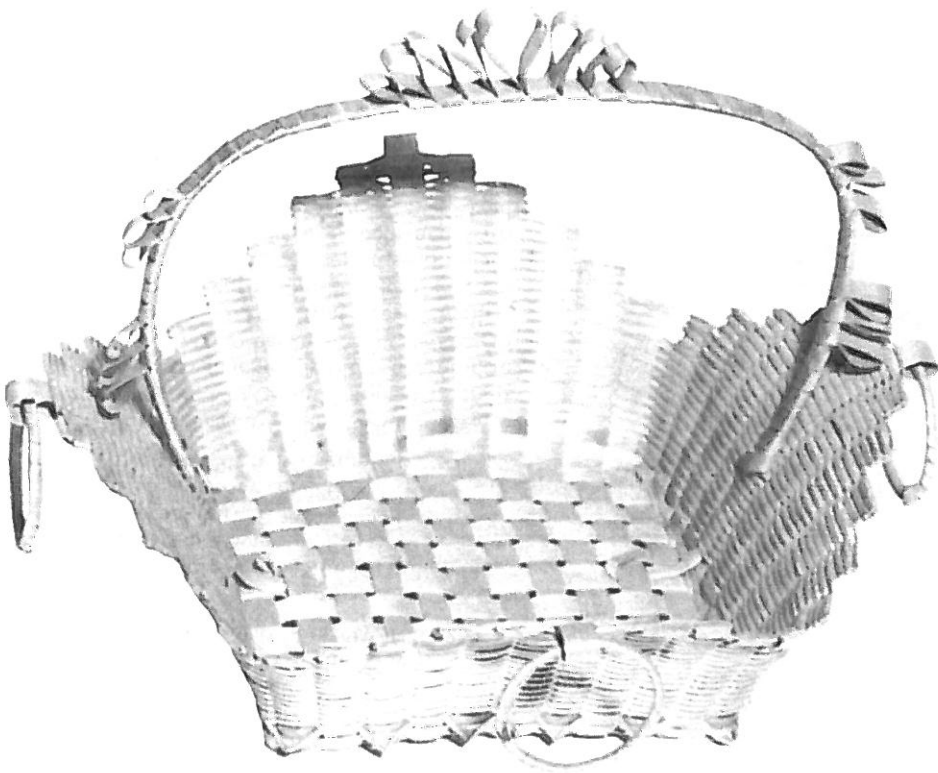
Penobscot?, circa 1860

From the collection of the Robert Abbe Museum

Throughout the nineteenth century, large

covered storage baskets were woven by Penobscot basket-makers. Earlier forms were square based, with round rims and covers (Cat. 18); later storage baskets were modeled after hat and band-boxes, with round bases and a cylindrical shape, and were designed to appeal to the same market. Across New England, similar forms appeared during the mid-nineteenth century.





23 Candy Dish

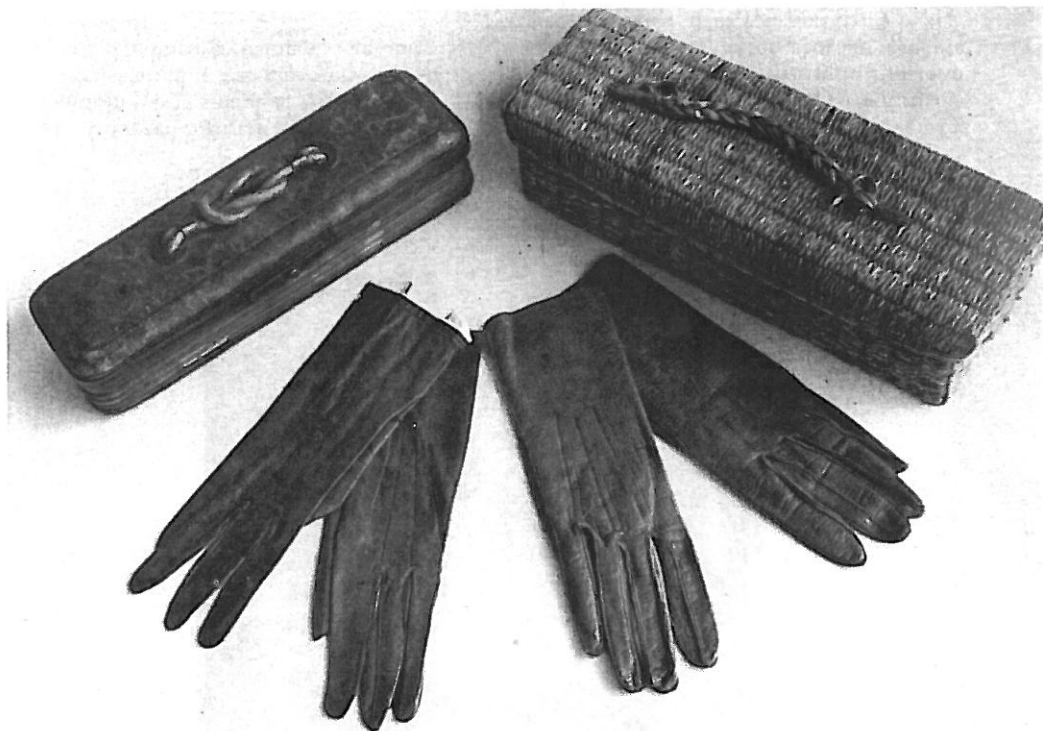
Porcupine weave detail at base
Penobscot?, circa 1920
From the collection of the
Maine State Museum, 80.157.50

Patterned after a Victorian glass candy dish, this basket was woven with extremely narrow splints, made possible by the use of a basket gauge.

24 Glove Basket

Warps dyed purple using
commercial dyestuff
Penobscot or Passamaquoddy, 1890–1920
From the collection of the Boston
Children's Museum (leather box for
gloves from the American History
collection of the Boston Children's
Museum, circa 1890)

Basket makers sought their inspiration in the wide range of Victorian forms already in use. Whether an item was made of cloth, china, or glass, a skilled basket maker could transform it into basketry. Work boxes, glove boxes, napkin rings, scissor cases, collar boxes—all common items of Victorian life—were transformed into graceful ash-splint containers. As models, these items would have been available to Native Americans in their homes, in Sears and Roebuck catalogues, or in the homes of wealthy tourists.



25 Sewing Kit

Warps dyed purple using
commercial dyestuff
Abenaki?, circa 1910
From the collection of
Mr. and Mrs. Reginald F. French

Napkin Ring

All splints dyed blue using
commercial dyestuff; wart weave detail
Penobscot?, circa 1920
From the collection of the
Maine State Museum, 81.147.212

Ideas for new basket forms often came from vacationers. This sewing kit, typical of early twentieth-century Abenaki work, was purchased at an Adirondack resort. Among the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Abenaki, different families established "rights" to particular resort areas. Penobscot basket-makers traveled to Rye Beach, New Hampshire, to Poland Spring, Maine, and to locations on the Maine coast. By the 1930s more than a hundred Penobscot left Indian Island every spring to sell their baskets at seaside and mountain resorts. Passamaquoddy families also left for the resorts in the summertime, while many Abenaki basket weavers traveled to the Adirondacks and coastal resorts in New Jersey (Pelletier 1982).



Figure 18. Using a basket gauge.

The basket gauge, a tool consisting of metal teeth set into a handle, was used to slice prepared splints into uniform widths. Here, the splint was held against the teeth and simultaneously pulled down across them. Some gauges, especially those used by the Mohawk, were composed of two pieces of wood that acted as a clamp to hold the splint against the teeth. Depending on the spacing of the teeth, gauges could be used to cut narrow or relatively wide splints.

Since many old gauges are set with teeth that are not uniformly spaced, it would appear that they first were intended to quickly cut up splints. Later, fancy-basket makers used gauges to ensure uniformity in finely cut splints.

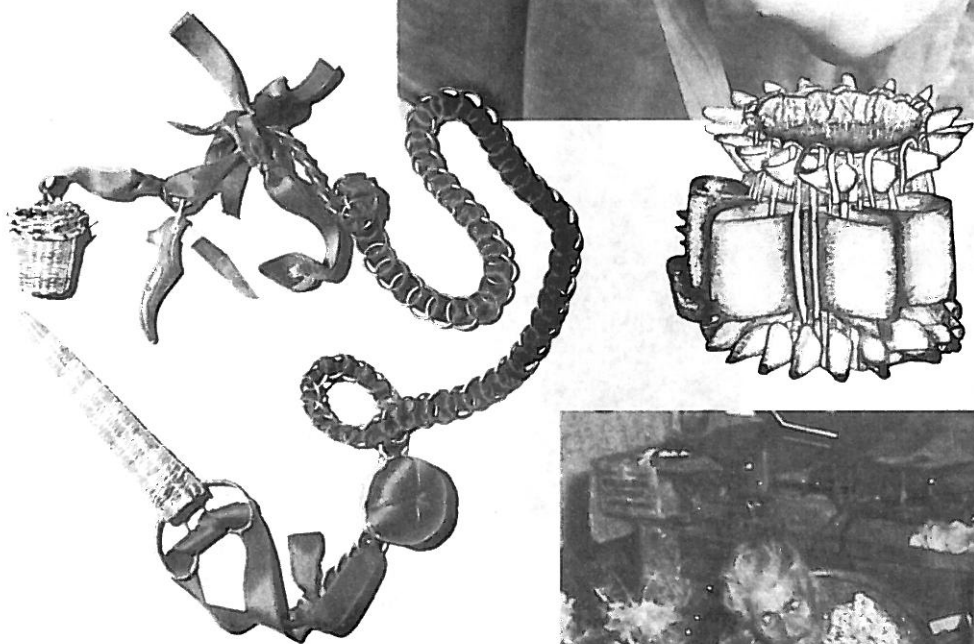


Figure 19. A Penobscot basket workshop.

Although many basket makers worked by themselves, this photograph illustrates a basket workshop behind the grocery store on Indian Island. The older woman, Rosella Lewis, on the left, is weaving the basket bases (see a completed base at her feet), while the woman on the other end, Evelyn Madas, does the rest of the weaving, using a composite block (note the strings that hold the unfinished basket to the block). The woman in the center, Cecile Paul, then puts the rims on the completed baskets. This kind of organization reminds one of an assembly line. Cooperative efforts such as this one, including sweet-grass gathering and braiding parties, were relatively common.



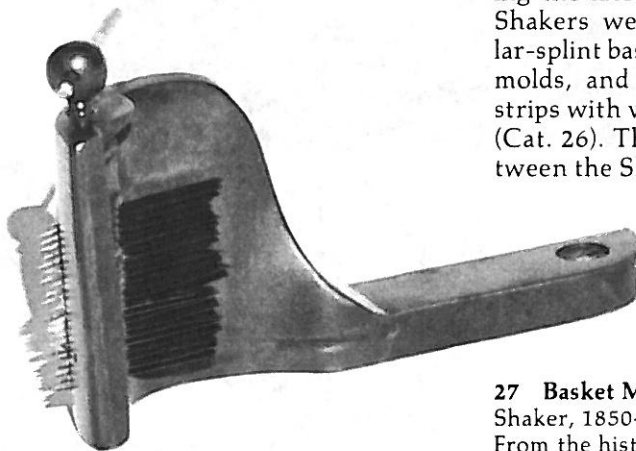
26 Straw Splitter

Shaker, 1850-1900

From the History collection of the
New York State Museum, 30.1.48

Before basket molds and gauges became popular among Native Americans, the Shakers apparently used hat and bonnet molds and straw splitters, resembling basket gauges, in their shops (Andrews 1933). Straw hats and bonnets, woven by women, were often sold to non-Shakers, and tools and molds assured a high-quality, consistent product.

Unlike Native American basket gauges, many Shaker gauges and straw splitters were equipped with adjustable teeth, so that sets of different gauges were unnecessary.



greater quantities of baskets in uniform shapes and sizes (Fig. 19). Blocks also made it possible to create basket forms that were difficult, if not impossible, to shape by hand. With blocks to shape the baskets and with thin, flexible splints for weaving, Maine Indian people stepped up production of fancy baskets to meet the needs of an expanding tourist industry.

The Introduction of Blocks and Gauges

The source of blocks and gauges is open to question. They may have been adopted from another non-Indian basket-making tradition or invented by Indian people themselves.⁴

In Maine and New York State, during the late nineteenth century, the Shakers were mass-producing popular-splint baskets on wooden forms or molds, and cutting the poplar into strips with very sophisticated gauges (Cat. 26). That there was contact between the Shakers and the Indians in

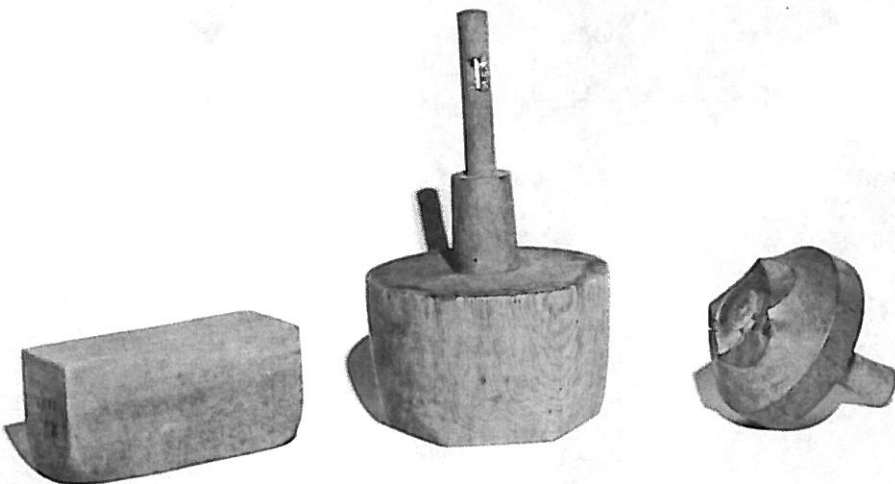
27 Basket Molds

Shaker, 1850-1900

From the history collection
of the New York State Museum,
33.3.101, 39.5.9, 39.5.13

The source of basket blocks and gauges is open to question. They may have been adapted from other non-Indian splint-basket-making traditions or independently invented by Indian people themselves. In New England both Nantucket Lightship baskets and Shaker poplar baskets were formed around molds, or blocks (Seeler and Seeler 1972; Andrews 1933).

Like Native Americans, the Shakers had a well-developed fancy-basket industry, including a wide variety of miniatures. Catalogues of Shaker fancy goods, made using molds like these, were available during the early twentieth century. A comparison of Shaker basket blocks with Indian blocks suggests a continuing exchange of ideas. Although Shaker blocks include forms not used by Indian basket-makers, the two are very similar.



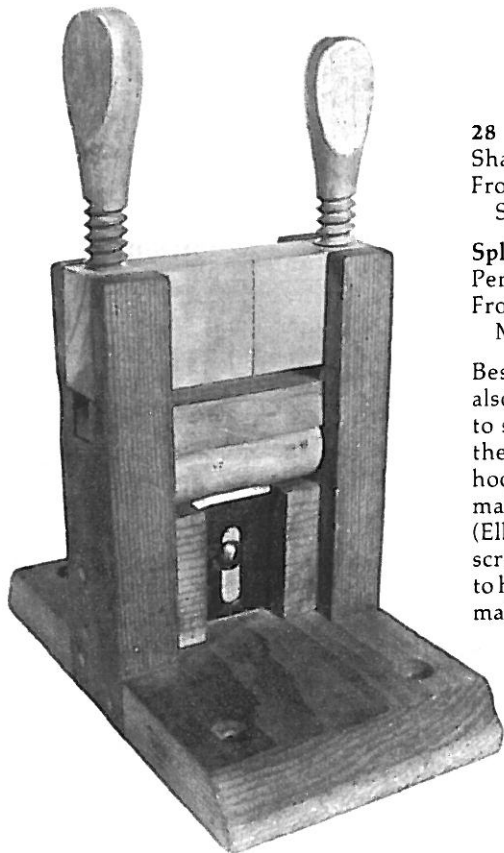
Maine is well established, and a comparison of Shaker basket blocks with Indian ones suggests a continuing exchange of ideas. Although Shaker molds include forms not used by Indian basket weavers, the look of Shaker and Indian blocks is similar (Cat. 27). Both groups used a wide assortment of blocks, were familiar with composite molds (Wetherbee 1981:14), and referred to molds as blocks.⁵ Since it appears that Shakers used hat and bonnet blocks even before they began using forms to weave baskets and did invent "basket making tools" (Andrews 1933:40, 172; White 1905:312), it is possible that the Shaker example led the Indian weavers to adapt such tools (Cat. 28).

Frank Speck, who devoted much of his life to a study of Northeast Indian cultures, seems instead to favor the Indian invention of blocks and gauges. He (1940:124) first states that gauges were "a modern instrument of native

invention." In 1945, describing Iroquois use of gauges, he (1945:44) writes that they were either "adopted or developed in modern times." Still later he (1947:5) explains that the growth of the basket-making industry among the Iroquois and Algonkian peoples served "to stimulate craftsmen to produce labor-saving utensils to increase quantity and quality," apparently concluding that such tools or utensils were invented by Native Americans.

A case may be made for the independent invention of blocks and gauges by Indian people. In the mid-nineteenth century the entire country was being transformed by a technological revolution. Indian people who worked in the mills and factories could have been inspired by examples of labor-saving devices, including molds and cutting tools, and could have invented blocks and gauges to solve their own pressing need for increased basketry production.

It is difficult, however, to determine which native community was the first to use these tools. In the mid-to-late 1800s, splint baskets were being produced in quantity by several Northeastern groups, among them the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy, the Iroquois, and the Abenaki. Iroquois weavers were using blocks and gauges in the mid-to-late nineteenth century (Benedict 1983:13; Holland 1983:1, 4). Among the Penobscot, such tools may have been known and in use by 1850; complete integration of the tools into the fancy-basket-making process seems to have occurred by the time of summer resorts. According to Mitchell Attean, a Penobscot, blocks and gauges "reached" Bar Harbor just after 1872 (Speck 1947:22). This approximate date is supported by basket makers, most in their sixties, who recall that their grandmothers and even great-grandmothers used blocks and gauges.⁶ An 1881 description of "split-wood waste-bas-



28 Splint Plane

Shaker, circa 1880

From the collection of Hancock

Shaker Village, Inc., 72.31.2

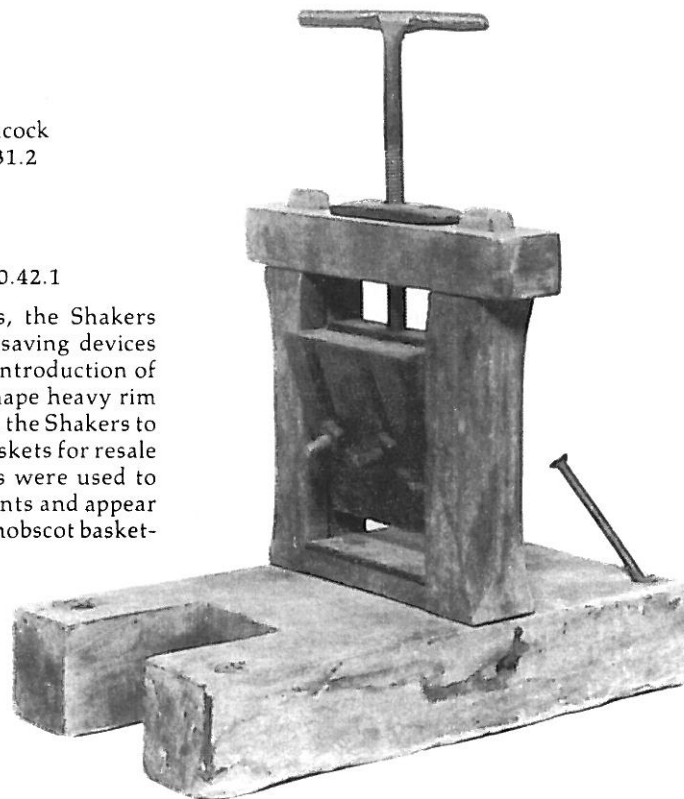
Splint Plane

Penobscot?, circa 1900

From the collection of the

Maine State Museum, 80.42.1

Besides molds and gauges, the Shakers also invented other labor-saving devices to speed production. The introduction of the steam tank, used to shape heavy rim hoops and handles, allowed the Shakers to make a large quantity of baskets for resale (Elliot 1974). Splint planes were used to scrape and smooth the splints and appear to have been adopted by Penobscot basket-makers.



kets . . . and sweet grass crewel baskets and wall pockets" woven by Indian people at Mount Desert Island further confirms the approximate date. Without full use of gauges and blocks, such baskets would have been difficult to produce in any quantity. As Eunice Crowley, a Penobscot basket-maker, said, "We didn't make fancy baskets until we were discovered."⁷ Among the Abenaki, blocks and gauges may have been introduced somewhat later. Weavers were using blocks extensively by the turn of the century for catalogue sales (Pelletier 1982:7, 8).

The Poolaw Collection of Penobscot Molds and Gauges

In the Boston Children's Museum collection of Northeast Native American materials, there are thirty-two Penobscot blocks and twenty-nine gauges (Fig. 20). The collection was that of Chief Bruce Poolaw, a Kiowa, who together with his wife, Princess Watawaso, a Penobscot, owned a basket store on Indian Island. Poolaw hired basket makers to supply crafts, furnishing materials and a workshop. To supply tools for his weavers, Poolaw collected basket blocks and gauges. Whenever someone needed a bit of cash, they knew that Poolaw willingly would purchase a block or gauges. If a basket weaver left a block in the workshop and did not return for it, that too became part of Poolaw's collection.⁸ When his wife, Watawaso, died, Poolaw sold a significant portion of this collection to an antique shop in Maine. The collection was acquired by the Boston Children's Museum in 1976.

A study of the blocks and gauges reveals much about fancy-basket production on the Penobscot reservation. Although all block types are not represented, a surprising array of fancy baskets could be produced with them. Each of the thirty-two blocks could be used to produce a different type of basket. The collection includes blocks for shaping the following basket types: collar (originally created to

hold linen and celluloid shirt collars); shopper (Cat. 29); round pocketbook; shoulder pocketbook; button; acorn and strawberry; knitting; wall pocket; tray; work basket; wastebasket; barrel; rectangular box (could also be used to create a miniature cradle basket); bowl; fruit bowl; and "flats."

The blocks, made primarily of wood, are hand carved from a solid piece of wood or are made of pieces of wood fitted and nailed together to form a solid mold. Nearly all the blocks have a handle for pulling the block out of the basket. Most handles are made of wood, but large nails, porcelain and metal drawer pulls, and a metal eye-hook also have been used. Tiny pin holes appear on the base of some of the blocks and were made when a basket weaver centered and pinned her basket base before tying it on the block. When received by the museum, many of the blocks were moldy and dye stained, with corroded metal parts, conditions caused by weaving with damp splints.

Baskets with openings smaller than their widest diameter, including the pocketbook, barrel, and shopper, necessitated composite blocks, that is, forms composed of several pieces (Cat. 30). During the weaving process the components of the pocketbook and barrel blocks were held in place by a piece of string tied around the block and held in place by a groove. Each piece was marked so that the block could be assembled correctly. When the basket was completed, the central core was removed and then the quadrants could be removed easily, one at a time. The shopper block, composed of two pieces pegged together, was also removed from the finished basket in sections.

The two-part shopper block was invented by John Lewey (Cat. 31). An old shopper block made by Lewey, somewhat smaller than the one in the Museum collection, is still owned by his family. In his time Lewey made shopper blocks for other basket weavers, and his name continues to be associated with this particular form. John Lewey is also remembered as the

man who invented the shoulder pocketbook block about fifty years ago. Lewey used machines at the Old Town Canoe Factory, where he worked, as well as equipment in the woodworking shed on Indian Island, to make some of his blocks.¹⁰ This history suggests that men designed and introduced new blocks, that such innovations were "owned" or at least credited to particular families, and that the inventor of a block produced them for other basket makers.

Names and initials are incised into many of the blocks, with some blocks bearing more than one inscription (Fig. 21). The shopper in the Museum's collection is inscribed with the name Alice Francis, a basket weaver who died about twenty-five years ago,¹¹ and also with the initials "O.K." A block for an eight-inch work basket is inscribed with the name Watty, a nickname for Watawaso used only by her closest friends. Another shopper, different from the Lewey one, is inscribed with the initials "F.S." for Florence Nicolay Shay,¹² the first Indian woman to graduate from Old Town High School (Verrill 1933:113). Clearly, the names on the blocks denote ownership. Since the blocks are passed down from generation to generation, multiple initials may appear. Chief Poolaw apparently was quite possessive about his blocks. In addition to the blocks personally inscribed with his or his wife's name, other blocks have "Chief Poolaw's Indian Tepee, Indian Island, Maine" hand-stamped on them.

Several blocks also have basket-making notations in pencil on the sides or base of the block. On the base of the Lewey pocketbook block is written "11-5," indicating that the basket will need 16 standards for its base—5 horizontals and 11 verticals. Similarly, the eight-inch block owned by Watty has the notation "9×9" and "18 standards" pencilled on it, indicating the number of splints needed to prepare the round bottom, or base. Evidently, once the exact number of standards needed to form the base of a particular basket had been deter-

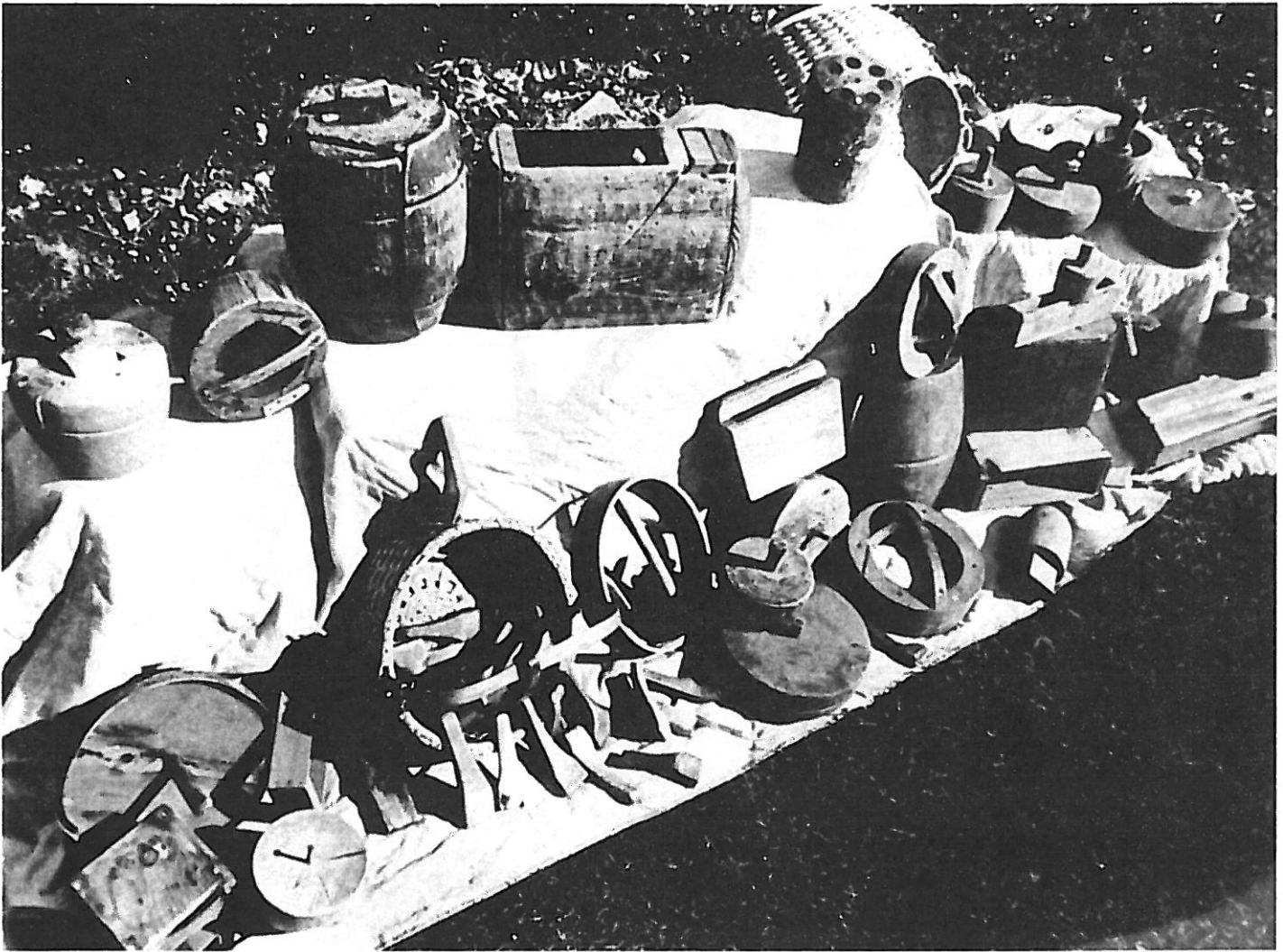
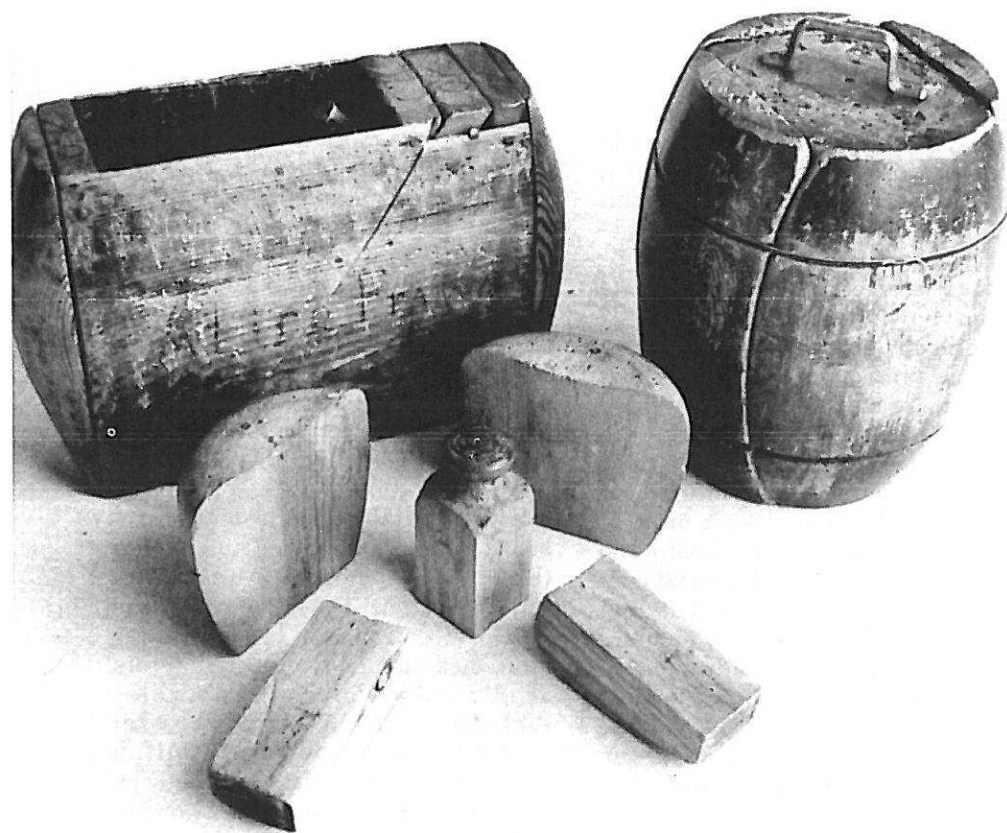


Figure 20. The Poolaw collection of blocks and gauges.

After the death of his wife, Bruce Poolaw sold most of the blocks and gauges he had collected over the years. They were acquired by the Children's Museum of Boston in 1976 through an antique shop in Maine. The collection consists of thirty-two blocks and twenty-nine gauges. Since each block represents a different type of basket, they reveal a great deal about the production of fancy baskets on the Penobscot reservation. Blocks for shaping the following basket types are found in the collection: collar, shopper, round pocketbook, shoulder pocketbook, button, acorn, strawberry, knitting, wall pocket, tray, work basket, barrel, waste-basket, rectangular box, bowl, fruit bowl, and "flats" or "arm baskets."



30 Pocketbook Block

Penobscot, circa 1930

From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

Shopper Block

Penobscot, circa 1930

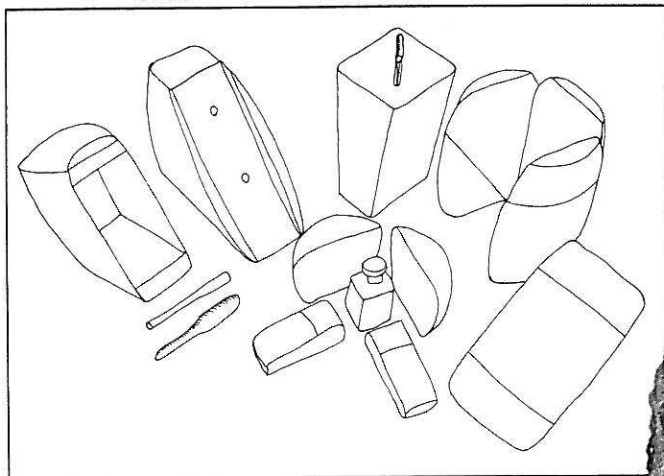
From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

Barrel Block

Penobscot, circa 1930

From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

Baskets with openings smaller than their widest diameter—including the pocketbook, barrel, and shopper—necessitated composite blocks, that is, those composed of several pieces (see diagram). During the weaving process the components of the blocks were held in place by a piece of string tied around a groove in the block. Each piece was marked so that the block could be assembled correctly. When the basket was completed, the central core was removed and then the pieces could be removed easily, one at a time.



29 Shopper

All warps dyed red using commercial dyestuff; splint wefts dyed red and blue

Made by Mary Ann Paul, Penobscot,
circa 1930

From the collection of the
Maine State Museum, 81.147.40



The popularity and use of Hong Kong cord and other commercially available materials like twisted paper cord varied from one native group to another. During the early twentieth century, Abenaki basket-makers were encouraged by middlemen to substitute Hong Kong cord for braided sweet grass in hopes that it would increase production. When these proved unpopular with buyers, imported materials were abandoned (Pelletier 1982). Among the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot, basket makers adopted Hong Kong cord for handles and for large baskets and have continued its use to the present day.

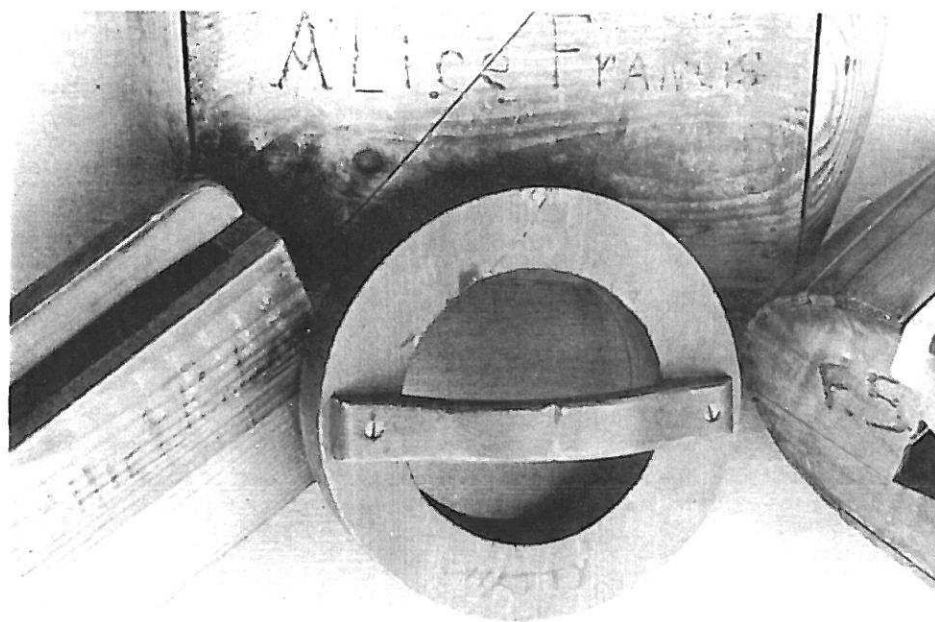
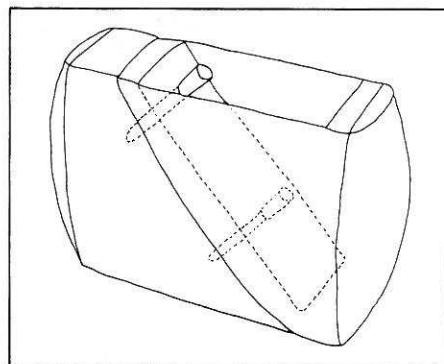


Figure 21. Detail of names and initials on basket blocks.

Names and initials are carved into many of the blocks. The names denote ownership, and since the blocks were passed down from generation to generation, many bear multiple initials. The mold for the Lewey shopper (Cat. 31) is inscribed with the name Alice Francis, a basket maker who died about twenty-five years ago, and also with the initials "O.K." The other shopper bears the initials "F.S." for Florence Nicolar Shay, the first Indian woman to graduate from Old Town High School (Verrill 1933). The Lewey pocket-book is inscribed "Chief Poolaw," and the block for an eight-inch work basket is marked with "Watty," Watawaso's nickname, used only by her closest friends. In addition, Poolaw marked the blocks in his collection with "Chief Poolaw's Indian Tepee, Indian Island Maine."



31 Shopper

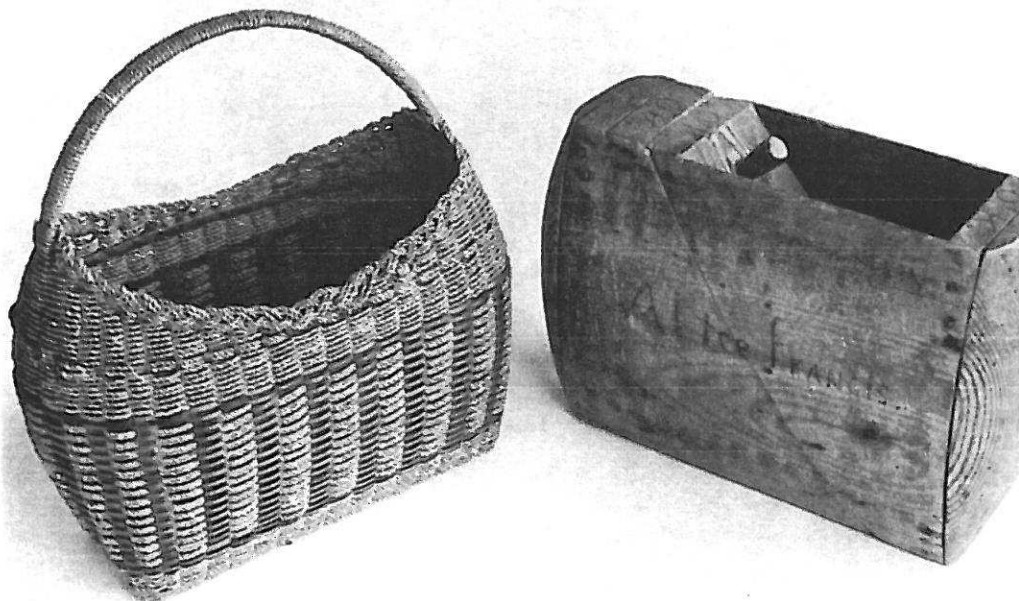
Random wefts dyed pinkish red and green using commercial dyestuff
Passamaquoddy?, circa 1930
From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

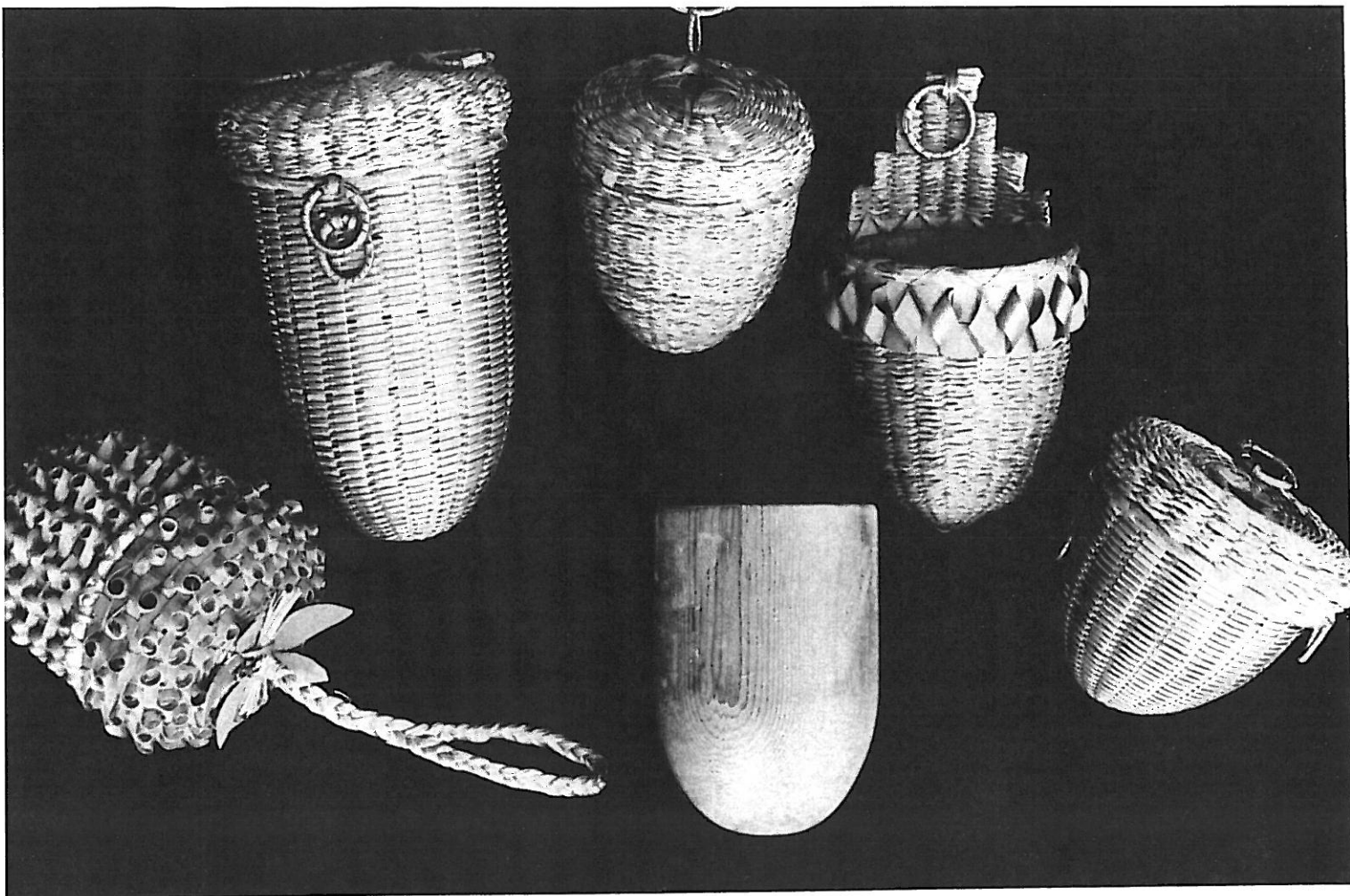
Shopper Block

Two components, made of other joined pieces, pegged together on a diagonal (see diagram)

Penobscot, circa 1930
From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

The two-part, pegged shopper block was invented by John Lewey and continues to bear his name. Its history suggests that among the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy, men designed and introduced new blocks and that such innovations were "owned" by or at least credited to particular individuals or families. Among the Abenaki however, the origins of specific molds are not personalized or even deemed significant. Rather it is a woman, the artist, who is often associated with a particular basket form (Pelletier 1982).





32 Acorn Block

Penobscot?, circa 1930
From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

Acorn Yarn Basket

Warp and weft dyed red; entire basket
covered with wart weave overlay

Made by Filomene Nelson,
Penobscot, 1976

From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

Acorn Yarn Basket

Penobscot or Passamaquoddy, circa 1920
From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

Acorn Yarn Basket

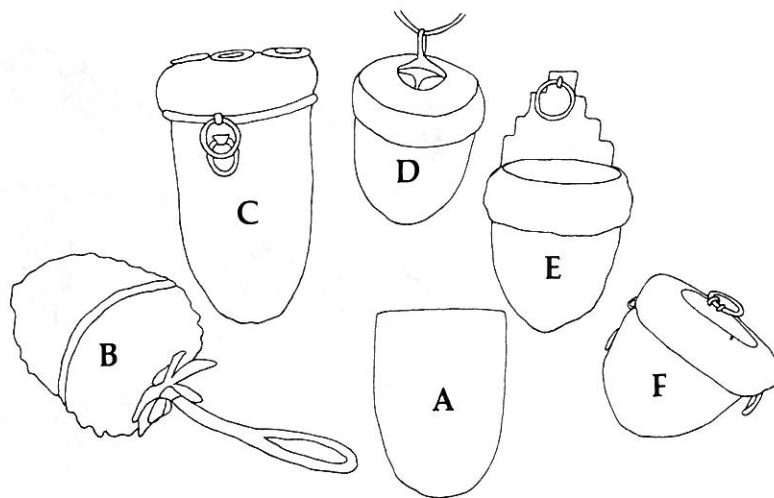
All warps dyed green using commercial
dyestuff

Penobscot or Passamaquoddy, 1920-1930
From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

Acorn Wall Pocket

Warps swabbed with green
(Prussian blue and Chrome yellow?)

Penobscot?, circa 1900
From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum



Acorn Yarn Basket

Odd warps and wefts dyed green using
commercial dyestuff
Penobscot or Passamaquoddy, 1920-1930
From the collection of the
Boston Children's Museum

Baskets with somewhat different shapes,
functions, and surface patterns could be
made from a single block. The acorn

block shown here (A) could be used to
create acorn-shaped yarn baskets (C, D,
F), wall pockets (E), or the more fanciful
strawberry basket (B). In this way basket
makers could respond quickly to market
trends without changing their tool kit
and could use different materials or
decorative styles to reflect their own
individuality.

mined, it was expedient to record that on the block, rather than calculate requirements every time.

Flexibility is built into the block system. A basket weaver can choose to make a basket that is taller or shorter than the block he or she is using. A series of short lines marks a cylindrical block, with "4 in" noted in pen on the wood. Weaving could stop at this height if a four-inch rather than the given five-inch basket was desired. To create a still taller basket, a weaver could pull up the block and continue to weave.

Baskets with somewhat different shapes, functions, and surface patterns can be made from a single block. A narrow rectangular block in the Museum's collection could have been used to make a tray, a bread basket, a wall pocket, or a glove box.¹³ Similarly, the so-called acorn block also could have been used to shape the more fanciful strawberry basket. In the Children's Museum collection, there are acorn and strawberry baskets with a variety of functions. They were containers for string, yarn, or crocheting equipment; trinket baskets; and even wall pockets. These baskets, made on the same type of block, look very different. Their materials and ornamentation reflect the style and personal choices of individual basket weavers (Cat. 32).

Blocks also can be altered to create slightly different shapes. A collar basket block in the Museum collection, for example, had cardboard wrapped around it to make it larger; and a round work-basket block had a wooden strip added to the rim to create a fruit bowl block.¹⁴

Substitutes may be used instead of wooden blocks for shaping baskets. Today glass jars serve as an ideal mold around which to weave vases;¹⁵ stove pipe once was used as a cylindrical basket block¹⁶ and a metal garbage pail has been used to shape a splint container.¹⁷

The Poolaw gauges have wooden handles and metal teeth. Slits are cut into the upper face of the gauge and the teeth set in. The earliest gauges

had teeth made from ordinary clock springs that were set into the gauge and then cut into blades.¹⁸ Today teeth are more likely to be made from old razor blades. The teeth are held in place with a variety of materials, including brass plates, wood, thin sheets of copper or tin, and even with a nail laid horizontally across the top of the gauge. Since the spacing of the metal blades is fixed in each gauge, a different gauge is required for each desired splint width. A fancy-basket maker might require as many as thirty gauges, each with differently spaced teeth.¹⁹ The gauges in the Museum's collection can produce narrow standards or weavers for fancy baskets as well as wide weavers for utilitarian ones (Fig. 22). For example, a gauge with fifteen teeth will yield sixteen extremely narrow weavers; a large gauge with only two teeth, $\frac{5}{8}$ inches apart, will produce three wide weavers. Some of the teeth on the gauges in the collection are now missing, and others have been worn down from slicing splints.

The Effect of Tourism on Marketing

The development of resort areas changed the marketing of ash-splint baskets. With many buyers congregated in one place, itinerant selling was no longer necessary. Instead, Indian basket weavers and their families traveled to the summer resorts and set up shop right there.

Among the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy, different families established "rights" to different resort areas. According to Madeline Shay, an Indian basket-maker, "Everyone had a place to go." Julia Dana went to Rye Beach, New Hampshire, and later on to Poland Spring, Maine; other Penobscot families went to Belgrade Lakes and Bailey Island, Maine.²⁰ John Ranco used to go to Deer Island, Maine,²¹ and Mitchell Attean was apparently in Bar Harbor (Speck 1947:22). By the 1930s more than one hundred Penobscot people left Indian Island every spring to sell their

baskets at seashore and mountain resorts (Verrill 1933:111). Passamaquoddy families also left for the resorts in the summertime.²²

Families prepared for the summer market by working throughout the winter to stockpile a large supply of baskets. They arrived at the resort with their completed winter's work as well as a supply of ash so they could make and sell baskets on site during the summer season. A similar pattern was followed by the Abenaki in Quebec, who frequented places such as Jefferson, New Hampshire; Lake George, New York; and Atlantic City, New Jersey (Pelletier 1982:5-6). Although people from the same reservation may have chosen different resort areas, each of the resort areas apparently attracted basket makers from many tribes. A postcard titled "Greetings from Bar Harbor, the Indian Village, one of the sights of old Bar Harbor" shows a street of camps where the basket weavers lived and worked (Fig. 24).

Not all Indian families traveled to resorts during the summertime; some chose to stay on the reservation and let the tourists come to them to buy baskets (Fig. 25). Basket making was seen as a means of survival, and children were assured by parents and grandparents that if they could weave, they would never go hungry.²³ Among the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy, rimless, square-bottomed candy baskets with a simple splint for a handle (Fig. 26) were made by novice basket weavers.²⁴ Older children sometimes were allowed to bind the rims of otherwise completed work baskets.²⁵ Weavers often worked in the company of other weavers, and sometimes there were sweet-grass braiding parties. Everyone brought food, gossiped, and braided sweet grass until the supply or the weavers were exhausted.²⁶

While the Abenaki in Quebec sold their baskets by the dozens to mail-order catalogue dealers (Pelletier 1982:6-9), there is no remembrance or knowledge among the Penobscot of mass production for catalogue



Figure 22. Selection of gauges from the Poolaw collection.

Most basket makers would have had sets of gauges to suit the baskets they wove, each with differently spaced teeth. In the Poolaw collection many of the initials and names that appear on the blocks appear on the gauges as well, including "A," "AF," "Alice Francis," "W" (for Watty), and "FN." Many gauges are decorated with chip-carved designs, and some with more representational subjects, such as fiddle-heads (Fig. 23).

Figure 24. The Indian village, Bar Harbor, Maine.

Historically, Indian people spent their summers on the coast; they were again drawn to these areas as the resorts grew. This postcard, titled "Greetings from Bar Harbor, the Indian Village, one of the sights of Old Bar Harbor," shows a street of tents and camps where basket makers and their families lived and worked. Encampments such as these were common in Maine resort areas, as evidenced by the following memories:

There was a settlement of camps and shacks, inhabited by the Indian families right on the Northeast Harbor, near the hotels. (Carol Means, museum visitor, 1985)

There were wonderful weavers at Old Orchard Beach. (Ann Scribner, antiques dealer, 1985)

A collection of tents along the Sea Road at Goose Rocks Beach in Kennebunkport . . . (Ann Scribner, antiques dealer, 1985)

Joe Knockwood wove baskets right here on Bailey Island. He could never keep up with all his orders. (Jack Sanford Prince, real estate agent, 1985)

An encampment on Chebeague Island . . . (Margery Howard, librarian, 1985)

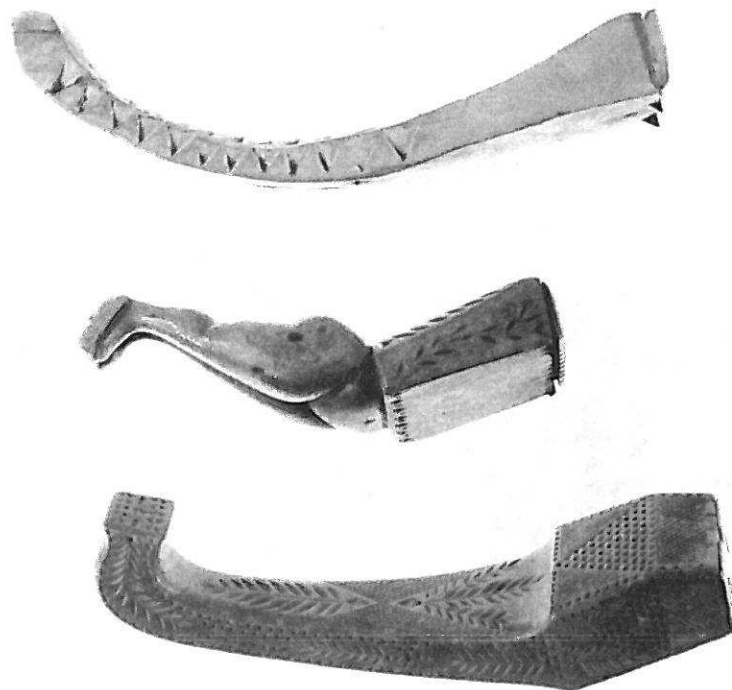


Figure 23. Decorated gauges from Old Town, Maine.

While many of the gauges in the Poolaw collection are decorated, they are not as elaborate as these, which were collected by Frank Speck in the early 1900s. Besides these examples, now in the collection of the Peabody Museum of Salem, many others were collected by Speck at the same time. These included several with open cut-outs in the handles, from the collection of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation. Compared to those from the late nineteenth century, the Poolaw gauges are simple, without cut-outs, and when carved, include only simple surface decorations.





Figure 25. Basket making on Indian Island.

Though many basket-making families traveled to resort areas to make and sell baskets, others remained on the Indian Island reservation and sold their wares to visiting tourists. This practice of basket making and vending in their own environment reinforced the idea that basket making was a means of survival. Children were assured by parents and grandparents that if they could weave, they would never go hungry. Among most groups, children began to learn by making rimless, square-based baskets with simple splint handles, known as five-cent baskets. Older children were allowed to bind the rims of completed work baskets.

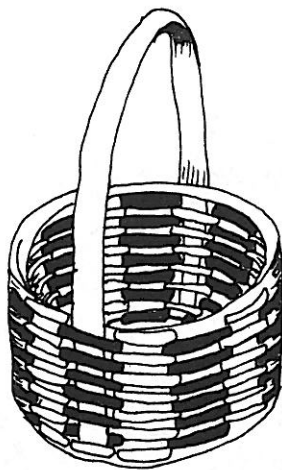


Figure 26. Five-cent basket.

Small rimless baskets with simple, splint-bail handles such as the one shown here, were commonly made by children and novice basket makers. They were known as five-cent baskets, after the price they brought during the early twentieth century.

sales. The only intermediary dealers they recall were the gypsies who bought up all the available baskets²⁷ or camped on the reservation until they had amassed a large enough supply, which they then peddled elsewhere.²⁸

Basket weavers did, however, occasionally mass-produce one type of basket for a special customer. For example, sometime in the 1920s about one thousand work baskets, shaped like crosses, were ordered and distributed by the Red Cross.²⁹

The Penobscot reservation, situated on what was then a main route to Canada, drew many visitors, whose numbers increased during the summer pageants. First established by the Penobscot Women's Club around 1930, the food, craft displays, and reenactments of past events provided a special attraction for visitors (Verrill 1933:115). In response to so many tourists, Indian people made and sold baskets in their own homes, as well as in tents set up on the main road, in the work area behind the grocery store, and in their own craft shops. By the late 1930s there were at least seven craft shops on Indian Island.³⁰

One of these craft shops, Poolaw's Tepee, still stands as an island landmark. Chief Bruce Poolaw, mentioned earlier, a Kiowa from Oklahoma, met and married Watawaso (Little Star), a Penobscot woman, and took over the craft shop she had opened in the 1930s³¹ (Fig. 27). He soon had Penobscot basket weavers working for him, producing baskets for an hourly wage. Poolaw supplied prepared ash, a work space, tools as needed, and cash for a day's work. He received in return a ready supply of inexpensive crafts, which attracted tourists to his shop. Madeline Shay, who worked for Poolaw from time to time, recalls that she made as many as six baskets a day and may have received three dollars for her efforts. Weaving was hard work but fun. "We talked, joked and made comments about all the people who walked by."³²

The Craft Today

The dispersion of Chief Poolaw's block and gauge collection, mentioned previously, is indicative of the lessened demand for fancy baskets on Indian Island. Today, a little more than one hundred years after it began, fancy-basket making is no longer the major activity that Penobscot women count on for economic survival.

With the Great Depression came the waning, if not the actual closing, of the resort areas. By the time the depression and World War II ended, the Penobscot people who had been going to the resorts were either gone or too old to continue. For the younger generation, a steady job offered a more secure way of earning money.

Traditionally, Indian Island was reached by canoe; later a ferryman took people across the river (Fig. 28). In 1950 a bridge was built across the Penobscot River between Indian Island and Old Town, making it easier for residents to drive to jobs in Old Town and beyond. Men who had been involved in the gathering and preparation of splints for the basket weavers were now often unavailable. Although the bridge facilitated tourist access to the island, the number of tourists was reduced, first by the end of the pageants in the late 1940s and then more dramatically in the 1960s by the construction of Interstate 95. This new route to Canada bypassed the reservation. Tourists who formerly had stopped by casually, en route to a different destination, now had to plan to visit the island.

In the 1970s the Penobscot made an attempt to recapture one of their old tourist markets by opening a cooperative store in Bar Harbor. Although the craftspeople supported this venture, tourists did not. Penobscot fancy baskets and woven beadwork could not compete with the plastic and ceramic souvenirs, primarily imports, available in this resort area; eventually, the Penobscot Indian enterprise was disbanded.



A Passamaquoddy cooperative initiated at about the same time suffered a similar fate. Fancy baskets were produced there, but the staple of the co-op was the rugged "fish scale" basket, well suited to the draining of fish scales used by others to make nail polish and fertilizer (Nicholas n.d.:9). When a local plastics company reproduced a fish-scale basket in plastic for a fraction of the cost of the splint basket, the Passamaquoddy co-op could not compete; it too disbanded.

In 1985 comparatively few fancy baskets were produced on Indian Island. Just as the basket weavers today cannot compete with the souvenir market, they also cannot compete with imported household goods, made of less expensive materials. The older women on the island who still weave do not produce baskets in quantity. They are able to weave at their own pace and sell their baskets for a price that seems equivalent to

the time and material invested.³³ One man, Leslie Ranco, creates and sells fancy baskets in his Indian Moccasin shop in Wells, Maine. Penobscot fancy baskets are now purchased by people who perceive the basket as an art form, appreciate the skill and expertise required to produce it, and understand the cost.

Despite the drop in fancy-basket demand, many weavers still own and use blocks and gauges. Some have been passed down from mothers and grandmothers and are treasured as family heirlooms. Mary Creighton received a collection from her grandmother and began to weave again, something she had not done since she was twelve. She said, "I'm not making any money on it. I just wanted to know I could still do it, for my children and for their children. Even if I don't use these blocks, they will be there for my children, so I can explain to them."³⁴

New blocks are still being created.

Billy Altvatar, a Passamaquoddy, constructed a composite block for shaping his backpack baskets. Because the sides of the pack are convex, the mold pulls apart so it can be removed from the finished basket.

While some contemporary Mohawk basket-weavers experiment freely with surface textures, combining traditional shapes with personal expression, Penobscot weavers are less likely to create new forms. They make basket types that are well known and recreate, upon request, basket styles from previous eras. Many baskets are made to fill special orders. Penobscot basket-makers are proud of their special skills and knowledge and are committed to passing it on to the next generation. At least two of the women have native apprentices. Although it will require much training, today's older basket makers are hopeful that new weavers such as these will keep the tradition of Penobscot fancy-basket making alive.



Figure 27. Chief Poolaw and Watawaso. "Chief Poolaw's Indian Teepee" was a well-known landmark on Indian Island, on the Penobscot River near Old Town. Bruce Poolaw, a Kiowa from Oklahoma, met and married Watawaso (Little Star), a Penobscot, and took over the craft shop she had begun in the 1930s. Here, they are surrounded by baskets and other items produced by Native craftspeople, including bark teepee models, moccasins, and the like.

Figure 28. Ferryman on the Penobscot River.

Traditionally, Indian Island, on the Penobscot River near Old Town, was reached by canoe. Later a ferryman took people across the river. After a bridge was built in the 1950s, making it easier for residents to drive to jobs in Old Town and beyond, men who had been involved in basket making were less available. Although the bridge facilitated access to the island, tourism dropped, and the construction of Interstate 95 in the 1960s drew even more travelers from the reservation.

An open-ended basket shop (see essay by McFeat) is visible on the shore.