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Birchbark Canoes

The Wabanaki tribe made their own canoes out of birchbark. The first one was made about 3,000 years ago. This was essential to their life. How to build them was passed down through the generations. The process of making them was hard. It took 2 weeks but it was worth it. They got a lot out of it.

The Wabanaki tribe used birchbark to build their canoes. During the winter they would peel bark from birch trees. It was easier because there was no sap and the wood was as thick as leather. The master builder taught the other tribe members how to build a canoe. When the builder was ready to make a canoe, he would lay the bark in the river to soak. This would make the bark more flexible. The canoe would be built from the outside in. They used spruce gum to seal the seams and holes. Women of the tribe would chew the gum until it was the right texture. When making the canoe they would pour hot water on the canoe to make it more pliable. They would use the outer layer of the birchbark on the inside of the canoe. This helped make the canoe more waterproof. To get the birch to stay on the canoe they would use wooden strips and the seams were sewed together and covered in spruce gum.

The Wabanaki tribe made them this way because they were light. On average they weighed 50 to 80 pounds. This made them light enough for one person to carry. The canoes were so light they were fast, unlike European longboats, that were slow and heavy. Birchbark was the best kind of bark because it wrapped around the trees and did not grow up and down like other trees.

Birch trees were also very easy to find across North America. To show ownership of their canoe they would carve designs into it. To keep the wood hydrated they would sink the canoes during the winter.

The birch bark canoes had many purposes. They were used for traveling, gathering and collecting food. One particular food was wild rice. They would use special knocking sticks to knock the rice down and catch it in the canoe. The canoes could also provide shelter when flipped over. When French trade was big they made the canoes larger. They did this so they could hold more items and men. Some of the bigger canoes could hold up to fourteen people and all of their cargo.

Birchbark canoes were a necessary item to have. The Wabanaki tribe used these canoes for a lot of things. Without them their way of life would not have been the same. Gathering food and trade would have been more difficult by land so using them made their life easier and more convenient. They did not have to travel across mountains and rough terrain. Birchbark canoes are not used very often today. Most of the Wabanaki tribes have chosen to use more modern canoes. The knowledge to build the canoes used to be handed down through the generations. Now there are very few people left who know how to build them. The Damariscotta River Association teamed up with Lincoln Academy to build a Wabanki birch bark canoe. They did this to try and keep the knowledge of how to make a canoe alive. The canoe the Wabanki tribe made 3,000 years ago worked so well that we use the shape of them in our canoes today.

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