

Native Americans on Acadia's Shores

Indigenous people have made use of the rich natural resources of what is now Mount Desert Island and its environs for at least 5,000 years. There is abundant archaeological evidence of their presence, especially in the coastal shell heaps known as middens.

While it is tempting to think of Native Americans as "the first summer people," in fact they came here at various times of the year depending on where food sources were most likely to be found. The milder winters of Mount Desert Island and the outer islands made these attractive sites for encampments when severe cold weather limited hunting in inland areas. Here they hunted for mammals and birds, gathered waterfowl eggs, and fished for shore fish and deepwater fish. Clams were an always reliable source of food during any season.

Acadia was important for social, cultural and political reasons as well. Located at the center of the Gulf of Maine, this area was a meeting place for the ancestors of today's Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Micmac and Maliseet people from coastal and inland Maine. Tribes from southern New England traveled here for trade and cultural exchange.

When the earliest European fishermen, fur traders and explorers arrived on these shores, they reported a Native population that was tall, strong, healthy and handsome. By making wise use of the natural resources here over the centuries, Native people had flourished.

Early European accounts also noted the skill of Native people in using canoes to swiftly navigate coastlines and rivers—the highways of that time. Native people used these superb watercraft to cross remarkable distances of open water, traveling up and down the coast and to offshore islands. Oceangoing canoes were essential for hunting sea mammals, swordfish and sea birds.

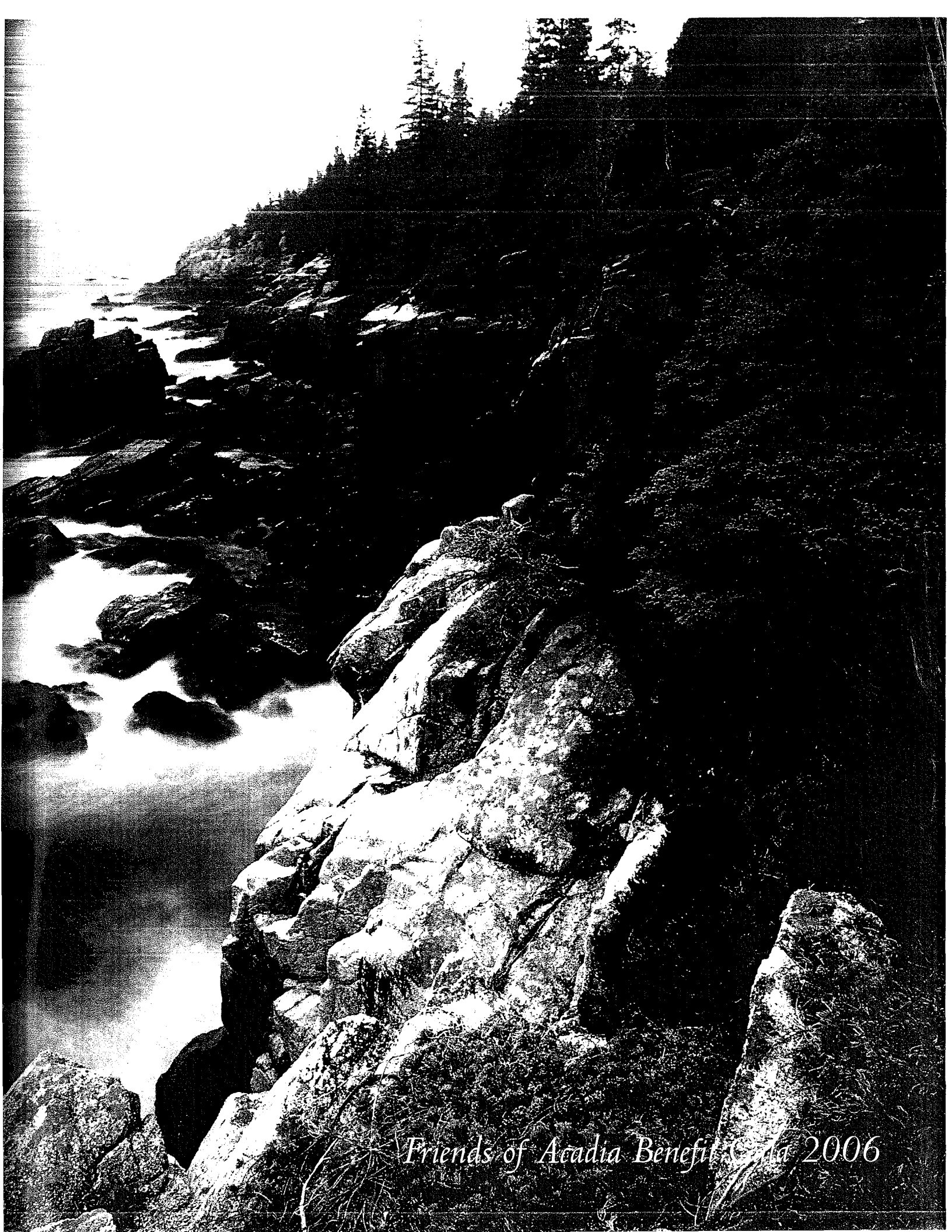
Canoes were constructed of birch bark, sewn with spruce root and sealed with spruce gum or pitch—all readily available at that time. The vessels were lightweight, making them easy to portage from one waterway to another, and could be built relatively quickly.



The Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor offers a variety of exhibitions and programs about the Wabanaki.

Thanks to Acadia National Park staff members Rebecca Cole-Will, cultural resources program manager, and John McDade, museum technician, for their invaluable assistance with this article.

Wabanaki canoes at Bar Harbor, late 1800s. (Courtesy of the Abbe Museum.)



Friends of Acadia Benefit Gala 2006

When Champlain scouted the Gulf of Maine in 1604, he came upon Natives traveling in canoes in the area that he named Isle de Monts Deserts. The Natives called this area Pemetiq, meaning “range of mountains.”

We know very little about Native presence here in the late 1600s and early 1700s because Mount Desert Island was on the contested frontier between the French and English, making it unsafe for hunting and fishing. At the close of the Revolutionary War, the rapid expansion of New Englanders



into Maine continued to displace Native people from their lands, and ultimately forced them to find new ways of living.

In the late 1800s, the growing popularity of Mount Desert Island as a summer retreat for rusticators and cottagers made this area once again an important location for Native people—this time, as a marketplace for their wares and skills. Indians established famous summer encampments in Bar Harbor, first along the waterfront at the foot of Bridge Street, and later at other sites, finally moving to what is now the town athletic field. Another encampment was set up on Clark Point Road in Southwest Harbor. In addition to selling their finely crafted baskets and other wares, Native people rented and sold canoes and offered their services as hunting and fishing guides. They continued to be part of the MDI landscape each summer until around 1920. In this way, Maine's greatly reduced Indian population was able to retain some of their traditional ways and earn a substantial part of their income.

The Native tribes in Maine are known collectively as the Wabanaki, “People of the Dawn.” Today, Acadia National Park honors the long history of Wabanaki presence and connections to the park. Wabanaki leaders and advisors consult with the park, and an interpretive exhibit about the Wabanaki was recently installed at the Cadillac Summit Center.

Canoes and encampment at Bar Harbor, late 1800s.

(Center photo courtesy of Maine Historic Preservation Commission and photos left and right courtesy of the Abbe Museum.)

by Sharon Broom, Development Officer, Friends of Acadia