



Unit 1: The Abenaki before 1600

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Section 1: Introduction

Abenaki means “people of the dawn” because as the sun rose each morning in the east, it shone on the Abenaki before any other people in North America. These first peoples who have lived in New Hampshire for thousands of years helped shape its history. Their culture is still celebrated in the state today.

As you learn more about the Abenaki, think about the following questions:

- How did where the Abenaki live impact how they lived?
- How did Abenaki traditions reflect their way of life and beliefs?



Section 2: People of the Dawn

Who were the Abenaki, and where did they live?

The last ice age ended nearly 12,000 years ago. When the ice melted and the glaciers receded, plant and animal life returned to northern New England. Native Americans had been living in other parts of the continent for thousands of years, and when the ice age ended, some of them began to move north. They were following large animals like woolly mammoths, which once lived all over North America but are now extinct.

In New England, the Native Americans found a place full of natural resources and great beauty. There were mountains, valleys, lakes, and rivers. There were thick forests that had deer, foxes, bears, beavers, and porcupines to hunt; berries, fruits, nuts, and seeds to collect; and tons of fish in the lakes, rivers, and ocean to catch.

As the years passed, the Native Americans developed a way of life in this area that relied on the natural world around them.

The Abenaki were comprised of several tribes of indigenous people, or Native Americans, who spoke a similar language and shared a culture.

The area where the Abenaki lived extended throughout northern New England (in what is today Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and northern Massachusetts) and parts of eastern Canada. The different tribes of Abenaki had different names.

There were several large tribes of Abenaki in New Hampshire.



The Abenaki were not one big group of people. Instead, there were several tribes of Abenaki living all over northern New England.

The Abenaki shared a common language and many common traditions and practices, but each tribe was independent of the others.

A tribe was composed of several families who were related to one another. Grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, parents, and siblings lived in a tribe.

Sometimes tribes would meet with other tribes to share stories and celebrate the seasons. The tribes that met all felt connected to one another because they lived close to one another.

In the Merrimack Valley, for example, the various Abenaki tribes were linked in what was called the Penacook Confederacy. That meant that all the tribes that lived in that area of New Hampshire felt connected to one another, and they would all get together a couple of times a year and celebrate the changing of the seasons.

The Abenaki worked with one another to make decisions and solve problems as a community.

If there was an argument between two people, each person would tell their side of the story to the larger group, and then the tribe would decide together how to settle it. This idea of talking through a disagreement until most everyone can agree is called building a consensus, and it was an important part of Abenaki life.

Even Abenaki children were allowed to participate in making decisions for the group.



The whole tribe also played a role in raising children by teaching them values like honesty, sharing, and generosity.

Even from very young ages, children were taught by the adults in the tribe to do the same tasks the adults did. By the time kids were in their young teens, they would have the same responsibilities as adults. Children as young as 12 or 13 hunted, fished, tended crops, made clothing, and took care of younger children just as the adults did.

The Abenaki had great respect for the older members of the tribe. They believed that their elders' experience and wisdom would help guide them in their lives.

The most respected elder in a tribe was the sachem. He or she helped people settle arguments and reach decisions. Sachems did not order people to do anything. Instead, people did what the sachem said because they believed the sachem was wise.

Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. End of the Ice Age: When the last Ice Age ended 12,000 years ago, people moved north to what is now New England. They found natural resources like thick forests and many animals that would help them survive.
2. People of the Dawn: The Abenaki are several tribes of indigenous people who lived throughout and beyond northern New England and Canada. Tribes are family groups that shared a culture and spoke a similar language.
3. The Natural World and the Community: The Abenaki developed a way of life that relied on the natural world. They solved



problems as a community. They worked together to raise children and support the community.

4. **Respect for Elders:** Abenaki people especially respected the wisdom of their elders. The most respected elder who guided the tribe was called the sachem.



Section 3: Abenaki Life

How did the Abenaki meet their basic needs?

For the Abenaki, their main tasks were to find food, protect themselves from the weather (especially New Hampshire's cold winters), and make tools from the natural resources around them that would help them with their other tasks. The Abenaki had to find everything they needed in the natural world around them. They made things from trees, plants, animals, rocks, and water. They did not have metal to make tools.

The Abenaki developed all sorts of creative ways to use plants and animals to make tools, clothing, canoes, baskets, and even toys.

Some of the most common materials used by the Abenaki to make these items were birch bark, porcupine quills, fur, clay, and animal tendons and bones. With these materials, the Abenaki could meet their needs for food and shelter.

Food

Much of the Abenaki's time was spent getting food. They gathered food from the land, planted gardens for crops, and hunted animals. Men and women had many of the same day-to-day duties that helped the community.

Hunters invented a number of tools to help them hunt, such as bows and arrows, stone axes, and several different kinds of animal traps for deer, rabbits, foxes, and even bears.

The Abenaki were also fishermen, which was a very important job for the community because the Abenaki ate fish more than any



other food. The fishermen used spears, nets, and weirs to catch the fish.

The Abenaki also built canoes that would allow them to go out on the water and catch fish. Sometimes they used torches at night to lure the fish to the surface where the fishermen could scoop the fish up with nets.

The Abenaki built birch bark canoes to use on rivers and small lakes. Birch bark canoes were light and easy to make, with a wooden frame covered in the bark of a birch tree, which was waterproof.

The Abenaki also made dugout canoes, which were big and heavy. They used dugout canoes on large lakes and even in the ocean. Each dugout canoe was made from a single large tree, usually a pine tree. The Abenaki would slowly burn the side of the tree until the wood was soft. Then they would use a stone tool to scoop out the burned wood until they had created a canoe. It took about a month of hard work to make a dugout canoe.

The Abenaki grew crops and gathered all sorts of plants to eat. New Hampshire was full of wild berries and fruit that could be gathered. There were also plenty of nuts and seeds like butternut, hazelnuts, and acorns that they could eat.

The Abenaki grew three crops—squash, corn, and beans—which were known as the “three sisters” because they grew together. The corn grew in a tall stalk and acted like a frame for the beans, which grew twisted around the corn. Squash, which has big leaves, grew at the base of the corn stalk, which protected the corn and beans from animals. Together the three sisters provided the Abenaki with food they could eat or store for the winter.



To cook their food, the Abenaki used stone or clay pots. Stone pots took a long time to make because they had to use a stone tool to slowly hollow out the center of a larger stone, which would make a bowl in the middle of it. Stone pots were also very heavy to move around. But they didn't break and would last for a long time.

Clay pots were made by shaping clay found in stream beds into bowls or pitchers. The pots were then placed in pits and covered with hot coals. The heat hardened the clay so the pot would keep its shape. The pots were easier to make than stone bowls and much lighter to carry. They could also be used to cook food. But they were breakable, which is why so few clay pots from the Abenaki survive today.

The Abenaki also used baskets made from reeds, branches, or birch bark to carry or store food. The baskets were both useful and beautiful. They decorated the baskets using different colors of plants to create patterns. Porcupine quills were often used to decorate baskets as well.

Shelter

The Abenaki developed three different types of shelters in which they lived throughout the year.

Most of the time, they lived in wigwams, which had frames made of tree branches and were covered with birch bark to keep out the rain. Wigwams were used in warmer months, so there was no need for a fire inside. Each wigwam held one family.

In the cold winter months, the Abenaki lived in longhouses, which also had frames made from tree branches but were covered with animal furs to keep in the heat.



Like their name suggests, longhouses could be up to 200 feet long, and they held several families. There were usually fires located in the center of the longhouse that were kept going all the time to keep people warm.

Longhouses also had sleeping platforms, like the kind used today for camping. The sleeping platforms kept people off the cold ground and were more comfortable, especially when the platforms were covered with animal furs.

The Abenaki also had tents that the hunters used when on a hunting or fishing trip. These trips could last for several days or even weeks.

The tents were light and easy to put up and take down, just like a tent is today! They were made from tall tree branches tied together by smaller branches or reeds and covered with animal skins.

How did the Abenaki live in New Hampshire's climate?

The lives of the Abenaki were guided by the seasons. In the spring, summer, and most of the fall, they lived in villages.

Villages were always built close to a source of water that they could use to cook or drink, like water found in a lake or a river.

Wigwams were built in a half-circle pattern. There was usually a large shared fire pit in the center of the half-circle. At night, the members of the tribe would gather around this fire for meals and to share stories or sing songs.

Around the outer edges of the village, beyond the wigwams, the Abenaki planted crops.



There were also places in the village for the Abenaki to work on tasks like preparing food for storage or turning animal skins into cloth. To preserve fish, for example, the fish would be laid out on racks and allowed to dry in the sun.

A successful bear hunt would produce meat for the Abenaki to eat, but the other parts of the bear would be carefully treated and then used in many different ways. Bear skin was used to make clothing or bedding, or was saved to cover a longhouse in winter. Bear claws, which were very sharp, were used as tools to cut things, such as a weapon to hunt or a knife to prepare food. The bear's bones were also turned into weapons or ground into a fine paste that was almost like glue. The organs of the bear, like the bear's bladder, could be used to carry water.

Other animals killed by the hunters would also be used in this way, providing not just food but also important tools for the Abenaki. Every part of an animal had an important use.

The Abenaki moved their villages a few times a year, always going to where natural resources were available.

In the middle of summer, they might live near an area that had lots of blueberry bushes.

Sometimes they lived close to waterfalls to catch fish like salmon that were migrating up the river.

Other times, they would move to a place where the soil was good for growing crops.

In the winter, the Abenaki built their villages in places that might offer them some protection from the cold, wind, and snow. Winter villages were mainly composed of longhouses and places to store their food.



Since the rivers and lakes froze during the winter, it wasn't so important to build villages close to a water source. The Abenaki could get water by melting the snow.

Hunters still went out looking for game in the winter months, although animals were harder to find at this time of year. The Abenaki developed wide, flat shoes made from branches to help them walk over the snow without sinking, which is why we call them snowshoes.

Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. Nature Provides Resources. Abenaki tribes developed creative ways to use the natural world to meet their needs for food and shelter. They made everything they needed from materials like plants, birchbark, porcupine quills, clay, and animal tendons and bones.

2. Food: Abenaki people spent a lot of time gathering food. They grew crops and gathered plants to eat. They also hunted and fished. They used tools like dugout canoes, animal traps, and spears to help them grow, hunt, and gather things to eat.

3. Shelter: Throughout the year, the Abenaki lived in three different kinds of shelter. Wigwams were used for one family in warmer months. Several families lived in long houses in colder months. People also used tents while traveling.

4. Adapting to the Climate: The Abenaki adapted their lives to New Hampshire's climate. Their villages were close to water and included wigwams, crops, fire pits, and work areas. They moved the village throughout the year depending upon the season. In



the winter, they moved to a sheltered place where food was stored.



Section 4: Abenaki Culture

What ideas shaped the Abenaki's beliefs about the world?

The Abenaki believed that everything in the world around them had a spirit, including all animals and plants. Even the elements (wind, sun, rain) and the land (mountains, lakes, rivers) were thought to have spirits. Each spirit played an important part in the world and was respected.

Sometimes the spirits argued with one another, which produced conflicts like storms or floods. Sometimes one spirit had to make a sacrifice so that other spirits could survive. For example, whenever an Abenaki hunter killed an animal, he would take a moment to thank the animal's spirit for its life.

The Abenaki also honored spirits in the natural world during their ceremonies.

It was also important to only take as much from the earth as you needed and not more.

When an animal was killed, the Abenaki thanked its spirit and tried to use every part of the animal to show their respect for the animal's sacrifice. Hunters might trap beavers for the food they could provide and for their warm fur. But if a group of Abenaki had all the food and fur they needed, then they would not hunt more beavers. That would have disturbed the balance of the natural world.

This belief in balance was one of the reasons the Abenaki moved their villages so often. They did not want to use up all the natural resources in any one place. Instead, they wanted to give nature a chance to regrow, which would restore balance in the world.



Since everything in the world was connected through spirits, it was very important to the Abenaki to maintain balance. They thought all spirits' needs should be respected because all spirits were important.

Therefore, they believed that when you took something from the earth, whether it was an animal or a plant, you would take a moment to thank the earth and maybe leave an offering, such as some sweetgrass, which was considered a treat for the Abenaki.

Among each group of Abenaki was a healer, who was an elder who was good at understanding the spiritual world. Either a man or a woman could be a healer.

The healer's task was to help everyone interact with the spiritual world to make sure there was balance.

Healers also knew a lot about medical care and took care of people who were ill.

Storytelling and Music

How did the Abenaki share their history and culture?

The Abenaki had a rich oral tradition, which means they shared stories to remind them of their history and teach themselves about the spiritual world.

Abenaki stories explained things seen in the natural world, like why sap ran from trees in late winter or why skunks had two white stripes on their backs. They passed down tales of great storms or hardship or famine through the generations.

The stories also taught children and adults moral lessons to help them behave properly. On long, cold winter nights, families would



often gather around a fire to listen to storytellers, who provided both education and entertainment.

Music and dancing were also popular among the Abenaki.

They used natural resources to create instruments on which to make music, such as drums and shakers or rattles. They even had an instrument that was similar to a wooden flute. All of these instruments were made from plants and animals, such as claws, seeds, sticks, and animal skins.

Dancing was also a big part of Abenaki ceremonial life.

Decorative Arts

What kinds of decorative art did the Abenaki create?

The Abenaki were creative in making beautiful things, like clothing, jewelry, baskets, and other decorative items. They would even decorate the outside of their wigwams with artistic patterns or the shapes of animals or animal tracks. Zigzag patterns and triangles were particularly popular.

The Abenaki created dyes or paints from plants they found in the natural world around them. Tree bark, when it is boiled, produces many different colors, including yellow, red, blue, and green. Berries often produce shades of purple.

Clothing

Abenaki clothing was usually made from animal skins that had been tanned. The tanning process was done by stretching an animal hide on tree branches positioned over a fire and covering the skin with a mixture of animal brains and water. After several days, the animal skin absorbs the brain mixture and becomes



very soft. Every animal's brain is just the right size to tan that animal's skin.

Animal tendons were stretched to make a kind of thread that the Abenaki used to stitch the animal skins together to make dresses, shirts, and leggings. Animal tendons were also used as ties to hold the skins in place as clothing.

Dyes were used to color the clothing in decorative ways, and small shells or beads were sometimes tied onto the clothing for more decoration.

Jewelry

Jewelry was most often made from animal parts, especially claws or teeth that could be strung together on a strip of leather to make a necklace or bracelet.

The Abenaki would also create beads from nuts or shells. The most common decorative shell was the quahog, which is a type of clam. Quahog shells are very beautiful. They are mostly white with a little bit of purple on their edges. The Abenaki broke the shells into small pieces and shaped them into beads, which were called wampum.

Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. Beliefs: The Abenaki people believed everything in the world has a spirit, including plants, animals, and the land. They thought balance in the natural world was important and did not use too many resources from one place or hunt too many of one kind of animal. Healers were respected elders who were good at advising



how to keep in balance with the spiritual world, as well as healing the sick and wounded.

2. **Storytelling and Music:** Abenaki people shared their history and culture in many ways. Oral traditions were important, and they told stories to educate and entertain. They used natural resources to create instruments to make music. Dancing was also part of their ceremonies.

3. **Decorative Arts:** Natural resources were used by the Abenaki to create art. They decorated useful items like baskets or wigwams. They also created jewelry from animals claws or teeth or quahog clams.

4. **Clothing:** Abenaki clothing was made of animal skins. After cleaning the skins, they would tan them using water and animal brains to make them soft and useable for clothing. Tendons were other parts of the animal that were used as thread to create clothing.



Section 5: Connections

In what ways did the Abenaki interact with one another and other Native Americans?

Although most of the Abenaki's time was spent with their family groups, they were well aware of other Native Americans living in this region. There were trails all throughout New England, which shows that the Native Americans in this area often traveled between different groups.

Trade

There was also lots of trading between Native American groups.

Quahog shells were only available along the seacoast, so Abenaki from further inland would trade with the Abenaki along the seacoast for wampum.

The clay pots that the Abenaki made were often traded with Native American groups much further west, in places like Vermont and New York.

War

Sometimes the Abenaki even went to war with the Iroquois, which were another group of Native Americans living in what we know today as New York.

The Abenaki did not like going to war, though. They usually tried to settle any arguments peacefully, even arguments with the Iroquois.



Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. Forest Trails: The Abenaki interacted with each other's family groups using trails that ran all throughout New England.
2. Trading: There was a lot of trading between different indigenous groups in the region.
3. Unique Items: Abenaki along the seacoast used quahog shells to make wampum that would be traded to people further inland. Clay pots were also traded with indigenous people further west.
4. Focused on Peace: The Abenaki did not like going to war. They tried to settle their arguments peacefully. However, they did sometimes have conflicts with the Iroquois, who lived in what is now New York state.



Section 6: The Abenaki in New Hampshire

In what ways can we still see the Abenaki in New Hampshire?

When the English arrived in New Hampshire in the early 1600s, the Abenaki shared with them many ways to survive in this region, from how to tap the trees to make maple syrup to how to use snow shoes to get around in the winter. In fact, the first English settlers might not have survived in New Hampshire without the Abenaki's help.

The Abenaki also shared with the English their decorative arts, particularly their skills at basket-making. And many English settlers learned from the Abenaki how to make both dugout canoes and birch bark canoes. The English also adopted the Abenaki's traditional crops, like corn and squash, which are still grown in New Hampshire today.

The descendants of New Hampshire's Abenaki people still live here today. They practice traditional Abenaki crafts and celebrate Abenaki culture. Much of this information about the Abenaki's heritage is handed down from generation to generation through stories and music.

Today, there are also many places in New Hampshire that still bear Abenaki-inspired names, particularly natural features like lakes (Winnepesaukee, Ossipee, Sunapee), rivers (Piscataqua, Pemigewasset, Androscoggin), and mountains (Chocorua, Monadnock, Moosilauke). The names of some towns are based on Abenaki words as well (Nashua, Penacook).

Granite Staters today are also beginning to recognize the Abenaki's ideas about keeping balance in the natural world. The environmental movement, which wants to protect America's natural resources, celebrates the Abenaki's practices to take from



the natural world only what you need and give the earth time to replace the natural resources we use.

Let's Review!

What are the big ideas in this section?

1. Teaching the English Settlers: When the English arrived in the early 1600s, the Abenaki shared their knowledge of the natural world with them. They taught them survival skills like which crops to plant or how to use snow shoes. They also shared their decorative arts.
2. Abenaki in NH Today: Descendants of New Hampshire's Abenaki still live here today. They practice traditional skills. They share stories and music that teach people their heritage.
3. Abenaki-inspired Names: Today, there are many places in New Hampshire that have names inspired by the Abenaki and their language. Mountains, waterways, and even town names have been influenced by them.
4. Environmental Wisdom: People in New Hampshire are starting to realize the Abenaki ways of keeping in balance with nature could help us today be better environmental caretakers.