



2007

Native Artisans and Trade in the Saratoga Region

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Recommended Citation

Bruchac, M. (2007). Native Artisans and Trade in the Saratoga Region. *The Saratoga Native American Festival Program*, 27-28.
Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_papers/157

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NATIVE ARTISANS AND TRADE IN THE SARATOGA REGION

Many parts of the local forests, high lands, creeks, marshes, and fields around Saratoga Springs are old familiar places for Mohawk, Mohican, Oneida, Abenaki, and other Native families from around the northeast who have long ancestral memories of being here.

To illustrate how long the region has been known to Native people, the oldest evidence of Native homesites and traveling camps dates back at least 9,000 years. Flint-knapped arrowheads, knives, drills, hooks, scrapers, etc., some of the oldest handiwork of Native artisans, testify to the importance of hunting and fishing. Ancient mortars, pestles and pottery shards bespeak nut-gathering, maize (corn) farming, and cooking activities.

Native people developed close relationships with local plants, animals, birds, insects, fish, trees, and other beings, and learned ways to make use of a wide range of local resources. Native artisans crafted comfortable clothing from brain-tanned deer and moose hides sewn with sinew, bedding and robes from warm furs, ornaments and tools from bone and wood, containers and mats from woven plant fibers, medicines from local plants, saps, and roots, homes from saplings covered with bark and woven mats, and canoes from dug-out logs or stitched birch bark. Many other ingenious material goods were made locally and decorated for everyday and ceremonial use. Local Native people also traded with other tribes for copper, chert, and other materials from distant places, using trade networks that spanned the length and breadth of the continent.

Very few of the perishable organic materials that illustrate the range of Native crafts have survived from the older times. But the knowledge of many of the old technologies has been preserved up to the present, and the resonance of old craftways can be seen in the work of modern-day Native artisans who still make beautiful stone, bone, wood, bark, leather, fur, or woven goods for personal use, gifts, and trade.

In the early 1600s, Dutch traders came to the *Mahicannituk* ("Mohican river," now called the Hudson River), carrying trade goods from Europe, and Native trade networks expanded to accommodate these new resources. Dutch, French, and English traders were all eager to purchase beaver, deer, bear, muskrat, otter, and other animal hides from Native hunters, and corn from Native farmers. European traders paid for these goods with glass beads, steel knives, copper pots, woolen strouds, linen cloth, guns, and other items that were relatively common in Europe. *Wampum* (meaning "shell beads") was in great demand

during this time, so the Dutch began using steel drills to mass-produce fine tubular shell and glass beads to supply the Indian trade.

The regular flow of trade goods became a crucial part of Euro-American diplomacy with northeastern Native tribal communities. Good trade ensured good relationships. European goods were not necessarily better, but for savvy Native traders, they were cheap and easy to obtain, and they were used in distinctly Native ways. Native hunters still used traditional stalking techniques while carrying their new European guns and ammunition. Native artisans adopted new materials for familiar uses, using wool for leggings and petticoats, linen for shirts, thread instead of sinew, and glass beads alongside shell beads. Traditional symbols and decorations, in colors that symbolized various spiritual forces, were reproduced in glass beadwork, paint, and silk ribbon on the hems of garments. Copper pots, as a source of precious metal in convenient sheet form, were rarely used for cooking; instead they were cut up to create arrowheads and ornaments. Silver coins were often hammered into silver brooches.

While all this trading was going on in the mid-1700s, the only permanent residents of the Saratoga region were Native American Indians. Few white settlers lived there until after the conflicts of the French and Indian Wars had ended. By 1800, the trading relationships and diplomacy had gone bad, and a great deal of land had been sold in problematic Indian deeds. Native populations shifted, as many Mohican Indian families relocated westward to Oneida and Wisconsin, and Mohawk families moved northward to Kahnawake and Akwesasne. During the early 1800s, however, the steady increase in non-Native visitors to the mineral springs at Saratoga Springs caused the Native people who still lived there, and some who moved away, to return to initiate some new methods of trading.

Continued...



NATIVE ARTISANS continued...

During the mid-late 1800s, a number of Native artisans from Oneida, Mohawk, and Abenaki communities frequented camps where they could market their goods to tourists who came to visit the mineral springs. The first Saratoga Springs Indian Camp set up specifically for the tourist trade was located in the Pine Grove near North Broadway. During the 1850s, it moved to South Broadway, and during the 1860s, it moved to Congress Park. Native families hunted and harvested raw materials from surrounding forests and swamps, just as their predecessors had done for generations. Tents and booths were set up, and Indian artists made and displayed woven ash splint baskets, beaded bags, and leather moccasins, decorated with traditional symbols. They made snowshoes, canoes, and toboggans, and miniature versions of these as children's toys. Native children performed trick shoots with bows and arrows. Styles of Native artwork evolved to meet public demands during the Victorian era, resulting in more ornate baskets, wall pockets, fans, and beadwork to accommodate fanciful trends in American tastes.



[1870s Indian Camp at Pine Grove, Saratoga Springs, New York. Illustration from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1876.]

Some Native craftspeople traveled door to door, weaving chair seats and peddling brooms and baskets that were essential to the upkeep of white households. One local Abenaki basketmaker, Sam Hill, used to walk down the Greenfield-Corinth Road (Route 9N) so loaded up with baskets he could barely be seen. (His disheveled looks, and his habit of traveling, may have been the origin of the phrases “you like look Sam Hill” and “where the Sam Hill have you been?”) The Fox Hill Indians from Greenfield and Porters Corners used their skills at hunting to provide

fresh game for cooks at the grand hotels. Several Akwesasne Mohawk folks, including Pete Francis, George Crum, and Katie Wicks, did hunting, fishing, guiding, or cooking for tourists around Saratoga Lake. (George and Katie's most popular gastronomic innovation was a thin-sliced version of fried potatoes that came to be known as “Saratoga Chips,” the first potato chips.)

In 1887, a novelist described one of the residents of the Saratoga Indian Camp as “the last left of his tribe,” but she was dead wrong. White tourists had a hard time recognizing eastern Indians as “real,” in part because they weren't dressed like the Lakota people who starred in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and other acts touring the country. Some white folks insultingly misidentified eastern Indians as “gypsies.” So Native artists adapted, and some began dressing up in western Plains-style fringe and feathers, to create a more recognizable attraction.

By 1900, the atmosphere for Native trading in Saratoga Springs had changed for the worse. The Indian Camp in Saratoga Springs closed down, at a time when hostile feelings against eastern Indians were increasing as a result of the Indian wars out west. Cheap manufactured goods took the place of Native crafts. Native artisans adapted by finding other kinds of work to support their families, and other ways to preserve their culture. Mohawk and Abenaki families continued making art, selling it from their homes, or from places like Montreal, Niagara Falls, and the White Mountains. Native men also worked in the Adirondacks as loggers and guides.

By the mid-twentieth century, very few Native artisans were visible in Saratoga Springs. But things have changed again, this time for the better. Northeastern Native artisans are gaining more visibility, and more respect, and finding inventive ways of adapting to modernity while preserving their culture. In 2006, the first Native American Festival in Saratoga Springs was an occasion to revive a new version of the old Saratoga Indian Camps. Dozens of Native artisans, hundreds of Native families, and thousands of tourists came together at the Saratoga State Park, near the mineral springs. At the second round of this festival in 2007, and, we hope, on many more occasions to come, Native families will gather again in Saratoga Springs, to wear their traditional regalia, demonstrate their traditional arts and crafts, and share traditional knowledge, as they work to strengthen the threads of some very old, lasting traditions.

[thanks to Marge Bruchac for contributing this article]