

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CHESHIRE COUNTY

# ABENAKI CULTURE: PRE-EUROPEAN CONTACT

Wonder Box 3 Teacher Packet



## INTRODUCTION

The Historical Society of Cheshire County creates Wonder Boxes as a multi-sensory learning experience so that students may touch, observe, and interpret historical themes.

This Wonder Box invites students to examine both rare historical artifacts and newly-made reproductions of historical objects. The items contained in the box represent the material culture that people, such as the Abenaki in the Monadnock region, used before the arrival of Europeans.

Within this Wonder Box are educational resources for teachers to use with their students including discussion questions, a description of each artifact and/or reproduction, and in-class activities.

# BACKGROUND

**Native people have lived in the Monadnock region for at least 12,500 years.**

Paleo Indians first traveled to North America from Asia about 15,000 years ago (YA). By about 12,500 YA, they had settled in New Hampshire where the rivers, fertile growing land, and herds of caribou (as well as many other ancient NH animals) were in abundance. They became known as the Western Abenaki with different sub-groups located all over NH and VT. Abenaki family bands located in the CT River Valley were the mainly Sokoki and Cowasuck.

For thousands of years, they were primarily hunters, fishers, and gatherers. As the environment slowly changed from a very cold environment to the type of environment we have today, the types of plants and animals available changed. The Paleo-Indians adapted to these changes by inventing new tools and a good variety of tools to use for hunting, cooking and preserving foods.

It wasn't until about 1,000 year ago that farming was established and flourished in the Connecticut River Valley. The main crops-- corn, squash, and beans-- were often referred to as the "three sisters".

In search of food and supplies to use throughout all of the seasons, paleo-Indians moved around often. Families most likely banded together to form family bands of various sizes to help each other seek out resources for food, tools, and other supplies. Different family bands, at times, came together during the certain times of the year to share fishing, gardening, or other cultural needs.

Western Abenaki people reside in Cheshire County today. They DID NOT disappear.

## Please Note

**We love to encourage hands-on learning. Although we do ask that the students handle these objects with care. The artifacts are special in that they are historical objects that cannot be replaced. The reproductions are often difficult and very expensive to replace. By carefully handling the objects, students are respecting their historical nature and ensuring their usefulness for future generations to learn from.**

# ANALYZING HISTORIC OBJECTS

Have students touch and feel the artifacts and reproductions.

Ask them to consider, based on what they see, what types of materials were available to the Indians to make their tools and household items. Would these materials have all come from the Monadnock region or could some have come from further away? Are these materials still around today in the Monadnock region?

Ask the students to consider what each item is in the Wonder Box. How was it used? Who made it? How was it made? Are these items still made today? Are these items still used by the Abenaki today?



## ESSENTIAL VOCABULARY

### Paleo-Indians

Term given to the first people who entered and inhabited the North and South America up until European contact. Archaeologists believe that the first inhabitants of New Hampshire arrived about 12,000 years ago.

### Abenaki

"People of the Dawnland"--Native American tribe from Northeastern United States and Canada. This tribe contains several bands or kinship groups.

### Algonquian

Language spoken by many Native American tribes from the East Coast to the Rocky Mountain region, including the Abenaki.

### Tanning

Converting animal hide into leather by soaking it in a solution.

### Kinship Groups/Family Bands

A sub-group of Abenaki who share the same cultural traits. There are about 25 bands of Abenakis. The Sokoki and Cowasuck have historically resided in the Connecticut River Valley.

### Artifact

An object made by people in the past. Artifacts in museums are often given as gifts with a promise made that they will be protected forever and made available to teach people about history.

### Reproduction

Recreating a historic artifact using similar materials and processes.

### Conchoidal Fracture

A curved breakage that occurs to minerals like flint or quartz.

# INVENTORY OF ITEMS IN THE WONDER BOX



## Deer Leather

Deer leather was used for a wide range of items, including garments, pouches/bags, and footwear. In addition to the sample, all of the small pouches in the Wonder Box are made of deer leather.



## Moose Leather

Moose leather was also used in similar ways as deer leather, or for those items that needed greater strength or durability.

**SMELL THE TWO SAMPLES OF ANIMAL HIDE.** CAN YOU TELL WHICH ONE WAS HUNG OVER A FIRE TO SMOKE IT? THIS WAS OFTEN DONE TO MAKE THE LEATHER SOFTER. (THE DEER LEATHER SAMPLE IS THE ONE THAT HAS BEEN SMOKED.)

## One Way to Make Leather

Animals hides become leather after they undergo the process of tanning. Tanning a hide is slow, hard work and takes many days to complete. One basic method that was probably used in this region is referred to as brain tanning. After a deer or moose was killed, it was skinned to remove the fat and flesh from the skin, or hide. Bone and/or stone edging tools were used to skin the hides.

Often the Abenaki placed their hides over a wooden beam while they scraped off the flesh and fat. When done the hides could be stretched and hung in a wooden frame.

If the hide was to be de-haired, it was probably first soaked. The hair was removed with a similar edging or scraping tool and was then soaked in a mixture of water and brain solution. This was done, perhaps several times, until the brain solution penetrated deep into the hide. After the braining, the hide was stretched and softened into workable leather. A final step was to smoke the hide to retain a greater softness to the leather.

# Tanning Hides to Make Leather



These two illustrations depict different stages in the process of tanning animal hides to make leather.

What do you see happening here?

# INVENTORY OF ITEMS IN THE WONDER BOX



## Furs

Furs were used for such things as bedding, clothing and blankets. Often beaver fur was used for waterproof clothing. Mink was another small animal found in large numbers in NH and VT.



## Awls & Needles

Awls are tools that were used to make small holes in materials like leather so that it can be sewn together with a needle. These reproduction awls and needles are almost all made of bone.

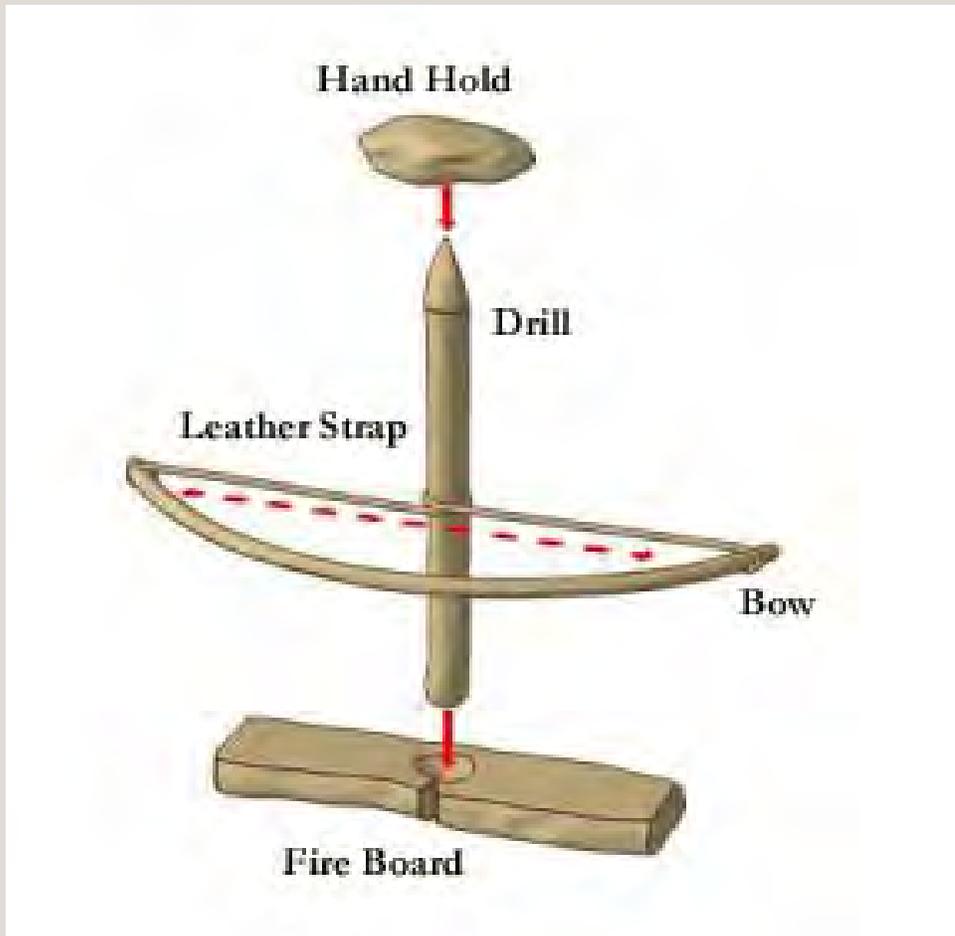
*Can you find the one made of antler?*



## WHAT WAS USED AS THREAD FOR SEWING? SINEW

**Sinew** is the shredded fibers of animal tendons, from such animals as moose, deer, or bear. These fibers can be used to make a small rope called cordage. The cordage was used for many projects including binding projectile points onto an arrow shaft, tying fish hooks to a line, or making jewelry with beads and pendants. *Find the reproduction sinew that was used to make necklaces.*

# INVENTORY OF ITEMS IN THE WONDER BOX



## BOW DRILL

The bow drill looks like a bow used to shoot arrows but this bow is used to make hot coal to start a fire. There are five different items that work together to make a bow drill. The bow, leather strap, drill or spindle, fire board, and hand hold.

A leather strap is tied to both ends of the bow. The strap is twisted once around the drill and placed in the hole of the fire board with the hand hold on top of the drill to supply stability and pressure. By moving the bow back and forth slowly with firm pressure a fine wisp of smoke will start while producing a fine powder in the notch of the fire board. When there is enough dark brown to black powder drill faster. This heat stage will create more smoke while getting the powder hotter. When the powder sustains its own smoke you probably have a coal. Blow on the coal to make it red and transfer it to a tinder bundle of dry grasses, fibrous bark or plant material. Blow on the coal in the bundle until it flames.

# INVENTORY OF ITEMS IN THE WONDER BOX

## Projectile Points



Projectile points were made of stone and possibly of bone. They were very important tools for the Abenaki for well over 10,000 years before present. Some points that have been found by archaeologists in Cheshire County, NH, are made of rock found as far away as northern Maine. They would have been very important gifts to receive from family or friends about 11,000 years ago.

Points are often referred to as *arrowheads*. This is not always accurate because points were also used for knives and spears. The bow and arrow is actually new technology, only a couple of thousand years old in this region, so many points date found in NH date to a time earlier than the bow and arrow.

The small black projectile point is made of a volcanic glass called obsidian, often found more in the mid-western part of the United States, not in NH. The other stone points are made of local rock. Notice one point is broken in a corner. Two other points appear to be unfinished.

## Smoking Pipes



The two pipes in this Wonder Box are historic artifacts, but when they were used is not known. They are made of soapstone catlin which is a soft enough stone that makes it easy to carve. Pipes are important objects for the Abenaki during cultural ceremonies and for medicinal use. The pipe stems could be made of reeds from a nearby marsh or of wood.



Materials used for smoking came from a wide variety of dried wild herbs, barks, and plants, including native tobacco. Compared to modern tobacco, the smoking mixtures of the past were much lower in nicotine and more medicinal in character.

# INVENTORY OF ITEMS IN THE WONDER BOX

## BEADS & PENDANTS

Many styles of beads and pendants were made from shells, stone, bone, antler, metal (native copper), and ceramics. They are often used as art, clothing accessories, or as jewelry. Yet beads and pendants have other important social, economic, political, and religious use. Animal pendants identified people to a particular family, clan, or society. Beads and pendants were used in many rites of passage during a person's life, in ceremonies of dance, curing, and other rituals.



### Shell

Before European contact the Abenaki produced barrel-shaped and disk-shaped shell beads, along with strands of perforated small whole shells. The quahog shellfish was a colorful purple and white shell used for making beads.



### Stone

Stone beads and pendants may have been made in a variety of shapes and sizes. Within the Wonder Box are examples of river stones that have been used for a necklace. One is on tanned deer leather and the other is on a fiber cord. There are also two on a piece of sinew.



### Antler & Bone

Bone and antler beads were often in tube shapes. The reddish tubes are of antler. The other two sets of tubes on sinew are of bone.

# INVENTORY OF ITEMS IN THE WONDER BOX

## FISHING



### Bone Harpoon

Harpoons were attached to a wooden shaft and thrown by a person for fishing purposes. Harpoons were used in coastal areas, and perhaps by Abenaki people visiting the coast to fish. Whether they were used to spear larger fish in the Connecticut River or elsewhere is not known.



### Bone Fishing Hooks

Fish were an important source of food. Traveling to particular fishing sites may have been part of the seasonal movement that families undertook each year. The Great Falls at Bellows Falls, Vermont, is a well-known fishing site used thousands of years ago. Archaeologists have also discovered the location of a fish dam on the Ashuelot River in Swanzey. The numerous artifacts found nearby tell us that people came to fish there regularly. Salmon, shad, and alewives were all important foods that were caught in the spring as they traveled upriver to spawn. Eels lived in fresh water and were caught going downstream to the ocean to spawn.

## How did the Abenaki people fish?

Traditional fishing methods depended upon the species of fish and the natural environment. Spears, harpoons, gaffs, and dip nets are common tools that may have been used in the rivers and lakes in the Monadnock region. Fishing with a hook and line or trolling behind a canoe may have been another method used on larger bodies of water. Fish traps and weirs required the cooperation of large numbers of people but potentially could catch a large number of fish.

Weirs were devices that made a blockage across a stream with openings. As fish are initially blocked by the weir, they find and pass through an opening where they are easily captured in traps or baskets or in nets. The Swanzey fish dam may have been used in such a way. Gill nets captured fish by entangling them in a net constructed to catch specific size fish. Seines also required a net that was small enough to trap specific size fish by pulling the two ends together to surround the school of fish.

# INVENTORY OF ITEMS IN THE WONDER BOX



## Combs

This reproduction comb is made of moose antler. Notice one of the comb teeth has broken off. Archaeologists look for all pieces of objects left by Native Americans even if they're broken.



## Vessels

Ceramic (clay pots) and birch bark vessels were two types of containers used by the Abenaki people thousands of years ago. Notice that the white of the bark is on the inside. This makes the vessel more waterproof.



## Caribou Bone

Caribou were important animals to the ancient Abenaki in New Hampshire for thousands of years. Caribou bones found in Swanzey by archaeologists date to about 11,600 years ago. The caribou was more than a source of meat for food. The hides were often used to cover a family's home, for blankets and for clothing. Its ligaments could be used to make sinew. The bones were used for making tools and useful equipment and the hooves could be used to make glue.



As the caribou moved so, too, did the Abenaki people. Yet as the climate in New Hampshire became warmer (about 5,000 years ago), the caribou relocated north to Canada in search of a colder climate. This migration of caribou out of New Hampshire had an effect on Abenaki diet, which later began to incorporate food from smaller animals like deer, turkey, squirrel, rabbit and birds. Their old style of hunting larger animals like the caribou also changed; Abenaki invented new tools and new ways of hunting to catch smaller animals that did not travel in large herds like the caribou had. New tools included the bow and arrow.

# INVENTORY OF ITEMS IN THE WONDER BOX

## Scrapers

For thousands of years, the scraper was one of the most important tools that Abenaki families used to survive. Scrapers were used for many different purposes including scraping hides and bones for making food, clothing or other necessary items. They were also used in woodworking.

Scrapers are often made by chipping the end of a piece of stone in order to create one sharp side and to keep the rest of the sides dull (making it easier to hold). Most scrapers are either circle or blade-like in shape.

The two scrapers in this box are made of chert which is a very soft “sedimentary” rock. Chert is a great type of rock for scraping hides and, so, was a very special gift to receive from friends and family from far away.

The green chert is probably from the Hudson Bay area of upstate New York. The red chert is commonly found in northern Maine, made from the sediment left behind by glaciers that has been compressed over time. Notice that the red chert has a smooth bump in it. This is called a conchoidal fracture, which means that when the rock was struck by a hammer-like tool to make the scraper it caused a curved break in the rock.



## How Stone Age Humans Made Hand Axes

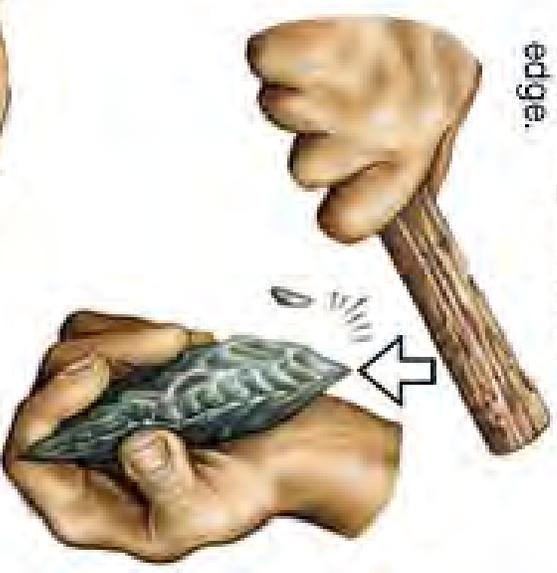
1. The process started with a large piece of rock.



2. The humans shaped the rock with a stone hammer.



3. Using a hammer made of wood, stone, or antler they sharpened the edge.



4. They trimmed the edge by prying off tiny flakes with a pointed stick.



**Finished hand ax**



front view



side view