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John Snow's Postcard Basket: A Story of Wabanaki Presence and Persistence on Mount Desert Island

By Julia Gray

The stories objects tell fascinate me. This small basket holds so many stories, stories of the Wabanaki people and of the place they call Pesamkuk,¹ the place many of us know today as Mount Desert Island. This basket holds stories of traditions, of persistence, and of adaptation. The rectangular basket, woven of brown ash and sweetgrass, is small, just big enough to frame a glass-encased postcard of John Snow.

The postcard photo shows Snow wearing a traditional Wabanaki beaded collar and a tall feather headdress that may be a blend of the traditional Wabanaki style and the Plains style that became popular in the late-nineteenth century. Many Wabanaki people (and Native people across the country) had formal portraits taken of themselves and made into postcards, which they would then use to help promote their wares or their services. Interestingly, the original printing of the postcard, copyright 1912, described Snow as Penobscot, perhaps because he spent a fair amount of time on the Penobscot reservation at Indian Island with his first wife, Mary Ann Francis, who was Penobscot. Aldelburgh Orr took the photograph, perhaps at his studio in Old Town, apparently assuming that because Snow was in Old Town, he was Penobscot.² But this confusion

also speaks to the interrelatedness of the Wabanaki peoples, the family connections and geographic mobility that sometimes blur the lines between "Tribes" and "Reservations," lines that were drawn according to Western standards, between people who saw such boundaries as porous and fluid. Many Wabanaki families were, and are today, a blend of Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Micmac, and Maliseet, and would move from one community to another over the course of the seasons and years.

Who was John Snow?

John Snow was a Passamaquoddy craftsman, a family man, and a storyteller who kept the non-Native people of Mount Desert Island connected to the island's Wabanaki heritage well into the twentieth century, while following millennia-old traditions of living with the land and its resources.³

Born in 1868 at the Passamaquoddy reservation at Sipayik (Pleasant Point), Snow spent his seasons living and moving across the Wabanaki homeland, from Sipayik, to Moneskatik (Bar Harbor), to Astuwikuk (Northeast Harbor), to Alenape Menehan (Indian Island), to Motahkomikuk (Indian Township) to harvest ash, and to the Cranberry Isles to harvest sweetgrass. When John Snow and his second wife, Alice Sockabasin, were raising their four children together, they lived year-round on Mount Desert Island. They lived in Northeast Harbor, where their children, Susan, Philip, Bertha, and Juanita, attended elementary school.⁴ During the period when the Snow family was living year-round on Mount Desert Island, most Wabanaki people were spending only part of

the year on the island, returning to their reservations or nearby communities during the winter.

Snow's daughter, Susan Snow Holmes, recalling her father to anthropologists Bunny McBride and Harald Prins and to Abbe Museum intern Erin Damon, told of a complex network of Wabanaki people, a network that supported an economy that adapted traditional lifeways to the early-twentieth century market for household items and souvenirs. Snow would travel to Indian Township in easternmost Maine to harvest ash logs, or he would buy them from other Wabanaki men who brought them down from the township, or from Aroostook County. He would harvest the sweetgrass from island marshes, and would then pass it along to his wife, daughters, or other weavers, who would weave it into baskets, which he would then sell either from a small shop at the front of his house in Northeast Harbor, or by taking them door-to-door.

The little basket featured here embodies Snow's story, and the network he was a part of. Its structure comes from the ash logs of the inland woods, held together with the sweetgrass gathered from the coast. The postcard shows a Wabanaki person dressed in the formal attire of a Passamaquoddy man, a marker that the buyer was obtaining a genuine Indian artifact. The work done to create this basket, likely by one of the women in his family, exemplifies the community nature of art and craft in Wabanaki society during this time of dramatic change.

John Snow was also known for the sealskin moccasins, belts, and vests that he made and sold to locals and tourists. These he crafted from skins taken from seals harvested by other Passamaquoddy hunters at Pleasant Point, or along the coast closer to Mount Desert Island—yet another network that supported the community's economic survival.⁵

John Snow was also a storyteller, who not only passed tales along in the oral storytelling tradition, but also collected stories and wrote them down,



This undated stereopticon view depicts the "Indian Encampment" at Bar Harbor where Wabanaki peoples sold their wares. *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

both in Passamaquoddy and translated into English. His daughter Susan recalled going with him to one of the big houses in Northeast Harbor where he read a story to the woman who lived there, first in Passamaquoddy, and then translated it into English for her. It is quite likely that this woman in her big house was summer resident and Native art patron Mary Cabot Wheelwright or her friend, historian and folklorist Fanny Hardy Eckstorm, who worked extensively to document Wabanaki oral traditions and languages.⁶

Snow's contributions to Eckstorm's research are further documented in a letter from Passamaquoddy culture keeper Lewis Mitchell to Eckstorm, in which he describes having "received a letter from John Snow ... with about 20 pages of Kluskap stories and one Indian Love Song, both in Indian and English."⁷

Prins and McBride uncovered another account of Snow's storytelling that seems to me to bring another dimension to his story. Snow shared with writer Elizabeth Coatsworth stories of the *mihkomuwehsisok* (Little People) who are both helpers and troublemakers in Wabanaki oral traditions. Coatsworth recalled, "As a man, John Snow remembered that his mother had once taken him as a little boy to a rock near the mouth of Machias River. There were old marks on it [petroglyphs] ... [and he remembered] that she had stood by the rock, and that she called out a question and that the [Little People] answered it."⁸ John Snow was a man of the twentieth century, but also firmly and deeply rooted in the millennia of his people's history in the Wabanaki homeland.

John Snow died in 1937, and was laid to rest in Forest Hill Cemetery in Northeast Harbor.⁹

Speaking to the Present

To me, the most significant and valuable pieces we can share from our museum collections are those that can speak to the present and can help us to see how we can work to make the world around us a more compassionate and equitable place. I believe that this basket embodies stories that can work towards that goal.

The adaptation and persistence that led to the creation of this fairly unassuming basket can help people today to understand and appreciate how it is that the Wabanaki people, building from a solid foundation of thousands of years of tradition and culture, continued to make their way in a changing world. The impact of colonization on the Wabanaki people was incredibly destructive. Between warfare, disease, bounty hunters, the usurpation of their land, and the destruction of the resources they relied on, the survival of their people and their culture is something we can all learn so much from.

John Snow, and what we now know about his life and his family, can provide valuable insight into ways that people from different cultures, and from different worldviews, can interact and co-exist. Of course, it also speaks to the stereotypes and implicit (and sometimes explicit) bias and racism that have been a part of Euroamerican relationships with the Wabanaki since first contact.

During the summer of 2003, Abbe Museum intern Erin Damon launched a project to search out and document local memories of Snow and his family. Many of the memories shared with Erin came from people who were classmates of the Snow children. In addition, both Erin and writer Bunny McBride interviewed Snow's daughter, Susan Snow Holmes, in 2003 and 2004. The stories

shared by local residents reflect the ambiguous relationship they had with Wabanaki presence and persistence on Mount Desert Island.

Ted Spurling recalled Snow coming to Little Cranberry to sell sweetgrass baskets, toy birchbark canoes, and toy bows and arrows, and he remembered going to school with the Snow children, especially Bertha.

Mildred Keezer recounted how, when her husband bought a sweetgrass whisk for her from Snow, Snow asked, "Is she sweet? Because this is sweetgrass."

Polly Bunker remembered "Old John" eating lunch at her house on Little Cranberry when she was a child, "He was a big man, friendly and quiet."

Mary Dunbar, a small child at the time, recalled the Snow family home across from the old steamboat wharf.

Dr. Tom Clark shared his memories of "Old John Snow" coming to their house on the Church Road on Northeast Harbor to sell baskets to his mother.

Shirley McGarr recollected walking through the woods to school with Susie, "Porky" (Philip), Bertha, and Juanita.

Jane Smallidge recounted the distinctive sound of processing ash logs into basket splints: "I remember hearing John Snow pounding on ash logs to make strips for weaving baskets. It seems as though it was in the summer, like a warm afternoon when it would be heard most clearly."

It is also important to share the darker side of some of these memories, comments that reflect the persistent bias and racism that was expressed towards Native people then, and that persists today.

Polly Bunker recalled that when Snow lunched with her family, the children were on "their best behavior because, even though he was friendly, they were still afraid of him."

And Shirley McGarr remembered that "some people in town were not too nice to John Snow, and she couldn't understand it as a little girl."



This c. 1880s stereopticon view depicts Indian canoes at the shore of Bar Harbor. *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*





Photograph by Moses L. Averill, Old Town, Maine of Indian Island "showing the people living there," around 1870. Several individuals in the photograph hold baskets in the process of being made. *Courtesy of Raymond H. Fogler Library, Special Collections*

Perhaps we can use these glimpses into the not-so-distant history of this place to build new ways of interacting and relating across difference. We can seek to understand this legacy, and let it inspire more just and equitable ways of existing in a diverse and complicated twenty-first-century Mount Desert Island.

You might be thinking, we can learn and act on that learning without this little basket. We have the stories and the memories. But this cultural object, something that you can see and hold, a physical embodiment of so much, has power.

Perhaps the main reason that John Snow's presence on Mount Desert Island is remembered today is that the objects he and his family created are still here, in museums and libraries, or treasured by the families who bought them. Most of the pieces known to be made by Snow are birchbark: etched letterboxes, a set of small berry baskets bought for treasured grandchildren, and model birchbark canoes. While John Snow may not have made this little basket, it encapsulates his image and his stories, his family, the ash he pounded to make the splints, his trip by canoe or rowboat out to the Cranberries to harvest the sweetgrass, his presence and persistence.

I hope you can see why I love this little basket, with all of the stories it holds of John Snow, and how it helps keep his story here, so that we will never forget that this is first Pesamkuk, a Wabanaki place.

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1. George Neptune, "Naming the Dawnland: Wabanaki Place Names on Mount Desert Island," *Chebeco*, Vol. XIV (2015): 97-98.
 2. Erin Damon, *In Search of John Snow*. Bar Harbor, ME: Abbe Museum Exhibit, 2003.
 3. Harald E. L. Prins and Bunny McBride, *Asticou's Island Domain: Wabanaki Peoples at Mount Desert Island 1500–2000*, vol. 1 (Boston: Northeast Region Ethnography Program, National Park Service, 2007), 319–323.
 4. *Ibid.*, 320.
 5. *Ibid.*, 320–321.
 6. *Ibid.*, 322.
 7. Lewis Mitchell quoted in Prins and McBride, *Asticou's Island Domain*, 323.
 8. Elizabeth Coatsworth quoted in Prins and McBride, *Asticou's Island Domain*, 323.
 9. Damon, *In Search of John Snow*, 2003.