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Fur Trade 02: Birchbark Canoes

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Juen, Rachel B. and Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project, "Fur Trade 02: Birchbark Canoes" (2011). *Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project*. 34.
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Birchbark Canoes

“All these nations make a great many bark canoes, which Are very profitable for Them. They do this Sort of work in the summer, The women sew these canoes with Roots; the men cut and shape the bark and make the gunwales, cross-pieces and ribs; the women gum Them. It is no small labor to make a canoe, in which there is much symmetry and measurement; and it is a curious sight.”—Jacques Sabrevois de Bleury, commandant at Fort Pontchartrain, Detroit, 1717

A Joint Effort

Europeans quickly adopted the use of the birchbark canoe from Natives, while at the same time European tools made canoe construction easier.

Native Americans used the strong, light-weight birchbark canoes long before Europeans arrived. The French *voyageurs* quickly adopted it while Natives in turn adapted European tools to aid them in canoe construction. Capable of carrying heavy loads, light enough to be carried around river obstacles such as rapids by only one or two men, and made from readily available materials, the birchbark canoe helped make possible the unprecedented growth of the fur trade in the 17th and 18th centuries.



A 14 ft. Algonquin canoe. Courtesy of Canadian Canoe Museum #977.24. Photo by M. Cullen.

A Valuable and Renewable Resource

Natives made a profit gathering birchbark and building birchbark canoes to trade to Europeans and other Native groups.

The range of white birch (*Betulapapyrifera*) extends across most of Canada south of the Arctic and in the northern portions of the Great Lakes. Birchbark canoe usage extended far beyond the range of white birch because Native Americans traded the desirable canoes and the bark widely.

By 1640, large groups of Natives, mostly Algonquians, had settled along the St. Lawrence River at Quebec and Trois-Rivières. They began trading into the interior of the continent and supplied voyaging and military canoes to the French and other Natives.

Some Native Americans lived permanently at Michilimackinac and made their living gathering and trading supplies that the European fur traders needed, including birchbark for canoes and shelters. The Huron, Ottawa, Ojibwa and Potawatomi who had settled at Detroit supplied canoes to the French at Detroit and farther south. They either gathered the raw material further north or traded for it, and made a profitable business in canoe construction.



1. Carving the gunwales from white spruce. 2. Attaching the gunwales to the bark. 3. Great Lakes woman sewing birchbark panels. Courtesy of www.firstpeople.us; www.marketworks.com; J. Demos, *The Tried and the True*.

Canoes Got Bigger

Over time birchbark canoes were built larger in order to carry more trade goods and furs.

By 1720, heightened competition between the French and British—along with the Native Americans’ growing demand for cloth garments, woven fabrics, and wool blankets—resulted in a large increase in the amount of trade goods moving west, necessitating larger canoes. The earlier canoes, which could carry about 1,750 lbs., were replaced by the *canot de maître*, an Algonquin-style canoe which carried about 6,000 lbs. These were best suited for Great Lakes travel, while the smaller version remained the preferred river canoe.

Why Birchbark?

Birchbark enabled the construction of canoes that were lightweight, waterproof, and strong.

Native Americans discovered that birchbark was light, waterproof, and strong. It did not shrink, so sheets of it could be sewn together. Unlike the bark of other trees, the grain of birch runs around the tree rather than parallel to the trunk. This allowed it to be formed into the sophisticated and subtle forms that became the birchbark canoe.

Birchbark canoes held heavy loads and kept passengers and their goods dry. They gave the Natives and French who used them an advantage over those who could not obtain the canoes or the birchbark to build them. The British and the Iroquois often had to make do with canoes made of elm bark, or with heavy dugouts, which were not nearly as serviceable.



Bending the bark in the canoe building frame. Photo courtesy of R. Nash.



Birchbark was a renewable resource; it was not necessary to kill the tree to harvest the bark. Photo courtesy of R. Nash.



Needles like these found at Fort St. Joseph may have been used to sew birchbark panels together. Photo by J. Lacko.

