

Telstar Regional High School

**The Presents of the Penobscot**

*How the Penobscot River was significant in Maine's history*

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History influences the everyday world of the present. Today, everything that humanity knows and has grown on, comes from its history. Perhaps that is why so many places are named after important historical references. For an example, many locations in Maine come from its Indian roots- the name “Penobscot” comes from the Indian word “Penawapskewi”, which means “the rocky part”. This describes the Penobscot River, where the Wabanaki people settled and found a great importance in the natural resources. The river has been an important topic all throughout Maine history. The significance of the Penobscot River in Maine’s history can be seen in the myths of the Penobscot River, the Wabanaki uses, and the European settler uses of the river.

The Penobscot Nation, which was part of the Wabanaki Confederacy, formulated a myth as to how the Penobscot River was formed. They believed that their ancestors were settling up where the river now lays, in desperate need of water, when a monster frog forbade them to have it. They called upon their spirit chief, Gluskabxe, whom ended up taking an ax to a large yellow birch tree. When it fell, it killed the monster frog and all of the water poured out of him- creating the Penobscot River. The branches of the yellow birch tree became other (smaller) rivers that all emptied into the Penobscot (McKeon). This shows how the Penobscot River was spiritual to the Wabanaki, and how they kept it in their hearts as a success and answer to their struggles.

They also created a second myth that allowed for the Penobscot River to become part of their identity. They told how when their ancestors, whom were dying of thirst, were introduced to the newly created river, they jumped in- turning into species of fish, frogs, turtles and other sea

creatures (McKeon). This caused the Wabanaki to keep their identity tied with the Penobscot and water in general, as their family names were now connected with the animals that lived in the waters.

Not only did the Wabanaki people tie themselves to the Penobscot spiritually, they also used it as a resource. By being able to fish in the river, the Penobscot were able to give themselves different types of meat. They could hunt in the woods for deer, moose, rabbit, and other woodland creatures, but still supply themselves with fish from the river. In fact, the Penobscot actually allowed them more access to a variety of food- by following it, the Wabanaki could make season relocations to the ocean for seafood and then back inland for hunting (New World Encyclopedia).

They did not just use the river for food, however. It was also a great supplier to help them make goods. The Wabanaki used the Penobscot to create their baskets, beadwork, birch bark canoes, moccasins, pottery, quillwork, and to help them find medicinal plants. Their creations could be used for their own advantages- like easier travel and gathering, or to be traded in order to obtain items that they needed. The importance of the Penobscot River to the Wabanaki can be summed up perfectly by Chief Kirk Francis, whom said “The river is simply who we are. It’s the very core of our identity as a people and it’s simply the most important in the Penobscot Nation’s life” (McKeon).

Just as the Penobscot Nation found the Penobscot River useful, the European settlers treasured it as well. It too fed them fish and allowed for them to interact with the Penobscot Nation- allowing for trading advantages- especially in food and furs. They also used the river to travel around in rafts and canoes (McKeon).

It is in these ways that the Penobscot Nation and European settlers found the same value in the Penobscot River. However, these new settlers soon diverged and found their own uses for the river. They began to log and make paper mills (McKeon). These logs could be used for building ships, making masts, and being building materials for other structures like houses.

By using the Penobscot River, these European settlers were able to transport large masses of wood to other areas with a considerably lower amount of effort and time (Geller). This allowed for their economics to grow even more, and soon "paper mills, fishing, logging became key economic activities in Maine, which were all practices on the river" (McKeon). After all, according to Roger Bennatti, the Penobscot River in the 1800s was mostly a log-driving system, but allowed vessels to come and transport people and goods to Bangor to trade/sell. When the Penobscot opened became an early trade corridor that connected interior Maine to the Atlantic coast, as it allowed these ships to come through and build the Penobscot River estuary ("Penobscot River").

The Wabanaki people created myths in order to connect themselves to the Penobscot River, proving how important they believed it was. They used the river to create and find resources that helped them survive and thrive. The European settlers also found great resource to the river, by using it for transportation, food, and making it an economic advantage. By looking at the myths and uses of the Penobscot River, a historian can clearly see how important it was to both the Wabanki people and the European settlers.

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