

## **Encounters: The Penobscot River**

### **Main Text:**

The Penobscot River has been home for the Penobscot Nation for generations. It is a vital part of their identity, a source of sustenance, and a place of connection and contention with outsiders since the first arrival of European explorers. Protection of the river, their ancestral home, continues to be of critical importance to the Penobscot Nation.

All Wabanaki peoples make their homes on and around rivers. The Passamaquoddy live along the St. Croix River watershed and the bays it feeds. The Maliseet, the People of the Beautiful River in their own language, live along the St. John. The Aroostook Band of Micmac live along the upper reaches of the Penobscot and St. John Rivers, while Mi'kmaq bands in Canada reach from the St. Lawrence the rivers of Nova Scotia and bays of Newfoundland.

### **Right Column:**

The People of the Penobscot have always believed that this river was our life-blood.

-Butch Phillips, Tribal Elder, Penobscot Nation



Penobscot River at dusk, Photo by Chris Sockalexix.

### **Follow-on Text:**

Learn how the Penobscot Nation has joined in an unprecedented coalition to restore the health of their ancestral river.

## Section: “The Penobscot River Restoration Project”

### Main Text:

The Penobscot River Restoration Project represents an unprecedented collaboration between the Penobscot Nation, local and national conservation groups, hydropower companies, the state of Maine, and the federal government to restore the health of the Penobscot River. The Penobscot River Restoration Project seeks to revive and revitalize the river as a sustaining and sustainable cultural and economic resource for both native and non-native Mainers alike. This collaboration has thus far returned species such as the Atlantic salmon, alewives, and sturgeon to the waters of the Penobscot Indian reservation for the first time in nearly two-hundred years, marking a critical milestone in preserving the subsistence fishing rights and cultural practices of the Penobscot people.

### Right Column:



[video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nu0v8oyLqA>]



Veazie Dam Removal. Joseph Dana of the Penobscot Indian Nation paddles a traditional birch-bark canoe past the breaching. Photo by Meagan Racey, USFWS.

### Follow-on Text:

Find out how the Penobscot Nation’s work to protect their river from pollution has been helped and hampered by federal and state legislation.

## Section: “The Clean Water Act”

### **Main Text:**

Increasing settlement and industry began to pollute the Penobscot River in the mid-1800s. By the early 1900s, the waters of the Penobscot were unsafe for children to play in, and the fish caught were too toxic to eat.

The Federal Clean Water Act of 1972 was a turning point for the Penobscot River. Towns and mills along the waterway were ordered to reduce industrial and municipal waste discharges into the river. And the Penobscot Nation established a water quality monitoring program to ensure upstream and downstream compliance.

Since the legislation came to be law, there have been ongoing disagreements about who can and should enforce water quality standards on the river—the state, the federal government, or the Penobscot Nation. This issue remains unresolved to this day.

### **Right Column:**

[\[Clean\\_Water.mp4 video\]](#)

Excerpt from *The Penobscot: Ancestral River, Contested Territory*, produced by the Sunlight Media Collective, 2015

We have a body of water around our reservation that’s not fit for fishing. We’re very restricted in terms of how we can practice our right to fish because the fish are not fit to eat.

-Kirk Francis, Penobscot, Chief, Penobscot Indian Nation

### **Follow-on Text:**

Learn more about how Penobscot guides connect non-Native visitors to their homeland and their culture.

## Sub-Section: “In Depth: The Clean Water Act and the Penobscot River”

### **Main Text:**

As early as the mid-1800s, textile factories and paper mills along the Penobscot River began to pollute the river with waste water containing chemicals such as mercury, dioxin, bleaches, and dyes. As the towns along the river grew, they too began to contribute to the pollution through municipal sewer discharge. By 1959, the water in the river had become so contaminated that the city of Bangor stopped drawing their municipal drinking water supply from the river.

For the Penobscot Nation, this meant that the waters throughout their reservation were unsafe for their children to play in, let alone drink, and that the fish they had subsisted on were too toxic to eat. The passage of the federal Clean Water Act in 1972 was a turning point for the river and the Nation. It required towns and mills to significantly reduce their discharge of pollutants. In 1992, in cooperation with the Department of Environmental Protection, the Penobscot Nation established their water quality monitoring program which continues today.

Implementation of the Clean Water Act has, however, been a contentious issue on the Penobscot River. Disagreements between the tribe and the state have arisen about who should ultimately regulate water quality. The Penobscot Nation has been given jurisdiction and authority by the Environmental Protection Agency to monitor water quality and pollution discharges in the Penobscot River, while the state has granted itself concurrent jurisdiction, leading to legal ambiguity regarding enforcement and jurisdiction. The Penobscot Nation has argued in several court cases that the river is part of their reservation, and that for this reason the federal government and the tribe, not the state, should have jurisdiction. This issue remains unresolved today.



The Old Town mill at Great Works on the Penobscot River. Photo by Chris Sockalexis.

Section: "Joseph Attean, Joe Polis, and Henry David Thoreau"

**Main Text:**

American writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau first traveled into the upper reaches of the Penobscot River in 1846. However, it was his later trips with Penobscot guides Joseph Attean and Joe Polis that radically altered his views and dispositions towards Native Americans. Prior to this journey, he viewed Native Americans through the stereotypes of the time - as disappearing, noble savages. Through his journey and personal interactions with the Wabanaki, he came to a new understanding of the people and their homeland that included respect and reverence for both the past and the present. Wabanaki guides continue to preserve cultural traditions and help people connect to the Maine wilderness today.

**Right Column:**

[Video: <https://vimeo.com/117003187>]

Courtesy of the Maine Office of Tourism.

Thoreau's journeys to the Maine woods with Attean and Polis changed his perceptions of what it meant to be a Native American in a rapidly changing world.

—James Eric Francis, Sr., Penobscot Tribal Historian

**Follow-on Text:**

Learn how decades of treaties with the Penobscot and other Wabanaki nations made promises that were eventually broken.

Sub-Section: “In Depth: Joseph Attean, Joe Polis, and Henry David Thoreau”

**Main Text:**

The upper reaches of the Penobscot River extend into an area that well-known writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau described in his 1864 book, *The Maine Woods*. Thoreau’s travels between 1846 and 1857 and his deep appreciation for the natural and cultural splendor of this wilderness would not have been possible without the support of his two Penobscot guides, Joseph Attean and Joe Polis. More importantly, this period that Thoreau spent with Attean and Polis began to change his stereotypical 19<sup>th</sup> century views of Native Americans as “disappearing, noble savages.” Instead, his interactions with Attean and Polis reshaped his thinking and replaced his cultural stereotypes with a more nuanced understanding that included respect and reverence.



Joseph Attean      Henry David Thoreau      Joe Polis

The accounts of Thoreau’s travels also served to introduce the world to the great adventures available in the Maine woods, inspiring generations of people to travel upriver to the Penobscot River’s headwaters. And while the main stem of the river from Millinocket seaward has changed dramatically since Thoreau’s time, the branches, tributaries, and lakes to the north are largely unchanged. This part of the Penobscot Nation’s ancestral river homeland is still important to the tribe for traditional activities, but now also provides wilderness and cultural tourism.

In 2014, in commemoration of the 1864 publication of *The Maine Woods*, a group of Wabanaki guides, Thoreau scholars, and Maine Guides navigated a carefully-planned sixteen day canoe trip based on the itinerary of Thoreau’s July 1857 trip.



The 150th Anniversary Thoreau-Wabanaki Tour, 2014. Photo by Chris Sockalexis.

## Section: “Promises Made, Promises Broken”

### Main Text:

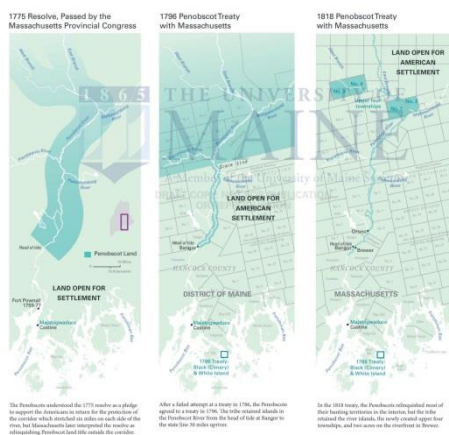
Early interactions between the state and the Wabanaki were not always marked by hostilities. The Wabanaki Nation secured promises from the colonial government to protect their lands from encroachment by settlers in exchange for support in the growing conflict with Britain.

Despite early promises to protect Penobscot territory, the loss of land and river escalated quickly throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. A homeland encompassing the entire river system was reduced to a collection of islands and a stretch of the Penobscot River, the result of settlement growth, further land exchange via treaty, and the construction of dams which altered the landscape.

### Right Column:

[Video: [Early\\_Promises.mp4](#)]

Excerpt from *The Penobscot: Ancestral River, Contested Territory*, produced by the Sunlight Media Collective, 2015.



Pawling, Micah A., and Donald G. Soctomah, “Defining Native Space,” in *The Historical Atlas of Maine*, edited by Stephen J. Hornsby and Richard W. Judd, cartographic design by Michael J. Hermann (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 2015), plate #23.

### Follow-on Text:

Find out how early encounters with Europeans shaped Penobscot attitudes towards these outsiders.

Sub-Section: “In Depth: Promises Made, Promises Broken”

**Main Text:**

As the non-Native population of what is now Maine grew, the loss of the Penobscot’s territory along their ancestral river grew apace. Over just a few decades, a homeland that had once encompassed the entire river system was reduced to a reservation of small islands and an eighty mile stretch of the Penobscot River.

This began in the eighteenth century. In June of 1775, a group of Penobscot men, led by Chief Joseph Orono, traveled to Watertown, Massachusetts to approach the provincial government about the increasing settler intrusions into their territory. (Note: The territory that is now Maine was part of Massachusetts until Maine was organized as a separate state in 1820.)

[The Penobscot] have a large tract of land, which they have a right to call their own, and have possessed, accordingly, for many years. These lands had been encroached upon by the English, who have, for miles on end, cut much of their good timber. They ask that the English would interpose and prevent such encroachments for the future; and they will assist us, with all their power, in the common defence [sic] of our country.

-from the Journals of the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts, 1775

The Penobscot petitioned Massachusetts to protect their land in exchange for Penobscot support of the colonial forces in the rising conflict with Britain. The Provincial Congress agreed:

We hereby strictly forbid any person or persons whatsoever, from trespassing or making waste, upon any of the lands and territories, or possessions, beginning at the head of the tide on Penobscot river, extending six miles on each side of said river, now claimed by our brethren, the Indians of the Penobscot tribe.

-from the Journals of the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts, 1775

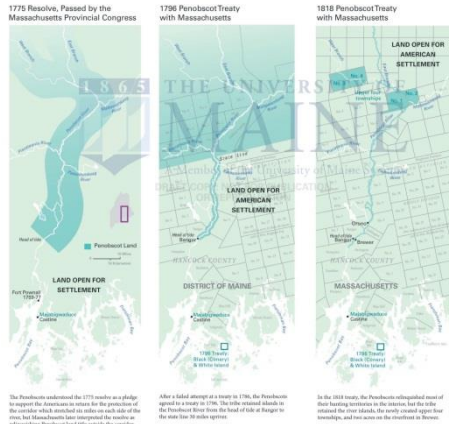


Powder horn believed to have belonged to Chief Joseph Orono, perhaps depicting some of the sites he encountered on his 1775 visit to Watertown. Abbe Museum Collections.

Not surprisingly, following the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, the growing population of the new state of Massachusetts began to eye this protected land for expansion. A new treaty was negotiated and



signed with the Penobscot Nation on August 8, 1796. In exchange for annual provisions of cloth, shot, powder, hats, salt, rum, and corn, the Penobscot ceded to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts a portion of the land that had been previously protected in the 1775 agreement. This consisted of land six miles to each side of the river, from head of tide at Bangor up river thirty miles to just below the mouth of the Piscataquis River. The Penobscot kept the whole of their territory above the 30-mile mark, as well as the islands in the river along that thirty mile stretch.



Pawling, Micah A., and Donald G. Soctomah, “Defining Native Space,” in *The Historical Atlas of Maine*, edited by Stephen J. Hornsby and Richard W. Judd, cartographic design by Michael J. Hermann (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 2015), plate #23.

This protection began to be undone by the industrial expansion of New England. The first mill dam was built on the Penobscot by non-Native settlers in 1797 among a cluster of islands that both the settlers and the Penobscot laid claim to based upon differing interpretations of earlier treaties. Five years later, in 1801, the Penobscot Nation sent another petition to the Massachusetts government:

They feel themselves and their Tribe greatly wronged and injured by a Mr. Winslow and his two sons of Portland erecting a sawmill at the Falls in Penobscot River within a gunshot distance from and below the South point of their Island....when the government secured to their Tribe and their descendants the aforesaid island with other islands in the Penobscot River with all their natural rights and privileges the Fishery was esteemed the most important advantage attached to their island and which no individual could deprive them of - they would therefore humbly request your excellency and honor in your wisdom to prevent an Evil so great as would be the total ruin of the tribe.

—petition of Joseph Pease, Franwook Sabion, Captain Nichola, and Joseph Loling to Massachusetts’s governor and General Court, Boston, September 24, 1801

By 1818, the Penobscot were convinced to give up all but four townships along the upper reaches of the river. These remaining townships were sold in 1833, under great pressure from what was now the state of Maine. The remaining islands in the river are what make up the present-day Penobscot Nation reservation.



Pawling, Micah A., and Donald G. Soctomah, "Defining Native Space," in *The Historical Atlas of Maine*, edited by Stephen J. Hornsby and Richard W. Judd, cartographic design by Michael J. Hermann (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 2015), plate #23.

During the land claims case in the 1970s, the 1796 treaty and those that followed were determined by a federal court to be illegal, as they were never ratified by the U.S. Congress as required under the 1790 Trade and Intercourse Act. The outcome of this landmark decision is still being felt today as territorial issues over the Penobscot River remain unsettled.

## Section: "Early Encounters"

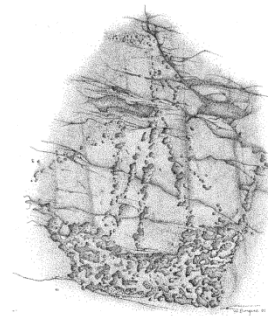
### Main Text:

Italian Giovanni da Verrazzano is reported as the first European to have direct contact with Native Americans living near Penobscot Bay in 1524.

However, the Wabanaki response to his arrival suggests he was not the first outsider they had met. They greeted Verrazzano's men from a cliff, and rather than showing fear or awe as expected, they mocked the new arrivals.

It is likely that European fishermen and traders had been interacting with Wabanaki people for decades, and these early encounters were probably both cooperative and contentious.

### Right column:



Passamaquoddy depiction of a European sailing ship from the Machias Bay petroglyphs. Drawing by William Burgess.

"It was evident that the general desire was that the habits of the strange people must be well learned, and all agree to wait and see what kind of treatment they will extend to the red people."

-Joseph Nicolar, Penobscot, *Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, 1893

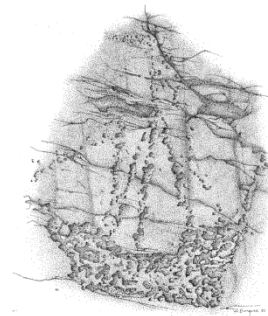
### Follow-on Text:

Discover the wide and complex trade networks that the Penobscots developed long before the arrival of Europeans.

Sub-Section: "In Depth: Early Encounters"

**Main Text:**

Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazzano is often referred to as the first European to make direct contact with Native Americans around what is today known as Penobscot Bay, at the mouth of the Penobscot River. However, the Wabanaki response to his arrival suggests that he likely was not the first. They greeted Verrazzano's men from the height of a cliff, and refused to approach the shore. Willing to trade only by lowering items on a rope, when they were finished trading, Verrazzano wrote that the Wabanaki traders mocked them loudly and with some humor. For this, Maine earned the title *terra onde la mala gente*, or "the land of the bad people."



Passamaquoddy depiction of a European sailing ship from the Machias Bay petroglyphs. Drawing by William Burgess.

It is likely that European fishermen and traders had been interacting with Native people in northeastern North America long before 1524. As would be the case for the next several centuries, these early interactions between the Wabanaki and non-Natives were both cooperative and contentious.

Penobscot oral traditions convey a Wabanaki perspective on the early encounters:

When this news spread [that the white man's big canoe had come again], the people took it so quietly and talked about it in such a way, there was no excitement, but everyone took it as though it was an old affair, yet it had such an effect on them, that it was evident that the general desire was, that the habits of the strange people must be well learned, and all agree to wait and see what kind of treatment they will extend to the red people.

—Joseph Nicolai, Penobscot, Life and Traditions of the Red Man, 1893



Samuel de Champlain's depiction of some of the Native people he encountered in 1605-1606.

Section: "Great Networks"

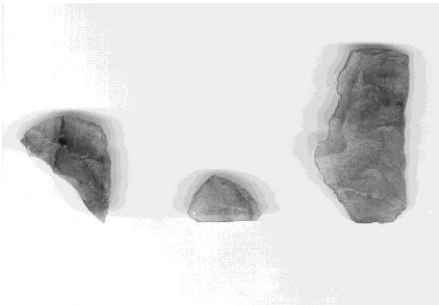
**Main Text:**

For more than 2,000 years before Europeans arrived on the Penobscot, a Wabanaki group camped along Caucomgomoc Lake. They used a variety of resources from their surroundings, including stone to make tools.

Several tools were made from a special type of stone—stone from a vein of white quartzite located over a thousand miles away in northern Labrador.

The Wabanaki were part of extensive trade networks that branched throughout eastern North America. Long before the arrival of Europeans, they traveled the waterways of their homeland to engage and connect with a diverse group of neighbors both near and far.

**Right Column:**



Ramah Bay quartzite tools from Caucomgomoc Lake.



**Follow-on Text:**

*None – or link back to the main screen*

### Sub-Section: “In Depth: Great Networks”

More than 2,000 years before Europeans arrived at the mouth of the Penobscot River, a Wabanaki group camped along the shores of Caucomgomoc Lake in the upper reaches of the river system, north and west of the Greatest Mountain, Katahdin. While at this campsite, they took out a valuable and beautiful piece of stone and made a scraping tool to help process what they had hunted, fished, or collected from the river and its surroundings.



Image: Caucomgomoc Lake Sunset in Maine, Stella Sherman, acrylic on board, 2012.

What made this particular piece of stone so valued? It had originally been quarried from outcroppings of a fine white quartzite, located at Ramah Bay in northern Labrador. This small group of Wabanaki camping in the Penobscot River drainage was part of wide-ranging and diverse trade networks that extended for more than a thousand miles along the Eastern North American coast. Long before Europeans arrived on the shores of the Wabanaki homeland, the inhabitants of the Penobscot River were connecting and engaging with a diverse group of neighbors both near and far.