



# Living

## Honoring the ancestors

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It's light, fast, agile, made entirely of natural materials – a venerable design that dates back more than two thousand years.

For Passamaquoddy David Moses Bridges, and coworker Steve Cayard, the process of building a birch bark canoe isn't so much about using their skills and ingenuity to produce a utilitarian object that is without a doubt a work of art. It's also about honoring their ancestors who passed along the knowledge needed to keep the

"There's a great deal of spirit involved. The design was created 2,500 years ago by the ancestors," says Mr. Bridges. He was taught by his great grandfather. "These skills were almost lost," he said.

The work is done as much by feel as by eye. Strong hands adept at wielding a draw shave are as, if not more important than, saws, mallets or clamps.

Building a birch bark canoe begins with the selection of the materials, which involves countless scouting trips to the woods to find just the right birch for the bark and the spruce trees needed for the roots that allow panels to be stitched together.

"There's nothing we can do to improve the design or use better materials," Mr. Bridges says. "The ancestors

figured all that out."

On a stand in the courtyard of the Abbe Museum on Mount Desert Street in Bar Harbor, the 14-foot long craft takes shape. Long, curled birch shavings pile up around the bow, not unlike the churning water of a rapid in a rushing stream. Mr. Bridges and Mr. Cayard work quickly with fluid motions in a practiced dance of creation. Pieces are shaped to a rough approximation of their final size. The fit is tested, and the piece trimmed again and again until it is perfect. When necessary, steam is used to bend the ribs and other pieces into complex, curved shapes.

Native Americans used the canoes for centuries to hunt, fish, and to travel back and forth between inland camps and the shoreline, including

Mount Desert Island. The program has been made possible by a gift from Donna and David Reis.

According to the Abbe, the month-long project is the first time in more than a century that a Native American canoe has been built on Mount Desert Island.

When the work is done, the extraordinarily light yet durable canoe will seem to float as much above the water as in it. If damaged on a rock easily repaired and ready to go again.

The 14-foot model is comparatively modest in size. During the height of the Canadian fur trapping trade centuries ago, it was not uncommon to see birchbark canoes that could hold 12 men and carry thousands of pounds of cargo.

In an exhibit about Na-

tive American guides inside the museum is a much larger example of a birchbark canoe crafted by Mr. Cayard.

For Mr. Bridges, making a canoe in the style of the ancestors is about more than just the preservation of technical expertise. "You put your heart and soul into it," he says.

While the modern world is a far cry from that in which the first birch bark canoes were used, continuing to make them allows the spirit of that ancient culture to survive even though few physical remnants remain. Mr. Bridges is proud to be able to pass along what his great grandfather taught him.

"In my community we've made a commitment to maintain the skills we have for the next generation."



ISLANDER PHOTOS BY EARL BRECHLIN

This birchbark canoe is being hand crafted at the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor using traditional Native American materials and techniques



Passamaquoddy canoe maker David Moses Bridges eyes a slat for the floor of the canoe. He learned his craft from his great grandfather. See more photos in an online gallery at [www.fenceviewer.com](http://www.fenceviewer.com).



### Visit the build

Skilled builders David Moses Bridges, Passamaquoddy along with Steve Cayard, have nearly completed a birchbark canoe in the Wabanaki tradition at the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor. They harvested the natural materials including large sheets of birch bark and spruce roots, in the far north of Maine and are building a 14-foot canoe as a public demonstration. The canoe can be seen at the museum on Mount Desert Street in Bar Harbor through Friday, Sept. 6, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and during Friday evening's Art Walk. Museum admission required.



Canoe maker Steve Cayard checks the fit of a piece of hand-thinned wood destined for the bottom of the canoe. Below, the canoe has been created almost entirely with a small number of hand tools.



This longer canoe, part of an Abbe Museum exhibit on Native American guides, was built by Steve Cayard in 2000. It was a gift to the museum from Mrs. William Wister Jr. See video at [www.fenceviewer.com](http://www.fenceviewer.com).



David Moses Bridges, left, and Steve Cayard work together with an intense focus and efficiency of motion.