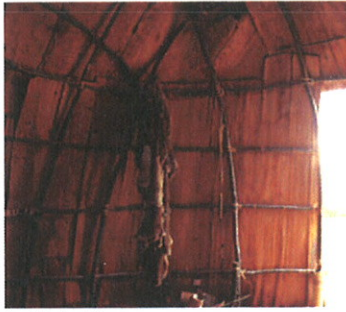


The Neshnabe Wigwam: Traditions in Potawatomi Architecture



by Kevin Finney

Generally speaking, Native American architecture has gotten a bad rap by Europeans. Traditional Indian homes in the Eastern Woodlands have often been described by historical accounts and modern texts alike in the manner one historian wrote, “crude huts...quickly made....offering little protection from rain or cold. They were covered with an assortment of tree bark, grasses, or animal skins....with an open fire in the center the inhabitants constantly suffered from smoke.”

This sounds to me like a pretty rough way to survive. In fact, one might begin to consider why, after thousands of years of adaptation to their regional environments, Indian folks didn't invent and make use of better methods to protect themselves from the elements, come up with some form of insulation, or develop a system to vent the smoke from their homes. Fortunately, I know the answer to these questions: they did all of these things and more.

At the time of European arrival into the Great Lakes, Neshnabe folks had developed and perfected a long architectural tradition of building beautiful and comfortable homes, making creative use of very specific natural resources designed to fit the needs of a family and communities seasonal cycles and industries. Unfortunately, as these Neshnabe needs and ways of life differed greatly from what was the standard way of life across the Atlantic Ocean, Europeans almost entirely failed to see the complexity and function of Neshnabe homes.

Of all the art forms and technological traditions developed and practiced by human beings, architecture may be one of the most intriguing and revealing. How we build our homes is a reflection of our lifestyle, daily needs, activities, family structure, and adaptation to regional climates and local environment. Yet, architecture is more than simple function; it is a true form of artistic expression. As with all arts, house design has aesthetic value and is often an external expression of the ideas and values of a culture. The traditional architecture practiced by the Potawatomi and Neshnabe peoples as a whole is no exception.

A Cycle of Seasons

Potawatomi architecture is part of a much larger architectural tradition once practiced by tribal communities throughout the Great Lakes Region. Generally speaking, Potawatomi homes were similar to those made by their Northern Neshnabe neighbors, including the Odawa, Ojibwa, and Menomini, as well as the Sauk, Fox, Kickapoo, and Miami who inhabited the Southern Great Lakes Region. At the time when these peoples were the predominant population in the Great Lakes area, each followed a specific round of seasonal activities throughout the year based upon the specific climate, habits, and resources available within their given territory. Most variations in Great Lakes Indian architecture are reflective of the variations of these regional resources and seasonal needs.



Occupying the region surrounding the southern portion of Lake Michigan, Potawatomi communities congregated in small villages in the fertile river valleys to grow corn, beans, and squashes during the summer months.

These villages were semi-permanent settlements to which families returned each summer. About mid-summer many folks often left the villages to engage in communal bison hunts in the prairie areas to the Southwest of Lake Michigan. They returned in the fall to harvest crops, then relocated to small, sheltered winter camps scattered throughout the region, with just a few families, to hunt and trap during the cold season. When spring arrived, about the end of February, folks moved again, this time to a sugarbush in the maple forest where they were reunited with extended kin.

The maple trees were tapped and the sap cooked down to make sugar. After the sugar was cached in bark boxes, families traveled to the rapids of rivers and streams to spear fish during their spring run. Then it was time to move again, back to summer village to plant. It was a carefully balanced cycle, perfectly coordinated to maximize the use of natural resources. It was this

cycle that also shaped the form and function of Potawatomi homes.

A Note on Terminology

Most contemporary literature refers to the houses used in much of the Great Lakes and Eastern North America as ‘wigwams’. This is indeed a Potawatomi term (a term also used by many other Algonquin languages). The word has been adopted by the English language to describe any Eastern Native American home that is domed in shape (versus say a teepee, which has a conical shape). The original meaning of the word wigwam to Neshnabe folk seems to have been far more general, simply describing a house of any type (even a European-style house). In Neshnabemowen, a domed house is referred to specifically by the term wage'nogen, which roughly means ‘bent house’, in reference to bending the poles for the frame. A short survey of fluent Native speakers or even a quick browse through a Neshnabe dictionary will give an impression of just how many terms there are to describe houses, as many as we use in English at the least. Some of these terms refer to the season of use, where others note the function of the structure, and yet others the materials used in construction.

The Potawatomi Summer House



Summer homes were permanent structures for the Potawatomi, the same homes were occupied year after year from spring-time to fall at the summer village site. A typical historic Potawatomi summer village in what is now southwestern Michigan would have had some 10 to 20 families, arranged by clan affiliation and clustered around their garden fields by the river's edge, or at the edge of an “opening” or prairie like area maintained by regular controlled burning.

These houses were circular to oval, domed-shaped (wage'nogen), and covered with panels of heavy bark. The houses ranged from 15 to 25 feet in diameter, depending largely upon individual family size.

It was a sizable task to put in a new village site and to clear land for gardening. The establishment of new fields and homes probably took place every 10 to 12 years, which is about the lifespan of a

bark-covered house with regular maintenance. It was also advantageous to move summer sites due to factors such as firewood depletion and to allow the soil to reforest and replenish after heavy gardening.

When a new village site was selected and homes were to be built, everyone worked together to accomplish the task. Men assisted with clearing fields and women oversaw home construction. It is often surprising to those unacquainted with Neshnabe traditions that women were the primary architects and builders of the homes. In European-based cultures, these have tended to be distinctly male roles.

I have pointed out to more than a few folks an elm-bark basket and asked them which gender they might imagine had made it. Every time, the response is women. Then I point out that the basket is structured with a bent wooden rim and sewn with boiled roots. A house is also made of elm bark, structured of bent wood and sewn with roots. Is it too hard to fathom, I ask, that a woman made a home as she made a basket, just on a grand scale of size, to hold her family?

The first step in constructing a new wage'nogen is to assemble the domed-shape frame. This was made of young, straight saplings such as maple, tamarack, hickory, elm, or ironwood. Saplings growing in dense second-growth stands were preferred for their length and straightness. The saplings were cut, limbed, and dragged to the construction site. This was the 2x4 of the Neshnabe world.

The plans for the house were laid out on the cleared ground, much like a full size blueprint, marked with small sticks and lines etched into the soil. The outline of the home might be round or oblong depending on the preference of the family. The places for each of the poles were marked, and a large stake was driven into the ground to create a hole where each of the vertical poles were to be placed.

The poles were then set into the ground and bent to form a series of interlocking arches in a dome shape. The bent poles of the frame were secured in place, lashed and tied with inch-wide, fresh strips of wigob, sometimes called wigbish. This is the inner bark of the wigobatek, American Basswood tree.

After the vertical arches were added, a series of four to five horizontal rungs was



added round the frame for additional structure. The lashed frame of a wage'nogen is incredibly strong. A dome distributes weight and pressure far more efficiently than a shape with straight edges. This aerodynamic design is also incredibly resistant to high winds, and sheds water readily. The finished frame looks something like a large jungle gym. In fact, to complete lashing the top of the frame it was common practice to climb up the sapling rungs.

The house covering was traditionally made from large panels of American Elm



Bark - anib nagek. These were gathered from the forest along the fertile flood plain near the village site. Elm bark only peels from the trees from late April to mid-June, conveniently, the same time folks were arriving to establish the summer village.

To gather the bark, a hatchet was used to cut around the tree as high as one could reach and at its base just before the trunk expands at the roots. The two hatchet cuts were then connected by making a long vertical cut down the trunk of the tree. A flat spud, shaped like a large wooden spatula, was slid between the moist bark and the tree, separating the bark in large flexible panels.



The panels of bark were secured to the house frame with boiled, peeled, and split conifer root, called wataw or basswood bark - wigob.

To add additional strength, external sapling rungs and framework were often added to the outside of the house, being secured by ties to the inner framework. To cover one typical home about 80 elm trees needed to be peeled. This process kills the trees. Though this may seem like a big environmental cost (80 mature trees per home), one must remember that, at this time, cleared land in the region was rare. Killing the trees along the river near a vil-

lage had an added benefit - clearing land for crops. The dead trees were then burned, sometimes felled then burned. The remaining ashes helped to enrich the soil.

The summer house was fitted with a door covering, usually a large hide such as an elk or bear. The interior was often outfitted with low benches, around three sides of the homes, for sitting and sleeping. Storage space for bark boxes, baskets, and firewood was available under these benches. At times, shelves were added. The floor was traditionally covered with naknen, large mats with elaborately woven designs made from bulrushes.

Many possessions such as bags, bows, quivers, and clothing were hung about the ceiling. In the middle of the home was the hearth. Shkode' was at the center of the home providing light, heat, and a point for thoughtful reflection. People have stared at fires long before they stared at the televisions, they probably learned more as well.

I can't think of anything more pleasant than spending an evening in a wage'nogen with the warm glow of a flickering fire reflecting off the golden bark walls and the stars peering down upon me through the square smoke hole in the roof, beautifully woven baskets and quilled buckskins dangling amidst the shadows.

The Winter Home - Pekye'gen



By the late summer, women in the villages were making their annual pilgrimage to swamps and marshes to gather abakweshk - cattails. The leaves of these cattails would be used for covering their winter homes. The preferred variety was the broadleaved cattail. The non-reproductive plants, those without seed heads, were cut off near the base. The two outermost leaves were discarded, then the rest of the leaves were separated while the plant was still moist and sappy. Inner and outer leaves were bundled separately and



brought back to the village to cure and dry in the sun.

The dried leaves were worked into large mats (5-7 feet tall and 10-15 feet long) that would serve as an insulating covering for the winter homes. Making mats, apakwnen, was a labor intensive task. The abakweshk leaves were cut to length then tied in pairs onto a long selvedge cord made of twisted basswood bark. The unfinished mat was then laid on the ground and sewn at intervals of a hands distance apart in long stitches running the length of the mat. The stitching was done with a large flat needle made of a split buffalo or elk rib, nameng.



Neshnabe women preferred to work on mats early in the morning as the dew softened the cattails and made them less likely to break. A completed 14-foot mat has an average of 1200 cattail leaves lying four layers deep.

With the crops harvested, dried, and stored in caches, families prepared to depart for their wintering grounds. The summer houses were left empty, and each family headed to its own spot in the forest to hunt and trap through the cold season.

When families moved, many of their possessions were packed inside the rolled cattail mats which were carried in bundles of two or three at a time using a burden strap worn over the forehead or shoulders. Imagine that, a roof that doubles as a suitcase.

When the family or families arrived at their winter camp, a new domed frame was erected and the mats were rolled out over it. Cattail mats were placed two layers thick on the home and sometimes a third layer was added on the windward side of the house for extra protection.

It is interesting to note that, whereas it takes two layers of mats to cover a house, a family typically made only one set of mats each year. The new set of mats was placed on the inside of the house and the old set on the outside. After two winters, mats are usually pretty much shot.

The principals and efficiency of the Ne'shnabe winter house, called a pekye'-gen, are really quite extraordinary. Cattail leaves themselves are full of thousands of tiny air pockets that serve as a sort of micro-insulation.

When the leaves are woven into a mat their slightly curved nature causes them to overlap each other to make an effective barrier against wind and rain. Each mat is, in turn, constructed four layers thick, and

two layers of mats are placed on the house. The end product is a fantastic insulating covering. A mat house is like a home with a thick winter coat.

Comparably, a summer house with thin bark covering is like a home in a t-shirt. I have noticed one other significant characteristic of cattail mats: the leaves are incredibly moisture-sensitive. In fact, on a humid day, the leaves double in width. Conversely, on a dry, hot day, the leaves contract, allowing the breeze to pass through and cool the house. A few times I have accurately predicted that it will rain just by looking at the lodge mats.

The greatest overall attribute of the pekye'gen, however, may be its portability. The coverings for an average-sized mat house weigh less than 45 pounds and can be carried by two persons, an important feature for folks who move a few times a year.

Inside the pekye'gen, a thick, insulating layer of pine boughs covered the floor, then a layer of hides and woven mats. The bulrush mats also lined the lower walls inside the home adding a sort of vapor barrier.

The pekye'gen was a cozy place to spend the long winter evenings carving or working with beads and quills and listening to the stories and teachings of a grandparent or elder.

About the Writer

Kevin Finney is a cultural historian and lifelong student of Neshnabek architecture and technologies. Over the last twelve years, he has constructed well over a dozen traditional bark and mat houses, including many for museums and interpretive sites. He is grateful for the many teachers and tradition bearers who have taken the time and effort to share their knowledge and insight. Kevin can be reached for questions or comments via e-mail at pathways@altelco.net.



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