

Late Period (1890-1970) Indian Baskets In Vermont: Part 2A



A selection of Vermont Baskets

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Knitting and Tattling baskets

Anyone who knits knows the trouble that a wayward ball of yarn can have when stepped on with dirty boots, or snagged by running feet. In order to manage the chaos of multiple wayward yarn balls on the floor, the Victorians developed a handy device -- the yarn basket. The Native version -- cylindrical baskets that held from one to three balls of yarn fed the knitter through a distinctive reinforced central hole in the lid. They were sometimes fitted with braided sweetgrass or cord handles, perhaps to help when traveling from room to room or to a neighbor's for a visit (while knitting of course).

A smaller related basket is meant to lie on its side (Figure 42 far left). I suspect the taller cylinder baskets were always falling over and then rolling themselves as the yarn was pulled from them. A solution was the acorn shape, which prevents it from rolling, in the same way that a bird's egg is designed to not roll. Pelletier, (1982:39) calls this shape a "tattling basket," but the few that I have seen that retain their contents have plain yarn in them rather than the much finer tattling string.



Figure 42. Knitting baskets:
Left, Acorn tattling basket (Pelletier, 1982:39), three right, knitting baskets (Pelletier, 1982: 32).

Baskets for the Hall Table

Card Accessories

Card receivers and storage boxes were staples for the turn of the 20th century hall table. People who visited or proposed to visit left their card on a proper card receiver or tray. These trays could be silver or porcelain, or in homes attempting a more "rustic" feel, made from basketry. Our example, from St. Albans, VT, has a square plaited base and two carved wooden "U" handles, and so has technological affinities to the open work basket. Its rectangular shape was complemented by the very delicate "porcupine" overweave. So this was a basket meant to be looked at not abused.



Figure 43. Card tray with porcupine quills and rigid handles

The cards from the receiver or card tray, after being acknowledged by the man or lady of the house would be kept in a card box such as the one in Figure 44 (see also Pelletier, 1982: 79). Conversely, a person could store their printed cards in this box and take a couple when leaving for the day's business or pleasure.



Figure 44. Card box with sweetgrass covering and ring clasp.
ca. 1930

Baskets for the Lady's bureau

Fancy handkerchief box

The Victorian and Edwardian lady's bureau had specialized containers for almost every accessory. One of the more interesting is the Handkerchief Box, a low square plaited basket with an everted, almost flower-like entrance gaily decorated with fine splint filigree splints in a style called "lace-work." It is also decorated with a band of standard diamond cowiss. This box (Figure 45.) is completely different from the mundane Odanak examples that lack any lace-work (Pelletier, 1982: 23)



Figure 45. Fancy Handkerchief box

This dainty basket was found in excellent shape, given its fragile construction and decoration, in a St. Albans, Vermont antique shop.

Glove Box

Another bureau accessory was designed to hold milady's gloves that she would don when going out for the day. These were also square, plaited boxes, but of a totally different shape than the handkerchief box, and had a hinged cover, as well as a band of decorative overweave. Our example is shown in Figure 46 and was picked up in Barre, VT. It has small ring handles that have been modified to make clasps. You can squeeze one ring and thread it through the other -- and when the ring springs back into shape, the lid will stay closed.



Figure 46. Fancy glove box with ring clasps

Button Baskets

The last bureau accessory in the Wôbanakik Heritage Center collection is a tiny button box shown in Figure 47; so called because it could hold buttons, but probably held any of the myriad tiny items needed for the turn of the 20th century's lady's toilet. Button baskets are essentially tiny 2-3" diameter work baskets. They were made by almost all of the various tribes that made the Wabanaki style splint basket (Pelletier, 1983:21, 22). They usually have no dye, sweetgrass or cowiss decoration and only a simple ring handle, if any handle is present. Our dainty example is a bit more fancy than most; with a teal-dyed band two weavers wide around the outside of the body and on the lid, and it has a bunch of sweetgrass around the rim of the lid.



Figure 47. Button basket with faded teal splint decoration.

Baskets for the Dining Room

Napkin Rings

The only splint basket goods made for the table in the Northeast were napkin rings, an accessory that held rolled white linen napkins at the elegant Victorian and Edwardian table. Two in the Heritage Center collections are identical to that illustrated from Odanak (Pelletier, 1982: 30) and presumably were made there or in Vermont by expatriate Odanak basket sellers such as the Panadis family of Highgate Springs.



Figure 48. Odanak style napkin rings

There is another napkin ring with cowiss decoration rather than sweetgrass, that was not listed for Odanak. However, an illustration from a Maine catalogue of Penobscot Indian-made crafts (Bourque and Labarr, 2009: 130) matches it. Both types were obtained in Vermont, but we do not have any evidence that they were made here.



Figure 49. Penobscot style napkin ring

An unclassified basket

There are occasional baskets that do not fit into the previous classification scheme, and so one of these will be presented separately. This unique basket is seen in Figure 50. It is probably some sort of a work basket, but the rim is exceptional in that it does not have an ash or solid wood "hoop" that binds the uprights. Instead it has a complex rim that uses the "one-up-one-down" overweave of the standard diamond cowiss to make a sort of castellated rim. The true rim can be seen below the castellations and is bound to the basket by the uprights being folded over and down over it to hold the body of the basket together and in a circular shape. The colors, which seem to be much brighter than is characteristic of 19th century baskets was put on the weavers before the basket was woven. All in all an interesting piece.



Figure 50. "Standard diamond" over weave rimmed basket with brightly decorated ash splint s.
Addison, Co. VT ca. 1860-1900.

Hampers, goose down baskets and other large, "fancy" baskets

These enormous baskets were probably locally made in Vermont, either by expatriate Canadian basketmakers or Indigenous Vermont craftspeople, because their bulk and simplicity would not have made them economically feasible to take on the road. We include them in this booklet because they all have a complex, often striking vase shape and at least a bit of decorative overweave, and so are not strictly utilitarian, but were also designed by their makers to be appreciated for their form and decoration.

The first example in the Wôbanakik Heritage Center collections is a large finely formed vase-shaped goose down basket or hamper (Figure 51). It has a wide bell-shaped opening to help funnel whatever was to be stored in it down into the body of the basket. It is well-made and sturdy, but as with most baskets of this size and age, has listed to one side and needs to be soaked and straightened. There are bands of standard diamond cowiss decoration around the body and the lid. The sides have loop handles made from splints rather than carved from solid ash wood, and the lid also has a low lug handle. The basket was known by the family that sold it to the author in 1988 as having been made by a local Abenaki family that came to Fairfield (the place where the basket was found) several times a year to sell baskets. This has a good chance of being a Vermont made piece.



Figure 50. "Standard diamond" over weave decorated ash splint goose down basket or hamper.
Franklin Co. VT ca. 1920.

A slightly later example uses Hong Kong cord and four rows of standard diamond cowiss decoration (Figure 52.). It also has two ring handles on the sides of the body. There is no remaining handle on the lid, so it is not easy to remove it to get to the inside. It is too small for a hamper, the lid prevents it from being a wastebasket, so we are unsure exactly what it was meant to be used for. It is much too coarse a piece to be considered freestanding art. We do not know where this came from, only that it came from an antiques shop in Rutland, VT.



Figure 51. "Standard diamond" over weave decorated ash splint vase-shaped basket. Rutland Co. VT ca. 1930-1940.

The last large decorated example in the Wôbanakik Heritage Center collections is a more or less cylindrical basket with a square plaited bottom. These sturdy baskets are actually quite common in Northwestern Vermont, but most have been painted (usually white) and are complete wrecks from hard use, and so are not useable in museum installations. This basket is made with thick ash splints of two or three growing years (this is obvious because many of the splints have separated over the years). It is a sturdy but very worn basket having seen heavy service over its use life. There is both exterior and interior organic (probably vegetal) staining and so it was apparently used for storing "wet" materials such as fruits. It is also weatherworn from the rain and sun. Even this piece had a bit of pride built into it, seen in the single band of cowiss around the center of the body. It also has one remaining ring handle, not visible in the photograph. The basket was collected in the mid 20th century by Ben Gravel "from a barn" in the Swanton/Highgate area along the Missisquoi River above John's Bridge.



Figure 52.. "Standard diamond" over weave decorated ash splint hamper.
Franklin Co. VT ca. 1900 -1920.

Baskets for the Field and Lake

Pack baskets were important equipment for woodsmen during the 19th century, and they are still being made today, but mostly by Maine and Canadian tribes, as well as Euroamerican companies that are beginning to outsource them to China. They have been perfected by years of use and abuse in the wild and so there is not any decoration or even much stylistic variation. The one in the Wôbanakik Heritage Center Collection came from the Northeast Kingdom in Vermont, but other than the antiques dealer's note that it came from a cabin on Averill Lake, there is nothing else to give it a place of origin, although we can presume that it was used in Vermont. An Odanak example is discussed and shown in Pelletier (1982: 44-45).



Figure 53. "pack basket.
Northeast Kingdom, VT ca. 1910 -1920.

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