

Native American Heritage Month



Around 10,000 years ago, the Wisconsin glacier receded forming Long Island. As the glacier melted, it separated the island from the mainland creating a vital waterway, linking the aboriginal communities of Long Island, such as the Unkechaugs, Shinnecocks, and Setaukets, with the coastal Algonquian peoples of southern New England. When colonizers first arrived on Long Island in the 1600s the land from West Sayville to Eastport was the territory of the Unkechaug People, “Unkechaug” is an Algonquian word meaning “land beyond the hill.” Despite Native maritime expertise, historical depictions of early encounters often portray Indigenous people as passive or landbound, while Europeans are shown as the dominant seafarers. This misrepresentation overlooks the fact that indigenous peoples were skilled mariners, using large canoes and sailing long distances.

In 1524, European sailors were amazed when a fleet of Native canoes appeared off Manhattan. These canoes, carved from large trees, ranged from 20 to nearly 60 feet long, sometimes holding up to 80 people. The dugout canoe is a vessel crafted out of a single tree trunk using a combination of axes, adzes, and controlled burning to shape and hollow out the trunk. Making these boats was no small task, the smallest personal craft took nearly two weeks of nonstop work and a large dugout could take up to a full year from felling the tree to floating the vessel. The Unkechaug carefully selected

different types of trees: pine for everyday dugouts, chestnut for its resistance to rot, and ash or maple for paddles. Most prized was the tulip tree, known in some coastal dialects as the “canoe tree,” for building large canoes. The task of canoe-making was so significant that one Algonquian afterlife punishment was the endless struggle of building a canoe using only a round stone.

As European and Indigenous watermen began sharing waters, they also shared knowledge of watercraft. Though the term "canoe" was borrowed from the Caribs via the Spanish, it became widely used among both indigenous and European peoples. While several indigenous terms for canoe existed, the most common was *Mishoon*.



These canoes became essential for colonial communication and trade, with indigenous watermen often serving as messengers and ferrymen. Colonists frequently relied on Native vessels to carry mail and passengers across long distances, and Algonquian pilots became integral to colonial transport. Despite European anxieties about riding in canoes, the speed and convenience they offered made them invaluable to colonial society. Over time, the colonists' practical dependence on these vessels and the skills of their Native builders and navigators forged a unique maritime relationship between the two cultures.

Sources:

Lipman, Andrew. *Saltwater Frontier*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

Strong, John. *The Unkechaug Indians of Eastern Long Island*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

Images: ©John Carter Brown Library, Box 1894, Brown University, Providence, R.I. 02912

Written by: Justin Walsh & Brooke Franks