Montague Chamberlain, writing in 1904, described the seating arrangements at a Maliseet wedding ceremony:

As the people assembled, they seated themselves in a circle in their customary manner; that is, the men in the front row, their legs crossed tailor fashion, the women seated behind the men, their legs drawn to the right side, while the children stood behind their mothers (Chamberlain 1904:292).

A man sitting with “legs crossed tailor fashion” is represented in a scraped, winter-bark decoration on a canoe built by Tomah Joseph, a nineteenth-century Passamaquoddy, and illustrated in Adney & Chapelle’s *The bark canoes and skin boats of North America* (1964:86, fig. 77). The decoration is described on p. 86 as a “representation of an Indian camp beside two trees, a kettle over the fire and the brave sitting cross-legged smoking his pipe, indicating, of course, ‘comfort and contentment.’”

Mrs. W.W. Brown was present at the inauguration of a Passamaquoddy chief at Pleasant Point in the late nineteenth century. After the installation of the new chief and the captains, she said,

the meat was brought in large wooden bowls, and placed near the centre of the wigwam; the Indians, sitting or kneeling about the bowls, ate the meat with their hands, and drank the soup from rudely shaped dishes made of birch-bark (Brown 1892:58).

William Henry Kilby, in his *Eastport and Passamaquoddy: A collection of historical and biographical sketches* (1888), wrote that in his own boyish recollections, the Indians added a most picturesque element to the life of our island town. Their head-quarters was at Hayden & Kilby’s store, and their graceful canoes [were] clustered on the beach, below what was once the town landing … (1888:486).

Kilby left us an intriguing account of early nineteenth-century Passamaquoddy seating arrangements:
One picture of home life, and a familiar one in many houses in Washington County, I shall never forget. When a storm or other cause prevented their return to Pleasant Point, [the Passamaquoddies] would unhesitatingly come to the house with the assurance that they would be welcome to a night’s entertainment; and, before going to bed myself, I have often looked in upon the scene. The cook-stove had not then come in; and before the broad kitchen fireplace circling round, with feet to the fire and with chairs turned down to rest against, were sannups, sqaws, and pappooses, sleeping as soundly as if under the shelter of their own wigwams. And before the family were astir in the morning the whole party would go silently away, their entertainers not having the slightest fear that anything not their own would go with them (Kilby 1888:487).

Nineteenth-century Passamaquoddies leaned against turned-down chairs. They, and the other Wabanaki, probably found them quite uncomfortable to sit in.

Frank Speck may have captured the transition to sitting on elevated surfaces when he described the way Penobscots sat in their canoes in the early twentieth century:

Originally the canoe was provided with fawn skins on the bottom for the man’s knees, as the position was to kneel, buttocks resting against the thwart. Of late years, however, the Indians prefer sitting in the canoe, the stern man sitting on the thwart, the bow man on the bottom, leaning his back on the thwart (Speck 1997:64).

The nineteenth-century Wabanaki birch-bark canoes described and illustrated in Adney & Chapelle (1964:58-88) had no seats. By the mid-twentieth century, however, according to Wallis & Wallis, Maliseets who guided “sports” used commercial canoes. “No one now could build a canoe,” they said, “even if bark were available” (1957:17). These commercial canoes were no doubt made with canvas and outfitted with seats. Maliseet houses at Tobique had “easy chairs” in this same period, according to Wallis and Wallis (1957:16).

On 12 April 1909, a Passamaquoddy named Gabriel Tomah recorded the deaths of “Noel Nicols and William” in his journal. They “want crost south andros Bay upset kneo Bouth drounded” (Walker 1981:100). They may well have been in a factory-built canoe of the sort that Gabriel

1. It seems that the “picturesque” Passamaquoddies and “their graceful canoes” all but disappeared from Eastport in the twentieth century. I was told in the 1960s that Passamaquoddy canoes in Eastport Harbor stayed well clear of the waterfront because Whitemen on the docks were in the habit of throwing rocks at them.
Tomah himself probably used when he guided vacationing "sports" on inland waters in this same period. Men in canoes with elevated seats in offshore waters, however, would have been at risk.

The introduction of factory-built canoes was surely not the only cause of the change in Wabanaki sitting postures. Whitemen with authoritative roles, such as Indian agents and priests, would surely have declined to sit on the floor. School teachers requiring children to sit at their desks may have been an important factor. But, for whatever reasons, the Wabanaki came to sit on elevated surfaces, even in canoes; and the old tradition of hunting seals and porpoises in hand-crafted, birch-bark, sea-going canoes may be gone beyond recall.²

Maggie Mel (Mitchell), an elderly Passamaquoddy from "The Strip" at Indian Township, said in 1969 that her father, who made canoes, put seats in them, "made with basket ash, sometimes with canvas." When asked whether he made any canoes without seats, she said, "I don't think so. I never seen one without seats." I didn't tell Maggie Mel about Kilby's "turned-down chairs" or about Frank Speck's account of Penobscot paddling postures.

We were in the old school house at Motahkomikuk. It's gone now. Maggie Mel and I and a lot of others. We were all sitting around a big table.

REFERENCES


² After giving this paper at London, Ontario, I was told by Wayne Newell, a Passamaquoddy who grew up at Pleasant Point, that Sylvester Gabriel, who hunted porpoises as late as the mid-twentieth century, knelt in his canoe. By 1967, however, porpoises were hunted in gasoline-powered boats.