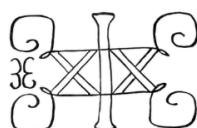


Shell Mound Wabanaki Studies Educator Guide



Photograph by Chris Sockalexis - Panawahpskek (Penobscot)



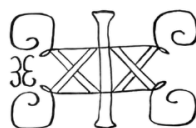
Introduction:

If you have lived in the Dawnland, or what is now called Maine, you may have observed a shell mound. A shell mound is a site built up over generations through the intentional and respectful placement of shells, bones, soil, charcoal, tools, and other cultural materials. These mounds are found in coastal and river areas and often reflect seasonal gatherings, food processing, community life, and ceremonial practices of the Wabanaki. They are living records of the relationship between their ancestors, the land, and the waters.

Rather than being refuse piles, shell mounds are living records of ancestral presence, land stewardship, and relationships with the natural world. For many Indigenous Nations, including the Wabanaki, these mounds are sacred places of remembrance and learning that continue to hold cultural, spiritual, and historical significance today.

Shell mounds serve as powerful connections to culture and tradition. Each layer of shell and soil is part of a story – a map of how people lived with the seasons and waters. They help Wabanaki people understand what was valued, how communities lived, and how their ancestors moved along the coast and river systems. They are places of learning, remembrance, and resilience, representing the enduring presence of the Wabanaki and their continued relationship with the land. As we learn about shell mounds, we are also learning to listen to the land, the waters, and the people who have always known them.

Many shell mound sites are located along the coasts and rivers of what we now call Maine. They are part of the living landscape and deserve the same respect we give to any place that holds stories; these places should always be treated with care. If you know the location of a shell mound or have seen one in person, it is important to avoid disturbing the site in any way. Protecting these places helps ensure they remain intact and honored for future generations. When artifacts or materials are removed from their resting place, the story they tell becomes harder to understand,



like reading pages torn from a book or trying to solve a puzzle with missing pieces. Context matters because every item is part of a larger story about relationships, not just history.

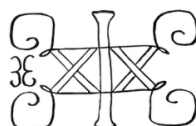
Knowledge about shell mounds comes from multiple sources. Archaeological study is one way of learning, but it exists alongside Indigenous ways of knowing that are grounded in long-term observation, oral history, seasonal practice, and relationship with place. These knowledge systems are cumulative, tested over generations, and deeply scientific in their own right. For Wabanaki people, archaeology is most meaningful when it is practiced in relationship—with communities, with land and water, and with respect for what should remain undisturbed.

There are many respectful ways for students to learn about shell mounds without causing harm. Videos, photographs, and maps can support understanding. For hands-on learning, consider bringing in examples of the types of shells commonly found in shell mounds, along with printed images of tools, pottery, and other cultural material that might have been part of these sites. Whenever possible, invite a cultural knowledge keeper or educator who is familiar with Wabanaki shell mound sites or archaeology to share their insights. Their lived knowledge and stories can help students understand that these places are not only historical but deeply connected to people and communities today.

Hands-on learning is incredibly valuable for students and all learners, but respect and stewardship of culturally significant places must always come first.

Note: The term “shell mound” is used throughout this guide because it better reflects the intentional, respectful nature of these places. While “*midden*” is sometimes used in archaeology, it translates to “garbage heap,” which misrepresents what these sites truly are. Shell mounds are places of gathering, remembrance, and relationship. Shell mound honors the cultural and historical significance of these coastal sites and encourages students to view them with the respect they deserve. By using this language, educators and students take part in honoring the knowledge and values of the people who built and cared for these places. Words shape understanding – and choosing shell mound is one small but powerful way to show respect, accuracy, and care for living history.

Shell mounds remind us that history is not behind us—it is beneath our feet, along our shores, and carried forward through care, responsibility, and relationship.



Guiding Questions:

1. *What are shell mounds? What do we know about shell mounds and what might we still need to learn?*
2. *How do shell mounds connect Wabanaki today with their Ancestors? What is their connection to the Nations?*
3. *What do archeologists and Tribal Preservations know about the shell mounds?*
4. *Where are shell mounds located in the State we now know as Maine?*
5. *What can shell mounds tell us about Wabanaki culture?*
6. *What are some of the theories about why they were created?*
7. *How can you preserve the shell mounds?*
8. *Why is it important to use the term “shell mound” instead of “midden”? How does language shape the way we see and respect these places?*
9. *How can learning about shell mounds change the way we understand history, place, and community today?*
10. *Why is it important that shell mound sites are not disturbed?*
11. *How are shell mound sites evidence of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and scientific thinking?*
12. *Why are shell mounds located along rivers and waterways? In what way do shell mounds serve as landmarks today and in the past?*

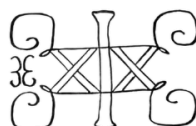
Background:

☰ Wabanaki Studies Framework

☰ Student Vocabulary List: Shell Mound Educator Guide

Shell mounds are ancestral cultural spaces (*archeological sites*) found along the coast of what is now called Maine. They hold both archaeological and cultural insight, connecting Wabanaki today to their ancestors and the lands and waters they have always called home, as well as in other regions with significant coastal areas. Some notable locations where shell mounds have been documented in the land now known as Maine include:

- Damariscotta River: Several shell mounds have been found along the shores of the Damariscotta River.



- Maine's midcoast region: Various shell mound sites have been identified along the midcoast region of Maine, including areas near Penobscot Bay and the Gulf of Maine.
- Down East Maine: Shell mounds have also been documented in the Down East region of Maine, near areas such as Acadia National Park and the coastal communities along the Bay of Fundy.
- Casco Bay: Some shell mound sites have been identified in the Casco Bay area, near the city of Portland and its surrounding coastal regions.

These locations represent just a few examples; shell mounds have been documented in numerous other coastal areas throughout what is now known as the state of Maine. These archaeological sites provide valuable insights into the historical and cultural practices of Wabanaki.

Unit Lessons:

[Lesson 1: Shell Mounds in this place now called Maine](#): This lesson provides an overview of what shell mounds are and begins the conversation with students about what is known about them.

[Lesson 2: Looking at Locations of Shell Mounds in the place now called Maine](#): In this lesson, students will identify the locations of some of the more prominent shell mounds throughout what is now known as the state of Maine and discuss the geographic significance of shell mounds.

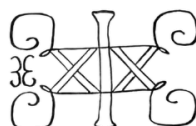
[Lesson 3: Unveiling the Wabanaki Culture Through Shell Mounds](#): Students will begin exploring the cultural significance of shell mounds to the Wabanaki.

[Lesson 4: Preserving Shell Mounds: Taking Action to Protect Wabanaki Heritage](#): In this lesson, students will gain knowledge about how they can take action to help protect Wabanaki culture through the preservation of the shell mounds.

 **Student Vocabulary List: Shell Mound Educator Guide**

Resources to refer to in unit:

MAINE DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION



WABANAKI STUDIES

[Marine-Related Wabanaki Language Activities](#) - created by Keely Becker (Panawahpskek) in partnership with UMaine 4-H Co-Op

[UMaine - Midden Minders](#)

[Slideshow of photos of shell mounds from Chris Sockalexis](#) - citizen of the [Panawahpskek](#) Nation

[Hudson Museum Wabanaki Artifacts](#)

[The Maine Archaeological Society](#)

Articles:

[Old Collections, New Analyses](#)

[Maine Park's - The Whaleback Midden](#)

[Maine's History of Sea-Level Changes](#)

[More Than A Pile](#)

[Hudson Museum article](#)

[Damariscotta Oyster Shell Heaps](#)

[Alice Kelley's research - NY Times article](#)

[A History of Clamming](#)

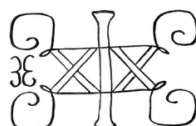
[Wabanaki Life 1000 years ago](#)

[Damariscotta Shell Midden](#)

[The shell middens - what are they and what are they telling us?](#)

[The Indigenous Origins of the Maine Lobster Bake](#)

MAINE DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION



WABANAKI STUDIES

[Reconnecting Wabanaki Communities to Coastal History](#)

Videos:

[Hudson Museum](#)

[Friendship Midden](#)

[Coastal Rivers - Wabanaki teacher training at the Whaleback Midden](#)

[Indigenous Shell Heaps, Climate Change, and Confronting Heritage Loss through Citizen Science](#)

[Bonnie Newsom - USET Climate Resilience Camp](#)

Podcasts:

[Outside In Podcast](#)

Other archaeology-related videos:

[Wabanaki knowledge, perspective, and science of Acadia](#)

[Old Collections, New Analyses - Bonnie Newsom](#)

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