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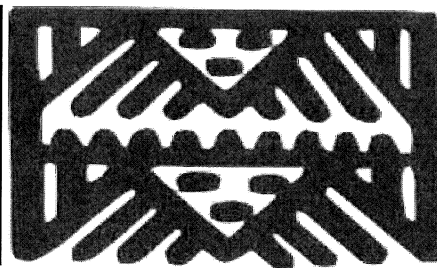
Lenopi Basketmaking in Southern New Jersey: A Traditional Skill That Survived Into the Twentieth Century

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Lenopi Basketmaking in Southern New Jersey: *A Traditional Skill That Survived into the Twentieth Century*

By Marshall Joseph Becker

Basketmaking was a skill essential to the mixed economics of southern New Jersey's Native population south of the Raritan River. While the fashioning of basketry may have been important among all of the cultures of the greater Northeast the identification of specific types and their actual makers is extremely rare. Hannah Freeman (1730-1802), a woman of the Brandywine band of Lenape in Pennsylvania across the Delaware River (Becker 1990, 1988) was often reported as being a basket maker. Supposed examples of her skills have no basis in fact (Becker 1992). Direct evidence linking makers and their product is almost impossible to find. Despite folkloric claims regarding known baskets and possible makers, two rare examples are known from among the Lenopi who remained in the Northeast. The regional economy, particularly those activities involving maritime resources, relied heavily on basketry of various types.

This skill among the Lenopi is well documented by the basketmaking trade of John Skickett (Becker 2014), a son of the Jacob Skickett (Becker 2011) who had been involved in the activities that formed the Brotherton tract after 1758. Jacob continued to be active years after moving to Brotherton, but there is no indication that he even engaged in basket making. How his son John learned the trade remains unknown.

We can trace John Skickett's earliest movements to New York, but by the mid-19th century he had relocated to Connecticut. Examples of John's baskets have survived and were recognized as the work of a single maker (Handsman and McMullen 1987:31) many years before his identity was revealed by following several lines of evidence (Becker 2014: 108).

Noah Newcomb, perhaps a better known and more recently active Lenopi basket maker, was active in the Bridgeton area of Cumberland County, New Jersey, during much of the early 20th century. Less known is "Clarence Morgan, a basket maker from Gloucester County," who at one time lived and worked with Noah, and "Injun Ann" (Ann Roberts) who specialized in the "gulls nest basket style" (Gaskell 2021, from Stewart 1932). Ann Roberts is the only female Lenopi identified with the basketmaking crafts. The survival of basket making crafts well into the 1900s has also been linked by Dr. Sandra Gaskell, a Lenopi descent woman from this area, with the local persistence of what may have been an important regional "dialect" of English. These traits offer some support to the possibility that these people were culturally maintaining traits shared with other Lenopi in southern New Jersey.

Noah Newcomb, known as "Nor," lived and worked in a tiny frame building (Fig. 1) that stood next to a brick building that once served as a streetcar office in the village of Bivalve along the Maurice River, within the Port Norris community of present day Commercial Township (see Bailey and Wentzel 1995: 70). The frame building had no bath or outhouse but provided a roof and storage for basketry materials and finished products. These structures in Bivalve had been part of a tram or "trolley" line that once ran from this community near the bay, through the towns of Port Norris, Dividing Creek and Bridgeton and hence to Vineland. Both structures were relocated after the trolley line closed, with the frame structure being moved to the King property near Dividing Creek. The King property was largely marshlands but had small stands of oak trees (possibly swamp oak) required for basket materials. In addition to the Newcombs, other old families in the area also maintained indigenous traditions. These families include the Blizzards, Garrisons, Moores, Gaskells/Gaskills, Lippencotts, Jenkins, Taylors, Lores, Walkers and Warfles. The members of these families who were born in the late 1800s maintained a number of traditional behaviors and speech patterns, but by the later 1900s the traditions of these people, including customs such as basket making and use of a regional dialect, were dying out!

Sandra Gaskell refers to Noah Newcomb, son of Anna Newcomb, as her great uncle (*BASKETMAKING*, continued on 4)



Figure 1: Basket maker Noah Newcomb and some of his oyster baskets in 1938. Source: Unknown. Photograph copy provided by the author

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BASKETMAKING (Continued from 1)

Evidently, he was Henry Newcomb King's uncle (Fig.2). Noah married a woman named Susan and they had two daughters, but details of his life remain largely unknown. Oral histories relating to Noah and his kin, as well as examples of his baskets, have been collected at the Bayshore Center at Bivalve [museum] in Port Norris, New Jersey. The Center, best known as the home of the *A. J. Meerwald*, a schooner built in 1928 as an oyster dredge, links this local industry with the baskets produced by Noah as one facet of the oyster trade. The fully restored *Meerwald* now serves as the official tall ship of New Jersey. Whether any "oyster baskets" survive in museums or private collections is not known.

Noah Newcomb's granddaughter, Frances Rogers, is featured in a newspaper article "Local Basket Maker is Remembered by Relative," first of a two-part series written by Kim Quinn for the *Burlington Evening News* about 1980. Ms. Quinn incorporates a family photograph that includes Noah Newcomb. Sandra's father, Jesse Gaskell III, and her mother's brother Howard King often made baskets alongside Noah. Thus Sandra was able to observe and later record facts about these skills. Noah Newcomb appears to have been illiterate, but he knew the Bible by rote. He attended the Methodist Episcopal Church of Dividing Creek. Of considerable interest is that Grandfather King and all three of his brothers spoke a distinct dialect of English that Sandra describes as being "from the Crick." Sandra recorded an audio tape of this important linguistic variant as spoken by her Uncle Howard, a son of Henry King's brother Marcus. This taped record of individuals speaking in this dialect or with this accent may include clues as to the linguistic origins of this speech. She does not mention Noah Newcomb as sharing this manner of speech.

Is it possible that the use of scaffold burials in mortuary behavior was another Lenopi tradition known and practiced as part of localized customs in this part of Cumberland County? I doubt it. Recent suggestions that scaffold burials might once have been used in this region have been considered elsewhere (Becker in review). The possibility that this idea is a distortion of other facts or behaviors is supported by the complete absence of any reports of this as a local custom. However, we do have considerable evidence for basket making among the Lenopi extending back several hundred years. Unfortunately, like the local dialect and other aspects of traditional culture, these behaviors have not survived into the 21st century.



Figure 2. Noah Newcomb in his old age. Date and Source: Unknown. Photograph copy provided by the author

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