

Bridging Generations

Mi'kmawey Debert Unearths Cultural Texts to Empower Future Narratives

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This past year a group from the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre (MDCC) embarked on a remarkable journey. Geordy Marshall (Mi'kmaw Language Specialist), Ashley Sutherland (Curatorial Associate for Digital Assets) and Elder Barbara (Tanas) Sylliboy ventured to the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives (NAA) in Washington DC and the American Philosophical Society (APS) in Philadelphia, PA. They weren't casual visits to explore old records but rare opportunities to reconnect threads of records that have been dispersed over time.

The archives contain a diversity of archival records, nearly all created by non-Mi'kmaw individuals: religious leaders, government officials, anthropologists, and travel narrators, some stretching back to the 1600s. The knowledge and expertise of these non-indigenous people varied and so the value of the record varies as well. During the visits, the team submitted requests to review over two hundred records containing over six thousand pages. Together they sifted through the collections to deter-



(L-R) Geordy Marshall (MDCC Mi'kmaw Language Specialist), Elder Barbara (Tanas) Sylliboy, and Ashley Sutherland (MDCC Curatorial Associate for Digital Assets) at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, PA, June 2024.

mine which records should be copied and returned to Mi'kmawey Debert, where they will be integrated into our work and made available here in Mi'kma'ki.

For decades, MDCC and other Mi'kmaw researchers have known these records existed, waiting to glimpse the potential wealth of knowledge they held. The team felt a sense of urgency to explore these extraordinary records, not only to preserve them but

also to bring them to life for future generations. To accomplish this ambitious task, they needed to survey the materials, evaluate their significance and find ways to integrate them into the fabric of Mi'kmaw life supporting reconciliation efforts and the revitalization of the language and culture. It is important to note that Geordy and Barb's fluency and expertise were critical to the assessment of the records. It has been rare for

these language records to be reviewed by fluent speakers; most often they are utilized by linguists, historians and anthropologists who have only partial understandings of the language and its meanings.

These research expeditions are one effort to reclaim some of what has been lost during the period of European contact and, in particular, Treaty Denial (c.1785 to 1985). Geordy and Barb believe that the vast collections maintained by the NAA and APS will be invaluable to Mi'kmaw communities, connecting present-day communities with voices from many generations ago. The archives hold significance for the Mi'kmaw community beyond just being historical records – they create healing opportunities and pathways to move forward into new understandings of who we are.

The team faced a mix of challenges and fulfilling moments during their archival investigation. Marshall, who was responsible for creating the "pull list" of

documents to be examined, recounts his initial uncertainty and eventual awe at the discoveries they made. A noteworthy discovery was the assortment of writings by Albert Samuel Gatschet—a linguist and ethnologist who chronicled facets of Mi'kmaw language and traditions. In Gatschet's collection were two notebooks brimming with details such as names of individuals and places along with cultural practices.

The documents didn't just contain language information; they also held insights into individuals from Mi'kmaw communities creating a link to past generations. Names like Andrew Bernard, Abraham Glode, and Jim Meuse from Bear River really leapt out from the reading material. Marshall was awestruck by these findings, saying: "It's just mind blowing to see those names and realize that Gatschet interacted with these individuals within the community." The notebooks had in-depth explanations of cultural customs and rituals that emphasized the depth

of the knowledge they had unearthed. "It's moments like these that make us think that we should definitely preserve this knowledge and ensure the community can easily access it," he remarks.

Another significant discovery was a Mi'kmaw prayer book donated by Bear River community member, Louis Harlow. Featuring hieroglyphics, this book once belonged to Harlow's grandmother and holds enormous value to the community, carrying the personal history of a Mi'kmaw family within its pages.

On their second visit, the team came across a surprising and noteworthy find: an "Abenaki dictionary" that intricately analyzed the various Eastern Algonquin tribes. Originally planning to peruse the dictionary to gather words linked to the nearby regions as a side project, they were taken aback by what they uncovered. "We encountered an analysis of all the Eastern Algonquin tribes, and it truly was remarkable," Marshall shared enthusiastically. "It turned out to be much greater than what I had anticipated."

Elder Barbara reflects on the changing traditions and the role of language in maintaining cultural identity. "What's interesting is that my grandfather, Grand Chief Gabriel Sylliboy, was mentioned in the journal of Elsie Clews Parsons. She talks about him giving a sermon on Chapel Island, and how people would come to see him, meet with the captains, the Grand Council, and the Grand Chief. The mission lasted longer back then—almost a week and a half to two weeks, whereas now it's only from Thursday to Monday." She continues, "What also struck me was the language. I find that many of our young people don't speak

NEXT Month's Deadline October 31st

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Nations News will accept letters regarding various topics of interest. All letters addressed to the editor must be signed by the writer and include an address and phone number. We reserve the right to edit any and all letters if we deem it necessary.

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it anymore. They say they understand some of it, but I always think understanding isn't the same as passing the language on to the next generation."

The team's discoveries emphasized the significance of ensuring that these documents are easily available to the Mi'kmaw community. As Ashley Sutherland explains, "We need to think about what we're bringing home and how we'll utilize it in the future Centre's exhibits. Accessibility is crucial when dealing with archives. We must consider what these archives contain and how we can make that information available to the community."

Interpreting these documents poses a set of obstacles. Even though the researchers transcribed the information they heard, they did not always grasp the underlying significance. "As Elder Ernest Johnson says, 'they recorded what they heard, not necessarily what they understood.'" Still, through his detailed observations, Gatschet's thorough efforts provide the groundwork for com-

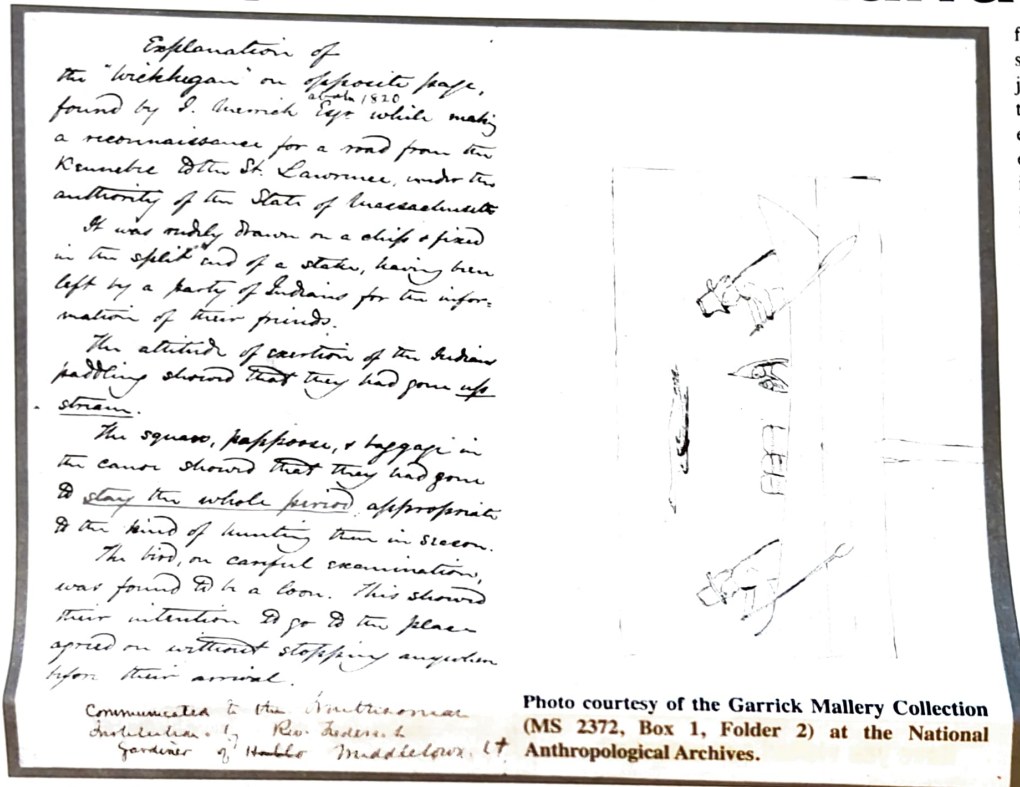


Photo courtesy of the Garrick Mallory Collection (MS 2372, Box 1, Folder 2) at the National Anthropological Archives.

prehending Mi'kmaw in the past.

The success of the project heavily depended on the efforts of everyone involved. Sylliboy describes the teamwork among the group, saying, "I really

enjoyed working with them. They have a lot of heart, dedication, and enthusiasm. It was a learning experience for all of us." She adds, "We all contributed, like a busy beehive. If Ash found something interesting, she'd

share it with us, and the same with Geordy. I tried to do the same." Through working this way, team members leveraged each other's unique abilities to ensure that every important finding was recognized and

valued.

Upon their return to Mi'kmaki, the team felt a revitalized sense of mission, bringing home a trove of digitized resources that will shape their work for years ahead. "A big takeaway

for me, especially on the second trip, was realizing just how much information there is. These linguists and ethnographers have dedicated their lifetimes to gathering this material, and there's a lifetime of work still to be done in researching it," Sutherland remarks.

Barb, Ashley, and Geordy's work extends beyond preserving history; it aims to empower the Mi'kmaw community to share and narrate our own story by reintroducing these records to the community with the purpose of equipping community members with the means to appreciate and honour Mi'kmaw heritage and traditions while also setting a strong foundation for future generations to continue building upon. The journey goes further than investigation—it is about ensuring that the next generations have the resources they need to create dynamic and meaningful lives as Mi'kmaw people.

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