



Wigwam Backgrounder

This resource acts as a backgrounder for educators to reference to learn more about wigwams. This is helpful to ensure proper instruction.

Please note that there are spiritual aspects to constructing a wigwam. Wigwam construction also requires the harvesting of natural materials. Accordingly, wigwams should never be constructed with students unless an Elder or Knowledge Keeper is present, and the structure will be used in the future. When providing teachings related to wigwams and their construction, we recommend having a Knowledge Keeper or community member present.

In the Tools Bundle we've explored the way Cattails can be used to make rope. This is important as it informs how wigwams are constructed.

To draw connections between previous material and new material, go over the different uses of Cattails and how they specifically relate to Wigwams.

Step One: Share the following information with your students.

- Cattail leaves are used to sheath a summer wigwam.
- In the dry weather the leaves shrink apart letting the breeze in.
- In the rain they swell and the gaps close.
- Linda Black Elk from Oceti Sakowin Territory shared that Cattails are waterproof so mats could be used to waterproof the roof of a wigwam or provide a waterproof surface to lay on.
- Rope made from Cattails would have been utilized by local Indigenous groups for building structures such as wigwams where people lived.

Now that you've made the connections between previous material and new material, go over further new material about Wigwams and their background information.

Lindsay Morcom is a member of the Kingston urban Indigenous community of French, German and Anishinaabe heritage. The following information was gathered from Lindsay's 2018 article *Wigwametry: Exploring Complex Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics through Indigenous Structural Design*.



Morcom, L.A. (2018). Wigwametry: Exploring complex science, technology, engineering and mathematics through Indigenous structural design. In M. Peters (ed). *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory: Living Edition*. Singapore: Springer. <https://rb.gy/c49lg>

Step Two: Share the following information with your students.

Question #1: What is a Wigwam?

Answer #1: A "Wigwam" is a generic term for various models of wood frame dwellings used mostly by Algonquian peoples across the Eastern Woodlands to the Atlantic coast.

Question #2: What are Wigwams made from?

Answer #2: Wigwams are made from harvested materials including soft pliable wood, cattail rushes, basswood bark, birch bark, and animal hides

Question #3: What was the construction of Wigwams?

Answer #3: Typically, they were dome shaped or conical, although those on the Atlantic coast were sometimes rectangular (Gadacz, 2017) They were constructed of wooden frames covered in animal hides, woven mats, hardwood bark, or birch bark.

Question #4: What was the purpose of Wigwams?

Answer #4: They had various purposes including lodgings, meeting places, and ceremonial sites.

Now that you've gone over basic information about Wigwams, go over new material about specific Wigwams (Dome-shaped Wigwams prevalent amongst the Anishinaabek of the Eastern Woodlands).

Step Three: Share the following information with your students.

Question #1: What are Wigwams made of?

Answer #1: The frames for dome wigwams consist primarily of saplings that are stabilized in holes in the ground and then bent over and lashed together.

Question #2: How are Wigwams constructed?

Answer #2: The poles may cross in the middle, or they may be woven together in a lattice for greater stability. There is one long pole that runs from the North to the South sides of the wigwam. All of the other vertical braces consist of two poles that overlap and are lashed together in multiple places to keep them secure; the number of vertical braces varies depending on



different Elders' teachings and in different geographic locations. Additional horizontal cross-braces, usually four, are added around the circumference of the dome at varying heights.

Question #3: What are the Wigwams covered with?

Answer #3: The frame is then covered with hides, woven mats, hardwood bark, or birch bark that is "cut in sections large enough to be sewn across each cross-brace on the top with enough overhang to overlap the top portion of bark sewn on below" (Montgomery, 2008, p. 32).

Question #4: What were Wigwams like when they were used as dwellings?

Answer #4: When wigwams were used as dwellings, moss, grass mats, additional layers of bark, or other insulators were sometimes placed inside the structure against the bark covering to protect against rain and cold. The floors were covered with cedar boughs and blankets and the interiors were decorated with various designs.

Question #5: Are there any other additional factors to consider about Wigwams?

Answer #5: Yes, a fire pit was constructed at the center of the wigwam with a space at the top of the dome for smoke to escape (Gadacz, 2017). Platforms raised off the ground around the edges of the wigwam provided sleeping areas (Montgomery, 2008). Wigwams could be of varying sizes; some were meant to house families of up to 10 or 12 people, while others used as meeting places were able to comfortably accommodate 25 or more people (Gadacz, 2017).

Question #6: What are Wigwams known for today?

Answer #6: While wigwams are no longer used for daily lodgings, they are still important structures within Indigenous communities in the Eastern Woodlands and elsewhere. Most notably, the same frame structure is used in the construction of modern sweat lodges. They are also still constructed as teaching spaces and cultural spaces; a notable example is the large teaching lodge at Kenjgewin Teg Indigenous education institute at M'Chigeeng First Nation, Manitoulin Island (Morcom, 2018).