

# Minnesota Maple News

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## Minnesota's Most Famous Maple Sugaring Painting

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One of the most famous, and quite probably the earliest, paintings of Native American maple sugaring in North America has its history and home in Minnesota. "Indian Sugar Camp," as it is formally titled, is a watercolor painting by Seth Eastman, a career officer with the U.S. Army who was stationed for many years at Ft. Snelling and had extensive contact with the local Dakota Indian peoples. The popular painting depicts a traditional springtime scene of a Native American camp in a sugarbush, with women gathering maple sap in bark or wood containers, storing the sap in a wooden barrel, and boiling the sap in a series of metal kettles on an open fire.

Although it is only a watercolor painting, it has the feel of a photograph. It is sometimes assumed that it was painted in the moment from a live scene, but it was not. It was painted in a studio in Washington DC, years after Eastman left Ft. Snelling. The painting was created specifically to be converted to an engraving for illustration of the Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's series of books titled *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Conditions and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*.

Scholars know Eastman created many sketches during his time in Minnesota and it is probable that he witnessed a Native American maple sugaring camp firsthand, but there are no known sketches or studies attributed to him that he may have used to assist his memory when creating the maple sugaring scene. Many scholars consider Eastman's work to objectively portray the lives and activities of Native peoples and what he shows is consistent with what other eyewitnesses to Native American sugaring in

the region describe at that time. So, while there is every expectation that Eastman painted from something he himself witnessed, the fact remains that the scene which is depicted is an idealized image from his imagination and a product of the strength or limitations of his memory. There are no known photographs of scenes of Native American maple sugaring from the 1850s or before.

Eastman was trained as a cartographer, draftsman, and accomplished painter who arrived on the frontier of the upper Mississippi River in 1829. Initially stationed at Fort Crawford in

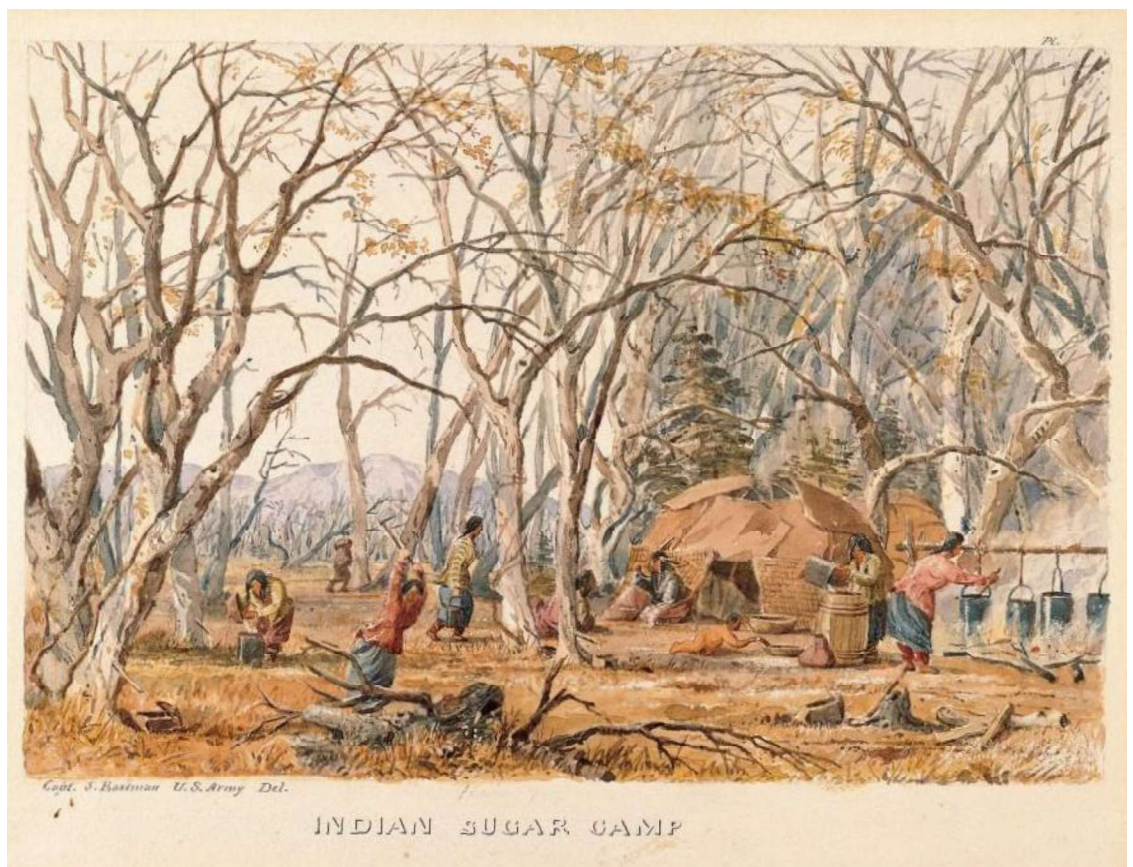


Figure 1. Seth Eastman's original watercolor painting titled "Indian Sugar Camp" (Image courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Art).

Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, he was transferred to Ft. Snelling in Minnesota in 1830. During his first assignment at Ft. Snelling, Eastman married a Dakota woman named Wakajin ajin win (Stands Sacred) which resulted in the birth of a daughter, Winona (Nancy Eastman), in 1831. Later that year,

Eastman was transferred to Louisiana, leaving his Native wife and daughter behind. Eastman returned to Ft. Snelling in 1841, with his new Anglo wife named Mary Henderson Eastman. He remained at Ft. Snelling until 1848 when he was transferred to Texas and then on to Florida.

In 1848 the Office of Indian Affairs began a project to produce a multi-volume study of the Indians of North America, to be compiled and written by famed Indian Agent Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. Known for his earlier depictions of Native life of the frontier, Eastman petitioned his military superiors to be transferred to the Office of Indian Affairs and assigned the task of illustrating all six volumes of Schoolcraft's study. Eastman's request was denied multiple times, until in 1849 he was granted a furlough to create the illustrations and moved from Florida to Washington DC to work on the paintings during the next five years. Eastman's Indian Sugar Camp painting was probably completed in 1850 and later converted to an engraving by John C. McRae in 1851 before being published in 1852 in Volume 2 of the Schoolcraft collection.

Because of the strong association of Native American maple sugaring in Minnesota with the Ojibwe populations, it is commonly thought that the Eastman painting depicts an Ojibwe sugaring camp, and the bark covered domed lodge in the painting is of a style common amongst the Ojibwe. However, it is also quite likely that Native American maple sugaring activity most often witnessed by Eastman, with his time at Ft. Snelling on the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, was among the Dakota people. Considering there is no indication that the painting was capturing a specific scene or location in real-time, it is interesting to note how much the hills in the background of the painting resemble the topography that one finds in the Mississippi River Valley near Red Wing. Likewise, the flats with the maple forests in the foreground are consistent with the flood plain forests that were by the Dakota peoples of the Prairie Island Community near Red Wing.

None of this is to take away from the artistic quality or historical and ethnographic value of what is portrayed in the painting. At the same time, it is important for scholars to understand the context, reality, and objectivity of the record that is used to document and inform the history of maple sugaring. Since Minnesota is home to the earliest of paintings depicting maple sugaring in North America, we want to

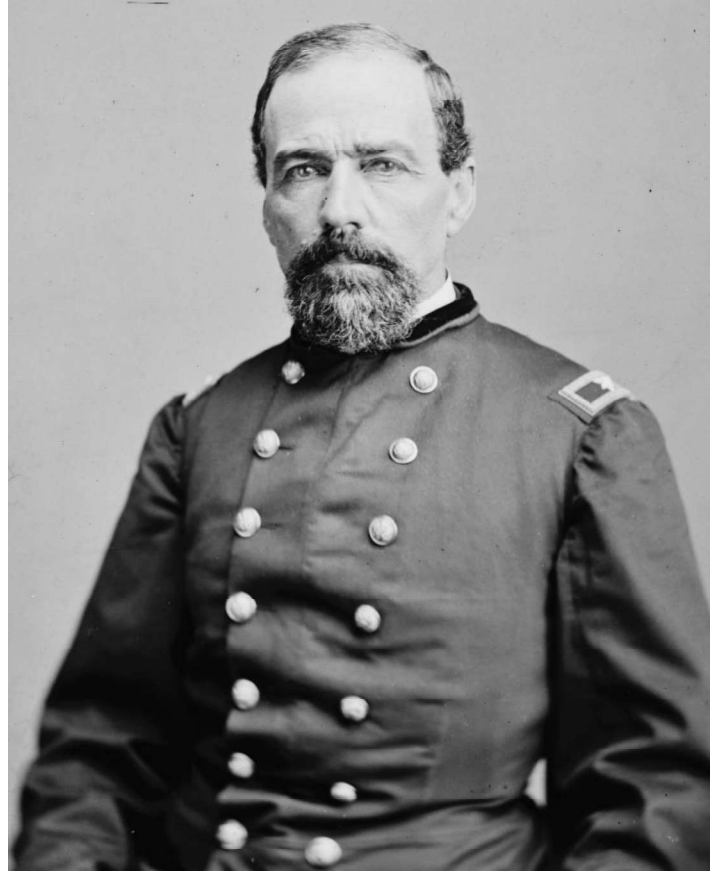


Figure 2. Portrait of Brigadier General Seth Eastman, circa late 1860 (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress).

understand our history as accurately as possible.

The original watercolor is executed on paper and the actual painted area is quite small in dimension, only 6 inches by 8 ¾ inches. At some point in the late 1870s before his death, Eastman sold the watercolor to an unknown buyer. At some time in the late 19th or early 20th century Minnesota's famous railroad baron, James J. Hill, came to possess the painting, and many other Eastman paintings. In 1994, The James J. Hill Reference Library in St. Paul sold the painting of the maple sugaring scene to W. Duncan MacMillan, a Cargill family billionaire, as a part of the sale of a series of Eastman watercolors by Eastman. Following McMillan's death, the watercolors, including the maple sugaring scene were donated by the Nivin and W. Duncan MacMillan Foundation to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 2014.

*Originally from St. Cloud, Dr. Matthew M. Thomas is a historian of the maple industry who shares his research and writing at the website [www.maplesyruphistory.com](http://www.maplesyruphistory.com). He is the author of the recent book "A Sugarbush Like None Other: Adirondack Maple Syrup and the Horse Shoe Forestry Company", available for sale on eBay and the book "Maple King: The Making of a Maple Syrup Empire," available on Amazon.com. He can be reached at [maplesyruphistory@gmail.com](mailto:maplesyruphistory@gmail.com).*