

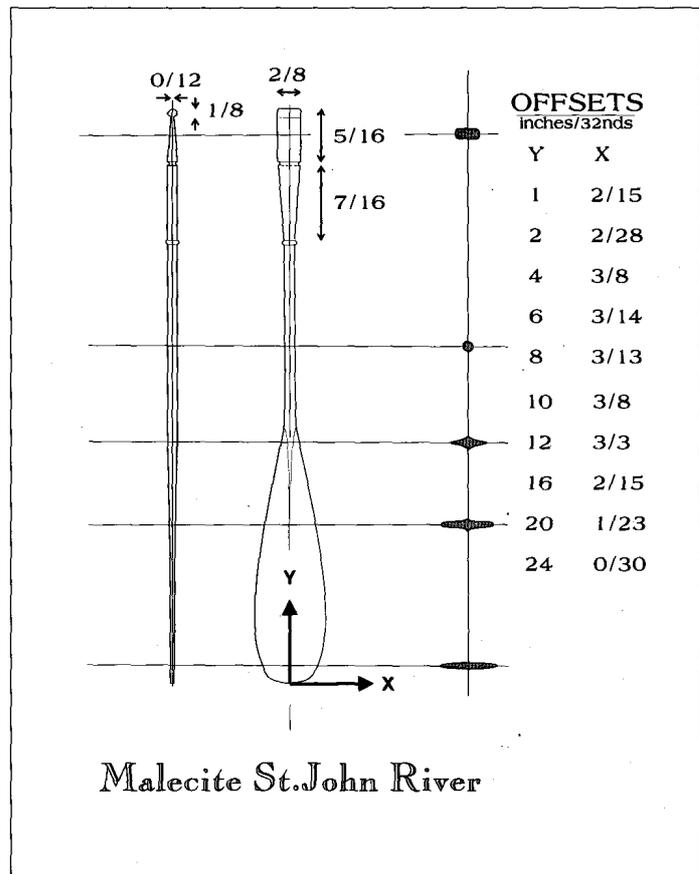
THE MALECITE ST. JOHN RIVER PADDLE (1996)

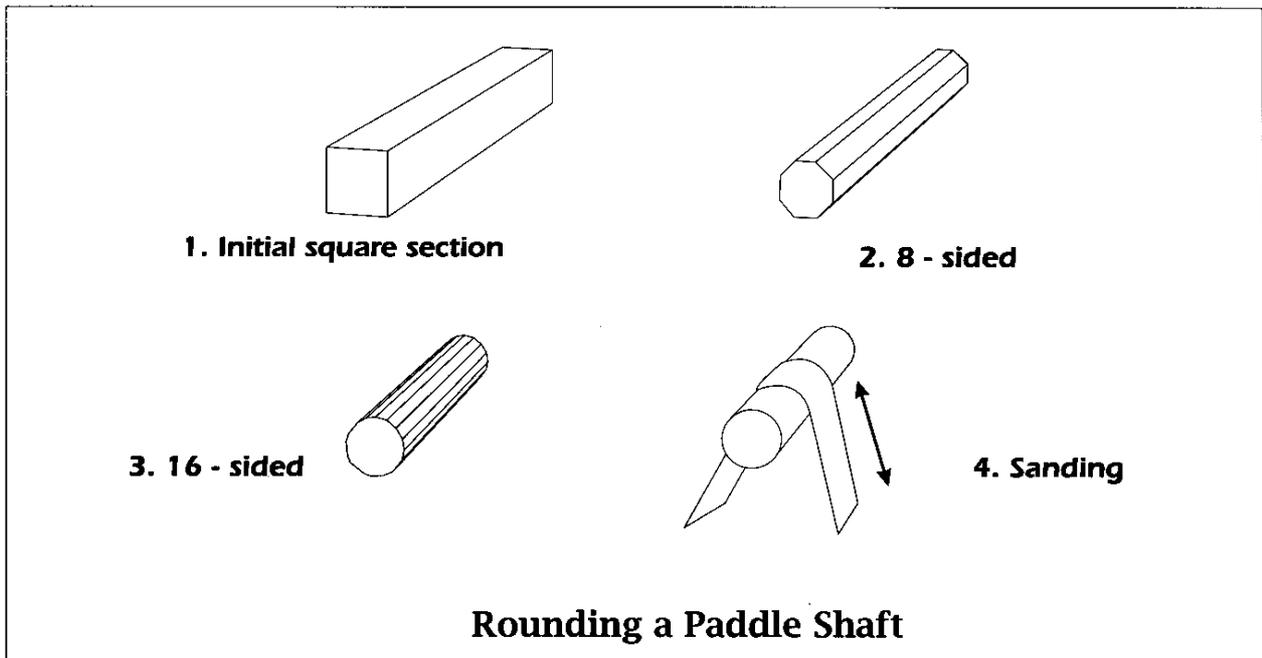
This design was documented in 1898 by Edwin Adney from an authentic native paddle carved in maple. It combines a functional blade with nice decorative details given by the spine and ringed and grooved handle. My prototype version of the paddle was made in pine, with the grain as flat as possible. When developing a new paddle design, I prefer to economise on materials and use strips of pine, glued up with Cascamite. If the finished paddle appeals, then one can go on to make a one-piece, or a decoratively laminated paddle using more resilient woods and stronger (but more expensive) urea-resorcinol or epoxy glue. However, pine paddles work very well and can be attractive, and I have yet to break one. The main disadvantage is that you must leave the edges rather thick ($1/8 - 1/4"$) to minimise the risk of chipping.

It is best to translate the table of offsets onto a hardboard template first.

The dimensions on the plan are given in inches and 32nds; i.e. $2/15$ means 2 and $15/32"$. The points should be plotted out and then joined up using a flexible strip, resulting in a half-template for the blade which can be flipped over to give a symmetrical outline on the actual wood. A separate handle template can be made from the measurements on the plan. As regards carving, the more challenging aspects of this paddle are the bobble-grip, the ring, the groove and the spine. When sawing around the outline, don't forget to allow extra for the ring at the base of the handle. I used my router to round over the top of the grip and a round Surform rasp to create the recess beneath. Spare a thought for the Malecite paddlemaker in the woods with just an axe and crooked knife, and

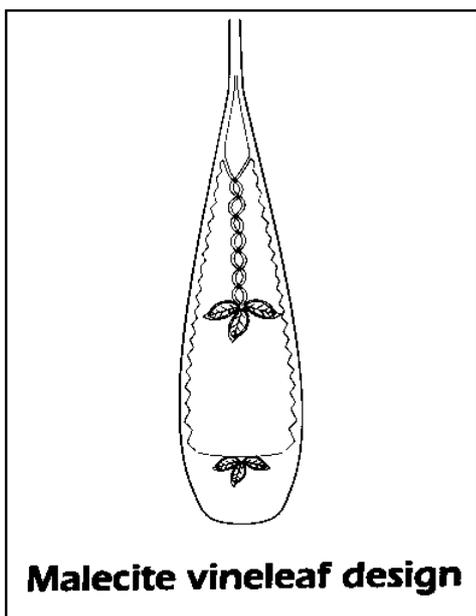
perhaps an abrasive stone or two. The groove was cut with a round metalworking file, although I have made grooves in the past by "sawing" with a piece of cord dipped in abrasive paste - an altogether more traditional approach. A spine is usually made by planing this section of the blade to a diamond cross-section, then hollowing out the faces with a convex blade spokeshave, although for this one I tried out a home-made variable-curved sanding block, which worked well. The shaft, round in the original, but





you might try elliptical, was made by 8- and 16 -siding the initial square section (see illustration), followed by a thorough sanding. I made the shaft 1 1/8" in diameter, a hardwood shaft could be a little thinner. The ring was made in the same way, with the sanding being achieved by pulling a very narrow strip of sandpaper to and fro in a shoe-shining motion. I protected the tip of the blade by letting in a transverse ash strip, and finished the paddle with 3 coats of marine spar varnish, except for the grip, which was treated with boiled linseed oil. The groove makes a convenient boundary between the oiled and varnished sections.

The Malecite (pronounced, and sometimes spelt 'Maliseet') were principally forest hunters and fishermen of the north-east woodlands of New Brunswick and Maine. They had the reputation of being rather warlike, and this



tendency was exploited by the French who enlisted the help of the Indians in territorial disputes with the English in the 17th century. They were also the supreme canoe and paddle artists, creating artefacts of great beauty. Their paddles were sometimes extensively decorated with vineleaf designs (see illustration) and representations of bears, moose and caribou. The owner of the paddle frequently incised his/her personal mark on the flat area just below the grip and highlighted it with red or black pigments. In shape, the Malecite bark canoes were the closest to the "classic" canoe shape associated today with the native peoples of America, and their paddles clearly provided the inspiration for the ever-popular "beavertail" design.

I like the performance of this design. It has a blade area of 132 sq. in., resulting in reasonable thrust, and it pulls without flutter. The tip is broad, giving high resistance to damage, and the handle, being somewhat on the chunky side, gives a natural balance point only a little below the throat of the blade on my 62" version. The weight in pine is 35oz.

Skimming along in the canoe with this paddle, even on the Chesterfield canal just below Sainsburys and the dog track, it is easy to imagine oneself amidst the sounds of the deep forest with the sunlight slanting down through the tall trees.

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