

Pierre Trichets in *Le Traité des Instruments do Musique* (~1631) reports that “*Bows made of Brazilwood, ebony, and other hardwoods are the best and esteemed...*” Brazilwood was therefore used for bows 150 years before the wood was used by Françoise Tourte.

The Brazilwood found commercially today may be true brazilwood (*Caesalpinia echinata*), or it may be sappan (*Caesalpinia sappan*). It may also be yet another species once used as a dyewood, such as *Haematoylon brasiletto*. These species are not as good for bowmaking as true brazilwood. The confusion in names, plus the fact that pernambuco is the best kind of brazilwood, leads to the common perception that a stick made of pernambuco is superior to one made of brazilwood. This is true if the ‘brazilwood’ is *Haematoylon*, but not necessarily if it is *Caesalpinia*.

Confusion may also exist with non-dyewoods. W. C. Retford, in his book *Bows and Bow Makers* (London, 1964) writes:

There is a species of wood known in England as Braziletta. This yields no color in water. The color being brown, somewhat resembling teak. It is used for mass produced continental work ... It is not an item in the stock of English merchants, neither has it been used by English makers.

Ultimately, wood was chosen for its utility, rather than for the name by which it was called.

Pernambuco

Pernambuco (*Caesalpinia echinata*) is merely the best kind of brazilwood, found only in certain places. Pernambuco was brought to France as ballast, and Tourte would check the suitability of the logs for use as bows. Therefore, the literature frequently cites Tourte as the first to use pernambuco in making bows. With all due respect to Tourte’s achievements, it must be said that at the time of the Tourte-family and the contemporary bow makers, pernambuco was already in use for bow-making, and its use had already spread beyond France. In *Handwerk und Künste*, by P. N. Sprengel, Spandau/Germany 1767, there is an article on violin building in which the following is said regarding bows:

It is usually made of Pernambuco, but sometimes also of Redwood (Brazil), Snakewood, Plum, actually of hard, flexible wood ...

The area of Brazil that contains the most noble stand of the species is the state of Pernambuco, an area characterized by mountain ranges and tropical rain forests. According to the Ethnological Museum of Recife, Brazil, the word “pernambuco” is derived from the Indian word *paranambuco* meaning “rocks that split the sea.” This Indian word was used to refer to the entire northeast region of Brazil as well as to the main port city. The port city of Pernambuco later became the State Capitol and is now named Recife. Although Brazil wood grows along the entire Brazilian coast, the best quality came from the Pernambuco area, and so that wood became known as pernambuco.

That is at least one theory for the naming of pernambuco wood, and it has an appealing symmetry; the country of Brazil was named for the tree that provided “brasily” dye, and the variety of the tree that provides the best dye (and the best bows) was apparently named for the area where the tree grows.

Another possible derivation for the word for Pernambuco is *Fernambucco*, which apparently comes from *ferro busco* and can be translated as “red hot iron”. Both styles of nomenclature have been used.