

Wampum Beads – News From the Roving Bead Hunter

by Diane Fitzgerald

I began to get a feeling somewhat akin to how I imagine Peter Francis, the late world-renowned bead expert, must have felt when he travelled and discovered a new bead. Some time ago I visited Martha's Vineyard, a small island about 90 miles south of Boston, Massachusetts, and on the southside of Cape Cod. (When you get invited to visit a place like that, you just say "yes"!)

My hostess, Andrea Hartman, was wearing a wonderful bracelet of purple beads. When she mentioned something about wampum beads, my ears perked up.

Her bracelet contained a dozen or so round purple beads, some with purple and white striations. She told me they were made on Martha's Vineyard and that she had been given them as a gift a few years ago. If you've read the William C. Orchard book, *Beads and Beadwork of the American Indians*, you'll learn that 100 to 200 years or more ago, Indians made beads of the from the shells of clams. In particular, Northeast coast Indians used the quahaug shell found in the waters extending from Cape Cod and the islands southward to Long Island. It is here that the hard shell clam colouration is so rich and so deep a purple. Although other types of shell such as periwinkles and whelks were acceptable for making white wampum beads, only the quahaug shell from this region could render the true purple wampum. Quahaug is an Algonquian word meaning round clam. The quahaug got its Latin name in 1758, when Linnaeus himself picked the word *mercenaria*, because he knew that beads of quahaug shell were used for currency in 17th century New England, and that *mercenaria*, the



The wampum bracelet I purchased in 1996 when I visited Martha's Vineyard. My friend Andrea Hartman took me to see a man living alone in a trailer out in the woods who made wampum beads and these were the beads I bought from him. Recently looking at bracelets made of new wampum beads, I am surprised that these are now quite valuable.

Latin word for money, seemed to be appropriate.

Upon the arrival of European traders and colonists in the early 1600's, metal drill points became available and the production of wampum beads developed exponentially. With increased availability of wampum, its uses in ceremony and ritual became deeply interwoven in the lives of Algonquian and Iroquoian people.

Recognising the importance of wampum beads to the tribes with whom they had contact, the Dutch founded a mint in lower Manhattan and by applying the most current bead-making technology were able to produce significant amounts of beads with which to trade. Wampum beads were transported upriver to the forest tribes and were an essential element in the fur trade. The three most standardised media of exchange were wampum beads, beaver pelts and Hudson Bay blankets.

So accepted were wampum beads that, once the tribes' original needs were met, their bead surpluses could purchase other European goods such as cooking implements, tools and, not insignificantly, guns and ammunition. Because of the economic windfall accruing to the wampum producers, inflation occurred and the situation was further aggravated by opportunists who introduced poor quality, undrilled and counterfeit beads.

It was at this time, in the last quarter of the 17th century, that wampum beads began to revert to their original uses.

The prosecution of the Revolutionary War was facilitated through treaties and alliances with native tribes and such pacts were documented and bound by the presentation of wampum belts. Of far greater importance, tribal law, history and ritual were often configured in a wampum belt's imagery.

Traditionally, there were two types of wampum beads. The earliest and most integral to ritual and ceremony is the council bead. It was nearly pure purple or white and averaged a quarter inch long by an eighth inch in diameter. The separation of the colours allowed contrasting figures to be woven into the belts and numeric codes to be delineated in the message strands.

The second type of traditional wampum bead is the purple and white striped trade bead which we refer to as the 'Campbell' bead, named after a family of that name who, for successive generations, were the principal producers of these beads during most of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The period from the end of the 19th century until 1975 appears quite barren in the history of the craft when wampum bead making reappeared on the island of Martha's Vineyard.

Inspired by the beauty of the pieces of ocean-tumbled quahaug shell strewn along its shores and the fortunate discovery of wampum beads at Harvard's Peabody Museum, island residents Charles Witham, Kate Taylor and Joan LeLacheur were rewarded for four years of research, trial and error with the first wampum beads of this era. These three people who were instrumental in the revival of the craft, named their guild the Black Eagle Mint. The Black Eagle Mint is not a business entity, but rather a craft association for the sharing of tools and information among the founders.

For more information, there are several websites which are devoted to both old and contemporary wampum beads and bead making.

