

Findings...

The Northern Virginia Bead Society

Spring 1996

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 world-renowned bead expert, feels when he travels and comes across a new bead. Some time ago I visited Martha's Vineyard, a small island about 90 miles south of Boston and on the south side 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. As 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 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 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 coloration 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.)

Upon arrival of European traders and colonists in the early 1600s, metal drill points became available and the production of wampum beads devel-

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Bracelet of wampum beads purchased by the author in 1996 from a lonely wampum beadmaker who lived in a trailer in the woods on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

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oped exponentially. With increased availability of wampum, its uses in ceremony and ritual became deeply interwoven in the lives of Algonquian and Iroquois people.

Recognizing 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 standardized mediums of exchange were wampum beads, beaver pelts, and Hudson Bay blankets.

So accepted were wampum beads that, once the tribe's 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 colors 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.

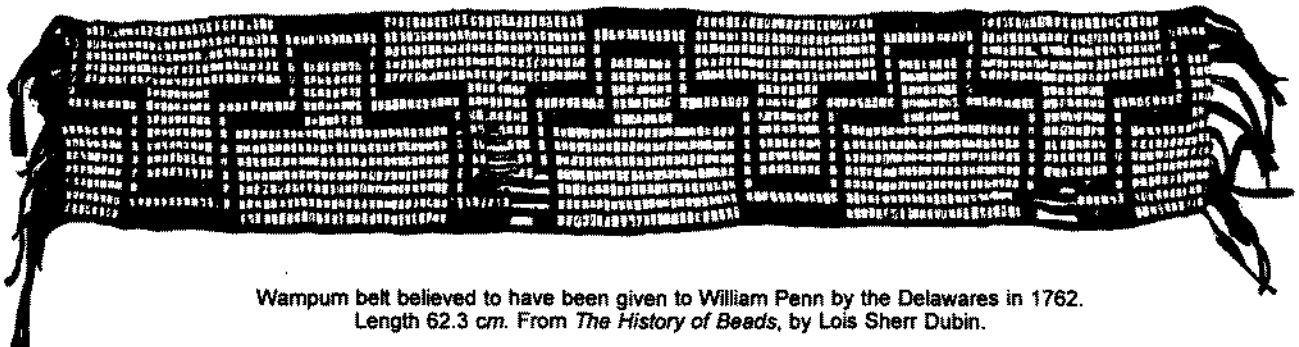


Quahaug Clam
An edible clam of the Atlantic coast of North America, having a hard, rounded shell. Also called hard-shell clam, round clam.

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. This is not a business entity, but rather a craft association for the sharing of tools and information among the founders.

Some information in this article was excerpted from a handout provided by Kate Taylor and Charles Witham. They may be reached at:

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Wampum belt believed to have been given to William Penn by the Delawares in 1762. Length 62.3 cm. From *The History of Beads*, by Lois Sherr Dubin.