"The damnable desire of wampum,"

Wampum Use and Trade during the Seventeenth century

(Drew Shuptar-Rayvis 2025/26)

Wampum, wampumpeg, wampumpeak, peak, peg, sewan. Wampum has had countless names in different dialects and languages spoken by Eastern Woodland people for thousands of years. Wampum, its use, and manufacture are integral to understanding the Eastern Woodland culture, the society, and systems of governance. However, what is wampum and why is it important to Indigenous people of the Eastern Woodlands?

The most common word for this object, “wampum,” derives from the Narragansett dialect of the Algonkian language, translating into English as “white shell bead.” Many of the earliest beads were constructed from the center column of the knobbed whelk (*B.carica*) and the channel whelk (*B.canaliculatus*). Wampum is comprised of two different shells: whelk and the quahog clam (*M. mercenaria*). The earliest beads that have survived generally fall into the category of “discoidal beads” or “round beads.” For the quahog clam, this occurs when it is broken into a small disc of purple shell that is ground smooth on all sides on an abrasive stone, exposing the purple color. A hole is then drilled through using a bow drill, pump drill, or hand drill with a chipped flint or chert stone drill bit. For the whelk, the center column is removed from the shell and then broken into small, thick columns where a hole can be drilled on either side until the two meet. Alternatively, the whelk can be manipulated into discs and made in the same way that quahog discoidal beads are made. Primary sources from the seventeenth century tell us that winter was the time of manufacture for wampum beads.

These discoidal beads—both quahog, whelk, and large “chunky” whelk columella beads—are some of the earliest, appearing in the sixteenth century. Fortunately, examples survive not only from various areas along the Long Island Sound, but also in areas of New England such as the Walkers Pond / Grindel Site in Hancock County, Maine. At the Walkers Pond / Grindel Site (dated to around 1580-1600), excavations in 1912 and 1914 uncovered numerous human remains (numbering around 11), as well as invaluable perishable artifacts, such as woven fiber, bark,

hide, and shell beads. A 2004 article by James B. Petersen and Malinda S. Blustain, written for the New York State Museum, records some of what was found at the site regarding shell beads. Citing the journal of the original archaeologist Moorhead and his 1914 excavations, Blustain, citing Moorhead says *"Eleven skeletons were discovered within a space ten meters in extent, but all were very much broken and decayed. They lay not more than thirty-five or forty centimeters below the surface. These were interesting burials in that they seemed to mark contact between Indians of the stone age and Europeans. There were great quantities of ordinary shell wampum [discoidal and less common columella beads] strewn over four of the bodies. The exact number of pieces has not been determined, but there were originally between 20,000 and 25,000 of these beads. From the position of some of them we conclude that they were strung on thongs and worn as necklaces and that others were used in fringing deerskin jackets or were woven on belts. A few large shell beads were found with the smallest skeleton, that of a child."* (1)

These discoidal beads are relatively easy to produce and can be made very readily, requiring only basic tools and skills. By the seventeenth century, things began to change. With the arrival of European traders, explorers and colonists, the desire for iron tools among Eastern Woodland people became insatiable. Of the iron tools we know entered the hands of Native people in the Eastern Woodlands, nails, awls and files were adapted and used in the manufacture of wampum. Due to these new tools, the style of wampum changes from the most common discoidal beads and large "chunky" whelk tube beads to much finer and smaller beads that range from 4-8 mm. Wampum of the seventeenth century is noted for being very "barrel-shaped" and not standard in size. These beads are manufactured by breaking the quahog shell into columns, then breaking the columns into sections and from there drilling the sections using a pump drill with a metal drill bit. The shell, fitted in a jig, is drilled on one end and, once drilled, is flipped to the other side and drilled until both holes meet. Whelk is worked very similarly: the center column is removed, cut into columns, then worked into rectangular sections. These sections are then broken into desirable lengths and drilled in the same manner as quahog.

Seventeenth century Europeans recorded explicitly how wampum is used by the Indians, not only as a form of personal adornment and marker of beauty and prestige, but also as a tool of political arbitration and governance. The use of wampum in this manner as an object of

governance spread far and wide. A well-known example is among the Haudenosaunee people, who originally had no wampum but became exposed to it through war and trade. They became entrenched in its use, a tradition that has continued to this day. Wampum beads could be woven into elaborate "belts" that served as mnemonic story telling devices which centered people, places, and communities into a chain of relationship and understanding. These belts could record histories, treaties, clan relationships, and spiritual teachings. They are believed to be living objects that require ritual and ceremony to hold, use, and read, and they can also be ritually "killed." Their spiritual significance can be compared to the spiritual reference for saintly relics in the Catholic world.

Of the earliest mentions of what may have been "wampum" appears in the 1524 Voyage Account of Giovanni Di Verrazano. Describing an encounter with Indigenous North American people in what is believed to be Narragansett Bay, he wrote: *"Among them were two kings more beautiful in form and stature than can possibly be described; one was about forty years old, the other about twenty-four, and they were dressed in the following manner The oldest had a deer's skin around his body, artificially wrought in damask figures, his head was without covering, his hair was tied back in various knots; around his neck he wore a large chain ornamented with many stones of different colors. The young man was similar in his general appearance."* (2)

While this description of chains made of colored stones may refer to wampum beads, it is also possible that inexperienced European observers mistook wampum beads as being made from colorful stones rather than actual shells.

By the mid-seventeenth century, wampum had become well-known among Europeans as an object of prestige and trade among the Indians. This became so apparent that European colonists who emigrated with low amounts of hard currency of their own, established a de facto currency of wampum and beaver skins. This was most famously instituted by the Dutch in New Netherlands and later continued by the English. This forced monetization of wampum is the origin of the falsehood that wampum is "Indian money." It is now a well-known fact that Eastern Woodland people had no concept of Old-World styles of currency. Objects were valued according to their practical, social, or spiritual use and significance. Wampum was needed for

every facet of life—from births and marriages to recompense, deaths, and treaties—giving it an ascribed socio-spiritual meaning. Europeans, who came from where coinage had existed since the Bronze Age, struggled to comprehend a culture without currency and erroneously ascribed wampum as being a "currency" used among the Indians, not understanding its deeper socio-spiritual value.

Fortunately, there are early records about wampum from New Netherlands. One of the earliest descriptions comes from the Dutch explorer and trader Isaack de Rasiere in his letter from 1626-28 to his patroon Samuel Blommaert. In this letter, he describes wampum, calling it by one of the common Unami/ Munsee terms for it: "Sewan/Sewant." Though he records how the Indians value it, he also records how it is worn for its beauty as well: "*As an employment in winter they make sewan, which is an oblong bead that they make from cockle-shells, which they find on the sea-shore, and they consider it as valuable as we do money here, since one can buy with it everything they have. They string it, and wear it around the neck and hands, they also make bands of it, which the women wear on the forehead under the hair, and the men around the body; and they are as particular about the stringing and sorting as we can be here about pearls."*(3)

De Rasiere's observation of wampum being used as a decorative object is also confirmed thirty years later by Adriaen van der Donck in his 1655 work *A Description of New Netherland*. Van der Donck, a "Schout," or legal representative of the Dutch West India Company that regulated the New Netherlands Colony, was not only a friend to Indigenous peoples of the Hudson Valley, but was also well versed in their languages, customs and manners. His work serves very much as an early anthropological report. Unlike De Rasiere, Van der Donck gives us some particularly crucial details on the use and manufacture of wampum, or, as he call it, "sewan." Like De Rasiere, Van der Donck also says wampum is used as a high-status decorative object, an adornment that is both worn and sewn on to clothing. He writes: "*Men's and women's stockings and shoes are of deer or elk skin, which some decorate richly with sewant, but most wear them as they come."*

He continues, speaking about wampum that is worn on the body as an adornment, saying *"The men mostly go bareheaded, and the women tie the hair at the back of the head and fold it into a*

tress of about a hand's length, like a beaver tail. Over it they draw a kerchief, often exquisitely decorated with sewant. When they want to appear splendid and lovely, they wear around the forehead a strap of sewant shaped like the headband that some believe was worn in antiquity. It holds the hair neatly together, is tied in a bow to the tress behind, and so makes quite an elegant and lively show. Then around the neck they wear various trinkets mostly made of sewant and regarded by them as very fine and elegant, as pearls are among us. They also wear many bracelets of sewant around their wrists and prettily wrought figures on the breast, which is halfway and not closely covered. Many of them drape beautiful belts of sewant around the waist and wear pretty little ornaments through the earlobes." (4)

Due to the profuse use of wampum among Eastern Woodland people's and their desire for it, many Europeans in the period came to believe it was somehow the "coin of the country." In a desperate bid to establish a solid and semi-permanent currency of their own—while they were largely deficient in large denomination European coinage—wampum and beaver skins filled the gap. Van der Donck again mentions this use of wampum, saying: "*Yet the use of gold and silver or any other minted currency is unknown there. In the areas that the Christians frequent, the Indians use a kind of currency they call sewant [wampum]. Anyone is free to make and acquire it so that no counterfeiters are to be found among them. The currency comes in black and white, the black being worth half as much again as the white."*

Van Der Donck continues, saying: *"This is the only money circulating among the Indians and in which one can trade with them. Among our people, too it is in general used for buying everything one needs. It is also traded in quantity, often by the thousand, because it is made in the coastal districts only and is mostly drawn for spending in the parts where the pelts come from. Among the Dutch, gold and silver currencies also circulate, and in increasing amounts. though as yet much less than in this country [the Netherlands where Van Der Donck is writing]"* (5)

William Penn, proprietor of the colony of Pennsylvania in 1683, goes into more detail about wampum's use. He, like Van der Donck, says of its use in society: "*But they that go, must carry a small present in their money., it may be six Pence, which is made of the bone of a fish*

[seashell]; the black is with them as Gold, the white, Silver; they call it Wampum." He continues discussing its use in forms of justice "*The justice they have is pecuniary: In case of any Wrong or evil faet , be it Murder itself, they Attone by feasts and presents of their wampum, which is proportioned to the quality of the offense or person injured, or of the sex they are of: for in case they kill a woman, they. pay double, and the reason they render, is, That she breedeth Children, which Men cannot"* (6)

Primary source documents have shown that wampum was used for all manners of society. The Indians made use of it for recompense as well as a high-status gift's for different events, and also for adornment. One element that is not elaborated in these previous sources is wampum's use in jurisprudence and government. One of the key reasons wampum is so desirable to Eastern Woodland people goes beyond just pure beauty and fashion and lies in the living spiritual quality that the beads possess, especially when woven into a mnemonic device such as a patterned wampum strand or elaborately woven wampum belt. Though Algonkian people are recorded as using, making, and wearing wampum belts, the Haudenosaunee (the people of the longhouse, historically called the Iroquois) are the most well recorded as using wampum belts as mnemonic story telling devices to recite treaties, histories and agreements with themselves, other tribal nations, and European governments. It is not precisely known when the Haudenosaunee adopted the use of wampum, since these shells are only found in coastal areas and the Haudenosaunee are an inland, freshwater community. These beads may have come to them through friendly trade or may have come through subsequent war and subjugation of coastal tribes. Whatever the case may be, the Haudenosaunee have left a monumental record of treaties and documents in which wampum was used in diplomacy.

The best examples of wampum strands and belts being used in a diplomatic sense come from the writings of Cadwallader Colden (1688-1776). Colden served as the first colonial representative for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy during the early- to mid-eighteenth century. In 1727, he wrote a book titled, *The History of The Five Nations,* which details Haudenosaunee history from the late sixteenth century onward, all the way through to the time he is writing in the second decade of the eighteenth century. The book was then expanded in 1747. Colden aimed to educate Colonial Americans, particularly New Yorkers, about the Haudenosaunee. He wanted to dispel

the myth that they were somehow inferior to Europeans or that they were culturally backward; in fact, Colden heavily rebuts this. He considers them to be equal to great nation states such as the Roman Empire and as organized and complex as any European Nation of that period. In his writings he records detailed treaties and speeches (mostly from the late seventeenth century) from Haudenosaunee people, where wampum is heavily featured.

In Haudenosaunee speeches, one of the consistent motifs that is recorded by Colden was the use of belts and strings of wampum along with the use of beaver skins. Wampum, both in strings and belts, are described as being used to "confirm peace" and represent that truth was being spoken, as well as being a symbol that the intentions of the speaker were clear. Wampum belts and the exchange of belts formally cemented agreements and were seen as legally binding objects. If wampum was not given, there was cause to believe or to debate that the agreement was illegitimate or not binding. Beaver skins, on the other hand, are given to "show respect" for colonial officials and governors. By the end of these speeches, which in real time took hours and sometimes days and by reading span several pages of dialogue, dozens of belts (sometimes comprising hundreds and thousands of wampum beads) and sometimes hundreds of beaver skins are given.

Most of the speeches read as follows: "*The Oneydoes particularly Thank your Lordship for hearkening to lay down the Ax. The Hatchet is taken out of all their hands. And gives a Belt. "We again thank your Lordship, that the Covenant Chain is Re-newed. Let it be kept clean and bright, and held fast, Let not any one pull his Arm from it. We enclude all the Four Nations in giving this belt. We again pray your Lordship, to take the Oneydoes into your Friendship, and that you keep the Covenant Chain strong with them; for they are in our Covenant. Gives a Belt."*(7).

Wampum is used to cement agreements and once delivered, are seen as binding. The second paragraph in Cadwallader's treaty speaks to this: *"Then each of them deliver an Ax to be buried, and gave a Belt. The Speaker added, "I speak in the Name of all three Nations, and include them in this Chain, which we desire may be kept clean and bright like Silver. Gives a Belt." We desire that the Path may be open for the Indians, under-your Lordships Protection to come safely and freely to this place, in order to confirm this, Peace." Gives six Fathom of Wampum. Then the*

Axes were buried in the Southeast end of the Court-yard, and the Indians threw the Earth upon them. After which my Lord told them, That since now a firm Peace was concluded, We shall hereafter remain Friends, and Virginia and Maryland will send once in two or three years to Renew it, and some of Our Indian Sachems shall come, according to your desire, to Confirm it."(8)

Beaver skins also make an appearance in numerous treaties as a way to showing respect to colonial officials and governors. Often, at the end of many of these treaties, anywhere from dozens to hundreds of beaver skins are presented. Most treaties mention beaver skins in language such as the following: *"The Oneydoes give twenty Bevers, as satisfaction for what they promised my Lord Baltimore, and desire that they may be Discharged."* (9)

What these sources clearly show is the immense need for wampum. Without these shell beads, Haudenosaunee law and governance could not proceed; the organization of society and governance would have been in disarray, and calamity of the highest order could have caused political collapse. The fact that dozens of belts (often times with copies or reciprocal strands given to the opposite party) were needed for every meeting with colonial officials goes to show the immense dependence and the monumental quantities needed for even simple arbitration.

Wampum continues to be culturally relevant. From the advent and use of European glass tube beads to make wampum belts and strands, to the revival of making shell beads in the late twentieth century, to the rebuilding of community and story belts among nations such as the Wampanoag in the twenty-first century, wampum persists and continues to be culturally relevant. Remarkably, surviving Haudenosaunee law regarding wampum still exists, much of which remains in practice and in place today.

In the fourth edition of *The Great Law of Peace of The Longhouse People,* author John Fadden gives us, in prose and visual form, an extensive view and understanding of Haudenosaunee law, often utilizing wampum in the form of strands. The Kaianerekowa (pronounced *gahn ya go ah*), or The Great Law of Peace, is very clear in wampum's usage, stating: *"A bunch of certain shell (wampum) strings each two spans in length shall be given to each of the female families in which*

the chieftain titles are vested. The right of bestowing the titles shall be hereditary in the family of females legally possessing the bunch of shell strings, and the strings shall be the token that the females of the family have the ownership to the chieftainship title for all time to come, subject to certain restrictions mentioned here."

"Any chief of the League of Five Nations may construct shell strings or wampum belts of any size or length as pledges or records of matters of national or international importance. When it is necessary to dispatch a shell string by a war chief or other messenger as a token of a summons, the messenger shall recite the contents of the string to the party to whom it is sent. That party shall repeat the message and return the shell string, and if there has been a summons, he shall make ready for his journey. Any of the people of the Five Nations may use shells or wampum as the record of a pledge, contract, or an agreement entered into and the same shall be binding as soon as shell strings shall have been exchanged by both parties." (10)

"A large bunch of shell strings, in the making of which the Five Nations League chiefs have equally contributed, shall symbolize the completeness of the union, and certify the pledge of the Nations represented by the chiefs of the League of the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca, that all are united and formed into one body, or union, called the Union of the Great Law which they have established. A bunch of shell strings is to be the symbol of the Council Fire of the League of Five Nations. And the chief whom the Council of Firekeepers shall appoint to speak for them in opening the Council shall hold the strands of shells in his hands when speaking. When he finishes speaking, he shall place the strings on an elevated place or pole so that all the assembled chiefs and the people may see it and know that the Council is open and in progress. Five strings of shell tied together as one shall represent the Five Nations. Each string shall represent one territory, and the whole a completely united territory known as the Five Nations Territory."

"A bunch of wampum strings, three spans of the hand in length, the upper half of the bunch being white and the lower half black, and formed from equal contributions of the men of the Five Nations, shall be the token that the men have combined themselves into one head, one body, and one thought, and it shall symbolize their ratification of the peace pact of the League, whereby the

chiefs of the Five Nations have established the Great Peace. The white portion of the shell strings represent the women, and the black portion the men. The black portion, furthermore, is a token of power and authority vested in the men of the Five Nations. This string of wampum vests the people with the right to correct their erring Chiefs." (11)

Though just a small object made from aquatic snails and bivalves, the cultural weight of wampum is immense. Wampum has been with Eastern Woodland peoples since before contact and continues to be a facet in everyday life. Since colonization of North America and the destruction of many ancestral Indigenous practices, wampum has made a huge resurgence and revival. Where once the display and use of wampum was only reserved for longhouses, churches established by tribal congregants, the marbled columned and oak halls of universities and state museums, or the blurry black-and-white photographs of elders showing the belts they had to curious anthropologists, wampum can be found almost anywhere. Glass tube beads, like the ones made in the 1700's, can now be found in almost every color and are still used to make belts today. Genuine quahog and whelk shell are a little rarer and more expensive, but they continue to be made and reproduced, often by the descendants of original makers from centuries past. The demand for them is so high that many quahog shell beads are now being manufactured cheaply overseas in China.

Wampum lies at the heart of identity, family, and community; many a Pequot, Wampanoag, Shinnecock, or Narragansett has called themselves "the Wampum People." From such a small bead comes great meaning, symbolism, and identity. We can only hope that wampum will continue to be a link for Indigenous North Americans—past, present, and future.

1. Petersen, Bustain 2004, *Perishable Material Culture in the Northeast*, by Penelope Ballard Drooker (ed.), New York State Museum Bulletin, 500, page 147

2. Ronald D. Karr, *Indian New England 1524-1674, A Compendium of Eyewitness Accounts of Native American Life* (Branch Line Press 1999), page 19

3. New Netherland in 1627. Letter from Isaack de Rasiere to Samuel Blommaert 1626-28, Page 3

4. Adriaen van Der Donck, *A Description Of New Netherland* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), page 80, *"Of the Dress and Ornaments of Men and Women."*

5. Adriaen van Der Donck, *A Description Of New Netherland* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), page 95, *"Of Money and Their Manufacture of It."*

6. William Penn, *A letter From William Penn, Proprietary and Governor of Pennsylvania in America, to the Committee of the Free Society of Traders of that Province Residing in London, 1683, (Kessinger* Legacy Reprints), *pages 6-7.*

7. Cadwallader Colden, *The History of The Five Indian Nations, Depending On The Province of New-York in America*, (Cornell University Press, 2017), page 40.

8. Cadwallader Colden, *The History of The Five Indian Nations, Depending On The Province of New-York in America*, (Cornell University Press, 2017), page 41.

9. Cadwallader Colden, *The History of The Five Indian Nations, Depending On The Province of New-York in America*, (Cornell University Press, 2017), pages 40-41.

10. John Fadden./ Kahonhes *The Great Law of Peace of The Longhouse People* (Akwesasne Notes, Mohawk Nation, Fourth Printing 1975), sections 17-59.

11. John Fadden./ Kahonhes *The Great Law of Peace of The Longhouse People* (Akwesasne Notes, Mohawk Nation, Fourth Printing 1975), sections 17-59.