

The Story of Wampum

Of the beads made by the Indians, wampum, the cylindrical shell bead of the Eastern tribes, is the best known and the most interesting. It was used by the Indians for personal adornment, ceremonial purposes, conveying messages, ratifying treaties, making records, and in the same way MONEY is used by civilized people. The first white traders adopted this currency, which all of the tribes were accustomed to. The traders received it as pay for their merchandise, and with it, buying furs from Indians. This and the fact that the Colonists brought little money with them, led to the adoption of wampum as legal money in the Dutch and English settlements. Wampum was handy but in short supply. The Dutch established factories where, with the aid of steel drills and grindstones, wampum could be turned out in such quantities that it soon gave them a monopoly of the supply for Indian trade. We can ask why the Indians would accept White man-made wampum, when they could make it themselves. Indians had all the time they wanted, but no "tools". The Indian would grind away for a month on a little piece of shell and finally turn out a good piece of work. But, this was a slow way to "coin" money. Eventually, the Indian realized that it was easier to trade a beaver skin or two, that only cost him a day's hunting, in exchange for a few beads which would have cost him six-seven weeks of arduous work! Some of these wampum factories were still doing business with the Indian traders of the West into the late 19th century. The best trade-bead time was from about 1835 until 1850. The last American wampum mill (Campbell family factory, Englewood, New Jersey) closed, after 120+ years of bead production, in 1888.

Wampum was of two colors, white and dark purple. White wampum was the most plentiful and its value was about one half of the purple. The white was made from the central part of the coiled shell of the whelk or periwinkle, and the purple from the shell of the quahog or round clam. The beads were from an eighth to a half inch in length and about an eighth of an inch on diameter. "Hairpipe" is a bit of shell that looked like clay pipe-stems, but thicker in the middle than on the ends. Because of their small size and their brittleness of the shell, the labor of making them with the Indian's tools was both very difficult and tedious. Just how they managed to drill these small beads with stone drills is unknown, but there is plenty of evidence that they did it before the introduction of steel tools.

Beads made of the tusk-shaped dentalium and abalone shells were also used as a medium of exchange by the Indians of the Pacific coast and were also adopted for use by traders and settlers. Another type of shell that is still being made is the small disk shaped one that is highly prized by the Navajo and Pueblo Indians. To make them, bits of shell are chipped roughly in shape and drilled with a pump-drill. Then they are rubbed between slabs of sandstone until they are of uniform thickness and diameter. They are generally strung with bits of turquoise and coral or with pendants of shell that have been inlaid with turquoise and jet.