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Parallel Paths on the Same River

ART IS A SUBJECTIVE MEDIUM. Even the term is suspect. In Native societies, art was not isolated from other aspects of life; it was interwoven with political, social, and religious life. It was expressed on the body, clothing, objects of daily use, warfare, and through gifts to the spiritual world. Art was also affected by events taking place throughout the continent. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the first material objects that showcased the early contact between Native peoples and European colonists was a cross-cultural product—wampum belts.

Wampum derived from shells. Atlantic coastal tribes, and later European settlers, collected whelk and quahog shells from the coastal regions of present-day Cape Cod to Virginia and transformed the central column of the shell into cylindrical beads that were then strung together into ceremonial wampum strings and later elaborate wampum belts. These objects—produced by the aid of European tools and manufacturing techniques—became essential objects that facilitated communication between the living and dead, increased trade, nurtured treaty agreements, and recorded histories.

Metaphorically, wampum belts connected Native tribes with other tribes, Native peoples with European colonists, and North America with the markets of Europe.¹ Present-day Albany, New York, became the epicenter for Dutch colonists, and later the English, to trade wampum to the Iroquois. In return, the Iroquois traded tens of thousands of beaver pelts to the colonists; the pelts served as the material for broad-brimmed felt hats that were immensely popular in Europe. In payment, the Iroquois received wampum beads, brass kettles, iron axes, and other European goods. In essence, nearly two centuries of economic life in the Woodlands—northeastern North America—revolved around four essential goods: beavers, iron, copper, and shells.

Cross-Cultural Product

The wampum-bead trade had existed long before Europeans began establishing permanent settlements in North America. Woodland Natives circulated shells throughout the continent in an

extensive trade network that included other luminous materials—quartz from the Rocky Mountains and copper from the Great Lakes.

Wampum was revered for many reasons. The shells were used as ornamentation for the body, and to project one's status. It was worn on the ears, applied to wooden objects, and crafted into headbands, necklaces, and cuffs. Wampum was also strung together on a single strand and used during treaty agreements to facilitate the communication process between two tribes. It was also "tossed into waterfalls and rivers as offerings to spirits, and burned in the White Dog ceremony."²

Moreover, wampum served as a burial item—gifts that the dead could take with them on their journey to the next world. Adult men and women, to strengthen their voyage to the spirit world, were buried with food and other items, including personal possessions, tools, weapons, and effigies. Children required even more burial items. In one example, archeologists excavated a grave where a young Seneca girl who had died in the 1650s was buried under belts and necklaces containing more than 43,000 wampum and glass beads.³

European arrival on the North American continent extended the trade of wampum and other material goods. Europeans were first called *metalworkers*, *ax makers*, and *cloth makers* by Native peoples, and their goods made of iron, copper, and glass were seen as a positive development that made cooking, starting fires, hunting, and fighting wars easier.⁴ Tools and materials from Europe also allowed Native crafts to flourish. Beadwork was greatly enhanced by the introduction of glass beads, needles, threads, and various clothes. Iron knives, chisels, and awls all improved carving techniques.⁵

Native tribes often moved closer to, rather than farther away from, those who had arrived on their shores. Some tribes, including the Susquehannock, relocated near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay around 1580 to be closer to the European fishing vessels.⁶ The goal for Native people: gain access to European goods and the "power they might possess."⁷

Natives believed that the next world was not adequately supplied with European goods but that an abundance of traditional crafts already existed in large amounts in the next world. Trade with Europeans could serve the needs of the spirit world, but it could also serve the needs of the living. European copper kettles were cut into smaller pieces and turned into ritual items—jewelry, ornaments, and weapons. Iron ax heads and knives were reappropriated into needles, awls, and arrowheads—objects that were all rooted in Native culture.

European contact also transformed the use of wampum. Wampum strings evolved to wampum belts that developed through the use of European tools. The Dutch introduced drills and grindstones to coastal Algonquians and revolutionized the manufacturing process that allowed Native women to produce a more refined product—small, tubular wampum beads that were more uniform in shape and size. Tools also allowed a small hole to be drilled through the bead at opposite ends, where it was then strung with vegetable fiber. Finally, the rows of strings were arranged in geometric designs that were placed on top of a piece of deerskin that served as the backside of the belt.

The Two Row Belt (Guswenta)—a wampum belt that the Mohawk first gave to the Dutch in 1613, and later versions to the English, French, and Americans—exemplified wampum's physical form, its mode of communication,⁸ and its meanings.

The belt consists of two rows of purple wampum beads against a background of white beads and depicts two purple lines (two vessels—one canoe and one European ship) traveling down parallel paths on the same river. The three white stripes on the background signify peace, friendship, and forever. Together, the belt advocates for the ideal scenario—the peaceful relationship between the Iroquois and the European colonial power that they were negotiating with. In a broader sense, the wampum belt advocated for tolerance for other cultures, a separate but equal coexistence, and the “enduring separation of [the] Iroquois from European law and custom.”⁹ It symbolized two distinct peoples sharing the same continent.

The Iroquois, neighboring tribes in the Northeast Woodlands, and colonial officials produced hundreds, if not thousands, of wampum belts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Famous belts included the “Hiawatha” belt that symbolized the formation of the Iroquois League (also called the Five Nations, or by the people themselves the Haudenosaunee—the People of the Longhouse) that formed in the late fifteenth century, nearly a century before Europeans began settling on the northeastern seaboard and the St. Lawrence River.¹⁰

The “Hiawatha” belt pictured the powerful confederacy of five Indian nations—Mohawk, Seneca, Onondaga, Oneida, and Cayuga—that were spread across what is now present-day central New York. Four of the five nations are represented by rectangles. In the center is pictured the Great Tree of Peace, representing Onondaga (Keepers of the Council Fire and Keepers of the Wampum Belts), and outward from it extends lines that connect the Five Nations in a shared alliance.

Wampum belts of this scale required intensive labor to produce. The bulk of the time involved manufacturing the central column of a shell into a bead with hand tools. In the mid-seventeenth century, the average output for a Native person manufacturing shells was forty-two white beads per day, and this excluded the time needed to collect the shells. Purple beads, which derived from a much harder part of the shell, took twice the time to produce: twenty-one beads per day.¹¹ A wampum belt with three hundred beads took upward of 7.1 days of labor and a belt with five thousand beads took 119 days of labor just to produce the beads alone.¹² One can barely imagine the time and labor needed to produce Pontiac’s Great War belt, at six feet long and containing more than nine thousand beads that were arranged in patterns to depict the emblems of forty-seven tribes that were in alliance with him.

As non-Native people began taking over the trade—mainly owing to Native tribes being decimated by European diseases and colonial populations waging war against coastal

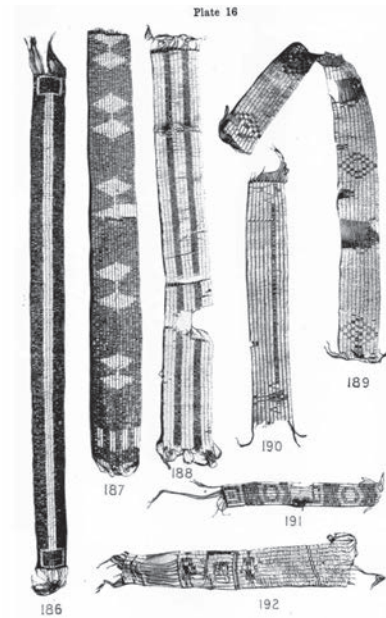
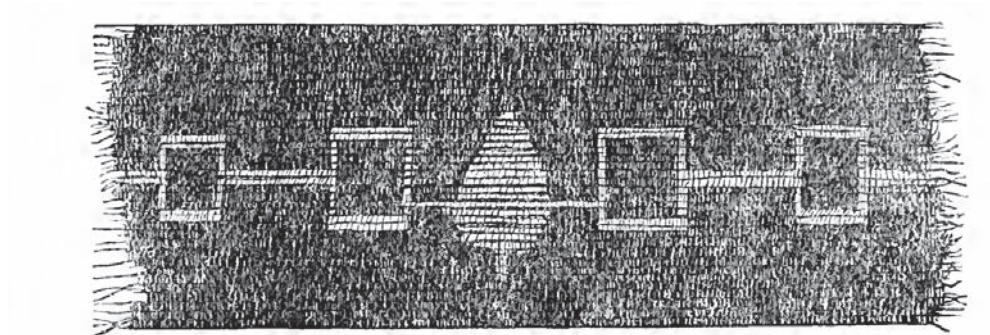


Illustration from *Wampum and Shell Articles Used by the New York Indians* (William M. Beauchamp, New York State Museum Bulletin #41, volume 8, February 1901, plate 16; University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Libraries collection)



Hiawatha Belt, illustration (Popular Science Monthly, volume 26, 1885–1886)

Native communities—both the labor dynamics of wampum and its value began to change.¹³ By the mid-seventeenth century, colonists in New England, New York, and New Jersey began churning out wampum beads by the tens of thousands, including at a wampum factory that was established by John Campbell in New Jersey.¹⁴ Colonists using lathes and more refined tools were then able to produce upward of 375 beads per day per worker; a 5,000-bead belt would take approximately thirteen days to manufacture.¹⁵

The colonial production of wampum was also fueled, briefly, by its role as money. The Dutch and the English lacked adequate metal coinage and by the mid-1630s wampum beads were adopted as colonial currency to purchase goods, land, and labor.¹⁶ However, wampum's value quickly depreciated. The value of wampum compared to pelts fell by 60 percent between 1641 and 1658, and by 200 percent during the 1660s.¹⁷ By the end of the decade, colonists had largely abandoned wampum as a form of currency.

During this same era, the use of wampum by the Iroquois accelerated; by the midcentury mark, more than three million individual beads were estimated to be in circulation in the Five Nations alone.¹⁸ The demand was fueled by the spread of European diseases, constant warfare, and competition over scarce resources that heightened the need for alliances, treaties, and burial gifts.¹⁹ Between 1663 and 1730, the Iroquois alone had approximately four hundred diplomatic encounters with the Dutch, English, and French.²⁰ Wampum strings and belts became an essential part of this process.

Forest Diplomacy

“You may know our words are of no weight unless accompanied with wampum, and you know we spoke with none and therefore you will not take notice of what was inconsiderately said by two or three of our People.”

—Mohawk speaker addressing Sir William Johnson, the Superintendent of Northern Indian Affairs, February 1757²¹

Colonists, newcomers to the continent, quickly came to realize that they had to follow Native customs if they wanted to negotiate over the two things that mattered most to them: obtaining beaver pelts and obtaining land.²² Additionally, colonial powers had a strategic interest in negotiating with the Iroquois, for they were the strongest confederation in the region. The Iroquois were situated between two imperial powers—the French on the St. Lawrence River and the Dutch (later the English) on the Hudson River. This location allowed the Iroquois to be the trade broker between colonists in New York and Albany and the Native people to the north and the west. To the Dutch, and later the English, the Iroquois were the perfect buffer zone between them and the French in Montreal and Quebec. They could be counted on to fight against Native tribes allied to New France, and they could help offset New France's control of the St. Lawrence River trade route by facilitating the trade of beaver pelts from the Great Lakes toward Albany and New York.

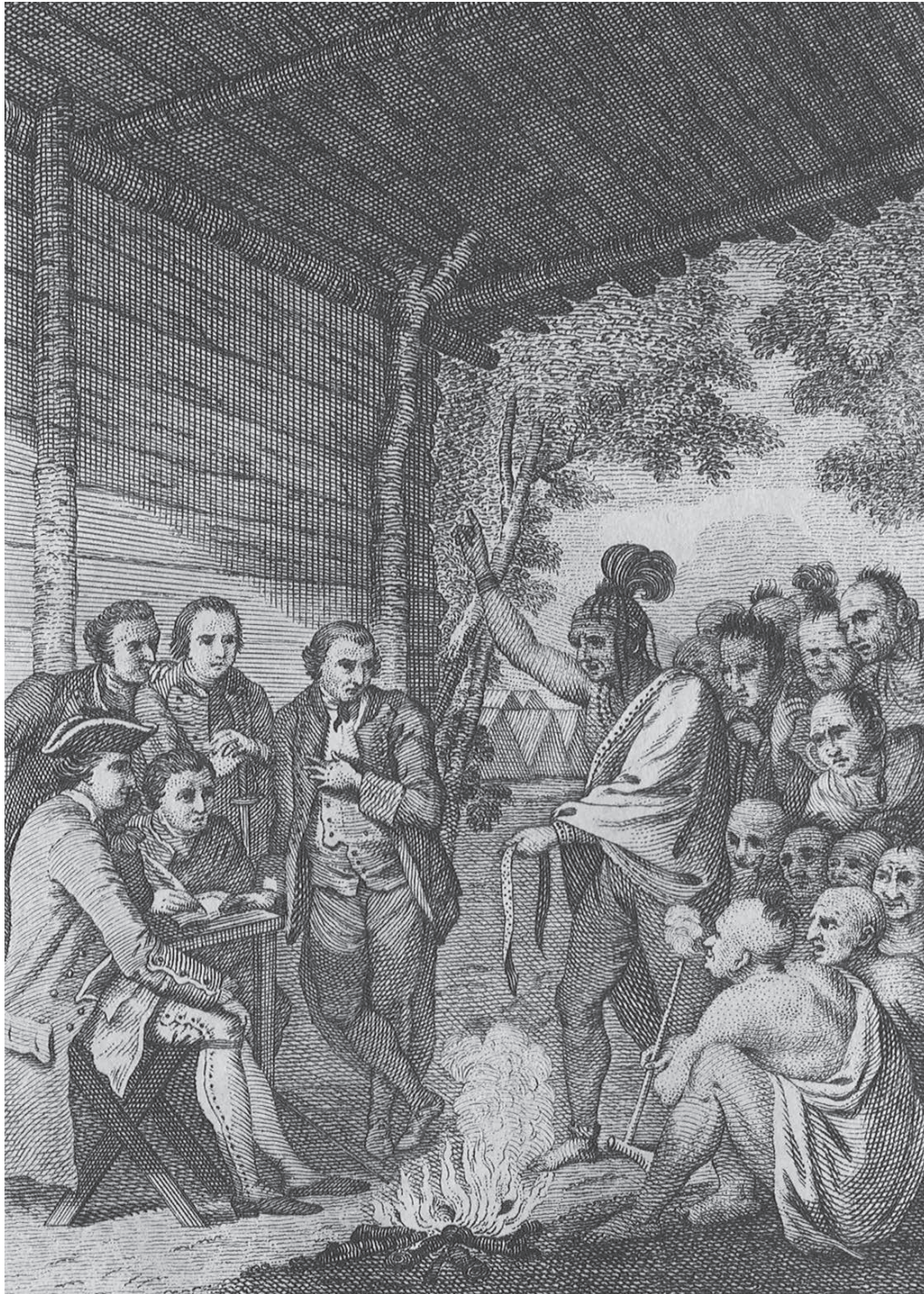
The Iroquois also viewed alliances with colonial powers as beneficial. Direct access to European goods—iron implements and guns in particular—allowed the Iroquois to decimate many of their Native enemies, and their favorable geographic location allowed them to play one colonial power off another. If New York did not accommodate them well, they could make a treaty with the French. And if New France did not make certain alliances with them, they could side exclusively with New York, a scenario that the French sought to avoid. Thus, as long as two colonial powers were in the region, the Iroquois could be assured of relative political stability.

Stability, however, depended upon treaty alliances, and these meetings depended upon passing wampum strings and wampum belts. Likewise, colonial negotiators knew if they were to trade and form strategic alliances with Native tribes, they'd have to learn how to pass wampum strings and belts properly, to reject them if need be, and to follow the etiquette of council treaties.²³

The process of treaty councils followed four major stages: invitations, the preliminary meetings of delegates, council transactions, and the ratifying of treaties. To the Iroquois, a council oratory followed three metaphors: the *path*, the *fire*, and the *chain*.

The process for calling a council began with an invitation. A runner would be sent out to deliver a wampum string, prepared in advance, that served as the invitation notice. The wampum string, not the messenger, was what mattered most. The role of the messenger was to deliver, in essence, a prerecorded message that conveyed the invitation from the chief. The messenger would then return to the home fire to inform the chiefs of whether the invitation was accepted.

If the wampum string was accepted, the invited visitors, sometimes numbering in the dozens, would set out on the path—a ceremonial process by foot or canoe to the council site, a neutral site at the woods' edge, where the two groups would meet. There they would first rest and ceremonially cleanse their eyes, ears, and throats from the hardships of the journey. After a day of rest the delegates would be seated and a condolence ceremony would begin where tearful eyes would be dried and minds and hearts would be cleansed of thoughts of revenge.



Native Orator Reading a Wampum Belt, illustration (William Smith and Charles Guillaume Frédéric Dumas, *Historical Account of Bouquet's Expedition Against the Ohio Indians*, in 1764; Amsterdam: M.M. Rey, 1769, American Geographical Society Library. University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Libraries collection)

Then the fire would be kindled. This was followed by the retelling of the history of the two groups gathered together and the explanation of the laws that guided council meetings. The next stage involved the offering up of specific propositions. A wampum belt for each specific proposal would then be passed. This process made the proposal visual and helped regulate the council's business and promoted "the orderly succession of speakers from the two sides."²⁴

The recipients of the proposal listened to the offer and would not respond until the next day. If wampum was thrown to the ground, it meant that the proposal was not acceptable. This process of accepting or rejecting belts could last for weeks. Every Native voice had to be heard, from sachems to warriors.²⁵

Colors and symbols on wampum belts communicated the tone of the proposal. Belts with a white background of beads communicated peace and goodwill. Black backgrounds conveyed a more serious matter—hostility, sorrow, death, and mourning. Belts that had red painted onto the beads changed the meaning into an invitation for war.

Symbols could also convey the same messages. In 1757, the French sent the Iroquois a black war belt with an image of a white ax in the center.²⁶ Symbols of diamonds or squares represented a nation or a castle. The cross represented Canada and, by extension, the French Jesuit missionaries and Christianity. Sloping lines represented temporary alliances, whereas connecting lines represented a strong alliance.

The final stage was the ratifying of treaties—or the *chain*—a bond that brought two groups of people together in agreement. This was followed by a feast and presentations of gifts from the host—an assortment of food, clothing, weapons, and often liquor. These gifts would then be subsequently redistributed to the village.

Historical Records, Consensus, and Capitalism

The significance of wampum belts did not end after the treaty process had concluded at the edge of the forest. When leaders returned from councils, important belts were taken to the Onondaga village, as the Onondaga were the Keepers of the Wampum Belts, and stored in the Council House.²⁷ There they served as a mnemonic device, objects that aided in the memory of alliances and words spoken. In the months and years that followed councils, chiefs would take out the belts and read them to younger members of the village, teaching them the history of their relations with those outside their tribe.

Council negotiators also had another process for belts and strings of lesser importance—they would break them up and redistribute the beads amongst the village.²⁸ A leader's status was not determined by his material wealth but by how he provided for his people. Daniel K. Richter explains, "Most presents delivered during treaty councils belonged to the lineages of these headsmen, who could then raise their status by distributing coveted items in community."²⁹ Wampum became a shared community asset, and family and village stores typically held wampum beads as public treasures.³⁰

Shared resources reflected upon a shared vision of governance. Politically, the Iroquois League was structured to ensure that one faction could not gain absolute authority.³¹ The Five

Nations of the League (and later the Six Nations, when the Tuscarora joined in 1722–1723) could negotiate with colonial powers as individual entities as long as their actions did not harm other League members.³² This allowed a certain degree of autonomy, but its key purpose was to decentralize leadership. Richter explains, “In a paradoxical way, it was precisely the *lack* of centralized political unity that made the modern Indian politics work: factional leaders independently cultivated ties to particular European colonies, cumulatively maintaining the multiple connections that warded off political dependence on powerful European neighbors.”³³

This process no doubt frustrated colonial negotiators to no end (accustomed as they were to negotiating with a central authority that made finite decisions), but the more anarchistic structure served the Iroquois’ purpose well: it allowed for neutrality to occur when needed and it kept the power in check among League nations.

In this manner council negotiators were free to complement or contradict the terms negotiated by other League members. Richter writes:

Plate 27



Illustration from *Wampum and Shell Articles Used by the New York Indians* (William M. Beauchamp, New York State Museum Bulletin #41, volume 8., February 1901, plate 27; University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Libraries collection)

In a nonstate society, neither the village majority nor those who held hereditary office had any power to force a leader who spoke for a substantial following to abide by collective decisions. Issue of war and peace therefore became extraordinarily complex, with at least the potential that arrangements painstakingly crafted by one group of village headmen might be undone by another, as each leader sought by his own lights to forge alliances with forces that might bring spiritual and material power to his kin, followers, and community. Each headman and war chief was free, to the extent he could mobilize resources and followers, to pursue his own policies both at home and in dealings with other people.³⁴

At stake were two competing value systems between Native and non-Native peoples: one based on consensus and various degrees of shared power, land, and resources, versus one based on hierarchal forms of government and private property.

These fundamentally different views of society came to a head during council treaties. Europeans viewed signed paper documents, not wampum belts, as “concrete evidence that a binding contract had been made.”³⁵ During the councils, colonial clerks recorded only small portions of the speeches made by the Iroquois participants. These individuals, like the majority of colonists, outside of Jesuit missionaries, never learned the Iroquois language. This affected the reading of the wampum belts. Mary A. Druke writes that colonial negotiators “never developed a system for transmitting oral traditions associated with wampum belts, so the specific meanings of belts were lost to them.”³⁶ Conversely, the Iroquois did not care for signed documents, nor did they care for the note-taking process by European clerks during the councils.³⁷ To the Iroquois, the treaty council process was not a means to an end. It was part of the regular lines of communication, not a concluding statement. The Iroquois believed that alliances were in need of *constant* attention, and the belts were part of a continuous process that regulated the dialogue and face-to-face communication that was needed to bring forth peace as conditions *changed*. Thus, wampum belts, both then and now, embody a large cultural disconnect: their meanings were understood by the Iroquois, but largely lost on the colonial population.

In more recent times, Native nations have brought wampum belts into the courts of law in the United States and Canada to support sovereignty rights, treaty rights, and other agreements that took place in the past, but the meanings of the belts are dependent on Native oral history and have been subsequently downplayed due to a system that prioritizes the methods that the colonial powers institutionalized—signed paper documents.

The Iroquois’ oral history of wampum belts presents a different perspective—a Native perspective. It viewed the 1613 Two Row treaty alliance with the Dutch as binding. Onondaga Chief Irving



Onondaga Nation Chief Irving Powless Jr. displays the two-row wampum belt at the Onondaga Land Rights forum at Syracuse Stage, July 13, 2010 (photograph by Mike Greenlar, Courtesy Mike Greenlar)

Powless Jr. noted in 1994 that the duration of the agreement, according to his ancestors, meant forever: "As long as the grass is green, as long as the water flows downhill, and as long as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west."³⁸ However, to non-Native audiences, unable or unwilling to accept Native perspectives, wampum belts became something to dismiss. They signified a past meeting, but not the specific details. In contrast, Rick Hill (Tuscarora) writes, "Wampum represents our interpretation of the agreements that took place. It is our understanding that we have inherited from our ancestors, which is not subject for debate; to be shared with those who are willing to consider our side of the story."³⁹ From a broader perspective, wampum belts become objects that tell the story of *survival*. Native people—despite the onslaught of European diseases, war, and colonial power competing to rob them of their land and resources—have persisted and retained their self-determination, identity, culture, and their sovereignty.⁴⁰