

(Top) Quahog shell and wampum beads.

Whelk and quahog shell, wampum beads, and bow drill.

NMAI photos by Stephen Lang

Chiefs of Six Nations with wampum belts, September 16, 1871.

NMAI photo P9784

WAMPUM

Wampum (WAHM-pəm) was introduced to the Haudenosaunee by Hayo'wetha (Hiawatha), who used the beads to console himself from the loss of his family. This was the first Condolence Ceremony, which is still practiced today among the Haudenosaunee.

The word wampum means "white shell beads" in the languages of the Narragansett of Rhode Island and Wampanoag of Massachusetts. Wampum are purple and white beads made from quahog (KWA-hog) clam and whelk shells. Native nations that lived along the Atlantic coast collected the shells from their shorelines and produced beads from them. Long before Europeans came to America, the Haudenosaunee traded with their Algonquian speaking neighbors, who lived along the Atlantic coast, to obtain the highly valued shell beads. In exchange for wampum beads, the Haudenosaunee provided furs, corn, beans and squash. The mostly white quahog shells contain a small amount of purple. The rareness of the purple beads makes them much more valuable than white beads. The process of making the beads is very difficult and time consuming. Today, they are made using power tools but formerly they were created using a bow drill.

A very important use for the wampum was to make belts, consisting of rows of interlaced wampum woven on a bow loom. The placement of the purple and white beads in the belt formed symbolic designs and codes. The designs in the belts recorded the laws of the Confederacy, oral tradition used for ceremonies, and important political interactions between Native nations, and later between the Confederacy and Europeans. Wampum belts were presented at Grand Council meetings or other official gatherings.

Wampum belts were never worn as clothing. Though they are all different sizes, the name alludes to the belt-like shape featuring long and narrow bands. Wampum continues to play an important role in Haudenosaunee society.

The Haudenosaunee never used wampum as money. However, due to the scarcity of metal coins in New England, Europeans and Americans recognized the value of wampum and began producing wampum in factories to use for trade among themselves and with Native people. The Narragansetts and Pequots played a critical role in the manufacture and exchange of wampum in the New England area in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The two tribes collected the shells and produced the beads, which they traded to Europeans in exchange for newly introduced goods. By the 1700s, Dutch settlers established wampum factories, including the Campbell Wampum Factory, founded in Bergen, New Jersey, in the 1780s. The Campbell Wampum Factory continued to operate until the 1880s.



HIAWATHA BELT

The Hiawatha Belt symbolizes the unity of the original five Haudenosaunee nations, connected by the Great Law of Peace. Each white square and the tree in the center represents one of the original five nations.



SENECA NATION Keepers of the Western Door	CAYUGA NATION	ONONDAGA NATION Keepers of the Central Fire and the heart of the Five Nations loyal to the Great Law of Peace	ONEIDA NATION	MOHAWK NATION Keepers of the Eastern Door
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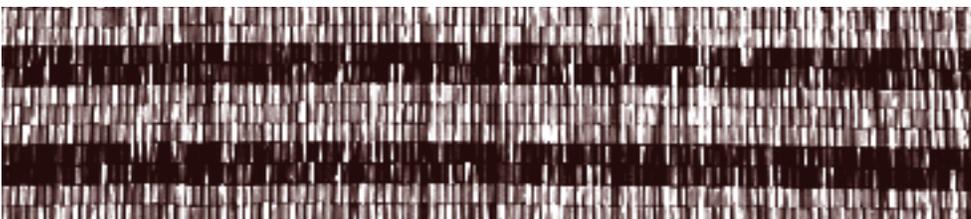
The white lines extending from one end of the belt to the other represent the path of peace, welcoming other nations to take shelter under the Great Law of Peace and join the Confederacy. The Tuscarora Nation, the sixth nation in the Confederacy, joined after this belt was created.

TWO ROW WAMPUM

Haudenosaunee exchanged wampum belts with Europeans to recognize treaty agreements. The Two Row Wampum records the agreement made in 1613 in upstate New York between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch government. This belt represents the first peace treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Europeans in which the two sides agreed to respect each other's cultures and to never interfere in each other's affairs.

The two parallel lines of purple beads represent the two parties to the agreement — one for a Haudenosaunee canoe and the other for a European ship — traveling, side by side. Each boat contains the owner's culture, traditions, laws, language and ways of life. The white parallel lines illustrate that the two would travel in peace and friendship without interference.

Today, the Haudenosaunee consider the wampum belts symbols of principles established by treaties.



G. Peter Jemison (Seneca, Heron Clan) Site Manager of Ganondagan State Historic Site and Faithkeeper to the Cattaraugus Seneca Nation, speaks about the importance of wampum to the Haudenosaunee people.

Photos courtesy of Karen Kaz

WAMPUM

Wampum belts are recorded documents constructed from shell beads. The white and purple beads form symbolic designs that reflect significant events or a code of ethics. Have students in your class create their own wampum belt designs, using any colors they want to fill in the squares. Have them make symbols to represent an event from their family, school, or community that is important to them.

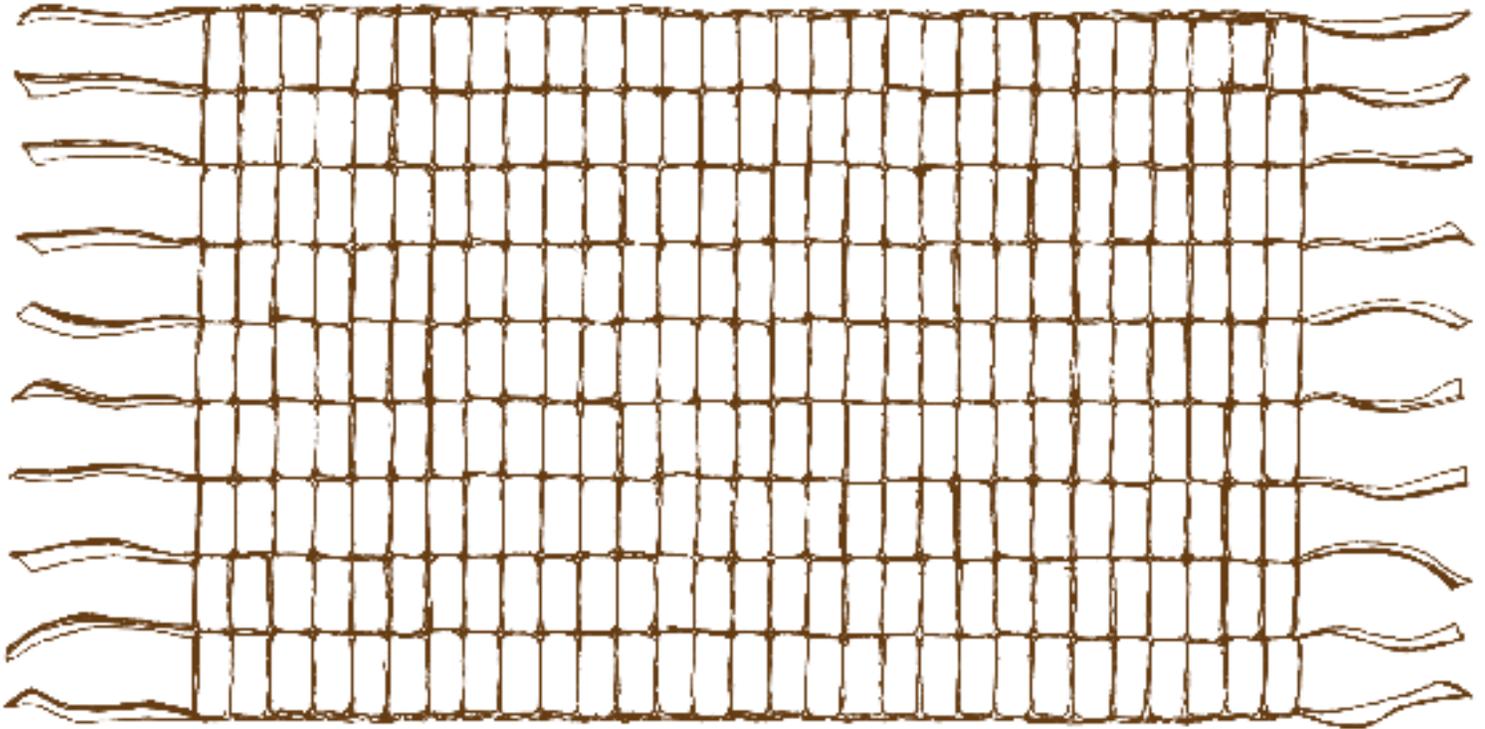


Illustration by Mary Ahenakew