WAMPUM: THE NATIVE SUBSTITUTE FOR CURRENCY IN NORTH AMERICA.

By Nehemiah Vreeland.

Wampum is a bead made from the clam, periwinkle, conch and other shells, used in former times by the Indians of North America as money. It was also adopted by the early Dutch, French and British colonists for the same purpose, and differed from the "cowries" in being a manufactured article; whilst to turn cowries into money all that was necessary was to find them and punch a small hole through them.

The question of currency or exchange was one of the most serious problems with which the colonists had to contend, and the scarcity of the European circulating medium rendered the adoption of wampum necessary in general trade. The Dutch were the first to employ it, and it went under the names "Seawant" and "Zewant," whilst by the French it was called "Porcelaine," by the Indians "Sewan," and Wampum was the British term.

It was not a cheap article of fictitious value, for the shells from which it was made were found only on the sea-shore, and the difficulty and expense of their supply proportionately increased their demand, according to the distance of the Indians of the interior, who used them, from the coast. Besides serving the Indian as a medium for exchange and a standard of value, wampum was their badge of wealth and position. From prehistoric times these beads were used by the Indians for personal decoration, the number of strings worn marking the wealth and social position of the wearer.
WAMPUM. A NAVAJO INDIAN'S NECKLACE, THE CENTRAL BEADS BEING PROBABLY PREHISTORIC. SIZE, \( \frac{1}{2} \).
In all affairs of state the chiefs and sachems wore wampum belts around their waists or over their shoulders. In negotiations with other tribes every important statement was corroborated by laying down one or more belts. Friendships were cemented by them, alliances confirmed, treaties negotiated, and marriages solemnised. In all of these the giving of wampum added dignity and authority to the transaction. “This belt preserves my words,” was the common phrase among the Iroquoise when promises were made. Some of the belts were of special design and employed to ratify every important treaty, and in effect were the same as the technical “delivery” of a deed of conveyance to-day. The redmen were born traders, and it is not, therefore, surprising to find in the localities of the most inland tribes, shells that had been picked up on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. There was a great variety of wampum. The tribes then occupying what is now known as California, New Mexico, Arizona, Tennessee, Georgia and Florida used different kinds, which are shown in the illustrations, but to describe and classify all in detail would require a large volume.

The variety used by the white colonists was manufactured in Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey. There were two colours, white and dark purple. The dark, made from the heart of the clam shell, was accounted double the value of the white. The dark wampum was known as “Suckauhock,” and in size varied from three-eighths to
five-eighths of an inch long by one-eighth of an inch thick, being drilled lengthwise and strung on tendons of animals or on fibres of hemp. Suckauhock served the purpose for which gold coin is used, and the white, of half the value, served in the place of silver coin.

Wampum made by the Indian in some cases was crude, for rounding, polishing and drilling with flint or iron tools required great patience, coupled with considerable labour and skill. The drilling in some cases was performed with a bow and drill, similar to the bow-drill used by watchmakers and jewellers of the present day, which certainly dates its origin from prehistoric times.

Lawson, the Carolina surveyor, writing of wampum in the year 1714, speaks of it as, "All made of shells which are found on the coast of Carolina, which are very large and hard, so they are very difficult to cut." He adds that "some English smiths have tried to drill this sort of shell money and thereby thought to get an advantage, but it proved so hard that nothing could be gained." Although anyone was free to make as much wampum as he pleased, the Indian never became wealthy by such a course, for the rich Indians were those who acquired wealth through trade, conquest, or both.
It was the custom to bury strings of wampum with the dead warrior, for the Indians believed he would have use for it in the next world, and that through the favour of the Great Spirit its possession would become in no small degree his passport to the happy hunting grounds. Wampum has been found in both very old and in recent graves, but such were often robbed for the wealth they thus contained.

The Algonquins of Connecticut used it to ornament their mocassins. The Sachems and great men of the tribe had belts, some of which contained so great a quantity of wampum that the English colonists valued them at eight pounds sterling, and these were treasured by the chiefs in much the same manner as are the crown jewels of the present day.

In the year 1641 the New Amsterdam (New York) Council promulgated an ordinance declaring that in the future all coarse wampum well strung, should pass at six for a stuyver, and the well polished beads should be valued at four for a stuyver.

The colonists, however, did not escape the counterfeiters. The latter brought into circulation unperforated beads made of stone, bone, glass and porcelain, with the result that the genuine wampum depreciated in value. Beads of porcelain were manufactured in Europe to imitate wampum, sent to America and circulated among the colonists, but the Indians ever refused to take or recognise them.

The Director-General Stuyvesant tried to stop counterfeiting by an ordinance of May 30th, 1650, declaring that loose or unstrung wampum should no longer be legal tender, and dividing the recognised
medium into two classes: (1) Well strung and perfect beads to pass at the rate of three dark, or six white to one stuyver; (2) The badly strung wampum at eight white or four dark beads to one stuyver. This measure, however, was not a success, for the scarcity of well strung wampum threatened to cause a financial disaster. On September 14th, 1650, therefore, the loose and imperfect beads were again made legal tender. Seven years later the supply of wampum was so large that the beads were reduced in value to eight for one stuyver.

WAMPUM FROM ARIZONA, NEW YORK (PREHISTORIC) AND TENNESSEE (PREHISTORIC). SIZE, ¼.

In New England in the year 1637 it was ordered that wampum should pass at "six a-penny" for any sum of less than twelve pence. On October 7th, 1640, it was proclaimed that white wampum should pass at "four a-penny," blue at "two a-penny," and not more than twelve pence in value at one time should be tendered unless the receiver desired more. On May 22nd, 1661, the law authorizing the use of wampum as legal tender was repealed, and to a great extent the coining of silver then drove wampum beads out of circulation.

There were several places in New Jersey where wampum was made, Cape May and Pascack turning out the best. The factory
located at the latter place was operated by the Campbell family of four brothers, who emigrated from Scotland and settled near the head waters of Hackensack River. In addition to being manufacturers of wampum they were farmers.

After the close of the war in the year 1783 there was very little money in circulation, most of the trading being done by barter. The then ancestor of one of the leading families in New York of to-day took advantage of the conditions then existing and arranged with the Campbells to furnish him with wampum, with which he bought furs from the Indians, and thus laid the foundation of the vast fortune of his descendants.

Some of the Indians grew wealthy and as time went on became more so. This created a desire and demand for something more showy in the way of shell jewellery. To supply this demand the Pascack factory made large wampum beads, measuring from one inch to six inches in length and highly polished. They were called "pipes." Also round shell discs were made called "moons" from one to three inches in diameter. The pipe variety was used by the Indian warrior
to decorate the breast of his vest or coat, also for braiding in with his hair in the same manner that some of the gypsies of Europe use silver thalers.

The moons, made from beautiful pink shells, were worn like a breast pin at the throat, the wealthy chief having a full set, while the poor brave had only two or three of the smaller size. The Indian acted on the theory that anyone fortunate enough to possess any considerable amount would miss no opportunity of making a display of the same, for Indians are naturally ostentatious. Pipes and moons thus acquired a standard value in trading among the Indians of the plains.

The day of wampum began to decline about the year 1830, there being little demand for it, except as pipes and moons. Glass beads were then imported from Europe in large quantities and usurped the place of wampum for Indian decoration.

So far as the colonists were concerned wampum was but an artificial currency. In Europe the beads had only the value of
curiosities, but the colonists had furs as a commodity with which to approach the European markets. But for over a century wampum played a most important part in the currency of the British and Dutch Colonies.

The Indians of Long Island were the greatest producers of wampum, for the reason that their supply of raw material was the best and obtained with little labour. The early name of the island was Sewan-backy, or the "land of the sewan shell." This mint of wealth was, however, of little benefit to the Indians of the Island, for their powerful neighbours, the Narragansetts, Pequots and Mohawks, compelled them to pay large tributes in wampum; thus keeping them in a state of slavery.

In the early part of the seventeenth century wampum was not in general use in Massachusetts, for it is stated that in 1627 Isaac de Rasieres sailed from New Amsterdam to the British colony at New Plymouth on a trading expedition, and among other merchandise he had fifty pounds in wampum, which was only accepted with great reluctance by the New Englanders. About 1645 wampum reached its highest value in New England. It was the chief currency not only in New York, but in the many settlements which were then under the control of the authorities at New York. In 1672 the inhabitants of New Castle, Delaware, imposed a tax of four guilders in wampum

WAMPUM FROM CALIFORNIA, BRAZIL (PREHISTORIC), AND THE MARSHALL ISLANDS.
SIZE, \( \frac{1}{4} \).
upon each anker of rum imported or sold there. In 1693 the ferriage of a single person from New York to Brooklyn was eight stuyvers in wampum or two pence in silver.

The wampum used by the Indians who formerly inhabited the eastern part of North America was the most difficult to manufacture of all the shell wampum known. The writer was curious to find out whether it was hard to drill the beads; and having several undrilled beads in his collection, he submitted them to a number of lapidaries and pearl drillers. They however refused to drill the beads, excusing themselves on the ground that their tools were not adapted for the purpose. As a last resort the beads were taken to a machinist, with the result that in the first attempt the drill broke and in the second the bead was broken, showing that it must have taken the Indians, with their crude tools and methods, a long and laborious time to drill a single bead.

The use of wampum was not confined to North America alone but was the primitive form of money in many parts of the world, as will be seen from the illustrations here given of a few varieties from California, Brazil (prehistoric), the Marshall Islands, Africa, Japan (prehistoric), and Mexico (prehistoric).