



Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

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WAMPUM: OUR HISTORICAL RECORD



INTRODUCTION

According to Iroquois tradition, wampum was used as an aid to memory. Against many people's opinions, wampum was not a money exchange in the popular sense even though it did represent a certain monetary value. The wampum beads were strung or woven in a particular design or pattern to depict events in history. They were used during certain ceremonies and as documentation in treaty negotiations. Strings or woven belts were used to convey leaders were assigned the task of memorizing events for which each wampum was created. These men could then read the belts back time and again with great accuracy.

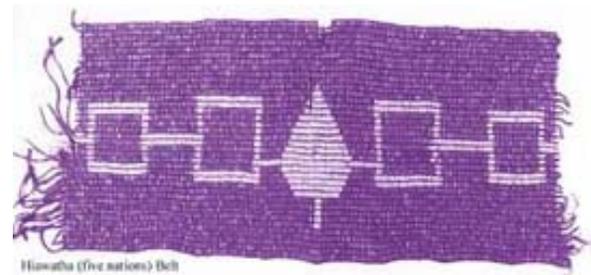
Wampum beads are made from the quahog shell which is found only along the Atlantic coast of North America. This shell is primarily white with purple edges. The Iroquois got their shell beads in trade from the Indians of Long Island. In the 17th century the Dutch encouraged the use of wampum as a medium of exchange in the fur trade and they set the value of the purple beads at two times that of the white beads.

The native people of the Northeast used wampum more so than any of the other native nations to the west. Although wampum is thought by many to be a type of money exchange, its main purpose is for record keeping and for sending messages to other nations. To the Iroquois People, its name was onikolha,

meaning "of the mind". Wampum endows its carrier with recognition of authority and truth.

THE PROTOCOL BELTS

The Hiawatha Belt, the Circle Wampum, the Tatataho Belt, the Wing or Dust Fan Belt and the Invitational Belt are considered the documents to best symbolize the protocol of the Iroquois Confederacy. They were recognized as agreements or treaties between the Iroquois and their allies of the good faith, judgment and character of the Six Nations and its leaders. All of these belts have been repatriated back to the Confederacy.

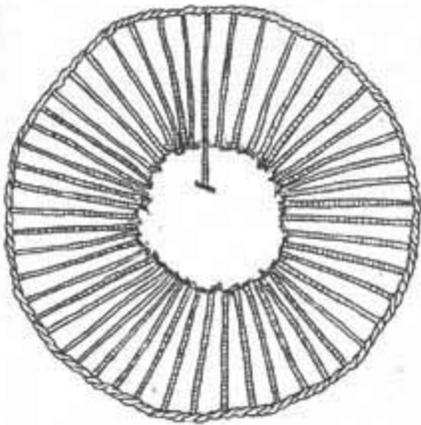


Hiawatha (Five Nations) Belt

Hayewate (Hiawatha) or Five Nations Belts

The Hiawatha Belt is considered to be the original record of the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy and is believed to be one of the most important and most valuable wampum belts in existence. The exact age of this belt is unknown.

On this belt the Great Tree of Peace stands at the center flanked on each side by two hollow white squares. All of the figures are joined by a band of white that runs the length of the belt and extends outward from the two outermost figures. When the belt is laid out so the tree points to the north, reading from right to left (or east to west), the first square is the Mohawk Nation, the Keepers of the Eastern Door. The square to its left is the Oneida Nation. The tree in the center represents the Onondaga Nation where the council fire for the League burns and where the Great Tree of Peace is firmly rooted in the heart of the Confederacy. The next square to the left is the Cayuga Nation followed by the Seneca Nation of Keepers of the Western Door.



Circle Wampum

The Circle Wampum also referred to as the Magna Carta of the Iroquois Confederacy, is the most sacred record of the foundation of the League. The original Circle Wampum was made at the time of the founding of the league and has been handed down through a long line of wampum keepers. It consists of two outer strands that are twisted together to represent laws of peace, the interrelationship between government and spirituality. Everything related to governing the people must take into account the spirit of the people. The inner strings of equal length represent the 50 chiefs of the Haudenosaunee, each being equal and unified. The titles of those chiefs still exist today. The longest of the strings represents Onanwire.tu, the seventh Onondaga chief, who was appointed keeper of all the other records of the League.

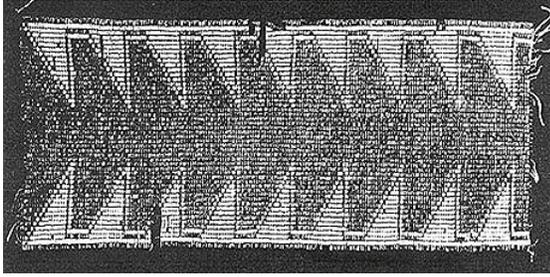
The circle of strings also represents the seating plan of the fifty chiefs during Grand Council. The chiefs are joined together at the outer circle as a sign of strength and unity. If a tree should fall upon them, they would not loosen their grip. They converge into a smaller circle which holds the culture and ways of the people; the beliefs, the language, the ceremonies, and the customs of our people. The people inside of this circle are to follow the ways set down by the Creator. It is the chief's responsibility to protect all that is within the circle. It is said that if a person does not follow the ways of the Creator, they have "left the circle" and are no longer under the protection of the 50 chiefs.



Tatataho Belt

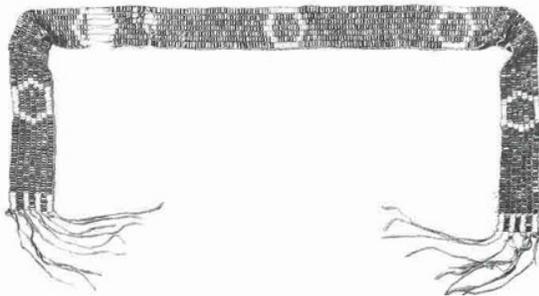
The Tadadaho Belt is the second widest belt known. It measures 27 inches by 14 inches, and is 45 wampum beads wide. It symbolizes the role of the Onondaga fire keeper to keep the council fire clean and protected. The belt shows a symmetrically arranged series of large purple triangles which overlap and run the length of the belt. Along the center of the belt is a chain of fourteen white diamonds which represent a covenant of friendship among the fourteen chiefs of the Onondaga Nation. Tadadaho's role was to protect the League from matters or propositions in council that would be detrimental to the survival of the Great Law of Peace and its Nations.

This belt is one of the belts referred to in the founding of the Confederacy. It was placed in the custody of the Onondaga wampum keeper in 1847 and was considered at that time to be a comparatively modern belt. It was acquired by the New York State Museum in 1898 through Rev. William M. Beauchamp.



Wing or Dust Fan Belt

The widest belt known, this belt symbolizes the Great Tree of Peace that was planted among the Onondagas who were in the center of the Confederacy. Also known as the Everlasting Tree Belt, it is held by the Onondaga Council. Purple beads form the ever-growing pine tree, symbolic of the life of the League. The purpose of this belt is to protect the council and the 50 confederate chiefs from harmful thoughts and to protect their eyes from the dust that might cloud their vision. It represents the permanence of the Iroquois Confederacy and was displayed whenever the League's constitution was read. It was acquired by the New York State Museum in 1898 through Rev. William M. Beauchamp.



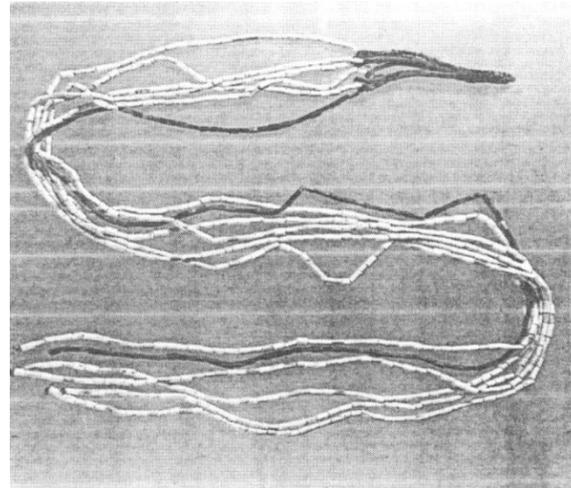
The Invitational Belt or The Champlain Belt

This belt is almost a duplicate of another belt called the Ely S. Parker belt. Both belts consist of five white hexagons, equally spaced along the length. At the end of each are alternating rows of white and purple beads. The only apparent difference is that the Champlain Belt has four white stripes while the Ely S. Parker Belt has only three white stripes. The each hexagon represents one of the five original nations of the Confederacy. They are set against a field of the darkest purple wampum beads, nine rows in width. The four short tows at each end symbolize the roots of the Great Tree of Peace, or the paths that lead to the tree, open for all nations to seek peace.

This belt commemorates the excursion of Samuel Champlain into the country of the Iroquois in 1609. This belt was delivered to other nations to invite them to abandon hostilities, to settle their difficulties through council rather than by blood and war.

OTHER STRINGS AND BELTS

After the establishment of the Chiefs and Clan Mothers, there were many kinds of strings and belts of wampum constructed as a reminder of agreements made with each other.



Condolence Strings

During the time of the beginning of the Confederacy, a man known as Hayawate (or as the anthropologists called him, Hiawatha), an Onondaga man, come across the wampum beads at the bottom of a lake. There he began to collect all the beads. He put them on a string and gave meanings to them.

The first use of wampum, according to oral tradition, was as a type of prayer bead used during the condolence ceremony. The first string was acknowledged as the "eyes". During the ceremony it is acknowledged that whenever someone loses a family member, their eyes become filled with tears and they are unable to see clearly what is in front of them because they are in so much grief. "We take the softest of white deer skin and wipe away your tears so that you can see clearly again the path that you are walking upon Mother Earth."

The second string represents the "ears". At the time the family hears the news of the loss

of a friend or family member, their ears become covered over. The griened are unable to hear the words of comfort. The white down of an eagle feather is taken to each family member and used to softly brush away any obstruction so that the words of comfort can be heard.

The third string of wampum represents the “throats”. Because of the grief felt over losing a loved one, it is said that the heart becomes lodged in the throat rendering the griened unable to speak or to take the nourishment needed by the body. “Now we take the purest of spring waters to help cleanse your throat and your heart so you can once again speak to each other and eat the foods to help strengthen your bodies”.

These were the first words that were used in conjunction with the use of wampum. In all, there are fifteen strings to the condolence ceremony. Each string addresses a way to help rekindle the families’ fire.

The Six Nations Fire

In addition to the condolence strings, there were wampum strings representing the authority of the league and its council. These are held by the speaker or fire keeper when opening and closing a council meeting. The Six Nations Fire wampum is used when the Nations come together. The five white strings represent the original five nations; the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and the Seneca. The purple string represents the Tuscarora who became the sixth nation during the 1720’s and the people later adopted them into the League.

Tatataho would officially open the meeting using this wampum. Once it was laid down upon a table for all the see, the meeting was in session. Then before the sun set, it was taken back up and the meeting would be closed until the next day. During the time the Great Law was being formed by the Peacemaker and the nations, it was said that a meeting would not be in session during the night time hours because arguments were more prevalent during that time.

Two Row Belt

The Two Row Wampum records the first agreement with the Dutch in 1613 and has formed the basis for all subsequent treaties.

There are two rows of purple beads on a white background. The three white rows of wampum symbolize peace, friendship and honor. The two purple rows represent out separate but equal paths as sovereign nations. We are not to interfere with each other’s rights to govern. We are to respect each other.



The rows are like two vessels traveling side by side. In one vessel are the laws, traditions and beliefs of the Iroquois and in the other vessel are the laws traditions and beliefs of the Europeans. If we should put one foot in each vessel, as they drifted apart we would fall into the dark water. This meant that the first Europeans agreed to respect Iroquois sovereignty and not impose their way of life upon the Haudenosaunee (The People of the Long House). Likewise, the Haudenosaunee would respect and honor the traditions and beliefs of the Europeans. All subsequent treaties have maintained that same principle.

“The belt represents the basis of Iroquois sovereignty. The two rows of purple beads represent the Red Man and the White Man living side by side in peace and friendship. The white background is a river. On that river of life you travel in your boat and we travel in our canoe. Each of us is responsible for our own government and religion and way of life... We’re equal... We call each other ‘brother’” That’s the way it’s supposed to be between us.”

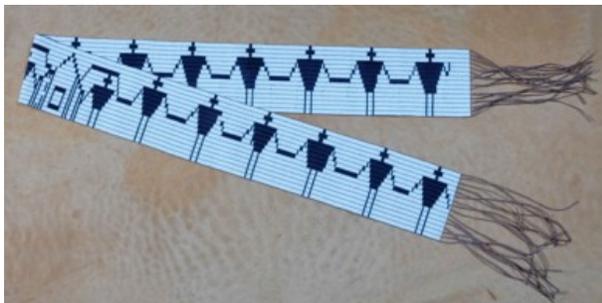


Oneida Tribal Belt

The Oneida tribal Belt was created shortly after the Revolutionary War to commemorate the reunification of the Haudenosaunee, (Iroquois Confederacy) It readdresses the commitment of alliance between the nations. This belt and seven original treaties

were entrusted to the care of Elijah Skenandoah, a Turtle Clan Chief of the Oneida Nation, who brought it to Wisconsin in the 1830's. Sometime after his death, the belt and treaties were found in the sage in the post office on the Oneida Reservation. Today the Oneida Tribal Belt is at the Field Museum in Chicago pending a repatriation claim for its return on behalf of the Oneida communities.

The six rectangles represent the territories of the Six Nations who are joined together as one nation. The diamond shape in the center of each rectangle represents their council fire. Reading the belt from right to left, the first rectangle represents the Mohawk Nation. The Mohawks are considered the Keepers of the Eastern Door, If nations to the East wish to address issues to the Confederacy, they must first bring their issues to the Mohawks, The next rectangle represents the Oneida Nation and their council fire followed by the Onondaga Nation and their council fire. The Onondaga Nation is known as the Central fire. All matters pertaining to the Six Nations are brought here. Next are the Cayuga Nation and its fire and the Seneca Nation who is known as the Keeper of the Western Door. All matters concerning the west are brought here before going to the Six Nations Confederacy. The final rectangle represents the Tuscarora Nation who was the last nation to join the Confederacy.



George Washington Belt (The Covenant Chain)

The belt consists of 15 men with outstretched arms and clasped hand which extend along its length. In the center is the figure of a house from which extends a protecting

shelter for the men standing on either side. The house represents the Long House; the two men with the lines over them are the Keeper of the Eastern Door (the Mohawk) and the Keeper of the Western Door (the Seneca). The remaining 13 men represent the original 13 colonies.

This belt is a record of the treaty with the United States at Canandaigua on November 11, 1794. It was given to the Six Nations as a covenant of peace between the Iroquois and the 13 colonies. George Washington had this belt commissioned to the Haudenosaunee with a pledge: "As evidence of the sincerity of the desire of the U.S. for a perfect peace and friendship with you, I deliver you this white belt of wampum." He wanted the confederacy to know that they were still united. There are seven states to the left and six to the right. The agreement is that the Iroquois shall live upon their own lands for as long as they want with no interference from anyone.

The Oneidas are a proud people. They fought on behalf of the Colonies in the Revolutionary War and they fought for America in every subsequent war since. They were among the first allies of a fledgling United States. Today, however, they are scattered from New York to Canada to Wisconsin and Kansas as a result of the throes of history.

Sources

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