

Wampum, Saybrook's First Currency

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS July, 2022)

The founders of the Saybrook settlement in 1636 had no banks and no colonial currency. In fact there were no banks in all of New England. And the limited number of English coins in Boston brought over by the early merchants quickly went back there to pay for supplies. But even in 1636 there was commerce up and down the river settlements, and wampum was the accepted currency used to pay for goods, especially for corn seed from the local tribes. This would change in 20 years when traders brought the Spanish silver dollar back from the Caribbean.



Wampum was cut from the white parts of the whelk snail shells and the purple parts of the quahog clam shells, both of which were especially prevalent in Long Island Sound.

Wampum, Saybrook's first currency

Wampum was initially not a currency. Wampum beads and buttons were mostly a valued personal adornment worn by most of the indigenous native people long before European traders and settlers arrived. It hung from their ears and was pinned in their hair. It was used as collars and bracelets around their necks and arms.

Political strings of wampum in varying lengths and patterns were also used as credentials, messages, invitations, and markers of the stages in condolence rituals.

Wampum was also commonly woven into belts to serve as



material records of alliances, political gifts among and between allies, and ritual tools of internal governance and as status symbols for sachems, or tribal chiefs.

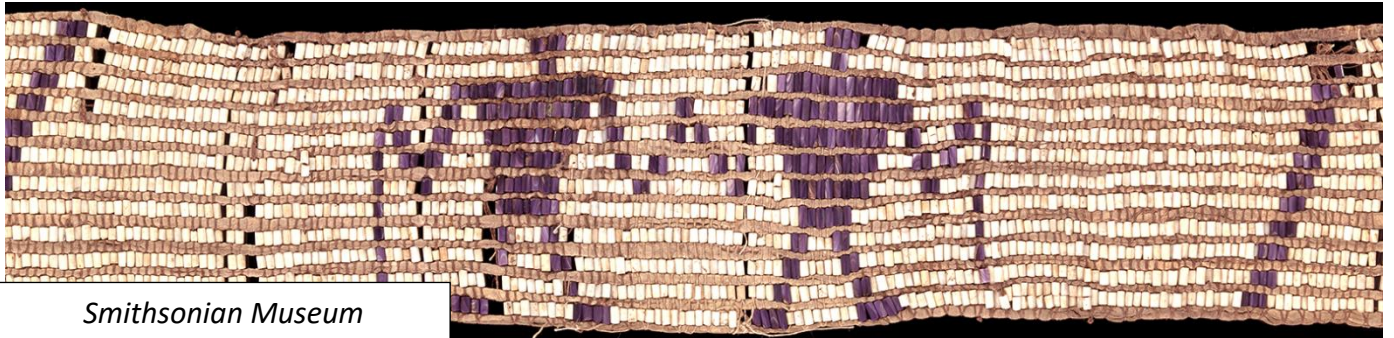


Wampum was cut from the white parts of the whelk snail shells and the purple parts of the quahog clam shells, and both were especially prevalent in Long Island Sound. In fact Long Island Sound was known by the Dutch as, "the mint of wampum production." Making wampum was labor-intensive and time-consuming. The clams

were harvested in the summer, their meat consumed, and the shells were then worked into beads. Wampum beads were difficult to make. The shells were

ground and polished into small tubes with a stone drill. They were placed on strings made of plant fiber or animal tendon and woven into belts, necklaces, headpieces, bracelets, earrings—a variety of adornments depending on the status of the wearer.





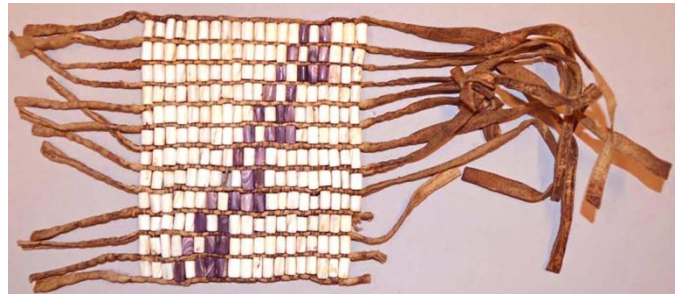
*Smithsonian Museum
Wampum Belt, circa 1600-1620*



1640 Ceremonial Wampum Belt, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada

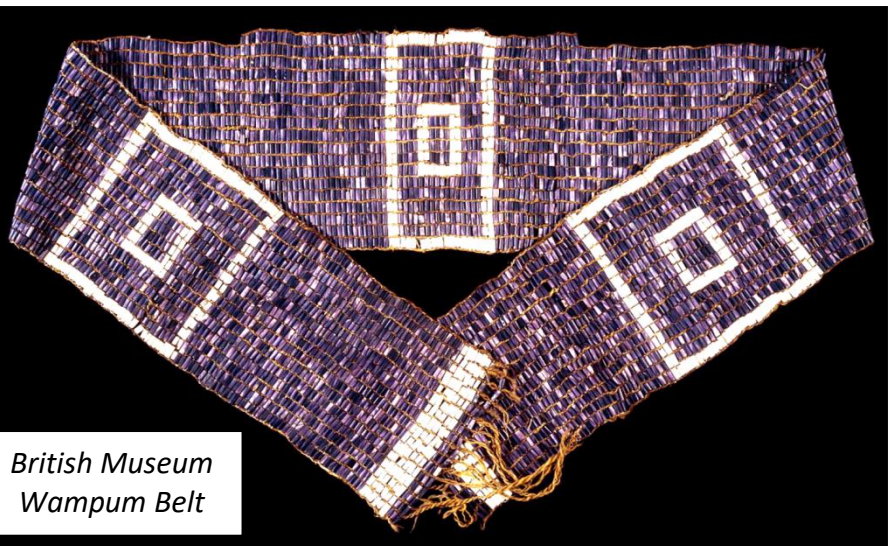
The color of the beads had meaning. For the Algonquians, white beads represented purity, light and brightness, and would be used as gifts to mark events that invoked those characteristics, such as the birth of a child. The more valuable purple beads represented solemn things like war, grieving and death.

The combination of white and purple represented the duality of the world; light and dark, sun and moon, women and man, life and death.



*(Above and Above Right):
British Museum Wampum Belts*

Wampum was given as a gift for many occasions: births, marriages, the signing of treaties, occasions for condolence and remembrance. The Iroquois believed wampum was so spiritually powerful it could bring back the spirit of dead loved ones.



*British Museum
Wampum Belt*

Dutch traders made Wampum an accepted colonial currency

Dutch traders had been using Venetian glass beads for centuries to trade with indigenous peoples in Africa, India and in what is now New England. The legend of Peter Minuit's 1626 purchase of Manhattan Island for \$24 worth of glass is based on this centuries-old Dutch trading practice. But the Dutch fur traders upriver on the Hudson were discovering that wampum, prized and valued by the local tribes, could be an equal-value replacement for their Venetian glass beads.



(Above): Examples of Venetian Glass Beads traded by the Dutch. Glass production in Venice was moved to the nearby island of Murano in 1291. The blue beads date from the 1400s

As early as 1611-1614 Dutch fur traders had established a trading post in what is now Albany on the Hudson River. That may have been when they realized the value of wampum and that it could be used instead of Venetian glass beads for trade with the local tribes upriver. They also learned that the source of the wampum was local, in nearby Long Island Sound. The Dutch quickly realized it would be cheaper and easier to manufacture wampum beads locally and they quickly focused their future explorations on Long Island Sound and on the coastal tribes making wampum.

Two decades later in 1633 the Dutch had established a fur trading post in what is now Hartford on the Connecticut River. By this time it was common knowledge among the tribes upriver on the Hudson and on the Connecticut and also up the coast in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and even Maine, that both the Dutch and even the English traders were using wampum as a trading currency.

In Hartford the trading-savvy Dutch made a clever and perhaps necessary agreement with the powerful resident Pequot tribe. An alliance was formed to monopolize the river trade in both wampum and beaver fur. Luckily for the Dutch, the Pequots had already conquered almost all of the wampum producing regions of Long Island Sound and they demanded tribute payments from these tribes in the form of wampum. (This was a major contributing factor to the impending Pequot War.) The Pequots began trading wampum to the Dutch for duffel cloth, iron-bladed axes, hoes, adzes, pot hooks, drills, kettles, looking glasses, metal spoons, brass arrow points and ultimately gun powder and guns. Their economic enrichment from trading wampum placed the Pequot socially and militarily in a dominant position over the neighboring river tribes. Wampum had become an accepted colonial currency. It would become legal tender in New England from 1637 to 1661 and in New York to 1673. This was also the start of the counterfeiting of wampum that would soon run rampant in the colonies.

Both the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Connecticut settlements recognized the reality of wampum as an accepted currency. Public exchange-rates were published. Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court declared that white wampum beads would pass as lawful payment. Strings of 8, 24, 96 and 480 beads were valued respectively at 1, 3 and 12 pence and 5 shillings. Purple beads were worth twice as much as the white ones. For the next 10 years the standard exchange rates for wampum was very stable.

Saybrook's second currency

The general acceptance of wampum was in part due to the fact that there was a shortage of money in the colonies and the English did not allow the colonists to mint their own. Wampum and the age-old system of bartering goods and services fueled the early commercial transactions of the Saybrook settlers. Those transactions were quickly growing well beyond the confines of small settlements like Saybrook. Within ten years of the establishment of Saybrook, riverside towns up and down the river were engaged in shipbuilding. First the boats were small coastal traders but then larger cargo sailing ships were built to trade with the West Indies.

Typical small 1630s coastal trader



It started as early as 1647 when Hartford and Wethersfield merchants built the sailing ship *Tryall* to trade with the Caribbean island of Barbados. It carried livestock, fresh produce, grain, seeds and lumber which were then traded for sugar and the prized molasses. Molasses was used to produce rum and the Connecticut River settlements became major producers and exporters of rum. There was another prized item brought back with the molasses. That was the famous Spanish silver dollar. It had circulated throughout the Caribbean for decades as a result of Spanish, French, Dutch and Portuguese traders.



Date-stamped 1657

The Spanish Silver Dollar

This coin quickly became the unofficial accepted currency of the colonies for the rest of the 1600s and throughout the 1700s. In fact it remained legal tender in the United States until the Coinage Act of 1857. By the mid-1600s the increased trade with the Caribbean Islands and the demise of the powerful Pequot monopoly of fur and wampum trade led to the end of wampum being used as an accepted colonial currency.

Most of these Spanish coins were minted in South America near the Spanish silver and gold mines. They were hammered out with enough uniformity and detail to make them trustworthy in weight and value. They literally became the first world currency by the late 1700s and they were the most trusted coins of the early colonists. They were difficult to counterfeit but several countries re-stamped or counter-marked them in order to use them as their own currency.

The Spanish silver dollar was approximately the size of the modern US silver dollar. It had been minted in the Spanish empire since 1497. It was worth eight Spanish Reales. Due to its consistent silver content, the Spanish dollar was the most trustworthy coin the colonists knew. To make change the dollar was actually cut into eight pieces or "bits." Thus came the terms "pieces of eight" from these early times and "two bits" from our time. Local blacksmiths usually helped cut the coins to assist in making change.



Half dollars



Quarters



One dollar



Pieces of eight

(Above right): A Spanish silver dollar cut into typical bits
 (Right): A penny versus one bit for size comparison



Saybrook's third currency

In 1652, Massachusetts colonists decided not to counter-mark the Spanish silver dollar but rather to start minting their own currency. This was a challenge to England's ban on colonial coinage. The English civil war had brought about the 1653 ascendancy of Oliver Cromwell as "Lord Protector of the British Isles." That meant there was no royal monarch on the throne of England. The Boston Puritans decided to take advantage of this royal loophole. The colony struck a series of silver coins initially called Pine Tree Shillings because they bore the image of a pine tree, an important Massachusetts export for ships' masts. Later coins bore the image of a willow tree and later an oak tree.

The silver coins were issued in the traditional English denominations of 3 and 6 pence and 1 shilling. They were minted from 1653 till 1682 but all the coins were stamped 1652 in order to appear they were minted when the English government was a commonwealth and had no sitting king to prohibit a colonial mint. King Charles II eventually shut down the Boston mint in 1682 but by then these coins had become a common currency throughout the New England colonial settlements as well as the Caribbean.



(Above Right): Silver Pine Tree shilling marked "Masathusets"

(Right): Silver Oak Tree shilling

(Below): Silver Willow Tree shilling, dated 1652

(Below Right): All coins were date-stamped 1652, a year when no monarch occupied the English throne.



Colonial currency footnote

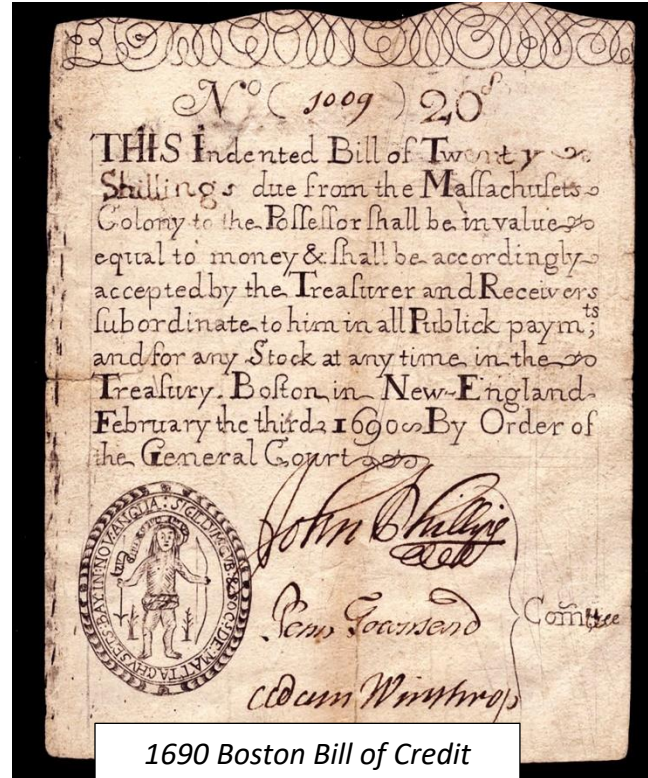
In 1690 the Massachusetts Bay Colony once again led the way with colonial currency when they issued the first official paper money to pay soldiers for their military expeditions in the north. The bills were basically IOU's for the soldiers returning home and became known as "bills of credit." They were redeemable in English coins. Shortly thereafter several other colonies began printing their own paper money. Nothing was uniform or regulated between the colonies and counterfeiting became rampant.

The Spanish silver dollar continued to be the most universally trusted currency in all of the colonies. In 1793, ten years after the American Revolution, a law was passed to allow the Spanish silver dollar to be an official part of the American monetary system. It remained legal tender in the United States until 1857.

Wampum footnote

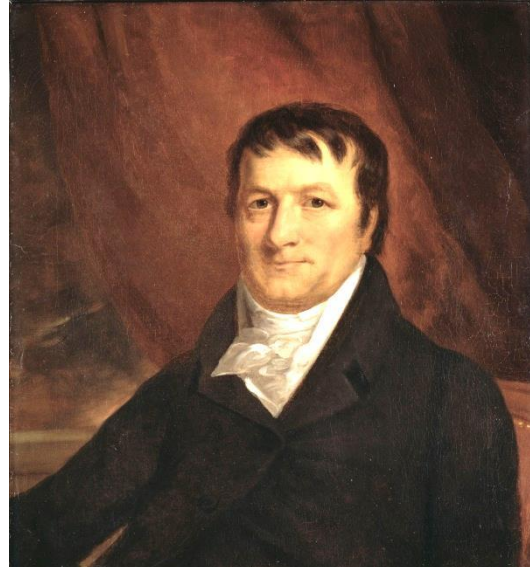
Wampum as a New England currency ended around the 1650s with the rise of trade with the West Indies and the demise of the powerful Pequot monopoly on fur and wampum trade. But wampum did not cease to be a currency elsewhere. By as late as the 1770s wampum was being mass produced in a mill in New Jersey called the Campbell Brothers Wampum Mill.

The mill purchased shells from fish markets in New York City and used West Indian conches brought in on ships as ballast. The mill sponsored quahog-shucking contests in Rockaway on Long Island in which the contestants got to keep the meat and the mill kept the shells. By 1812 the mill invented a drill that quickly and precisely drilled a hole in the wampum, then used a grindstone to fashion the shape. This made production quicker than traditional hand-drilling and the mill was operating full-time and became the largest employer in the area. The mill sold strings of 50 beads.



1690 Boston Bill of Credit
redeemable for 20 shillings

Fur magnate John Jacob Astor purchased those wampum strings from the Campbell mill to use in trade with native tribes around Montreal, where his American Fur Company acquired most of its lush furs. Ironically, other customers of the mill were federal Indian Agents who sold the strings of wampum beads to various western Indian tribes. Between 1835 and 1866, the Campbell mill produced a million purple beads a year. Production dropped during the Civil War and by 1890 most native tribes had been placed on reservations, and the wampum production industry came to an end.



*John Jacob Astor (1763-1848, 84 yrs.)
Fur magnate, wampum trader and
New York City real estate investor*

Today some indigenous artists in the Northeast are still crafting wampum jewelry on a small scale using traditional shells. There is also an ongoing effort to reclaim lost historical wampum belts from museums in foreign countries and numerous private collections and historical societies that lack appropriate provenance for the belts.

As a sign of today's modern economy, most of today's wampum beads are acrylic reproduction beads being mass-produced in China and sold to hobbyists in the United States.