

## Wampum

The earliest European settlers on these shores had very little of any given commodity, not the least of which was hard money. While items and services were calibrated in the British pounds, shillings and pence, there wasn't any actual currency involved, just the applied value in monetary terms with the rest to be bartered by a mutually agreeable price. Hard English coin, silver or copper, was simply not to be had for ordinary commerce. Barter was tried in some places, but it was shells that really came to the fore, in the form of wampum. And wampum, it turned out, was subject to all the laws affecting money.

There were two kinds of wampum; the white came from the shells of large marine snails called whelk, and the black (which actually was dark blue) from shells of the quahog, or clam. The latter was worth twice as much as the white. These shells were collected by the Indians along the shores of Long Island Sound, then cut into tiny beads that were polished to a glassy smoothness, bored and strung on thin strips of deer sinew, usually in units of a fathom, or six feet. A fathom contained from 240 to 360 beads and was worth from five to ten shillings if white, or ten to twenty if black.

So widespread was the use of wampum among white settlers that in 1641 the Great and General Court of Massachusetts made it legal currency in the Bay Colony for sums of ten pounds or less. By this standard, an English penny was worth six pieces of white wampum, or three of black. Soon, however, wampum currency was debased by an influx of ill-made shells. In 1648, the Court ordered that "it shall be entire without deforming spots" and that henceforth it would be strung in different lengths, worth from one to twelve pence in white, and two pence to twelve shillings in black.

About this period of time a man by the name of William Pynchon appeared on the scene. He was a fur trader and one of the original proprietors of the Bay Colony. In 1636, Pynchon built a warehouse at what is now Springfield, Massachusetts, and proceeded to gain a monopoly over the fur trade of the entire region. He had been so prudent as to acquire, from sources unknown, bushels of loose wampum shells. Then he hired the women and children of the settlement to string him twenty thousand fathoms' worth of beads (about 22  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles). There was nothing "ill-made" about them. With this mass-produced if somewhat bogus wampum, he paid the Indians for furs.

Just how well his scheme worked in a day and age when there were no treasury agents to interfere is indicated by the Pynchon account books now in the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum at Springfield. In six years, for instance, William and his son John acquired from the Indians over nine thousand beaver skins weighing about seven tons – all paid for in wampum and bartered goods.

For years Pynchon paid over half the taxes of Springfield. Eventually he had the gall to write a theological treatise that displeased the governing theocracy of Boston, a far greater indiscretion than minting money at home in those days. The offending writings were denounced by the clergy and publicly burned; in 1652, William Pynchon returned to England, leaving his wilderness empire in the hands of his son.

John Pynchon also was a successful real-estate operator, buying up tracts of land from the Indian sachems who supplied him with furs. He would give them credit at his trading posts to the extent of the price agreed upon. For the land that is now the town of Hatfield, Massachusetts, he paid the sachem Umpanchala three hundred fathoms of

wampum, (1,800 feet) and charged the settlers he resold it to an equivalent amount, which he figured at £75 (about \$364.00). In his ancient account books we catch a glimpse of the fate of the simple red man: Umpanchala expended the full amount of his trade credit in one year, buying no less than fifteen coats for an average of five fathoms of wampum each; two pairs of breeches and a waistcoat for four fathoms and nine “hands”; a gun for six fathoms and five hands, leaving a credit of two fathoms of wampum, which was canceled by the entry: “For your being drunk.” Pynchon had conveniently managed to be elected local magistrate.

John’s account books were kept in fathoms and hands of wampum. Since he computed ten hands of wampum as equal to a fathom of six feet, his “hands” came to a little over seven inches instead of the usual four. By the time he died in 1702, wampum was no longer legal tender; it had given way to silver coin, brought in by the growing West India trade. But the wampum makers had invested well. John was worth about five thousand pounds, (\$24,250) a vast estate for that place and time. It is ample testimony to his and his father’s remarkable talents.

**Historic Bytes**

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