

Native American Heritage 2

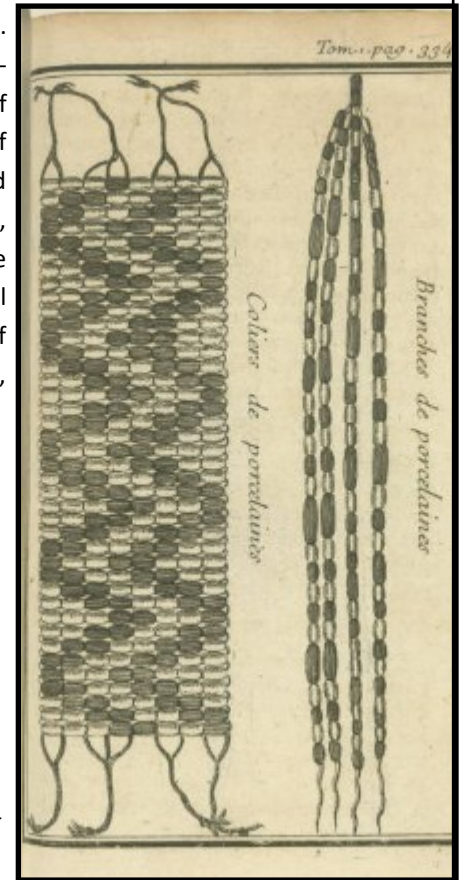


While Europeans arrived in this area nearly 400 years ago, archaeologists have found stone tools, arrow heads, and food storage sites that indicate humans have occupied this area of Long Island for at least 4,000 years. Prior to the influence of European colonizers the Unkechaug did not tend to have heavily centralized villages, instead their villages consisted of a network of semi-permanent family wigwams which were connected more through social ties than proximity. These villages could move and change, particularly with the addition of seasonal hunting camps which spread habitation sites further into the forests and along game trails. Archaeological evidence illuminates the deep material culture of the Unkechaug, with pottery from at least 1,000 BCE, archery technology developed around 700 CE, and agriculture practices originating in Mesoamerica reaching the area by 1400 CE. The material culture of the Unkechaug, like many of their Indigenous neighbors throughout the North East, heavily features wampum.

Wampum are handcrafted shell beads of two varieties; white wampum made from the center spine of

the common whelk and the more valuable black or purple wampum from the deep indigo edge of the hard shell quahog clam. Wampum making was an artisan craft in which Indigenous men would use quartzite stones to chip away the outer edges of the shells then, using stone blades, chisels, and scrapers, they would grind and cut the shell to the shape of the beads and finally use a stone tipped pump drill to create a hole through the bead. These beads served a multitude of cultural purposes; they were woven into clothes or worn as jewelry as signifiers of social status, belts of wampum were given as restitution to the family of murder victims, and different amounts, colors, and arrangements of wampum strands were used as diplomatic tools.

As Dutch and English colonizers arrived their impact was felt in every aspect of Indigenous life, including the production and use of wampum. The earliest examples of indigenous-colonizer wampum trade was as a barter tool in hostage exchanges, first seen when Dutch captain Willem Dunton took four indigenous men hostage and subsequently released them in exchange for “long strings of beads.” From there wampum grew to become part of the currency system of the settler economy, especially after the 1650s as increasing conflicts with both Indigenous communities and the British made it difficult to get hard currency from Holland and they relied on wampum for trade deals. At the same time as the role of the wampum changed, so did the methods of construction. Iron tools traded from Europeans began to replace the stone ones that had traditionally been used to make wampum, significantly expediting the process as well as increasing the standardization of the beads. The change in production methods as well as the greater demand for wampum as a trade currency led to an increasing industrialization of what had once been a more artistic process as the indigenous people became more entrenched in the settler economy. The latter half of the seventeenth century brought significant cultural changes to Long Island’s Algonquian-speaking communities. Unkechaug leaders like Tobacus and Mahue fought to protect their people and land, but English entrepreneurs and officials steadily reduced their territory. By 1700, most of the Unkechaugs’ land was lost, forcing them to find ways to survive in the English economic system.



Sources:

Lipman, Andrew. Saltwater Frontier. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

Strong, John. The Unkechaug Indians of Eastern Long Island. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

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