

Wampum

“As an institution, money is almost infinitely adaptable. This helps to explain the wide variety of origins and the vast multitude of different kinds of objects used as primitive money.”

“These include: amber, beads, cowries, drums, eggs, feathers, gongs, hoes, ivory, jade, kettles, leather, mats, nails, oxen, pigs, quartz, rice, salt, thimbles, umiaks, vodka, wampum, yarns and zappozats, which are decorated axes – to name but a minute proportion of the enormous variety of primitive moneys... “

“... and none of this alphabetical list includes modern examples like gold, silver or copper coinage nor any of the 230 or so units of paper currency.” (Davies)

When the Pilgrims arrived, the natives had money, but it was very different from the money Europeans were used to.

American Indians had been using money for millenia, and quite useful money it turned out to be for the newly arrived Europeans – despite the prejudice among some that only metal with the faces of their political leaders stamped on it constituted real money.

Worse, the New England natives used neither silver nor gold. Instead, they used the most appropriate money to be found in their environment – durable skeleton parts of their prey. Specifically, they used wampum, shells of the clam (*venus mercenaria* and its relatives), strung onto pendants. (Szabo)

“‘Peag’ is the Indian word for a string of beads and ‘wampum’ meant ‘white’, the most common colour of their money, hence the full title of their famous currency ‘wampumpeag’ is usually abbreviated to ‘wampum’.” (Davies)



Clams were found only at the ocean, but wampum traded far inland. Sea-shell money of a variety of types could be found in tribes across the American continent.



Only a handful of tribes, such as the Narragansetts, specialized in manufacturing wampum, while hundreds of other tribes, many of them hunter-gatherers, used it. Wampum pendants came in a variety of lengths, with the number of beads proportional to the length. Pendants could be cut or joined to form a pendant of length equal to the price paid. (Szabo)

Naturally wampum was most commonly used in what are now the coastal states from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in the north to Florida and Louisiana in the south; but wampum spread inland also and was used by certain tribes right across the continent.

The powerful Iroquois amassed large quantities by way of tribute, though they lived far from the original source of wampum. The shells are mostly white but with a smaller deep purple rim. The scarcer 'black' or blue-black wampum was usually traded at double the price of the white.

The average individual piece of wampum was thus a cylindrical bead about half an inch or so long and between an eighth and a quarter inch in diameter, with a hole drilled lengthwise for stringing; but other shapes and sizes were not uncommon. Even the genuine highest-quality wampum became depreciated over time in quality as well as through increased quantity.

For normal currency purposes the wampum strings were either about 18 in. or 6ft long and were therefore usually reckoned in cubits and fathoms, but on occasions singly or in feet; they were eminently divisible. (Davies)

Wampum Was Legal Tender in the Colonies

As an indication of the essential role wampum played in early colonial days even among the white settlers, it was made legal tender in a number of the original thirteen American colonies.

As Bradford notes,

But that which turned most to their profite, in time, was an entrance into the trade of Wampampeake;

for they now bought aboute 50li. worth, of it of them; and they tould them how vendable it was at their forte Orania; and did perswade them they would find it so at Kenebeck; and so it came to pass in time, though at first it stuck, & it was 2. years before they could put of this small quantity, till ye inland people knew of it;

and afterwards they could scarce ever gett enough for them, for many years together. And so this, with their other provissions, cutt of they trade quite from ye fisher-men, and in great part from other of ye stragling planters.

And strange it was to see the great allteration it made in a few years amonge ye Indeans them selves; for all the Indeans of these parts, & ye Massachussets, had none or very litle of it [Peag], but ye sachems & some spetiall persons that wore a litle of it for ornamente.

Only it was made & kepte amonge ye Nariganssets, & Pequents, which grew rich & potent by it, and these people were poore & begerly, and had no use of it.

Neither did the English of this plantation, or any other in ye land, till now that they had knowledg of it from ye Dutch, so much as know what it was, much less yt it was a comoditie of that worth & valem.

But after it grue thus to be a comoditie in these parts, these Indeans fell into it allso, and to learne how to make it; for ye Nariganssets doe geather ye shells of which yey make it from their shors.

And it hath now continued a current comoditie aboute this 20. years, and it may prove a drugg in time. (Bradford, 1628)

In 1637 Massachusetts declared white wampum legal tender at six beads a penny and black at three a penny, but only for sums up to one shilling.

Apparently this experiment succeeded, for the legal tender limit was raised to £2 in 1643, a substantial amount for those days and far exceeding the real value of our coinage limits today.

Although wampum ceased to be legal tender in New England in 1661, it still remained a popular currency in parts of North America for nearly 200 years subsequently, although the blanket and the beaverskin were strong competitors among the Indians of Canada. (Davies)

Information here is primarily from Bradford; History of Money – From Ancient Times to the Present Day, Davies; The Origins of Money, Szabo

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young