

IX. Wampum

Wampum is, strictly speaking, a string of white beads, typically made from the shells of mollusks indigenous to the seacoasts of eastern North America. The beads were prized by Native Americans as ornament for the body or for weaving into fabric, and they were valued as "shell money" or "currency" in barter. Some have claimed that only white beads are properly called wampum, but those made from the purple of clam shells have also been included, and with post-Columbian blue glass beads, they were even more highly prized.

Belts made from beads, known as wampum belts, were used on great ceremonial occasions, such as the making of treaties. They were used, rather than signed paper, to seal and solemnize events. Miles, Charles, "Indian & Eskimo Artifacts of North America," New York: Bonanza Books (1963) shows fine pictures of beads and necklaces, which were made, not only from shell, but from many other ordinary materials as well.

That beads of various kinds have a rich history among very many cultures dating back to antiquity is evident from the title of Dubin, Lois Sherr, "The History of Beads from 30,000 B.C. to the Present," New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers (1987). Even in North America at least eight thousand years before the White Man, Indians were wearing and trading beads. Dubin demonstrates the richness of relatively recent bead art in its sophisticated uses by Native Americans, such as in a saddle blanket and saddle.

Dubin's timeline for bead-making has glass beads entering North America with Christopher Columbus in 1492 as gifts for the native population. "Most of the beads introduced to the New World by Europeans were made of glass, a material unknown to the native cultures." She tells us that glass beads from European producers of Venice especially, but elsewhere too, became objects of barter for furs in the west.

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were not, at their Expedition's 1803-06 moment in history, however, yet up to trading for animal furs of commerce, but, typically, for food and other articles needed by the vulnerable Corps of Discovery; there were hungry circumstances. At Fort Mandan, during the cold winter of 1805, axes made on site were traded for corn. Preparing to cross the Bitterroot Mountains outbound, the Corps traded dearly for horses, some of which became meat for the men in difficult winter travel. On the return trip, the men traded what they had left, namely awls, knitting pins, needles, vermilion, thread and ribbon, for roots only.

Along with beads, Meriwether Lewis stored up on many other items in Philadelphia for shipment by wagon to Pittsburgh, and later in St. Louis too, which were intended for use as "coin" of the west: scissors, thimbles, calico, mirrors, brass buttons, silk, knives, tomahawks, razors, ivory combs, arm bands, tobacco, whiskey, medals, flags, brass kettles and ear trinkets. All were packed in 21 bags, each of these meant for a specific tribe that Lewis expected to encounter. That is how meticulously this Expedition was

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planned under our Librarian-in-Chief's guiding hand. Thomas Jefferson and Lewis had a very good idea of what served as "currency" in the vast new land being obtained from Napoleon Bonaparte, even if its borders were yet fuzzy.

So, North America at the time of the Lewis and Clark Expedition had two economies. Lewis made his outgoing purchases on the basis of one, a \$1000 War Department draft in Philadelphia; then, for the most part, he left his White Man's "wampum" behind, and went forth with the other, Indian wampum. Compared to exchanges in a paper economy, the stocking-up preparations took much more attention to detail, and added burden to the keelboat in Pittsburgh. However, he could not have otherwise succeeded.

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation