

STRINGING WAMPUM

an art activity



Introduction:

Wampum, the tubular beads made from seashells, drilled and strung into strings or woven into belts, was a key ingredient in any talks and meetings held between Indian clans, or between Indians and white colonists in North America. For the Indians, wampum carried a spiritual importance, and served as a communication tool, -- a symbol linking different groups. It was an important part of any speech. Although substitutions were used on some occasions, wampum was always the preferred and expected token to use when holding a conference or meeting.

Colonial leaders quickly learned of the importance of wampum and knew that a good supply must be on hand, as well as strings or belts made, for use in negotiations with the Indians. When communications back and forth between colonists and Indians was particularly busy, it was often hard to keep well supplied with wampum.

A belt might contain tens of thousands of beads. Patterns and designs on belts would often be fashioned using two colors. White beads symbolized peace, while black (dark purple) beads meant war. The length of a string of beads also had meaning: a long one symbolized something important.

Today, realistic-looking artificial wampum in the two traditional colors is available through craft suppliers. (A list of suppliers is below) With advance planning, students can take part in an easy and enjoyable classroom activity, stringing beads to form strings of wampum. If necessary, tubular beads in appropriate colors from the local craft store can be substituted for this activity. This art activity can easily be combined with a drama/role-play activity, The Onondaga Council Ceremony, for a more expanded lesson on Pennsylvania frontier diplomacy, conflict resolution and Indian traditions.

MAKE YOUR OWN STRING OF WAMPUM

Difficulty Level: using artificial wampum - grades 6-8
using tubular beads with larger holes, gr. 4-6

Materials needed:

purple and white wampum beads*

(or substitute a similar tubular bead from craft store)

thread: simulated sinew (available at websites, below)

or, buttonhole thread

Optional: thin crewel needles or small eye sewing needles

[*most suppliers carry beads 1 cm. in length; 30 beads/student will yield an adequate string of wampum approximately 1 foot in length.]

Instructions:

1. Cut thread twice as long as desired length for each student.
2. Distribute beads in small bowls or containers.
3. Tie triple or quadruple knot on end of thread. Test with bead to insure that knot holds and beads don't slide through.
4. Using tip of thread, or thin needle threaded with sinew, or buttonhole thread or beads onto string. twist, thread
5. Tie final triple or quadruple knot to secure end.
6. Enjoy your wampum!

SOURCES FOR WAMPUM AND SUPPLIES:

Waaban Aki Crafting, <http://home.cshore.com/waaban/wampum>
recommended source for artificial wampum

The Wandering Bull, Inc., <http://shop.store.yahoo.com/wbtp/beads>
carries simulated sinew, wampum and glass beads*

[*note: glass beads can split the thread or sinew when threading beads]