

HISTORIC ROOTS

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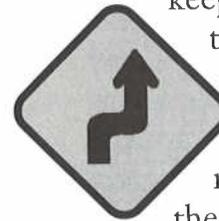
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HISTORY IN BEADS

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When we talk about reading today we are usually talking about reading words. But long before people wrote words, they used pictures or patterns to send messages, tell stories, keep records. We still use some forms of this kind of writing today.



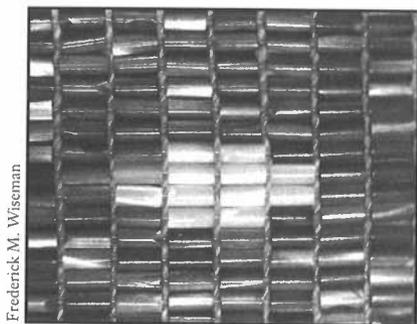
For instance, when we see this sign on the road we know that the road is going to bend to the right and then go straight.

When we see this one in a mall or diner we know smoking is not allowed. Shapes can bear messages, too, and colors.



A sign shaped like this means “Stop!” and it is red because red means both “stop” and “danger.”

For hundreds of years the Western Abenaki, a Native American nation in what is now Vermont and New Hampshire, used designs and patterns made of beads—wampum—instead of writing. They used the beads



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Closeup of tubular wampum beads in a belt.

for decoration and to tell stories, send messages, celebrate important events, and keep records.

Because they did, they were able to remember their stories and their history.

“Wampum” is an English word that comes from a Western Abenaki word meaning white bead. Not all wampum beads were white, but they were all made from shells. The Western Abenaki began to use wampum several thousand years ago. They strung or wove the beads on animal sinew or on woven reeds and grasses.

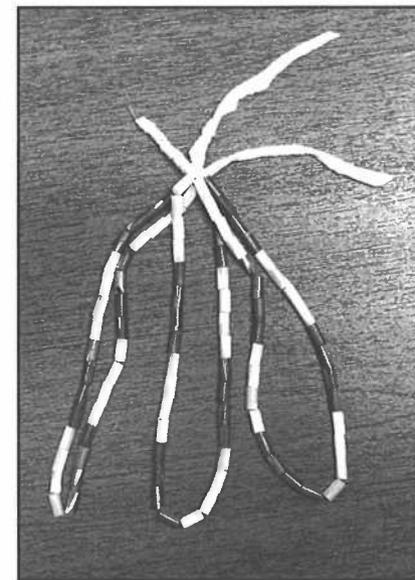
The Western Abenaki used three kinds of wampum beads: flat, round ones, called “disc” beads; whole-shell beads, made out of tiny shells; and longer, tube-shaped (tubular) beads. Disc beads were made from the shells of clams and mussels found along the coast. Bead makers shaped the shells into discs and then drilled holes in the middle for stringing. One necklace found in Maine was made of 5,000 tiny disc beads.

Beads made from whole shells simply had their ends cut off to make the holes for stringing. The kinds of shells used for these beads

came only from the southern part of North America. The Abenaki lived only in northern New England. The beads thus tell a story of trade along thousands of miles of coast at a time when there were no roads, when canoes were the only means of travel by water.

At first, because tools were clumsy and the shells easily broken, it was hard to drill holes to make the longer tubular beads. At the end of a day, a bead maker might have made only one whole bead. By the 1680s, when iron tools were in use, drilling was easier and bead makers could finish 100-200 beads a day. Tubular beads were made only on the coast, so the fact that we find them inland means there was trading and gift-giving between the people on the shore and those living far from the water.

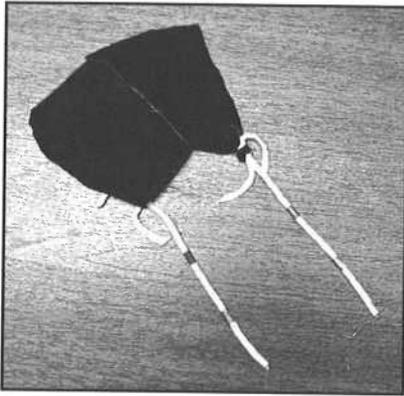
Some wampum beads were used for arm bands and necklaces for men and to trim cloth and leather. Strings of them also marked life’s important



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A wampum string used to invite Abenakis to a meeting.

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Wampum strings were sent to propose marriage. These have been sent back with the woman's answer. Don't you wish you knew what color the cloths were?

events—birth, coming-of-age, marriage, death. Among some Abenaki people, a man would send a string of wampum to a woman he wanted to marry. If she wanted to marry him, she sent part of the string back with a pink or red

piece of cloth attached to it. If she was not interested, she attached a blue cloth. Wampum belts might also record victory in war, the election of a new chief, or illness within a group.

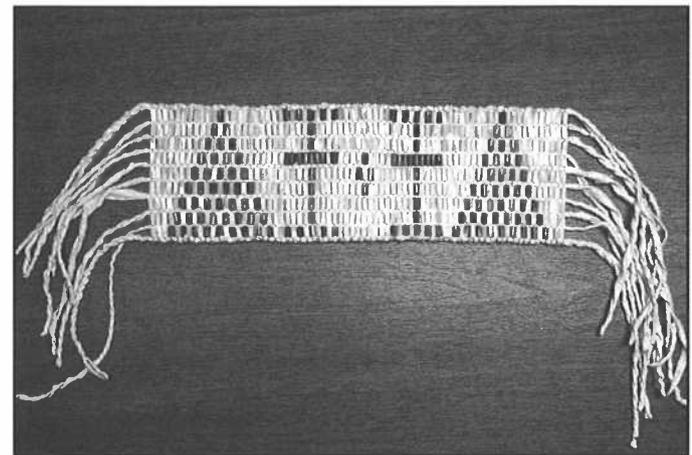
Some Christian Abenaki made wampum designs honoring God. In 1699 two large Western Abenaki belts, whose patterns of white and purple beads formed religious sayings in Latin, were sent to Chartres, a large cathedral in France. They are still there for visitors to see. One is more than seven feet long! In return their church received a silver statue of the Virgin Mary, which was later stolen.

Patterns in wampum belts helped storytellers remember their stories. Wampum patterns

also recorded actual events. The more important the event, the more complex were the wampum patterns. The Western Abenaki used beads to record agreements with other Native American groups or with French, English, and later, American governments.

Specially trained men and women kept these belts and learned what they said by heart so that they could recite them. They trained younger men and women to do the same thing, to be sure the information was not lost. Sometimes by using these belts, the Abenaki were able to remind the English and Americans of terms of treaties.

By the middle of the 1800s, as more and more Abenaki learned to read English and



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A wampum record of the number of Abenaki who had become Catholics. The triangle symbols stand for Abenaki houses; the crosses for the Catholic Church. The same kind of belt, with different symbols and patterns, was used to record treaties.

French, they stopped using wampum to record history or to tell stories. But now with the growing interest in Native Americans, wampum is again being used, for decoration, for ceremonies, and as an important and beautiful way to record the present and remember the past.

Rooting Around

At the beginning of the article are some signs that need no words to be understood, signs that we see every day. What others can you think of?

What did Abenaki women mean when they used pink or blue to answer a man's proposal of marriage? What do those colors mean to us? What other colors have special meanings?

The Abenaki used strings or belts of beads woven in patterns to mark important events in their lives. We have our own ways of marking events such as birthdays, engagements, and marriages, that everyone understands without needing words. What are some of them?

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