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Small Wampum Bands Used by Native Americans in the Northeast: Functions and Recycling

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Abstract Wampum, as a commodity and as a cultural product, is commonly considered as part of the material culture of the Native American peoples of the northeastern region. These small shell beads, of a roughly standardized size and shape, emerged after 1615 as an effective response to the developing pelt trade. Recent studies reveal that the native populations in this region used these beads in a variety of different ways, and that the political uses generally associated with these materials were regularly employed only among the peoples of the three great confederacies – the Huron, the Susquehannock, and the Five Nations Iroquois. Small woven bands of wampum, as well as strings of these shell beads, were the most commonly used forms of these materials. Despite the vast numbers of studies dealing with wampum, the widely varied functions served by small bands and strings of these beads have never been examined as a specific aspect of Native American material culture.

Introduction
Wampum, the small cylindrical shell beads that became an important commodity in the northeastern region after 1615, has only recently been recognized as having had a number of very different uses. The many contexts within which these materials were used, both by natives and colonists in the northeast, are now much more clearly understood (Becker 2002, 2005, 2006). The impressive larger examples of surviving wampum bands attract the most attention. Most of these had political uses, forming a subcategory of bands that commonly are identified as “belts.” The few examples of the small bands and strings of wampum that survive, many of which also served political uses, are rarely noted in print and seldom illustrated (see Fig. 1). Modern uses of these large wampum bands reflect impressive renewed political importance, but almost entirely without reference to their many possible original functions. Politics has come to overshadow much of the research on the origins, makers, and many situations in which these beads came to be part of life among the natives and colonists within an extremely limited area of the northeast. Study of the small bands and strings helps us to understand the different ways in which
the diverse forms of objects incorporating these materials were used during the 200 years when wampum was part of colonial diplomacy and economics in the Northeast.

Jonathan Lainey, Archivist for the Aboriginal Archives (Library and Archives Canada), suggests that the wampum bands that were re-circulated, whether originally used either as gifts or as small diplomatic belts, were distinct from the principle diplomatic belts. Diplomatic belts were presented as the equivalent as a written treaty document, or as a pledge of agreement between participants at the treaty. These principal belts generally were larger and had more elaborate designs. Some even may have included design elements specifically relating to the nature of the treaty. These “documentary” belts were intended as records to be preserved (Lainey 2004: 67, n5). These belts are what most often come to mind when modern peoples talk about wampum. Diplomatic belts, at one time, were brought out and “read” by native specialists who were knowledgeable about the details of the treaties at which the belts originally had been presented. Various problems often developed among native participants at treaties, and particularly their descendants, through the use of wampum belts as mnemonic devices. The narrations relating to each example were subject to information loss, misperceptions, and misuse. By the latter half of the 18th century, natives were making claims to the meanings of specific belts that were not supported by the documentary record. As documents the value of these belts declined as literacy and other factors of “native” life were changing. By the 1790s, the Five Nations Iroquois requested only the written copies of treaties, having lost faith in the abilities of wampum “keepers” to recall the many details of a treaty that might be represented by a large series of wampum belts. Although those Iroquois who left New York for Canada in 1984 retained some understanding of the political belts that they took with them, by the end of the next century even the original meanings of the surviving wampum belts held in New York had been completely lost.

Figure 1. Vatican Small Penobscot belt (from Becker 2004: 227, fig. 1).
**A Variety of Uses**

Small bands of wampum, many of which served as ornamental garters (Fig. 2), could be used in a number of ways. In 1636, one of the Jesuits who was resident among the Wendat (Huron) reported that “Le quatorzième d'Auût le fils du Capitaine Aenons après avoir perdu au jeu de pailles vne robe de Castor, & vn collier de quatre cens grains de Pourcelaine, ... il le déjepera, & le pendit à vn arbre” (Jesuit Relations 1897, X: 80). This may be translated as follows, with my insertions to clarify the context: “On the fourteenth of April [1636]
the son of [the native elder known as] Captain Aenons, having gambled away, at a game of straws, a beaver robe and a wampum band of 400 beads [and unable to face or feed his family] became desperate and hanged himself from a tree.” The gambling that led this melancholy young man to commit suicide was not unusual among the Huron, who commonly played at least three different forms of games of chance. Beaver robes and wampum bands were some of the high end stakes often wagered (see Jesuit Relations 1897, X: 186, 290) by these people, as well as members of other native groups. As soon as wampum had become one of the common commodities among native peoples in the northeast, having become increasingly available after 1620 (see Becker 2002), loose beads as well as woven bands joined the ranks of artifacts that could be wagered. Gambling losses, including wampum in various forms, frequently left native peoples bereft of clothing and vital implements, even during the depths of winter. The few references to these unfortunate events in the early documents provide us with clues to varied uses for wampum over the two centuries that this commodity was common in the material culture of the northeast. What remains to be understood are the unique patterns of use of wampum found within each specific culture.

The vast numbers of original documents describing the various uses of wampum are filled with references to small bands and strings, used as everything
from ornaments to burial offerings (Jesuit Relations 1897, X: 297). As decorative elements, wampum bands were similar to, but less colorful than the dyed quillwork strips also produced in this region of North America, and beyond (see Fig. 3). The popular and scholarly literature relating to wampum, however, tends to be strongly focused on the larger bands used for political purposes, and commonly termed “belts” in English (colliers in French). Diplomatic belts, or the long ecclesiastical belts, are the forms of wampum bands that most commonly survive in museum collections (e.g. Becker 2006). By the 1640s, the importance of wampum in complex diplomatic negotiations among native peoples and between natives and colonists often required that vast numbers of small belts, as well as strings of wampum, be employed. These varied diplomatic functions for wampum strings and bands also differed from the ornamental or decorative uses in which these beads were employed. The composition of surviving bands often reflects their original purposes. Ornamental bands commonly incorporated beads of glass and/or metal while diplomatic bands were composed only of wampum beads.

To put the entire concept of diplomatic uses for wampum into some historical perspective, one should note that the standardized small cylindrical shell beads identified as wampompeag, or “wampum,” developed over a short span of time, between 1590 and 1604 (Becker In press), earlier than previously suggested (Becker 2002, 2005b). Within only 20 years after this commodity emerged, woven bands of wampum had become essential presentation pieces (items that anthropologists call “prestation,” or formal presentations, for which reciprocal “gifts” were expected) throughout the “Core Area” of wampum use (Becker 2006). There rapidly emerged a vast range of uses for woven bands of wampum. “Belts” used in treaties or diplomatic contexts are perhaps the best known. In addition to the colonial powers and their native allies exchanging many small belts of wampum, individual traders as well as government representatives had belts woven that incorporated their initials. “Strings” of wampum of several types were also used as minor items of prestation at treaties and in other formal contexts. Ornamental wampum bands of various sizes were commonly used in the “Periphery” (the region immediately around the “Core Area”: Becker 2006) and beyond. Loose beads had rapidly become a valued commodity throughout the northeast, and later spread west with some of the tribal groups that shifted their territories to locations far from the area where wampum use had been concentrated.

Research relating to the recent discovery of a small Penobscot wampum “belt” held in the collections of the Vatican Museums (Becker 2004) raised several interesting questions regarding the many functions of small bands of wampum. Several possible uses were served by this commodity when woven into small bands: small diplomatic belts subject to dismantling and recycling of the beads, ornamental bands attached to clothing that could be reused intact, decorative bands that served as functional garters (Fig. 2), and ornamental
headbands and/or crowns. In addition to the Jesuit Relations there are a great number and considerable variety of manuscripts that are available for the study of the colonial history relating to wampum and its uses. For the Mohawk alone, and only in the years before 1693, Grassmann (1969: vii-xiii) has assembled an interesting review of the relevant literature.

In order to understand how the small Vatican wampum bands may have been used requires us to consider the various possible uses for objects of this size. We could assume that the Vatican specimen might be an example of wampum used in political contexts; the type of band identified as a “belt” that was presented at treaties or sent with a diplomatic message. Several examples of these small belts are known to have reached Europe quite early, and others appeared in publications by the early 1700s (Fig. 4). Among these may have been the Vatican Penobscot band (Fig. 1), which may have originated as a decorative example, possibly used as an ornamental garter. Examination of this small band reminds us that hundreds, if not thousands, of small diplomatic wampum belts are noted in the extensive surviving documents, yet very few examples of small belts survive. Those that do survive are rarely illustrated in the modern literature. I also believe that the vast majority of these small belts were recycled intact, or were dismantled and the beads reused in a process that I call cannibalization (Becker 2006).

Notes on the Size Range for Belts

Among the largest surviving wampum belts are those that were made among the native converts at Catholic missions as presentation pieces to other
religious communities. The two examples of the ecclesiastical belts in Chartres Cathedral are perhaps the best known in this category (see Becker 2006: App. II). The mid-17th century Huron belt at Chartres is relatively small, while the 1699 “Abenaki” example is much larger. The last ecclesiastical belt fashioned by native “converts,” made in 1831 by one or more of the three groups of natives then resident at the Lake of the Two Mountains missionary community as a gift for Pope Gregory XVI, incorporates nearly 10,000 wampum beads (Becker 2001, 2006). Grassmann (1969: 207) makes note of the Dutch making a gift to the

*Figure 5.* Benjamin West’s engraving “Indians Giving a Talk to Colonel Bouquet, Oct. 1764.” From the Smith 1766 edition, the first volume to include these illustrations by B. West (Library Company of Philadelphia).
Mohawk in 1659 of 8,000 white and 4,000 blue wampum beads, presumably loose or strung in fathom units. The seemingly large numbers of these beads were small in relation to the considerable extent to which wampum had been incorporated into items of diplomacy. This gift of 12,000 beads made in 1659 could have been used to fashion only one impressive belt.

The records of treaties between the Five Nations and the English, or with their native neighbors, indicate that considerable numbers of small belts of wampum as well as strings were used in normal political discourse, as seen in an engraving made by Benjamin West (see Fig. 5). The largest of the wampum belts that had been made in the normal course of these political dealings were most likely to survive. Small belts of wampum, or those with fewer than 500 beads (5-rows by 100 files), were much more frequently used but are notably rare from among the collections representing the material culture of the Five Nations as well as in all other contexts. The small belts noted in the treaty records, usually only as “a belt” to indicate that a small belt of wampum had been presented, were far greater in number than the large belts recorded from the same gathering. How small belts and strings were used, and how commonly they appear to have been recycled, is well documented in a number of minutes from treaties and conferences. Beauchamp (1898: 11, citing Lafitau 1724) recorded that among Agoiards, or nobles, belts were taken apart and their wampum beads were recycled. I believe that strings and small belts were kept intact, but recycled when needed in the course of diplomatic interactions. On 27 August 1715, several sachems of the Five Nations brought three belts of wampum to Albany to present to Governor-in-Chief Robert Hunter. These elders previous had made three requests of Hunter, but “not having then Belts of Wampum to lay down according to our custom, gave three sticks, and now bring the three Belts of Wampum for the said three propositions” (Graymont 1996, IX: 19). This important record also suggests that these Five Nations emissaries did not wear bands of ornamental wampum that could be used in an “emergency,” or that the ornamental bands worn among the Five Nations included glass or metal beads that marred the “sacred” nature of a pure wampum presentation.

Of particular value in understanding wampum use and belt sizes is a text endorsed as “Conrad Weiser’s Accot of Wampum, left in the Secretary’s Office, October 21st, 1748” (Hazard 1852, 2: 17). Weiser had attended two treaties at which belts had been exchanged, and this account is a listing of the belts received along with size (a bead count) and descriptive information. The listing is similar to a modern bank deposit slip. Note that not even the “large” belt has any design noted on it, and probably was monochromatic or at best had a series of diagonal lines. Relatively simple “designs” were typical for the period before the 1750s, after which belts grew larger and designs more elaborate. The average belt size during the 1740s appears to have been around 900 beads. In treaties where numbers of belts were exchanged, the designation of “A Belt” at the end of each request probably refers to examples that included fewer than 1,000 beads. These small belts probably included as few as 400 to 500 beads, or
about as many as the larger strings of wampum. Belts of 2,000 or more beads are described as being "large." The revealing text of 1748 reads as follows:

"Mem're of Wampum from C. Weiser, 1748.
Memorandum of the Wampum I left in the Secretary's office, October the 21st, 1748.
Were given by the Indians on account of Carolina affair. See my Journal.

- A large Blake Belt, .......................................... 2000 grains
- A String Blake and White, ....................................... 256
- Dito, Blacke & White, ........................................... 600

Were given by the Indians to the President & Council of Pennsylvania. See the Journal.
- A String of White of .............................................. 150
- A Belt of White & few Black, .................................... 900
- A String of White, ................................................ 300
- A String White, ................................................... 185
- Another String of White Wampum, ............................ 212

I can give an account of ten thousand grains of white & Blacke Wampum, I used at the treaty on Ohio. Some of the Belt the Indians will return or ansr with some of their. Some Hundreds [of wampum beads] I Brought Back, not included in the above, but will return them by first opportunity to Secretary.

CONRAD WEISER, Interpreter."
(Hazard 1852, II: 17)

Documents of Diplomacy

Most of what we know about wampum presentation comes from transcripts of diplomatic events. The documentary records of these diplomatic events include the presentation of belts as well as "strings" or "hands" of wampum (also called "branches"). "Hands" of wampum generally involved two or more separate strings tied together at one end. The small strings of wampum that were included in a "hand" each generally incorporated 15 to 25 beads. When an individual string of wampum was presented it might include as few as seven or eight beads or as many as 100 beads. A few larger examples of strings are known from the documents, but very few are known to survive (but, see Feest et al. 2007). What remains to be studied are the many specific records for the use of strings and hands to determine is there are specific meanings embodied in the use of long strings of wampum that incorporate no more beads than "hands."

As was the case with belts of wampum, when a particularly large string was offered, the scribe or official recorder of the treaty tended to make specific note of that fact. For example, at a treaty in 1757, during the French and Indian War, some long strings and a belt were presented on behalf of Sir William Johnson in a context where the unusual length of the strings was noted and the numbers of beads in each was recorded. The first is noted as "A String (480)" and the
subsequent strings are each followed by their bead counts as well (260, 460, 300, and 280). These numbers of wampum beads were as large as the numbers that might be found in small wampum bands, or political belts. Perhaps the circumstances were hurried, and even the brief time needed to fashion a belt was not available. Regardless of the specific reasons, these long strings noted in 1757 parallels a trend toward larger wampum belt sizes, and the presentation of increased numbers of other goods delivered to native allies, as a function of the politics of war.

The detailed records from a 1758 meeting between Teedyuscung and his followers and the Governor of Pennsylvania provides an excellent example of wampum use at treaties. These natives were Lenopi immigrants who after 1733 moved from New Jersey into Pennsylvania where they learned how to use wampum in diplomatic contexts. The exchange of strings as well as belts of all sizes at this meeting reveals the use of wampum of many forms at an important political meeting (cf. Becker 2005b). These records also include information regarding the cannibalization of older belts to create a new and larger example.

A particular presentation of a set of very large examples of wampum strings was recorded shortly after a law was enacted in the New Jersey colony, on 12 August 1758, “to purchase the Right and Claim [to land] of all or any of the Indian Natives of this colony” (Bush 1977, II: 579-581; Graymont 2001, X: 305-307). This act, passed at the height of the French and Indian War, was intended to clear title to any claims outstanding after the hundreds of purchases, large and small, from native bands and from native individuals throughout the state that had been made over a period of more than 125 years (Becker 1998). The colonial government wished to be certain that the native peoples of New Jersey, including the many Lenopi who had migrated into Pennsylvania and had been at one time allied with the French (Becker 1987, 1988, 2004), were satisfied with their previous sales. Two months later, at a major treaty attended by a number of native cultures held at Easton, Pennsylvania under the aegis of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, the New Jersey representatives met with representatives of the three tribes from New Jersey to wrap up the details of their total land sales. Because of the momentous nature of this treaty, on 26 October 1758 after summarizing the terms of the transfer of all land rights, the government representatives presented “A String consisting of one Thousand grains of Wampum” followed by condolences for those recently killed, for which another thousand-bead string was presented. A third string of the same length was presented during the dispersal of those who had gathered for that day (Colonial Records of Penna. 1852, VIII: 210-220). On other days, later in the course of this wartime treaty, various other belts and strings were presented relating to other aspects of these alliances (Colonial Records of Penna. 1852, VIII: 221-222), but no strings as notable in length as those confirming and concluding the earlier land transfers within the borders of this colony (cf. Becker 1998). The following observations, largely derived from the Jesuit Relations (hereafter JR),
provide some ideas regarding the many ways in which wampum was used. The specific focus in this presentation is on “loose” beads and small belts.

Of particular note is that by the 1750s wampum diplomacy had been in use for over 100 years. Although the origins of this commodity can be documented to the years around 1615, and not before 1611, within a few decades all of the varied uses for wampum had been developed within the Core Area of its use. For example, late in the summer of 1644, perhaps in August, or after Father Joseph Bressani had been taken prisoner by the Mohawk, a “matron” of that tribe apparently purchased full title to him through a payment of 3,000 beads of wampum. Soon after Father Bressani was ransomed by the Dutch from this woman with a payment of 200 livres (Jesuit Relations 26: 29-51, 39: 57-97; Hastings 1901, I: 437; see also Grassmann 1969: 93). Almost certainly the ransom was paid in strung wampum. At four white wampum beads to the English penny (the value sometimes fluctuated, often falling to as low as six for a penny), a pound sterling would have purchased 1,440 beads. The value of the French livre, supposedly that of the pound sterling, would suggest an unlikely payment of nearly 300,000 wampum beads.

In the preliminaries to a major peace treaty in 1645 a presentation was made of 18 “belts” of wampum, probably representing both long strings and belts (Jesuit Relations 27: 79, 281-285). During the fall, perhaps in October or November, the Mohawk offered “a great necklace of Porcelain [wampum]” to the Huron (Jesuit Relations 28: 283-287) as an inducement to attend a peace treaty the following May. On 7 May 1646, during this meeting, the Mohawk presented several examples of wampum “bracelets” (either long strings or garters; see Becker 2005b) as a condolence offering. Later at this treaty they presented a “brasse” (brace, or fathom) of wampum, and then a belt of some 3,000 beads. In a reply to the Mohawk from the Governor of Canada five separate gifts are noted, the third of which was a belt of 1,000 beads (Jesuit Relations 28: 291-295). These significant diplomatic efforts of 1645 and after, including the presentation of huge belts to the Huron, may have been a ruse. Attacks by various Five Nations raiders in 1647 completely dislodged the Huron from their traditional territories and forced them to withdraw even further to the north and west.

Two years later, in July of 1661, an Iroquois delegation appeared at Montreal under a white flag, specifically as envoys representing only the Oiongoenhronnons and the Oonmontagchrontons (probably the Cayuga and Onondaga) and returning four French captives as a sign of good faith. At that time the several members of the Five Nations Confederacy were still engaged in various levels of “internal” conflict, and were far from operating as a united confederacy (cf. Jesuit Relations 46: 181). This delegation, believed by Grassman (1969: 220) to have been led by a Cayuga, arranged a specific day on which to hold their treaty. On the appointed day the captain or speaker “brought forth twenty fine presents [belts?] of porcelain which spoke more eloquently than he himself” (JR 46:225). He presented them with the kinds of statements that had become typical opening statements at treaties. The first five belts were presented with
the usual declamations. Then came the central and major request: “Voila, dit-il, en prelentant vn grand & large collier,…”, a request for the French to come to his territory as his guests and to bring with them a delegation of Ursuline nuns as nurses and teachers (Jesuit Relations 46: 229). Most of the 20 “presents” were small, monochrome belts of the type that commonly were recycled. The term “presents,” as used here, should be understood to represent “opening gifts” (items of prestation) that were presented in order to have the requests of the presenters heard. The large number of “belts,” regardless of their size indicates the seriousness of the request, and the number may have been intended to indicate that many nurses and teachers were wanted. The “collar of great size and width” presented at this treaty was the document intended to be retained by the French were they to accept this request.

The political maneuvering of 1661 was meant to provide advantages to the Five Nations Iroquois and to damage the capacities of those native tribes to their north. The Five Nations Iroquois, as other tribal peoples around and in the Dutch sphere of influence, were well aware of the growing English influence and were busy trying to gain advantages of all kinds before the Dutch lost their power in the region. In 1664 the English took control of the last Dutch outposts in the region. Grassmann (1969: 298-298) provides some notes on a treaty held on 22 May 1674 between Mohawks from two “castles” (palisaded villages) and the English Governor-General Anthony Colve at Fort Willem Hendrik (later Fort James). The Mohawk delivered six “words” (greetings and/or requests) to the Dutch, with each of the first five being accompanied by a string of wampum. Grassmann notes that another version of this treaty states that “a belt of wampum” was given with each of the six statements. If six belts actually were given, in what appears to be a pro forma treaty, they would have been very small.

**Gifts of Wampum and Payment in Wampum**

Jonathan Lainey also has considered the possibility that many small bands of wampum were given as “presents’ – as were furs, powders, and cauldrons” (Lainey, pers. Comm. 6 Jan. 2006, cf. Lainey 2004: 62-64). The specific contexts of these wampum presentations merits further study. Lainey reviews the vast archival record in French, and much of that information relates to colonial interactions with the Huron. Since the peoples of the Huron Confederacy were situated at the greatest distance from the earlier native production centers, as well as from later colonial production in colonial Albany, wampum in “belt” form presented as gifts may have been an important means by which this basic commodity entered local economies.

Lainey has also made the extremely important observation that wampum bands were held in the *Magasin du Roi* (King’s warehouse). This depository may have been used to store the elaborate political belts that often had various designs woven into them as well as large numbers of small belts. At present the specific function of this *Magasin* and what else was stored there is uncertain. Nor do we know where diplomatic belts received by any of the various English colonial
powers were held. Lainey notes that the French colonial equivalent of diplomatic emissaries had access to bands stored in the Magasin as well as to a vast range of other goods used to treaty with native peoples (Lainey 2004: 76-80).

Wampum was often used to pay for goods or services, usually with the specific number of beads indicated for what was, in effect, “cash” payments. While standard values were established in many colonies, such as six white beads to the penny (Becker 1980), the variations in the lengths of individual beads created difficulties in making payments involving large numbers. The standard string “unit” of wampum used for such payments was a fathom length, incorporating approximately 360 wampum beads. The fathom of wampum also had a set currency value, which fluctuated by law with devaluations and revaluations (see Becker 1980).

**A Small Penobscot Band of Wampum: A Garter or a Gift?**

The limited numbers of surviving small belts provided few comparative examples for the study of the 308-bead Penobscot wampum belt now at the Vatican Museums (Becker 2004). However, the Vatican example incorporates some extremely interesting features that merit careful consideration. The presence of a piece of black fabric along one short edge of the Vatican small belt, plus the presence of a length of red ribbon attached to one end of the belt are features of some note. Ribbons and other attachments to belts are discussed at length in another paper (Becker 2006). Therefore, in this comparative section analogous attachments and decorations added to other belts will not be reviewed. In this section only a few other belts with similarities in design and form will be discussed.

The use of small bands of wampum as garters among the Penobscot, and other peoples throughout the northeast, is suggested by the unusually small size of most of the bands from this region and the fact that the warp lines of these examples commonly are braided rather than left as loose lines. Several wampum “garters” are illustrated by Speck (1919). One would expect that garters would have been relatively narrow, and many of the bands called “garters” by Speck are indeed quite thin. However, wider ornamental garters are quite likely to have been used as well. Since the catalogue card for the smaller Vatican wampum belt shown in Fig. 1 identifies the object as a “Schnurr (Arm, od. Hals od. ?)” [a band, to be worn on one’s arm, or throat, or elsewhere], the cataloguer certainly perceived the possibility that this band might have served as a garter, or as a neckband as is suggested by the catalogue card (see Becker 2004).

Garters were common items in native inventories dating from the contact period, but their antiquity is unclear. Beaded or quillwork garters, such as seen in Fig. 3, were used by natives to hold up sleeves on the European-made shirts secured through trade, and on other items of clothing that may not have been common before contact (see Becker 2005a). Ornamented garters may, therefore, have had a long history. The functions of these items are most easily inferred when they appear in pairs. Included in an “old war bundle of the Sauk of
Oklahoma was a pair of woven beaded garters” (Orchard 1929: 104-106, Figs. 101, 102). These beaded garters (MAI, Heye Foundation 2/8738) are similar to the small wampum belts known from the Penobscot region as they appear to be about the same general size and shape. The beaded area measures 11 by 2.25 inches, and each end has “about three-quarters of an inch of weaving without the insertion of beads; the remaining loose ends are left as a fringe” (Orchard 1929: 106). In fact, a fringe is not compatible with “garters” but the condition of this pair suggests some damage. Also, these may have been captured items and thus part of the ceremonial gear in this bundle rather than items of clothing worn by the owner.

Conclusion

Some of these examples of diplomatic belts were quite large (Becker and Lainey 2004), but the majority of the woven bands appear to have been small in size. Determining the original function of any specific surviving small band of wampum, none of which retains detailed ethnographic documentation, remains a difficult task. Even the specific individual histories of some of the best “known” wampum belts that survive remain murky (see Fenton 1989, Tooker 1998). Small Penobscot wampum bands with fringes at both ends almost certainly were intended to serve as garters, particularly since diplomatic uses for wampum in their homeland are almost unknown (Becker 2005b). Among the Huron and the Five Nations Iroquois, the principal users of wampum for a wide variety of functions, we are unable to divine the original uses intended for those few small wampum bands that survive. Small bands may have served many functions, but their size and generally monochromatic composition reflect their less significant cultural importance. As such, small bands of wampum were more subject to being used for a variety of functions and/or were cannibalized for reuse in larger bands or as part of a variety of objects that incorporated wampum beads.

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Ecclesiastical Records, State of New York (see Hastings, Hugh)


Material Culture
