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Shells & Nails on the Wampum Trail

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Abstract
In May, my research assistants Stephanie Mach and Lise Puyo joined me for field research in the northeastern US and Canada, visiting nine museums, four tribal communities, and several private collectors to examine colonial-era wampum (woven shell bead) belts and collars. (For more details, see our blog, On the Wampum Trail.) Our travels on the wampum trail were charted, in part, by following a track that Frank G. Speck (one of the founders of the Penn Department of Anthropology) laid a century earlier, when he collected examples of visual, ephemeral, and material culture among Algonkian and Iroquoian communities. By creating detailed object cartographies and provenance histories, we hope to recover connections between Indigenous objects in museums and contemporary Indigenous communities.

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SHELLS & NAILS ON THE WAMPUM TRAIL

By: Margaret Bruchac

In May, my research assistants Stephanie Mach (http://wampumtrail.wordpress.com/2014/05/19/meet-stephanie/) and Lise Puyo (http://wampumtrail.wordpress.com/2014/05/10/meetlise/) joined me for field research in the northeastern US and Canada, visiting nine museums, four tribal communities, and several private collectors to examine colonial-era wampum (woven shell bead) belts and collars. (For more details, see our blog, On the Wampum Trail (http://wampumtrail.wordpress.com/).) Our travels on the wampum trail were charted, in part, by following a track that Frank G. Speck (one of the founders of the Penn Department of Anthropology) laid a century earlier, when he collected examples of visual, ephemeral, and material culture among Algonkian and Iroquoian communities. By creating detailed object cartographies and provenance histories, we hope to recover connections between Indigenous objects in museums and contemporary Indigenous communities.

Stephanie Mach and Lise Puyo examining the Fort Shantok collections at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. Photo by Marge Bruchac.

We started our tour in Connecticut, analyzing the coastal archaeological collections housed at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History.

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(http://peabody.yale.edu/collections/search-collections) in New Haven. There, we found dense evidence of early 17th century Native wampum manufacture in materials salvaged from a dig at Fort Shantok (http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=19586&ResourceType=Site) (also called Uncas's Fort, at Trading Cove), a well-known site in the homelands of the present-day Mohegan Tribe (http://www.mohegan.nsn.us/Heritage/ourHistory.aspx). This collection includes local species of shell used for wampum-making—channeled whelk (Busycon canaliculatum) and knobby whelk (Busycon carica) for white beads, and quahog (Mercenaria mercenaria) for dark purple beads—along with sandstone blocks for polishing shell blanks and bone awls.

(http://www.penn.museum/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/P1040563.jpg)

An iron nail excavated from the Fort Shantok site, re-worked to fit into a bow drill or pump drill. Item #10289 housed in archaeological storage at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, Connecticut Tier 78, Drawer 4. Photo by Lise Puyo.

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The European debris collected from Fort Shantok includes bits of copper, clay pipe fragments, a rusty jaw harp, and a single wrought iron nail. The size suggests it to be a ship’s nail, hammered and drawn from quarter-inch squared iron rod stock (http://www.gregorylefever.com/pdfs/Early%20Nails%202.pdf) (typical of the 16th or 17th century), but the shape is unusual. It has been re-worked, and the point has been drawn out and narrowed into a tubular shape. The head has been flattened in such a way that it would never hold a wooden seam secure. Who would alter such a good nail? To what purpose? The answer may be found among the shell debris from the same layer of the same site: a single white shell bead with a channel that matches the diameter of the narrowed point of the iron nail.

Weeks later, far to the north, at the Canadian Museum of History (http://www.historymuseum.ca/home) in Gatineau, Quebec, we examined two bow drills crafted from bent wood strung with leather cord. Before European contact, Native hand drills, bow drills, and pump drills were fitted with a stone bit (called a mux), secured in a piece of wood which was rotated to generate the necessary heat and friction to bore holes in wood, shell, or stone. Yet, each of these drills was fitted with a cast-off wooden spool and...a nail.
At this juncture, we were delighted to discover that Frank G. Speck’s collections in Canada assisted our research in Connecticut. In 1911, Speck recovered this bow drill from a Huron-Wendat wampum-maker at the Native mission village of Lorette, near Quebec City. During the colonial contact era, Northeastern Native peoples routinely adopted European trade goods, putting them to use for Indigenous purposes. A classic example is cutting up copper pots to make ornaments. Another example (as these wampum collections demonstrate) is using iron nails for drill bits.

For decades, scholars of Iroquoia have been imposing strict timelines on the manufacture of Indigenous materials using European technology. Wampum shell beads were difficult to craft with stone drill bits. Hence (it has been argued), Native people were not able to produce uniform tubular wampum beads until the Dutch introduced metal drills in the 1630s. Technically, shell beads were actually “bored” rather than “drilled,” using high-speed rotation and pressure to puncture the shell without shattering, and water to keep the heat and dust in check. New France journals note that by the 1610s, Native people living along the Saint Lawrence seaway were already familiar with (and specifically requesting) awls as trade goods. But the awl was not the first innovation in drilling technology. Nails from ships manned by Breton fisherman (or even Viking adventurers) could have been procured centuries earlier. A Native artisan could just as easily fit an Indigenous bow drill with an awl, or with a simple iron nail.

Early archaeologists habitually sorted materials from Native American sites into “prehistoric” (presumably Native) and “historic” (presumably European and non-Native) categories. This sorting process can obscure evidence of the Native use of European trade goods for new purposes. For example, we examined a collection of old wampum beads recovered from an archaeological site that showed wide variation in hole diameters. Were the wide holes bored by stone, and the narrow holes bored by iron? Or were all of these beads bored by different sizes of nails?

The material evidence for both Algonkian and Iroquoian culture in the northeast suggests that the inclusion of new tools in old traditions is a marker of both material change and cultural continuity. Europeans and their tools clearly enabled, but did not invent, wampum ceremonialisim. We found evidence of wampum belts that had been made and re-made, damaged and repaired, purposed and re-purposed, woven together and taken apart. These patterns of wampum use and manufacture resonate with other Indigenous traditions that have persisted from the past to the present. All of these wampum beads and belts and tools demonstrate the rich ingenuity of Indigenous philosophies and technologies. All of this evidence deserves our thoughtful attention.