

WAMPUM RESEARCH: NOTES FROM THE TRAIL – 2014-2015

By: Margaret Bruchac



(<http://www.penn.museum/blog/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/P1070587.jpg>)

Margaret Bruchac, Stephanie Mach, and Lise Puyo at the Canadian Museum of Currency, in Gatineau, Quebec. Photograph by Margaret Bruchac.

In May 2014, three members of the “Wampum Trail (<https://wampumtrail.wordpress.com/>)” research team (Dr. Margaret Bruchac with research assistants Lise Puyo and Stephanie Mach) set out to follow a century-old trail left by University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Frank G. Speck (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/the-speck-connection-recovering-histories-of-indigenous-objects/>). With funding from the Penn Museum and the Department of Anthropology, we made an ambitious list of wampum in museum collections to examine. We also received encouragement and guidance from Haudenosaunee wampum experts like Richard W. Hill (Tuscarora, Coordinator of the Deyohahá:ge Indigenous Knowledge Centre (<http://www.snpolytechnic.com/index.php/indigenous-knowledge-centre>)) and G. Peter Jemison (Seneca, Coordinator of Ganondagan Historic Site (<http://www.ganondagan.org/>)). Our goal was to chart the distribution of wampum belts into museums; along the trail, we discovered much more.

Our research and interviews took us into the collections of thirteen museums and five tribal nations across the northeastern United States and Canada, including: the Archives of Nicolet Seminary; Canadian Museum of History; Kanehsatake Mohawk Nation; Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center; McCord Museum; Museum of Currency; Ndakinna Education Center; New York State Museum; Peabody Essex Museum; Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University; Penn Museum; Tantaquidgeon Indian Museum; and the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, among others.



(<http://www.penn.museum/blog/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/P1070276.jpg>)

Chief Curtis Nelson (Mohawk) and Margaret Bruchac with wampum belt recently repatriated to Kanehsatake Oka Nation, Quebec. Photograph by Lise Puyo.

During the salvage anthropology era (from the 1870s-1920s), wampum belts and other Indigenous items left tribal communities and entered the collections of different museums, often without clear records of their tribal identities or symbolic meanings. Over time, Indigenous meanings were often replaced by misleading stereotypes and idiosyncratic interpretations. In general, we found that misrepresentations of wampum (such as the notion that wampum belts are inherently unidentifiable) reflected, not the erasure of Indigenous memories, but the influence of processes that separated these objects from communities. In some cases, we found that data housed in one museum shed light on poorly identified wampum in another museum. Through close material analysis of a sampling of individual wampum beads, strings, collars, and belts, we recovered a wealth of lost information about these old objects. Through interviews with curators, scholars, and Native American wampum keepers, we also recovered new insights into wampum semiotics and display that reflect the evolving relations among Indigenous people and museums.



Wampum shell beads from an unidentified 17th century New York archaeological site. Photograph by Margaret Bruchac.



Detail of mid-18th century wampum belt showing the inclusion of a single blue glass bead in the original weave of shell wampum beads. Photograph by Lise Puyo.

The most intriguing insights emerged from our observations of the physical details of wampum construction. We found:

- clear visual distinctions among different sizes and sources of shell beads (quahog, whelk, and conch)
- anomalous beads (stone, bone, clay, glass, rounded beads, and painted beads) in historic shell bead belts
- various weaving materials (sinew, hemp, leather, linen, and cotton) and distinct patterns of twining warp and weft
- various treatments of warp and weft, including rubbing with dye (red ochre, vermilion, ash, and paint), and wrapping, knotting, or braiding of edges and ends
- evidence of the re-use of older beads and leather warps in newer belts

All of these details bespeak artisanal, aesthetic, practical, symbolic, and cultural choices, and they reflect savvy Indigenous technologies that deserve more careful analysis. After examining more than 50 wampum belts and collars, we realized that we had only just scratched the surface. Current inventories indicate that there are more than 400 extant historic (pre-20th century) wampum belts in the collections of museums and Native American and Canadian First Nations tribes. Our hope is to recover as much data as possible on each of these objects, so as to restore their object histories, and reconnect them with each of their respective tribal nations.



(<http://www.penn.museum/blog/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/0512151625.jpg>)

Margaret Bruchac, Zhenia Bemko, and Sarah Parkinson looking out over the landscape of the Connecticut River Valley, an historic site of wampum production and trade. Photograph by Justin Kennick.

With that goal in mind, and with additional support from the Penn Museum, in May of 2015 the Wampum Trail research team set out for another round of research in museums. This time, Project Director Margaret Bruchac was accompanied by graduate student Stephanie Mach, and by two new research assistants, Sarah Parkinson and Zhenia Bemko. Watch for upcoming reports on our new research findings along the Wampum Trail!

For more information about the Wampum Trail research, see the following:

- Margaret M. Bruchac. June 27, 2014. "Shells and Nails on the Wampum Trail." (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/shells-nails-on-the-wampum-trail/>)
- Margaret M. Bruchac. October 2, 2014. "Wampum in Museum Collections: Tracking Broken Chains of Custody." (<http://www.pennchc.org/page/bruchac2014>) Colloquium for the Penn Cultural Heritage Center.
- Stephanie Mach. August 11, 2014. "A Balancing Act: Traditional and Museological Care of Wampum." (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/on-the-wampum-trail-balancing-traditional-and-museological-care-of-wampum/>)
- Sarah Parkinson. May 26, 2015. "On the Rail to the Wampum Trail." (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/research/student-fieldwork/on-the-rail-to-the-wampum-trail/>)
- Sarah Parkinson. July 14, 2015. "Of Words and Matter: Glass Wampum." (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/of-words-and-matter-glass-wampum/>)
- Lise Puyo. May 22, 2014. "Rummaging the Archives." (<https://wampumtrail.wordpress.com/2014/05/22/rummaging-the-archives/>)
- Lise Puyo. July 18, 2014. "How Much Does Matter Matter? A Glass Wampum Belt at the Archives of Nicolet Seminary." (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/world/americas/how-much-does-matter-matter-a-glass-wampum-belt-at-the-archives-of-nicolet-seminary/>)
- Zhenia Bemko. July 10, 2015. "Deconstructing Knowledge; Reconstructing Meaning." (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/deconstructing-knowledge-reconstructing-meaning/>)
- Stephanie Mach. September 2015. "Wampum Field Report Part 1: Blueberry Stands, Beaver Dams, and Mannequins." (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/wampum-field-report-part-1-blueberry-stands-beaver-dams-and-mannequins-stephanie-mach/>)
- Stephanie Mach. September 2015. "Wampum Field Report Part 2: Kaianerasere'Kówa." (<http://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/wampum-field-report-part-2-kaianeraserekowa-stephanie-mach/>)