EASTERN BEADS, WESTERN APPLICATIONS WAMPUM AMONG PLAINS TRIBES

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In the seventeenth century, when Europeans first arrived in what are now the New England and mid-Atlantic states, they encountered a wide array of indigenous tribes already calling the land home. The new settlers soon realized the importance of shell beads called wampum. Manufactured primarily along Long Island Sound, these beads, shaped from marine shells, could be made into belts or grouped as strings. Though whites failed to grasp the nuances of wampum culture, leading to the generalization of wampum as “Indian money,” they nevertheless recognized its significance in Native American trade and diplomacy. Eventually, wampum came to be used among whites as well, serving as a common monetary unit for Dutch and English colonists.

As the colonies and later the fledgling nation of the United States moved westward, frontiersmen attempted to follow patterns of Native American diplomacy already established. Such patterns included using wampum strings as trade goods on journeys of exploration and fur trading. However, tribes outside the Northeast did not produce their own shell beads, nor did many tribes know about the shell beads of the Munsee, Mohawk, and other tribes. Westward-expanding whites and displaced Native American tribes of the Northeast carried wampum into the lands surrounding the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. By doing so, these travelers introduced the Osage, the Kansa, the Pawnee, and many other tribes to the purple and white shell beads. The varied uses of wampum in the Trans-Mississippi West departed drastically from the established cultural significance of the beads in the Northeast. Although wampum played a traditional role in diplomacy in the West, there it was largely white-driven rather than devised by Natives. Most wampum in the West was used for personal ornamentation, completely removed from the beads’ original spiritual and symbolic aspects. Only in later decades did wampum beads find inclusion in traditional ceremonial objects and then only in limited quantities as components in larger artifacts.

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Wampum is a tangible example of the East’s influence over the West in the early nineteenth century. The presence of wampum across the Plains attests to whites’ wide-ranging and successful economic and diplomatic forays into the frontier. The beads’ spread both north and west from a locus on the Lower Missouri demonstrates a gradual process of cultural adaptation between Indians and whites as well as between Native tribes. By examining the written, material, and pictorial evidence, we can utilize wampum as a means to track this intercultural exchange over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The essentially simultaneous appearance of identical wampum earrings in multiple eastern Plains tribes implies a close-knit intertribal material culture that had common styles and shared indicators of wealth and status. Wampum jewelry became a sign of power and affluence among these tribes, with whom it had a prominent place in formal and ceremonial attire. These Native cultural markers were in turn carried to the East by Indian dignitaries and recorded by portraitists like Charles Bird King, illustrating the cultural adaptations made possible by trade with the East.

This article seeks to trace the spread and varied use of wampum among the Native American tribes of the Great Plains. It first discusses the symbolism integral to northeastern wampum traditions and next examines wampum’s first appearances west of the Mississippi, beginning with French and British frontiersmen and followed by the Lewis and Clark expedition. After wampum’s introduction to the Plains, its usage falls into three major categories: eastern-style diplomatic rituals driven primarily by British influence, application in personal ornamentation and jewelry, and inclusion as a decorative element in sacred and ritual objects of the Plains cultures.

WAMPUM’S SYMBOLIC VOCABULARY

Among the Native peoples of the American Northeast, wampum beads held great symbolic and spiritual meaning. For example, historian James P. Merrell calls wampum the “Indians’ customary means of giving words weight." Words alone held little meaning or trustworthiness in these cultures, even when they came from a person of high social standing. Thus, “true” words were always accompanied by presents of symbolically charged or economically valuable items, primarily strings or belts of wampum.

In these ritual contexts, the beads’ color, “specifically white, red, and black,” was fundamental to the symbolic meaning or cultural ‘value’ of wampum. Anthropologist George R. Hamell goes on to describe these colors as they relate to the conditions or states-of-being of those giving the wampum. White beads represent “social states-of-being, exemplifying the desired state of the individual or community, physical, social, and spiritual well-being.” Black beads denote “ritual asocial states-of-being, such as the ‘darkness’ of mourning,” and red-painted beads reflect “antisocial states-of-being,” war in particular. Thus, the colors of beads used in a belt or string corresponded with the particular purpose for which the wampum was intended. A primarily white belt with dark patterns or pictographs communicated a positive social message while a primarily dark or red belt represented less amiable circumstances.

According to Hamell, early settlers “recognized the analogy in the symbolic functions and meanings of [white wampum] beads and that of silver, gold, and diamonds in European traditions.” Not only were these items wealth in terms of monetary value, but they also visibly represented social well-being. Given this cross-cultural correlation, Hamell speculates that these “white, bright, and light things are ‘good to think’” and represent positive ideas of life and “correlated states of physical, social, and spiritual well-being.” If European settlers were aware of these deeper levels of meaning, the more practical understanding of wampum’s use in commencing and ending hostilities took precedence.

FRENCH WAMPUM ALONG THE MISSISSIPPI

Wampum, though well established among the Indians of the Northeast, was originally a purely regional commodity. European explorers of the late
seventeenth century carried the first wampum to reach the Mississippi River. The French in particular, familiar with the use of wampum among tribes in the Northeast and Quebec, brought wampum strings and trinkets with them as they explored the newly christened Louisiana. One early episode of wampum trade with Plains tribes concerns Father Louis Hennepin, a French priest and companion of René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, explorer of the Great Lakes and later the Mississippi River valley. Hennepin, traveling near the junction of the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers in 1680, encountered a war party of Sioux and was swiftly surrounded. That evening, Hennepin and his companions were alarmed to discover that “the majority of warriors were in favor of tomahawking them.” To appease his captors, Hennepin offered “several fathoms of French tobacco, axes, knives, beads, and some black and white wampum bracelets,” which the warriors divided among themselves. Though less an example of trade than a desperate bribe, this incident is potentially the first introduction of wampum to the Sioux and foreshadows the value placed on wampum by Plains tribes as ornaments, independent of the rituals of wampum diplomacy.

BRITISH WAMPUM DIPLOMACY

While the French can be credited with introducing wampum beads to the tribes of the Great Plains, both Indian and European diplomats brought the practice of wampum belt diplomacy to the region. A complex intercultural “treaty protocol,” based in Iroquois political ritual, “spread in the mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth century to other Native groups and to French, English, and Spanish officials throughout the Northeast, the Great Lakes, and the Southeast.” However, the timing of the protocol’s appearance among certain groups is difficult to ascertain.

When the British moved to occupy formerly French-held territory near Green Bay, Wisconsin, they encountered a number of Great Lakes tribes using wampum belts in a manner comparable to that seen on the Eastern Seaboard. In 1761, British lieutenant James Gorrell found his diplomatic efforts stymied when a promised supply of wampum was not available. Gorrell quickly learned “that there was a vast number of Indians dependent upon [wampum], more than was ever thought of,” and so he requested wampum be sent from the garrison at Detroit. When wampum could not be procured from Detroit, Gorrell had to “borrow of the Indian squaws,” paying them immediately and promising to replenish their stores when the next trader carrying wampum arrived. The following year, Gorrell met with members of the Winnebago and Iowa tribes. While the Winnebago delegation offered a wampum belt and declared their peaceful intentions, the Iowa brought nothing. However, they accepted belts from Gorrell “for the return of prisoners.” When the chief of the Iowa visited in June 1763, he too came empty-handed, though the British presented him with gifts. These interactions between the Iowa and the British illustrate a persistent factor in wampum’s westward spread: piecemeal tribal participation.

Clearly, members of the Iowa tribe understood the rituals of wampum belt diplomacy. Their neighbors the Winnebago fully participated, and Iowa representatives witnessed Winnebago exchanges with whites. The Iowa themselves accepted wampum belts from the British and fulfilled the terms of the agreements they symbolized. Why the Iowa evidently did not present wampum belts to their white or Indian allies is unclear. Gorrell’s first Iowa visitors even apologized for not bringing belts, demonstrating an understanding that the whites expected belts to be presented. Though they surely understood the processes and implications of wampum diplomacy, the Iowa could have accepted belts only to humor their white acquaintances. To tribes without existing traditions of wampum use, belt exchanges came about solely in the context of intercultural encounters. The practice’s Native origins were inconsequential; wampum was a British symbol, not an Iroquoian one. Likewise, the British assumed all Indians valued wampum, so they continued to send wampum belts to new tribes, inadvertently introducing many nations to the practice. In this way, cultural misunderstanding spread ceremonial wampum use westward.
There are many different factors that could explain selective participation by the Iowa and other tribes of the area. One reason could be the high cost of creating wampum belts. The Natives of the Great Lakes could not make the beads themselves. Instead, traders would have carried the beads nearly 1,000 miles overland from production centers on the New York coast. Furthermore, creation of wampum belts required a specialized technique of cutting, drilling, and shaping shells—one that may not have been known by the Iowa and neighboring tribes. Practical reasons aside, however, the inscrutable rules of cultural taste and etiquette played a role. The Iowa and other nonparticipating tribes may have simply not valued wampum in the way that belt-making tribes did.

Despite uneven participation by the tribes they encountered, British officials held to established patterns of wampum belt diplomacy in the West well into the nineteenth century. In 1778, army officers hoping to recruit fighters on the side of the crown in the American Revolution sent wampum belts to many tribes, including the Iowa. Two years later, Lieutenant Governor Patrick Sinclair delivered wampum belts to nine tribes, including the Iowa, the Sioux, the Sauk, and the Fox, in order to rally support for the capture of Spanish-held St. Louis. Though none of these four tribes used wampum belts among themselves, each heeded the call to arms. Soon after, British wampum reached the Missouri River where it was used to coerce Sioux bands into alliance with Britain and hostility with American fur traders. In 1817, fur trader Manuel Lisa wrote to William Clark, then governor of the Missouri Territory, warning him that “wampum was being carried with British influence all along the banks of the [Missouri] river.”

**INTERTRIBAL WAMPUM EXCHANGE IN THE WEST**

Although ceremonial wampum usage in the Iroquoian tradition often corresponded with European activity in the West, wampum exchanges between tribes did occur along the Mississippi. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, tribal leaders in the Old Northwest spearheaded many of these ceremonial uses. For instance, in July 1812, as the War of 1812 began, Tenskwatawa, brother of “the Shawnee Prophet” Tecumseh, “sent each of the western tribes a pipe and a belt of wampum” to call them into council to strike against American frontiersmen.

Tribes migrating from the East also spurred wampum exchanges on the frontier, though not always with full participation from western tribes. Members of the Delaware tribe, wampum makers originally from New Jersey and New York, settled in Kansas in 1829. Conflicts between the transplanted Delaware and their new Plains neighbors began swiftly. In 1833, John Treat Irving Jr., nephew of author Washington Irving, attended a peace council between the Delaware and the Pawnee at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. In council, a Delaware warrior named Sou-wah-nock “presented a string of wampum to the Wild Horse, as being the most distinguished warrior of the Pawnee nation.” Wild Horse made a speech of thanks and goodwill but offered no wampum or other gifts in exchange. The degree to which Wild Horse and his fellow Pawnee understood the significance of the wampum is unknown. Even with the original practitioners of wampum diplomacy demonstrating its rituals, wampum exchanges failed to find a true cultural niche among the tribes native to the eastern Plains.

**LEWIS AND CLARK’S WAMPUM DIPLOMACY**

Commissioned in 1803 by Thomas Jefferson to explore the newly purchased Louisiana Territory, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark spread wampum farther west than ever before. Lewis’s supply lists featured an entry for five pounds of white wampum to serve as “Indian presents.” Expedition documents refer only to white wampum, except for one small mention of blue or purple wampum traded to the Nez Perce in exchange for horses. The captains primarily used wampum, along with tobacco, medals, and American flags, as part of their standard gift package to Indian chiefs and dignitaries. In contrast to previous
British and American wampum diplomacy, Lewis and Clark distributed plain strings of wampum, not wampum belts. Wampum’s inclusion as part of the expedition’s supplies indicates that the captains knew its value as a staple of diplomacy in the East. However, if Lewis and Clark intended to replicate such diplomacy in their Indian encounters, they were unsuccessful. The explorers presented Indian gift packages with great ceremony involving lengthy speeches from the captains, shooting displays, and, inadvertently, presentations of Clark’s slave, York. None of the expedition’s diarists note the Native leaders’ reactions to the wampum, only that it was given. Although the chiefs made speeches of their own and amicably smoked with the captains, none reciprocated the gift of wampum in the form of strings or belts. If these men attributed symbolic meaning to the strands of white beads, their thoughts were lost amid the excitement of trinkets, tobacco, and Clark’s “turrible” servant.

As the Corps of Discovery moved farther west, Native reception of wampum grew colder. Tribes living along the Columbia River had never seen wampum before, but they had developed very specific preferences for the beads they would accept, preferring blue glass trade beads above all others. In January 1806, Clark wrote of the Clatsop tribe, “The best wampum is not so much esteemed by them as the most inferior beads.” An incident in April 1806 illustrates that wampum was not a universal commodity. The captains purchased a canoe from an Indian man along the Columbia for six fathoms (thirty-six feet) of white wampum. However, the man returned the following day with the wampum in hand, demanding his canoe back. Unlike on the Atlantic or the Great Lakes, where a belt of wampum could end a war, on the Pacific Coast wampum was meaningless. Between its lack of trade potential and its lackluster reception as a diplomatic gift, wampum benefited Lewis and Clark very little during their journey. In fact, the expedition would have been better served by jettisoning the wampum in favor of extra blue beads, which among the Indians could, as Lewis wrote, “be justly compared to goald [sic] or silver among civilized nations.”

UNITED STATES INDIAN FACTORY SYSTEM

Upon Lewis and Clark’s return to St. Louis in 1806, travel and trade by white Americans boomed in the West. In the following decades, two major powers struggled for economic control of the region, and both utilized wampum to do so. Beginning in 1795 and continuing until 1822, the United States government operated the Indian factory system, establishing trading posts to supply Native peoples with otherwise unavailable goods. Though the posts themselves were called factories, they were in actuality more like small military garrisons and produced no manufactured goods. Overseen by a division of the War Department, the factory system’s goals were diplomatic more than economic, with the government hoping the Natives “would show their appreciation by being friendly to the United States and refraining from engaging in war.”

The Louisiana Purchase opened a vast number of new trade opportunities for the factory system, allowing it to expand beyond the American Southeast. In 1804, Congress approved a sum of $15,000 to extend the system into the new territory and $100,000 for the construction of new trading posts.

As the factories expanded into the Louisiana Territory, fur-trading companies arose as a sort of private counterpart to the federal Indian factory system. In contrast to the government program’s diplomatic intent, the companies’ goals were wholly economic. Spearheaded by entrepreneurs like John Jacob Astor, fur companies grew to become influential players in the economy, government, and Native relations in the West.

In both the federal and private systems, day-to-day operations looked largely similar. Customers could purchase items on credit and pay it back through the sale of furs. Native customers’ tastes and whims almost entirely dictated trade-good selections. A change in available wares or a shortage of a particular item could cause trade to halt entirely. To prevent disputes and loss of profit, the head of each post was responsible for ordering only goods that appealed to the locals and their specific requirements. For this reason, the
ledgers and letter books of the various posts provide an invaluable resource for tracking wampum usage in the Plains.

Although factory logs do not include which customers purchased wampum or the purposes for which it was used, the amounts and prices recorded give an indication of supply and demand on the frontier. In 1808, a thousand white beads of wampum cost $1.75, and a thousand gray or purple beads cost $3.00.31 Ora Brooks Peake, in A History of the United States Factory System, 1795–1822, notes that the factory system used nearly $1,500 of wampum annually.32 However, records from Fort Osage on the Missouri River in 1810 show a stock of $1,523.98 of wampum at that factory alone.33 Compared to other beads commonly traded at the factories, wampum was quite expensive. A pound of sky-blue glass trade beads cost $0.43 in 1810; 1,000 grains of wampum (wampum was sold by number of beads or “grains”) cost $3.00.34 The willingness of the federal government to pay such a premium for a comparatively small amount of product speaks to wampum’s place as a staple of Indian trade. Additionally, two other types of decorative shell products made their way to the Plains—moons and hair pipes. Moons were round, flat discs shaped from shells with a diameter of around three inches. Hair pipes were long, thick white shell beads often threaded onto lengths of hair, hung as ear adornment, or combined to make breastplates. Because these ornaments were made of materials similar to wampum, traders often called them “wampum moons” and “wampum hair pipes” despite their not being true wampum. After the Civil War, hair pipes and moons superseded traditional wampum beads as adornment among Plains tribes.35

Over time, Indian buyers grew to prefer beads larger than the traditional ones used in wampum belts. Existing specimens range from 0.5 inches to 1.1 inches, twice to four times the size of traditional, or “council,” wampum, which typically measured close to a quarter inch in length.36 Indian trade officials, in a purchase order written in 1815, requested wampum beads to be “of a large size and the white should be as free of a yellow cast as possible.”37 By 1818, such demand for wampum existed that its price had more than doubled, and agents for the factory system and for John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company struggled to purchase any from their East Coast suppliers.38 In February of that year, Ramsay Crooks wrote to Astor saying, “I have spoken to a man who promises to procure us Thirty thousand [beads]; though the competition for the article runs so high, that I put but little faith in his promise.”39 The federal government had no better luck. Superintendent of Indian trade Thomas McKenney wrote to employee Joseph Lopes Dias, a purchasing agent in New York, that he would double Dias’s commission on any wampum he managed to acquire, because wampum was “so troublesome to procure and claiming the same attention as articles the amount of which would far exceed that of wampum purchases, and with much less trouble.”40 The high demand for wampum even necessitated that the beads be sent to
factories via mail, rather than the typical ships and wagons, to save time.  

WAMPUM AS PERSONAL ORNAMENTATION

The large volume of wampum reaching the Great Plains led numerous tribes to find new applications for the beads. Most prominently, Plains tribes used wampum to create jewelry, primarily earrings and necklaces. The earliest evidence for wampum-bead earrings among Plains tribes comes from portraits painted by Charles Saint-Mémin of Osage tribe members. Though the precise dates are unknown, Saint-Mémin’s subjects sat for the portraits between 1805 and 1807, when a number of Indian delegations toured Washington, DC. Saint-Mémin’s *Chief of the Little Osages, Osage Warrior I, and Osage Warrior II* depict men of the Osage tribe wearing simple ear ornaments of strung wampum. The strings consist of alternating blue and white beads that hang through large slits cut in the men’s ears. First documented in these portraits, this style would later appear among nearly all the tribes of the Lower Missouri.

A decade later, white explorers began to document instances of Natives belonging to other nations wearing earrings similar to those seen in Saint-Mémin’s portraits. Physician Edwin James accompanied Major Stephen Harriman Long on an army expedition in 1819 to further explore the lands between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains. James’s account mentions that among the men of the Kansa tribe, “the outer cartilage of the ear is cut through in three places, and upon the rims, thus separated, various ornaments are suspended, such as wampum, string beads, silver or tin trinkets, &c.” Saint-Mémin’s Osage portraits potentially show three such ear slits, though wampum strings hang from only one. James later encountered a similarly ornamented member of the Otoe tribe, with “a profusion of wampum about his neck, and suspended to his ears.”

Two years after James’s journey ended, German aristocrat Duke Paul Wilhelm of Württemburg began his own tour of North America. The duke recorded a more detailed description of Kansa jewelry, writing, “The ears of both sexes are perforated four times lengthwise, and in every incision hangs a bundle of blue and white porcelain sticks, which are valued highly by these Indians. The richer among them wear strings of such porcelain sticks around their necks.” Wilhelm’s term of “porcelain” was used in his original German manuscript, a borrowing from the French, who used the word to refer to wampum. In contrast to James’s notes and Saint-Mémin’s portraits, Duke Wilhelm claims Kansa women slit and ornamented their ears in the same fashion as the men of the tribe and that the ears are cut in four places, not three. Wilhelm observed members of the Iowa nation wearing wampum jewelry in this style as well. Wilhelm also writes that among the Pawnee, “sticks of porcelain, such as are sold by the traders, are considered of great value, and they wear them in their ears, around their necks, and around their wrists.”
WAMPUM IN INDIAN PORTRAITURE

Though Edwin James and Duke Paul Wilhelm provide some indication in their accounts of how far wampum jewelry spread, neither expedition brought back pictorial evidence. Fortunately, beginning in 1822, Thomas McKenney commissioned Washington portraitist Charles Bird King to paint members of visiting Indian delegations for the federal government just as Saint-Mémin had done fifteen years prior. Across a twenty-year period, King painted more than 140 portraits of dignitaries from over a dozen tribes. King’s first subjects, arriving in the spring of 1822, came to the nation’s capital “as part of an elaborate scheme designed to influence the Upper Missouri tribes to accept peaceably American expansion into their country.” Where written sources like James’s and Wilhelm’s journals lack detail, King’s portraits show with precision and clarity how the Natives living along the Missouri used wampum as ornamentation.

Black (or blue) and white wampum earrings in the style described by James and Wilhelm appear in more than a dozen of King’s Indian portraits, worn by members of five tribes: Iowa, Kansa, Otoe, Pawnee, and the merged tribe of the Sauk and Fox. Among those wearing the earrings, the style is very much the same. Each ear has one large cut in the earlobe and holes around the ear’s outside edge. In every case, the wampum strings follow an alternating pattern of black and white beads.

Variations in this style of ornamentation include the number of holes in the ear and the
length of the wampum strings looped through each hole. Monchonsia, a Kansa Chief, shows its subject with very tight loops of wampum in his ears. Compare this to the long, loose loops worn by the subjects of Choncape, or Big Kansas, and Nowaykesugga, both Otoe. Intriguingly, King’s portraits also depict women wearing wampum earrings. Hayne Hudjihini of the Otoe and Rantchewaime of the Iowa appear in their portraits wearing earrings in the same style as the men of their tribes. Though Duke Wilhelm mentioned only Kansa women wearing wampum in their ears, King’s portraits prove the women of other tribes did so as well.

Perhaps most importantly, King’s portraits demonstrate not just how wampum jewelry looked but what it meant to the people who wore it. The Native American dignitaries who toured Washington, DC, did not do so as a sightseeing trip. In the nation’s capital, government hosts treated these men and women as they would have treated visiting foreign heads of state, culminating in a meeting with the “Great Father,” President Monroe. The Indian delegates wore their finest clothes and adornments during their time in Washington. As chiefs, great warriors, and the wives of such high-ranking men, the representatives were the wealthiest members of their tribes, and they dressed to
make their wealth and power known. The prevalence of wampum among them demonstrates its role as a status symbol—something meant to impress, like the gold and precious stones so valued in white society. The visitors wore this finery during their meetings with the president and donned it again to have their portraits painted by Mr. King, intending to leave a lasting reminder of their personal and tribal importance.

Furthermore, the widespread use of the alternating black and white pattern, with equal numbers of both colors of beads, indicates a break from the northeastern understanding of wampum bead-color symbolism as described by Hamell. Alternating strings of dark and light beads have no precedent in Iroquoian usage, nor do exclusively white or black strings appear in western contexts as they did in the Northeast. Following the northeastern color model, Indian dignitaries should have worn white earrings to correspond with the friendly diplomatic atmosphere and to communicate the wholeness and well-being of the Indian delegation. This is not the case, however. Chiefs and warriors, men and women—all wore alternating black and white beads. In the West, evidently, the dark beads lost their association with asocial emotions and strained diplomatic circumstances. Instead, the beads were used freely in an ornamental capacity to contrast with the bright white beads and the tanned skin of the Native wearers.

Another notable painter of Indian portraiture began his work ten years after Charles Bird King and differentiated himself by visiting his subjects in their tribal lands. George Catlin arrived in St. Louis to begin his western journey in 1830, carrying his brushes and paints with him. From 1832 to 1834, he made a grand two-year tour of forts and villages. Along the way, Catlin painted hundreds of portraits with unusual speed, potentially painting 170 portraits in five months in 1832. Though this speed allowed Catlin to produce an impressive array of portraits, it often impacted the level of detail included. Plains anthropologist John C. Ewers noted Catlin’s tendency to depict the necklaces of his subjects “in a very sketchy manner” and this criticism applies equally to Catlin’s treatment of earrings and other adornments. The minimal brushwork Catlin used for beaded necklaces and ear ornaments complicates the process of identification, but at least three dozen of his portraits feature wampum jewelry.

Where Charles Bird King’s portraits demonstrated the geographic extent of wampum ornamentation in the Plains, George Catlin’s portraiture shows wampum’s heightened availability and popularity. In at least three Plains tribes, a majority of Catlin’s subjects wear wampum bead earrings. While among the Pawnee, Catlin painted thirteen men’s portraits. Of the twelve extant today, eleven feature wampum strings as ear ornamentation. The Otoe, neighbors of the Pawnee, had five men sit for Catlin. One portrait is lost, but three of the four remaining show wampum in their subjects’ ears. Similarly, six of Catlin’s ten paintings of male Osage show wampum earrings, though some works include multiple subjects for a total of nine tribesmen wearing wampum. As with King, a minority of Catlin’s portraits featured women. Of these, only the Ponca woman Bending Willow, a chief’s wife, wears wampum ear ornaments.

George Catlin recorded his experiences in the West on paper as well as on canvas, penning the two-volume *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians; written during eight years’ travel (1832–1839) amongst the wildest tribes of Indians in North America, or simply North American Indians.* Letter 27 in volume 1 includes a lengthy footnote by Catlin describing wampum’s history and manufacture, focusing on its monetary and ceremonial usage. Unlike other visitors to the West, Catlin noted the difference between the larger wampum worn as adornment by Great Plains tribes and the smaller beads used for wampum belts. Catlin’s understanding is flawed, however, as he claims “the same materials for [wampum’s] manufacture are found in abundance through those regions [the Upper Missouri].” He mentions the commonplace nature of wampum on the Lower Missouri but asserts that the Fur Traders have ingeniously introduced a spurious imitation of it, manufactured by
steam or otherwise, of porcelain or some composition closely resembling it, with which they have flooded the whole Indian country, and sold at so reduced a price, as to cheapen, and consequently destroy, the value and meaning of the original wampum, a string of which can now but very rarely be found in any part of the country.60

While Catlin rightly recognized that whites manufactured the wampum of the Lower Missouri, he misapprehended its materials, its method of manufacture, and its intent. Apart from the aforementioned larger size of white-made, or Campbell, wampum, the two types were essentially indistinguishable. Certainly Catlin was correct in his statement that traders had “flooded the whole Indian country with wampum,” but in no way did the imported wampum “destroy the value and meaning” of existing wampum.61 First, the areas visited by Catlin had no traditions of wampum manufacture—the required shells could not be found there. Second, Catlin’s complaint that “original wampum” could “very rarely be found” speaks not to the corrupting effect of new wampum but to the scarcity of the ceremonial wampum with which Catlin, as a Pennsylvanian, would have had familiarity. From Catlin’s perspective, less expensive wampum purveyed by fur traders reduced wampum to an ornament instead of a ceremonial good, when in truth the traders introduced wampum to lands and peoples previously without it. Misunderstandings aside, Catlin’s summary provides a useful overview of wampum distribution in the first half of the nineteenth century: virtually absent on the Upper Missouri and westward but abundant on the Lower Missouri.
SPREAD OF WAMPUM JEWELRY

Following the lead of Duke Paul Wilhelm was another German nobleman, Prince Maximilian of Wied, who toured the American West concurrent with George Catlin’s travels. Maximilian’s first encounter with wampum came early in his journey, when he met a group of men from the Sauk and Fox tribes in St. Louis. Of the encounter, Maximilian wrote, “Their ears are pierced along the upper edge with three or four holes, and from them hang short strings of blue and white wampum, like tassels. They wear similar strings of many strands about their necks.”  

On some of the men, “the rim of the ear had been cut loose” in the style of the subject of Saint-Mémin’s Osage Warrior I; Maximilian compared this practice to the Botocudo tribe of Brazil, which he visited prior to arriving in North America.  

Farther into his voyage, Maximilian met a mixed group of men from the Iowa, Otoe, and Omaha tribes who “had pierced their ears with several holes along the edge, in which they wore blue and white wampum strings.” Evidently, these piercings intrigued the prince because he sketched a picture of one of the men’s pierced ears with the wampum ornaments removed.

In addition to the common style of wampum ear jewelry, Maximilian noted a unique style among the Crow tribe of the Upper Missouri in modern Montana. Rather than looping wampum through holes in their ears, men of the tribe wore “several feathers hanging down [beside] each eye with long azure and white strings of beads.” Maximilian’s use of “beads” rather than “wampum” indicates that the ornaments worn by the Crow were glass trade beads, not wampum shell beads. However, later writers indicate that the Crow retained this style but integrated wampum beads as they became available. American Fur Company employee Edwin Denig wrote ethnographical reports on the tribes he dealt with at Fort Union near the Montana–North Dakota border. Writing in the 1840s, Denig recorded that next to their ears the Crow “suspended several inches of wampum.” In 1851, nearly twenty years after Maximilian’s visit to the Crow, Swiss artist Rudolf Friedrich Kurz wrote of the tribe, “In their hair they hang hollow tubes of white and violet-colored porcelain (wampum), and about their necks they wear long ropes of the same ornaments.”

By 1835, wampum’s utility as a trade good was such that stores on the edge of Indian country sold it to travelers unaffiliated with the government or the fur companies. In June of that year, Sir Charles Murray, an Englishman on tour in the tradition of German nobility, stopped for provisions in Liberty, Missouri, before continuing to the prairies. While there, Murray purchased wampum along with “other trifles for presents.” Murray does not note who suggested that he carry wampum on his journey, but it served him well—Murray later presented some to a friendly Pawnee chief and paid for the services of guides with wampum.

WAMPUM IN PLAINS CEREMONIAL OBJECTS

Although wampum never attained widespread symbolic or ceremonial significance in the Plains,
its use as ornamentation eventually led to its inclusion as a component of other ceremonial artifacts. Members of Plains tribes commonly smoked long-stemmed pipes as part of ceremonial occasions. Native artists intricately decorated the pipe stems, which could be separated from the pipe bowls. Five specimens of such pipe stems—two at Harvard University's Peabody Museum and three at the National Museum of Natural History—have strings of wampum hanging along their lengths.

One of the Peabody’s pipe stems resides in the museum’s Lewis and Clark collection, though without attribution to a particular tribe. From the pipe stem hang five strings of white wampum. The wampum beads are belt-sized (approximately 0.25 inches long) and of the style typical of the early nineteenth century. This pipe stem, as with the wampum strings held by the museum, belonged to the collection of Charles Wilson Peale, an artist and naturalist to whom Lewis and Clark donated a number of relics from their expedition. Unfortunately, Peale’s ledger provides no physical description for any of the fourteen pipe stems he received. Peabody researchers recognized the pipe stem’s wampum strings and blue ribbon wrapping as ornamentation William Clark added to a pipe received from Broken Arm, chief of the Nez Perce. This explanation makes a good deal of sense. The scarcity of wampum in the Trans-Mississippi West at the time of the expedition makes it less likely that wampum would be an original part of this pipe stem.

The second Peabody stem provides more details of its provenance. This stem has four strings of purple and white wampum attached, but most importantly, it has writing on it that appears to explain its origins. On one end of the pipe, written in ink, is the inscription “Wah ma de Sappa Chief-2 of the Wahpacoota Sioux at St. Peters—June 20th, 1831.” “Wahpacoota” is a rendering of “Wahpekute,” one of the bands of the Santee Sioux who lived in southern Minnesota. Thus, “St. Peters” would refer to St. Peter, Minnesota, previously the location of an Indian factory that would have made wampum available to nearby tribes. This pipe also came from the Peale collection, having come to Peale from a Colonel J. H. Hook. With this information, a potential narrative emerges wherein “Wah ma de Sappa,” a secondary chief of the Wahpekute, presented Colonel Hook with the pipe stem at the conclusion of a diplomatic encounter. Unlike the Lewis and Clark stem, the Wahpekute stem provides no indication that the pipe stem’s original Native owners did not add the wampum.

Similarly, the three pipe stems housed at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, likely come from diplomatic encounters between representatives of the federal government and the Sioux. Attached to two of the pipes are strings of white wampum, while the third has strings of mixed purple and white beads. The Smithsonian Institution lists all three as originating with the Sioux and coming to the natural history collection via the War Department. Thomas McKenney, first superintendent of Indian trade, then superintendent of Indian affairs, gathered the War Department’s Indian collection during his tenure. As head of Indian trade, McKenney authorized the head of each factory to barter up to $100 of goods to obtain “curiosities peculiar to the tribes trading at his post.” McKenney’s zeal for collecting was so great that he collected items himself on various treaty-making trips. If the attribution of these pipe stems to the Sioux is correct, McKenney’s 1826 journey to Fond du Lac in modern Wisconsin is a likely time for their acquisition. In 1840, the National Institution for the Promotion of Science inherited the War Department collection but only held it until 1861 when the newly founded Smithsonian absorbed the National Institute.

That wampum was used to decorate pipe stems reflects wampum’s original application in diplomatic circumstances. Wampum’s usage here is ornamental though not without its own symbolism. Just as King and Catlin’s subjects wore wampum in their ears to show their social status, wampum strings attached to pipe stems likely fulfilled a similar purpose. A long pipe stem with multiple strings could require a few feet of wampum. Such a display would have been expensive, and to give such a lavishly decorated pipe as a diplomatic gift would communicate the wealth and stature of the donor chief and his tribe.

From the time of wampum’s introduction to
the Trans-Mississippi West in the seventeenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, wampum use fluctuated with changing political, economic, and cultural factors. British officials popularized ceremonial wampum belt exchanges, but as Great Britain’s control of the region slipped away, wampum belts largely fell out of use. Lewis and Clark carried wampum farther west than it had ever been before, but they discovered its lack of ceremonial value along the Missouri. The United States Indian factory system and fur-trading companies established wampum beads as a trade commodity in the Plains, where it subsequently became a popular means of ornamentation. Furthermore, wampum jewelry acquired connotations of wealth and power, becoming a status symbol immortalized by painters like Charles Bird King and George Catlin in their Indian portraits. Wampum’s position as a symbol of wealth carried over to traditional ceremonial goods, leading members of Northern Plains tribes to ornament sacred pipe stems with strings of wampum. Over more than two centuries, use of wampum by the Native peoples of the Plains varied greatly. Although wampum’s applications and meanings often changed, the shell beads never fell into insignificance.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 92.
5. George R. Hamell, “Wampum: Light, White and Bright Things Are Good to Think,” in One Man’s Trash Is Another Man’s Treasure, ed. Alexandra van Don- gen (Rotterdam, Netherlands: Museum Boymans–van Beuningen, 1996), 47.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 51.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
18. Draper, Collections, 1:38.
19. Ibid., 1:25.
20. Blaine, Ioway, 64.
21. Ibid., 67.
23. Ibid., 116.
32. Ibid., 6:215.
33. Ibid., 7:50.
34. Ibid., 7:253.
36. Ibid., 4.
37. Ibid., 65.
38. Ibid.
39. Inventory of Property on Hand, December 31, 1810, Miscellaneous Accounts 1808–23, Osage Factory, Factory Records, Records of the Office of Indian Trade, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Record Group 75), National Archives Building, Washington, DC.
40. Inventory of Property on Hand, March 31, 1810, Miscellaneous Accounts 1808–23, Osage Factory, Factory Records, Records of the Office of Indian Trade, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Record Group 75), National Archives Building, Washington, DC.
42. Hanson, “Campbell Wampum,” 3.
43. Ibid., 2.
46. Peake, *Factory System*, 44.
47. Ibid., 65.
50. Ibid., 14:277.
52. Ibid., 318.
53. Ibid., 390–91.
55. Ibid., 21.
56. Ibid., 29.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 1:374.
64. Ibid., 2:82.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., 2:207.
69. Sir Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America during the Years 1834, 1835 & 1836, including a summer residence with the Pawnee tribe of Indians in the remote prairies of the Missouri and a visit to Cuba and the Azore Islands* (London: R. Bentley, 1839), 248.
70. Ibid., 425, 443.