



# Stories from the Shells of Native America

Wampum Belt **Teachers' Pack**



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## Wampum: Stories from the Shells of Native America

‘Wampum: Stories from the Shells of Native America’ is an ambitious response to Mayflower 400 and the creative opportunities it offers on both sides of the Atlantic. This exhibition unites contemporary indigenous artists and educators in the USA with museums and historic collections in the UK.

Wampum belts are stories of communities and culture. This exhibition centres on a newly crafted wampum belt created by the Wampanoag people of Massachusetts, alongside historic material on loan from the British Museum. Together, they explore the history, art and culture of the Native Americans who met the passengers of the *Mayflower* and ensured their survival. Wampanoag artists share their story through images, ideas and wampum – the sacred shells of Native America.

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### About this resource

This resource for teachers supports your teaching about the wampum belt project with background information and images of these remarkable pieces. It includes new research conducted by Helen Chamberlain, a PhD student at the University of Plymouth, who visited Plymouth, Massachusetts to interview representatives of the Wampanoag Advisory Committee to find out how they wanted students in the UK to learn about Wampum belts and their culture. The research trip was generously supported by the Charlton Foundation.





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# The new wampum

Wampum is sacred and symbolic. It carries the history, the culture and the name of the Wampanoag people. Wampum belts are a tapestry of art and tribal history, and were made by Wampanoag, Algonquian and Iroquois tribes. Wampum belts are made from the purple and white shells of the quahog (an edible clam with a hard shell found along the Atlantic Coast of North America). Wampum beads embody the Wampanoag connection to the sea and to life itself. Each shell is imbued with memory and meaning.

A new piece has been designed to reflect the rich ancestral traditions and continuing craft of wampum-making in and around Cape Cod, USA. It includes 5,000 beads. It's nearly 5 feet long and has been made by Wampanoag artisans. It represents the past, present and future.

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‘The people who participated in the making of the new wampum belt are sharing the story in the age-old oral tradition of the Wampanoag. The White Pine in the centre tells our creation story - that we came from her roots more than 12,000 years ago to become the people of the dawn. This belt will preserve our stories for many generations of Wampanoag to come.’

Paula Peters, Smoke Signals and Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Nation

‘The new wampum belt is an object in and of itself, and it will remember all the hands that have touched it and all the hands that have contributed to weaving it. But I think it will also remember what has come before – it will recall – and it will signal to generations to come what this is all about.’

Dr Margaret Bruchac, University of Pennsylvania

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# What is wampum?

The word Wampum denotes both the shells and the piece, which to this day remain highly valued traditional adornments. Wampum – beads carefully honed and drilled by hand from the shell of the quahog or whelk in white or grades of purple from light to dark – are woven together into a pattern symbolic of the clan or village. The wampum is made by the Wampanoag Nation. Their ancestors lived in America for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans, including the English passengers of the *Mayflower* in 1620.

Wampum belts are the creative expression of their stories. Each shell and every woven measure are imbued with memory and meaning, protecting an oral history from one generation to the next. It's believed each bead is an anecdote of a greater narrative and in that way, each wampum holds the history of the people.

The process of creating a wampum belt unites the collectors of the shells, the artisans who refine them and polish them, and the makers who shape and weave them.

In making Wampum, beads would traditionally be contributed by many different makers and the construction of the belt would be the responsibility of a collective of skilled weavers. They would work over many months and years representing different generations.

The bead making and weaving was a long process requiring patience and precision. It was not uncommon for belts to have clear beginnings, but unworked endings to symbolise the fact that the story of the people would continue.





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## Who are the Wampanoag people?

The Wampanoag are the artisan craftspeople who make wampum, and are the descendants of the Native Americans who met the passengers of the *Mayflower* in 1620.

The Wampanoag were sophisticated and successful. They understood the rhythms of the seasons, land and sea. This ensured their survival for centuries.

Wampanoag means 'People of the First Light'. They have lived in eastern America for more than 12,000 years. They continue to live there today.

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## What is the significance of wampum?

Among the Wampanoag, wampum was traditionally used in jewellery including necklaces, collars and wristlets and as decorative embellishment on clothing. It was also used in diplomacy, for condolence or ritual. A belt of wampum beads would be carried by tribal leaders and would be considered similar in significance to a crown on English royalty.

This significance was subverted and changed by the colonialists. In colonial times wampum belts were recognised as currency, resulting in many coming into British collections, some of which are still held by the British Museum.

Today, the British Museum holds a large collection of wampum, which allows the belts to be looked at and studied all together. This western, curatorial approach to understanding the belts is different to the way in which the Wampanoag people relate to them.





‘When I travelled to London and visited the British Museum archives, I had the honour and privilege of being able to view the collections of wampum belts that are held there. An amazing experience. I had asked for permission to enter alone, and to pray over the belts in Wampanoag. I felt like it was an opportunity for me to really connect with that part of my history and for that history to connect with me. Those belts are like a living part of our history and it was their first time to hear their own language in two or three hundred years.

It was very spiritual time for me.

It was amazing to be able to see belts that were hundreds of years old, but hand-tooled. These little beads, so beautifully crafted, and each one placed there to hold our place, to hold our story. It was very moving.

It was an honour to see these belts and to touch them. It’s like touching the hand of an ancestor. It’s like being with them – and touching their hand. Being close to them. Very special indeed.’

Paula Peters, SmokeSignals and Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Nation

‘Around 400 wampum belts are now in museums and not in tribal nations.

In indigenous cultures these belts are animated beings. They do have lives of their own. There are messages embodied in them. They have work to do when they are circulating through the appropriate communities and context. The context does not include lying on a museum shelf. There is a distinction between curatorial treatment, which preserves something in perpetuity in a frozen condition and indigenous curation, which lets something be alive. That’s why they come alive in your hands.’

Dr Margaret Bruchac, University of Pennsylvania





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# The story of the missing wampum

The English passengers who travelled across the Atlantic on the *Mayflower* arrived in America at the start of winter in 1620, later documented how the Wampanoag people helped them to survive.

At this time, between 1616 and 1619, the Wampanoag were suffering from three epidemics of European diseases which devastated their population. An estimated 70%-90% of them died. In addition, the survivors of the epidemics were vulnerable to larger numbers of Narragansett people – another Native American nation – who lived nearby.

**‘We, the Wampanoag, welcomed you, the white man, with open arms, little knowing that it was the beginning of the end...’**

**Wamsutta, Aquinnah Wampanoag Tribal Elder**

Personal relationships between the Massasoit (the leader) of the Wampanoag – Oosamaquan – and other individuals secured a political alliance between the English colonists and the Wampanoag people. They shared harvests and peace, until changes in both societies broke it. The colonists grew in number and dominance. The Wampanoag did not. By 1676 disease, war and the impact of colonisation had decimated the local population.

King Philip’s War – the bloodiest in American history – is the name given to the conflict that lasted from 1675-1678. It’s named after Oosamaquan’s son – Metacom – who was given the name Philip by the colonialists.

This bloody war between the colonialists and Native Americans resulted in the head of Metacom, the Wampanoag leader, displayed on a stake in the colony and Plymouth’s governor sending a ship of Wampanoag survivors to the Caribbean as slaves. In addition, Metacom’s nine foot long wampum belt was taken.





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## The search for Metacom's missing belt

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Metacom's belt is still missing. It was transported to England after he was killed. The last reference to it dates from 1677. Efforts to search for it began in the 1970s and continue today, but there are few leads about its location.

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In 2018, Paula Peters and Linda Coombs from the Wampanoag Advisory Committee visited the British Museum as part of their search for Metacom's belt.

Although they didn't find it on this visit, they were able to see the historic collections of wampum, which reveal traditional making-patterns and designs dating back to the 1600-1800s.

Working with conservators, Paula and Linda were able to share their knowledge of wampum and the traditional craftsmanship involved in its creation, whilst learning about the origins and history of the collection here in England. To mark the visit, prayers were given in the Wampanoag language (Wopanaak).

**'The artifacts including wampum belts and other weavings, are incredibly sacred to the tribal people of our ancestral homeland and to pray over them in their indigenous language was an important ritual.'**

Linda Coombs, Wampanoag Advisory Committee





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## A restorative project

While the search for Metacom's belt continues, support for the making of a new belt is helping the Wampanoag community restore this historic tradition and begin anew. The project engages both wampum and weaving artisans to produce a belt that connects their history to contemporary times and invites future generations to contribute.

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**'I do not hold you responsible for the past,  
but I do hold you responsible for the future.'**

Paula Peters, SmokeSygnals and Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Nation





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