

How Beads Were Used in Early America

Humans have made and used beads for over 40,000 years.

A bead can be any size, shape, color, and made from anything.

What's the one thing it must have in order to be a bead? A hole so you can put a string or cord through it.

Native American Beads

Beads have been an important part of Native American culture.

Native Americans have used beads for:

- jewelry
- gifts
- communication
- record keeping
- religious ceremonies
- trading for other things.

The amount of beads they wore often showed how wealthy they were, or what their job was in their village.

Beads were made from things they found in Nature:

- stones
- seashells
- wood
- clay
- seeds
- animal parts (bone, horn, hoofs, teeth, claws, quills).

To make beads from these things, Native Americans cut, polished, and made holes in them using sharp rocks, knives, or other hand tools.

Sometimes they carved designs in the beads, or painted or dyed them to make them colorful or to give them a special meaning.

When the beads were finished, Native Americans strung them on a leather cord they made from animal skins or sinews.

Storyteller Necklaces

Native Americans sometimes used beads for storytelling.

They decorated beads to symbolize different things, such as an animal, a person, or a place.

They strung the beads in a certain order so they could tell a story by reading the beads from one end to the other.

Wampum

Wampum is the name of a special kind of beads that were an important part of early American history.

The name "Wampum" comes from a Narragansett word that meant "white strings", referring to strings of shell beads.

Wampum is small beads made from white or dark seashells.

Native Americans used Wampum for hundreds of years to keep records of important things that happened, since they didn't have handwriting, books, or computers.

They strung the beads into belts with patterns of light and dark beads. Each pattern had its own meaning, and Native Americans could read the designs on Wampum belts the way we read a book or paper.

Messengers carried Wampum belts from one village to another to bring news or messages, since there was no newspaper, TV, post office, telephone, or e-mail.

The Pilgrims' First Money

When the Pilgrims came to America, they didn't bring coins or other money with them, since there were no stores in the New World where they could spend money.

But without money or something of value to trade, it was hard for the Pilgrims to get things they needed from each other or from the Native Americans.

So the Pilgrims adopted the Native Americans' Wampum as a form of money, and it was the only kind of money the Pilgrims used for many years.

Wampum was valuable enough to use as money because it was rare.

To get Wampum beads, you had to search a long time to find good seashells of the right kind, size, shape, and color.

Then you had to cut them and make a hole in them using only hand tools. That took a lot of time!

Dark Wampum shells were harder to find, so in the Pilgrims' money system they were worth twice as much as the white Wampum shells.

One penny was represented by 3 dark Wampum shells, or 6 white Wampum shells.