

Name _____

Date _____ Class _____

BACKGROUND: Wampum Beads

Have you ever seen a purple shell on the beach?

Quahog (pronounced /kwah-hog) is a kind of clam with hinged shells that are white and purple on the inside. Northern quahog live along the east coast of North America in waters with soft, warm, sandy bottoms. They are often found in shallow bays and estuaries.



Image credits: Deirdre O'Regan for the National Maritime Historical Society.

Cherokee Wampum Bead Tradition

American Indians of the Eastern woodlands, primarily Algonquian and Iroquoian language speakers, traditionally used the clams for food and the shells as tools. They also made beads out of the shells. Only a few can be made from each shell, and it takes many to make an elaborate wampum belt. Shaping the shells and drilling holes to make white and purple beads was delicate work.

Today, the largest of the 574 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. is one of three Cherokee tribes. At the time of colonization, the Cherokee lived in the southern Appalachian area and spoke an Iroquoian language. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians still lives in North Carolina and two other Cherokee tribes now live in Oklahoma. Although called "belts," men wore the shell creations around their necks like scarves. Belts made from thousands of beads took great skill and time to complete. The patterns often symbolized a diplomatic event and were significant to the Cherokee and other Eastern Woodlands tribes as physical reminders of formal agreements.



A strand of white and purple wampum collected from members of the Cherokee at Tahlequah, Oklahoma at an unknown date, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian collection, 244161.



A modern artisan of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians created this replica wampum belt out of clay beads, Richard Saunooke beadwork, Museum of the Cherokee People collection, 2024.0187.

Quick Fact Check

1. What is wampum made from?
2. What type of American Indian language is Cherokee?
3. What did wampum belts often represent?
4. Which Cherokee tribe still lives in N.C.?