

# Laws Braided into Belts

## *Understanding wampum belts*

### Wampum Belt Information

Wampum belts are an integral part of Haudenosaunee (pronunciation: hoe-dee-no-SHOW-nee) culture, holding laws, treaties and values within their beads.

Imagine living in a democratic society whose laws, instructions, and complex governance structure have been upheld for hundreds of years without ever having needed to be written down. Instead, they are preserved by dedicated storytellers and able hands, who weave such teachings into glistening rows of purple and white beadwork. This is the reality for the Haudenosaunee, one of the world's oldest remaining democracies.

Haudenosaunee, means “longhouse builders” in the Seneca language, after their iconic elm wood dwellings. Haudenosaunee are also frequently referred to as the Iroquois, the Six Nations Confederacy, or simply onkwehonwe (pronunciation: oon-gway-HOON-way), the word for the “Original People” of this land. They have called the Great Lakes home since the Creator originally breathed life into the soil that made their bodies — and they remain connected to the lands and waters to this day.

One of the most recognizable qualities of the Haudenosaunee and, to a lesser extent, other Eastern Woodland cultures, is their many wampum belts. These are beaded documents gifted from their ancestors that continue to preserve their original ways of being.

The wampum comes from the inner shells of quahogs, or hard clams, bivalves known for their distinctive purple sheen. After collecting the quahog shells, a wampum artisan traditionally uses rock and bone tools to painstakingly shape them into tubular beads. Even with today's fine power tools, crafting such delicate shapes is incredibly labourious and challenging, highlighting the brilliance of their ancestors who would have used bone picks.

Most contemporary beaders use other, more accessible, materials such as clay, glass, and plastic. The beads are then strung together with leather and sinew as a mnemonic device for important teachings (i.e., devices to assist with memory or the preservation of stories).

Ultimately, wampum belts are records of the achievement of peace on Earth at a time of many Nations.