

STORIES of New Jersey

PREPARED FOR USE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY THE
FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT of the WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

1060 Broad Street, Newark, New Jersey

SCOTCH PLAINS

No. _____
PUBLIC LIBRARY

COLONIAL CURRENCY

WAMPUM

The early settlers of America, in adapting themselves to conditions in the wilderness, soon learned that beyond the commodities of civilization -- the firearms, boots, tools and the new and strange "firewater," there was nothing that the natives accepted more gladly as a medium of exchange than wampum, which was valued simply as a decoration.

Strictly interpreted wampum means "heart." At tribal ceremonies or councils gifts of wampum belts or strings of beads were exchanged as tokens of esteem, or to mark the completion of a transaction or treaty. The newcomers, therefore, adopted the Indian custom and exchanged gifts of wampum to seal treaties and land settlements. To some extent Indian currency came to be used by the white settlers in trading with one another.

Wampum was made in two colors. A string of black beads, made from the thick blue part of the clam shells, was worth double that of a string of white, made from the conch shell. Trading ships filled their holds with conch shells picked up along the South American and West Indian beaches. These were brought into the eastern ports and from there shipped to the several wampum factories that had been established to serve the needs of the traders. John Jacob Astor carried on an extensive trade in this simple manner. Strings of wampum beads at 12 cents a string, shell pipes at one dollar and pale pink moons at one dollar and a half were used to buy from the Indians valuable furs and land.

One of these wampum factories was built in what is now Park Ridge, in Bergen County on the Pascack Creek, a tributary of the Hackensack. Before 1775 John Campbell started to make wampum and shell ornaments in his spare moments. These he sold to his neighbors at twelve cents a string. So successful was he that before long the business had outgrown its quarters in the low rambling red stone colonial homestead. An abandoned woolen mill on the Pascack Creek (on the site of which now stands the Park Ridge electric light plant) was converted to use; water power was installed and a business that was to continue uninterrupted in the hands of the Campbells to the fourth generation started in full swing. In a short time the industry expanded beyond the limits of the woolen mill and it was necessary to build a real factory. This factory was called "the Mint." Under Abraham and William Campbell, sons of John, the business continued to flourish.

The interior of the workshop looked much like a lime kiln, the floors hidden from sight by great heaps of shells, the rude benches and tools covered