

## INDIAN TRADE AND MEDIA OF EXCHANGE

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Commercial intercourse between people and groups seems to have developed quite early in Man's cultural history. Numerous examples of this may be found in works on archeology and prehistory in the Old World. Similarly, trade and exchange between early peoples and areas of the New World can be demonstrated from archeological finds and documented from early historic accounts. This paper brings together some of the facts dealing with this aspect of prehistoric and early historic cultures in America, with particular emphasis on the Virginia area.

We know from numerous archeological finds that trade was taking place in eastern North America as far back as the Middle Woodland (Hopewell) Period, approximately 500 AD. This evidence is primarily from burial mounds in Ohio where numerous finds have been made of the following: Grizzly bear teeth from the Rocky Mountains; Obsidian from the Wyoming area; Gulf of Mexico species of sea shells; mica from North Carolina; and copper from the Lake Superior area. Similar finds found in other states in the Mississippi Valley show that this was not an isolated situation, but was fairly general.

In Virginia we have comparable evidence. Shells from the Gulf of Mexico and from the Chesapeake Bay region have been found together in burial mounds in the Shenandoah Valley and in southwestern Virginia. Steatite (soapstone) quarried from outcrops in the Piedmont sections of the state has been found throughout the Tidewater area, as well as in the Shenandoah Valley. Chert native to the mountains of western Virginia has been found throughout the state, and stones known to outcrop in Pennsylvania are found in Eastern Shore Indian sites. Of all materials, it appears that seashells were the main items of trade. This can be attributed to such characteristics of shells as (1) easy to collect at the seaside; (2) attractive appearance; (3) easy to work; (4) easy to transport; and (5) durable. We shall see later that shells became for a time the common medium of exchange during the early historic period.

Barter seems to have been the primary means of carrying on this prehistoric trade, since there was then no common denominator, such as we now use the dollar to represent. One can readily imagine the haggling which must have taken place repeatedly as goods changed hands. In addition to barter, however, there must have been other means whereby goods changed hands. We can imagine items of value being taken by stealth, and certainly capture in combat would help to spread items of value. Such capture, or tribute levied on conquered peoples might be termed "trade by force." Other means might also have contributed to the diffusion of articles from one region to another, e. g. migrations, intermarriage, etc.

One economic rule which becomes apparent from archeological evidence is the "Rule of Scarcity." Here we can see the role of supply and demand very clearly. The value of an item or material obviously increased with distance from its sources. For example: seashells were used for containers, dippers, tools, and even retaining walls to housesites in the Florida area, whereas they were used almost exclusively for beads, pendants and other ornaments in the interior of the eastern United States. In Wisconsin and Michigan we find native copper being used to make axes, mauls, projectile points and massive ornaments, whereas in areas further away, copper is used almost exclusively for ornaments. Sharks teeth were used in Tidewater Virginia for tipping arrows, whereas in the mountain section, they are so scarce that when one is found it had been used as an ornament.

During the period of early contacts with Europeans, trade by barter was necessarily the primary means of exchange, although we can be sure that the Europeans took what they wanted by force, when it suited their purpose to do so. We know that traders from Spain, France, Holland and England visited the eastern coasts of North America repeatedly throughout the 16th Century. They were seeking slaves for the West Indies (this was before the African slave-trade began), furs for European markets, and foodstuffs for provisioning the ships, in addition to the never-ending search for gold and other precious commodities. No record has come down to us as to values set on any of these commodities, and we can imagine that considerable haggling and use of bribery, threats, rum, etc. entered into the negotiations.

With the settling of the mid-Atlantic coast by the English, patterns of trade began to develop, values were stabilized for short times, and a group of full-time traders came into being, along with governmental regulation of their activities.

The initial trading efforts in the Jamestown area of Virginia were directed toward obtaining food for the starving colonists. Even here, however, we find restrictions on trading certain items to the Indians. Especially prohibited was the trade in fire-arms, although the Indians repeatedly offered high prices for weapons of all types. A few colonists did succumb to the temptation and sold guns to the Indians. Trade was usually limited to specific trading parties sent out by the governor or his deputy from Jamestown to seek specific items, such as corn or land, and individuals were prohibited from personal trading. This control was necessary to prevent the colonists from bidding against one another and thereby driving the prices of essential commodities upward. The Indians were deemed to be sufficiently aware of the laws of supply and demand to take advantage of uncontrolled trade.

While Powhatan lived, trade by force was kept somewhat under control, and trade by barter predominated. This trade seemingly was enough to satisfy many of the Indian's needs, and they began to become dependent on the colonists for such items as glass, iron implements, cloth, powder and lead, tobacco pipes, and eventually for food. During times when the Indians' crops were insufficient, the

better agricultural methods of the colonists produced food surpluses which were sold to the Indians, primarily for land, since that was the commodity the Europeans wanted most, and the commodity that the Indians valued least. John Rolfe's Relation of 1616 tells of Indians trading away large tracts of land (equal to an English shire) for four or five hundred bushels of corn. A letter from Gov. Argall to the Virginia Company in London states that the Indians are "so poor that they cannot pay their debts or any tribute to the governor." This matter of debts implies that some colonists (or the company) sold goods to Indians, either individually or as tribes, on credit. What values were set is unknown, and we can wonder what the Indians might have had, other than land, with which to pay debts. We can suspect personal service, sort of a voluntary servitude, as one way of paying debts, although the record is not clear on this. We do know that Indians captured in battles, or sentenced to servitude for crimes, were used as a source of labor in the colonies. Again, the values, or the media of exchange are unknown.

We know that individual colonists did attempt to trade with the Indians, because it was necessary for the Governor to issue proclamations from time to time restricting or regulating the trade. In 1617, one proclamation prohibited all private "trucking," as it was called, on pain of death. The death penalty was also established as the penalty for teaching an Indian the use of fire-arms. This indicates that some Indians had fire-arms, but needed coaching from the colonists, as well as powder and lead. Upon the death of Pocahontas (and later Powhatan), all trade and familiarity with the Indians was prohibited, and this cessation of trade may have helped induce Opecancanough to plot his 1622 attack on the settlers.

There is a popular belief that glass beads for the Indian trade were made at Jamestown by Italian glass-makers. Since no trace of bead-making came to light in the excavations for the glass-house near Jamestown, we can be reasonably sure that beads were not made there. Glass beads were an important item of trade, however, and are the most commonly found of all trade items in Indian graves and sites of the contact period. The value of glass beads apparently varied by types and scarcity. One report in the Minutes of the Council for the period 1622-29 says that a Robert Poole paid two arm-lengths of one type of beads for a bushel of corn, and thirteen arm-lengths of another type for a bushel of corn, all on the same corn-buying expedition. In the same record is a report that Captain Croshaw paid 10,000 blue beads to an Indian for a "great canoe," probably a large dug-out. In another place, Poole paid 20,000 blue beads for a quantity of woven mats, of which he used twenty to leaks in his boat. Poole also paid a Patuxent Indian guide 600 (or 800) blue beads for guiding him to a place called Pocotonck. That Poole traded goods other than beads is shown in an entry in the Minutes in which he bought "not over 6 bushels of corn" for some copper (amount not stated).

Following the settlements by Europeans, the Indians acquired tools of iron and were able to increase their production of shell beads and also make them of a uniform size and color. This standardization quickly led to the use of such beads as an official medium of exchange. We can quote from Beverley's History and Present State of Virginia, published in 1705 to show how these shell beads were made and valued in Virginia of his time.

The Indians had nothing which they reckoned riches, before the English went among them, except Peak, Roenoke, and such like trifles made out of the cunk-shell. These past with them instead of Gold and Silver, and serv'd them both for Money, and Ornament . . .

Peak is of two sorts, or rather of two colours, for both are made of one shell, tho of different parts; one is a dark purple cylinder, and the other a white; they are both made in size and figure alike, . . . They are wrought as smooth as glass, being one third of an inch long, and about a quarter, diameter, strung by a hole drill'd thro the center. The dark colour is the dearest, and distinguished by the name of Wampom Peak. The English-men that are called Indian Traders, value the Wampom Peak at eighteen pence per yard, and the white Peak at nine pence.

Somewhat earlier, in 1654, the King of Metompkin, on the Eastern Shore paid to the colonists 100 arms-lengths of Roenoke, plus a later 150 arms-lengths and sixty Indian mats as payment for his people having killed some hogs belonging to the settlers, (number of hogs not stated).

Shell beads, both of Indian and White manufacture served as a medium of exchange for many years during the 17th Century, although increasingly the wampum made by the whites for use in the Indian trade depressed the market and resulted in a general devaluation of the beads and hardship on the Indians who tried to compete in the market. Inflation took its toll even in those days.

As danger of Indian hostilities passed in Virginia, the Indians were more and more allowed to use fire-arms, and in many cases they served as full-time hunters for plantation-owners and kept the plantation tables supplied with fresh meat, using guns supplied by the settler. Local Indian trade continued, however, well into the 1700's. In the digging at Williamsburg, archeologists have found Indian-made pottery dishes in trash pits of the 1740 period. These dishes were made in the Indian's technique, but in the English style. In addition, the Indians continued to make and sell mats, baskets, brooms, dug-outs & wooden trenchers to the settlers. The media of exchange by this time had become the small coins of the English, coupled with credit accounts and some barter. Trade, then, filled for a long time a critical need in the economy of the Indians. As might be expected, the trade became more and more to be patterned after European methods and eventually became entirely so. And with the modern methods of media of exchange we need not concern ourselves in this paper.