

Cleansing the War Belt

On May 22, 1815 a Council was held at Michilimackinac with the British, Dakota, Winnebagoes, Fox and Menominee. Captain T. G. Anderson of the Indian Department stated that, *The great Wampum Belt, by which they had been summoned to war, was divested of its red color, and rendered blue, as a symbol of peace, according to their customs. . . The Ceremony commenced with displaying the great Wampum belt, which having changed its color, was now the Belt of Peace.*



This Delaware belt shows the kind of iconography employed in wampum belts. The two human figures holding hands are a symbol of peacefulness. They have laid down the weapons of war at their feet. The double diagonal lines represent the two sides that have joined together in peace, strengthen their alliance. The large pipe is that which is used to seal the agreements made between the two parties.

Wampum belts meant to declare war were often painted red to symbolize the spilling of blood that was about to take place. The assembled warriors and chiefs were then told that Peace had been made between Great Britain and the United States. Lieutenant Joseph Renville and Captain Francois Michael Dease of the Indian Department were sent various Native Nations with the Wampum Belt, Pipe of Peace and speech to inform them of the peace treaty.

The American also sent emissaries among both their allies and former enemies. A number of treaties were negotiated soon after the end of war to solidify their allegiance to the U.S. In July 1815 Meskwaki chief Black Thunder explains the significance of the pipe to Governor Missouri Territory of William Clark in making peace between them: *"I call heaven and earth to witness, and smoke the pipe in evidence of the truth and sincerity of what I have said. . . My only desire is to smoke it with you—to grasp your sacred hand, and claim the protection of the United States for myself and tribe. I hope as the pipe touches your lips, it will operate as a blessing on all my tribe—that the smoke will rise like a cloud, and as it passes away will carry with it all the animosities that have arisen between us."*