

The Seal Island Legend

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Four years ago, this reporter wrote here of a discovery on Fire Island, which is the current name for Seal Island – its Algonquin name. In this report it was revealed that a large collection of 40 wooden cases of wampum, along with some gold doubloons, silver pieces of eight, along with English coins and pieces of parchment were uncovered under an early 19th century site of one of the life saving station “rescue huts” built by volunteers along Fire Island in 1805. Four years ago it was estimated that this might be worth ten million dollars.

Because this cache of mixed treasure was discovered on private land, it was never reported beyond a small article in a numismatics trade magazine. Now it seems that the parchments – some in fragments – contain certain information that was originally written in 1641 and 1642, right after the first European settlers appeared in Long Island. The writing was in the hand of Henryk Neuhaus, who identified himself as a Dutch settler – a former sailor who had jumped ship and was then living with the Secatogue Native Americans on the north shore of what is now called the Great South Bay.

History indicates that the Dutch had begun their colony, New Amsterdam, back on the Hudson River, and were endeavoring to enlarge their territory, while the English who had first settled in New England, had been expanding southward from New England to the eastern tip of Long Island. The English and Dutch had no love for each other.

History also shows that the English had been through an aggressive war five years earlier with the Pequot Indians in southern New England, and were actively settling in Long Island by 1640. There were several tribes on Long Island that had established “tributary relationships” with the Pequots. These tribes now knew they had to deal with the English. The main tribe – the Montaukettes – was headed by young chief sachem Wyandanch.

One of those other tribes with former allegiance to the Pequots was the Secatogues. Neuhaus wrote that he had settled in the Secatogue Native American area in what is now Sayville, where there was a substantial farming village that also harvested an enormous resource from the Great South Bay – quahogs, the Algonquin word for clams. Since the Europeans had arrived in America, and traded with the Indians. Almost every tribe along Long Island’s north and south shore had access to European metal tools for the manufacture of wampum from the plentiful hard clams in Great South Bay and Long Island Sound.

The Secatogue Native Americans – had an enormous advantage over most other tribes on Long Island with the rich quantities of

the quahogs that were available close by. There were hundreds of artisans making some of the highest quality wampum beads which were often woven into intricate patterns that were prized all over the area within hundreds of miles.

Wampum was considered “status related” and quite valuable. It was widely used in the place of European coin in trading with other widespread tribes. Archaeologists have discovered that wampum has been found in remote locations as far west as the Dakotas, and copper from the Minnesota area has turned up in Algonquin graves. The colonists, needing furs and agricultural goods even adopted wampum as legal tender for the period between 1630 and 1660. The idea was to conserve scarce coin supplies for trading with the European market. This caused a burst in wampum production during that time. Generally, six white beads were worth about one penny, while the colored ones – purple or black – were worth about double at that time.

As has been the case throughout history of those times, when a group becomes successful in accumulating wealth, they also begin to realize that they were vulnerable to attacks.

The Secatogue chief sachem – Cockenkata – had given one of his daughters in marriage to Henryk Neuhaus. Together they decided that the wealth of the entire tribe was at stake, out of concern that English soldiers would attack from the east. Neuhaus, had a role in deciding that the safe answer was to relocate their community wealth in a place outside of their village. Seal Island was chosen.

The fact that the wampum and coin trove found on Seal Island remained hidden for almost 370 years is quite phenomenal and the trail goes cold. Could it be that the entire Secatogue tribe was destroyed at some point soon thereafter Neuhaus made his writings? Also, many Native Americans succumbed to European diseases.

It is known that the Dutch New Amsterdam colony only existed until 1664 when the English Duke of York sent a fleet to threaten New Amsterdam, which did not have the ability to resist. And no record exists in history of the fate of Secatogue sachem Cockenkata.

And how did it happen that the trove ended up beneath one of the “rescue huts” on Fire Island and did not get reported? Or taken?

The quahogs are still in the bay, and rumors have it that they are becoming more plentiful now that current machine-harvesting techniques have been abandoned. Today, the wampum makers are local artists who find well burnished shell pieces along the coastal beaches of Seal Island.

