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TORTURE, SCALPING, AND DESECRATION OF THE DEAD ON PENNSYLVANIA’S PRE-REVOLUTIONARY FRONTIER

James P. Myers, Jr.

In the minds of most people, the French and Indian (the Seven Years’) War (c. 1755–1763) was less destructive than other American conflicts. We tend to regard the war, which was fought mostly in the backcountry by raiding parties and rather small armies of British, French, and their Indian allies and, more often than not, consisting of raids on isolated small settlements and plantations, as little more than a prelude to the Revolution and as the romantic genesis for such important mythic legacies as manifest destiny and for novelists like James Fenimore Cooper and those who followed. The reality, however, was rather different.

From abundant, extant testimony, we can see that the war’s destruction was unprecedented. Writing to Sir William Johnson in 1756, Pennsylvania Governor Robert Hunter Morris captured the feeling iterated in hundreds of contemporary letters. “You cannot conceive what Havok has been made by the Enemy...nor what
Numbers of Murders they have committed; what a vast Tract of Territory they have laid waste, and what a multitude of Inhabitants...they have carried into Captivity. Indeed, we cannot conceive; Morris did not exaggerate. It has been estimated that in Pennsylvania and Virginia between 1754 and 1758 over 2,000 British subjects died on the frontiers, with another 1,000–2,000 carried off into captivity. During the French and Indian War in Pennsylvania, raiders penetrated as far east as Reading, only 40 miles from Philadelphia itself. The border counties in Pennsylvania and in Virginia were virtually abandoned as thousands of panicked refugees fled east, their farms burned, their livestock stolen or wantonly destroyed.

One of the most perplexing mysteries of this war is the degree to which all parties employed torture and, more generally, enacted atrocities far in excess of what we associate with the Revolution and the Civil War. In this respect, the French and Indian War and Pontiac's War which followed it are unmatched by any other conflict in the history of North America. British, French and Indian—all resorted to torture; all seemed to be trying to out-perform one another in their respective application of brutality and terror. Equally as intriguing, perhaps, is that, for all of its near-universality, torture was employed by Europeans and Native Americans with significant, distinguishing differences, both in their justifications, applications, and often their very methods. Let me give you two examples.

In December of 1763, Pennsylvanians living in Paxton township on the eastern bank of the Susquehanna River vented their frustrations and fury on peaceful and Christianized Conestoga Indians living in Lancaster county. Although the latter were protected by Provincial decree, some even having sought sanctuary in the workhouse of Lancaster-town itself, the enraged Paxtonians brutally killed these twenty remnants of the once populous and powerful Susquehannock Indians. They did not merely murder the unarmed and defenseless Conestogas, who for years had been eking out an existence by selling brooms and baskets; they savaged and desecrated their bodies. Here is

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one graphic description of the slaughtered Indians found in Lancaster, site of several peace-treaty conferences with the Indians:

In the workhouse yard "lay the whole of them, men, women and children, spread about;...shot—scalped—hacked—and cut to pieces." Against one wall splattered with blood and brains sprawled an Indian man whose remains were as grisly as anything his killers might have seen at [the] Wyoming [Valley]. Shot in the chest, hands and feet chopped off, 'his head was blown to atoms' when someone jammed a musket in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Near the rear door sprawled two children, perhaps three years old, skulls split and scalps gone. Beneath them was Kanianquas (Molly) and her husband, Will Sock.\(^3\)

The episode here referred to at Wyoming had occurred in October and provides my second example. There, Delaware Indians had fallen upon fledgling settlements of Connecticut settlers who were trying to extend that colony’s claim to territory just above the Forks of the Susquehanna (today’s Sunbury) in the Wyoming valley. Pennsylvania scouts reported finding the ten New Englanders at one settlement "most cruelly butchered; the Woman was roasted, and had two Hinges in her Hands—supposed to be put in red hot; and several of the Men had Awls thrust in their Eyes, and Spears, Arrows, Pitchforks, &c., sticking in their Bodies."\(^4\)

In both instances, the attackers had not merely killed their victims; they had tortured, maimed, and desecrated them in ways characteristic of the warfare that had raged all over the frontier during the previous years. But, academic though it might seem, there were differences we need to appreciate: the Delawares destroyed the New Englanders with a symbolism they intended the Whites to read, while the Paxtonians, illiterate to the content of the Indians’ text, reacted brutally, simply out of frustration and vengeance, and destroyed the pathetic remnants of Indians who had been living peaceably among the whites of Lancaster county for decades.


\(^4\) Merrell, 285.
Contrary to popular understanding, Native Americans did not usually kill their captives. One of their purposes for raiding, in fact, was to obtain captives to restock their diminishing numbers. That they generally treated captives well, furthermore, has been supported by the testimony of numerous Whites and by the examples of those hundreds who preferred to remain with the Indians when they had the chance to return to the settlements; hard as it was for Europeans to credit, Whites, especially women, frequently found better, freer lives among the so-called savages. There did exist, however, a long-standing tradition of torture among the Indians, and during the contact period with Whites, the numbers of atrocities increased greatly, partly in response to a European zest for the same. Even here, however, there were significant, defining differences in the Native American attitude toward torture. Let me give you some background on the subject.

Although we need to allow for a good measure of sadistic pleasure in humiliating and painfully destroying one’s enemy once captured, Indian torture was predicated on a firm foundation of cultural, philosophical, even religious justification. At least one modern commentator, in fact, has elaborated what he terms a Native-American “esthetic of warfare,” in which torture played a defining role. At the very core of this philosophy lies a belief recalling the ancient Greek ideal of areté or “excellence,” specifically the excellence with which one dies. Writing early in the eighteenth century (1710), the French writer Joseph Jouvency recorded this concept:

The prisoner who has beheld and endured stake, knives and wounds with unchanging countenance, who has not groaned, who with laughter and song has ridiculed his tormentors, is praised; for they think that to sing amid so many deaths is great and noble.

Virginian William Byrd in 1728 elaborated on the same belief:

While these poor wretches are under the anguish of all this inhuman treatment, they disdain so much as to groan, sigh,

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6 Cited in Gleach, 50-1.
or show the least sign of dismay or concern, so much as in
their looks, on the contrary, they make it a point of honor
all the time to soften their features, and look as pleased as if
they were in the actual enjoyment of some delight; and if
they never sang before in their lives, they will be sure to be
melodious on this sad and dismal occasion.\(^7\)

About 1779, drawing upon his experiences as a Moravian
missionary among the Delawares and the Iroquois for over 40 years,
David Zeisberger testified to the perseverance of this tradition. His
description of the general practices is one of the most detailed we have
from the period. "A fire is made in the open," Zeisberger meticulously
writes,

> irons are heated, and the unfortunate captive is bound to a
> stake placed at some distance from the fire. He is burned
> with the irons. Long strips of flesh are cut from his body
> with knives and salt is rubbed into the raw wounds. He may
> be half-roasted at the fire, then released for a time, with a
> view to prolonging his tortures, which sometimes last three
> or four days. At length rendered insensible by pain, death
> may bring release, or his tormenters put an end to his
> sufferings and throw the mangled body into the flames.\(^8\)

He concludes by stressing the heroic demeanor maintained by the
victim: "Captives often endure the torture with the greatest fortitude,
sing of their heroic deeds accomplished in war, and do not let their
captors notice fear or terror of death."\(^9\)

Testing a captive’s integrity as a warrior, his resolution to die well,
therefore, becomes one justification for torture. When a warrior had
so proven his heroism in this fashion, his captors celebrated that power
ritualistically: he was rewarded in a way by sharing that power through
the ceremonial eating of his body or specific parts thereof, particularly
his heart. William Byrd again:

\(^7\) Cited in Gleach, 50
\(^8\) David Zeisberger, *David Zeisberger's History of the Northern American Indians*, ed. Archer Butler Hubert and William Nathaniel Schwarze (Columbus, Ohio: F. J. Heer, 1910), 106–07.
\(^9\) Zeisberger, 107.
They never fail to treat those with the greatest inhumanity that have distinguished themselves most by their bravery; and, if he be a war-captain, they do him to honor to roast him alive, and distribute a collop to all that had a share in stealing the victory.\(^\text{10}\)

A kind of wry justice also played its role in torture, as in the instance of the woman at Wyoming discovered with the once red-hot hinges in her scorched hands, fitting retribution to a homesteader daring to erect a doored dwelling in forbidden lands. Similarly, starving colonists at Jamestown in 1622 who set out to steal food by armed force from their Indian neighbors were discovered “slain, with their mouths stopped full of bread.”\(^\text{11}\) And soldiers participating during the late eighteenth century in one campaign to conquer land from the Ohio Indians were tortured and killed, their “mouths stuffed...with soil—satisfying in death their lust for Indian land.”\(^\text{12}\)

Scalping, terror to so many people of the back country, had its origins in similar beliefs. Contrary to current understanding, the consequence of White guilt, widespread scalping antedated the contact period with Europeans.\(^\text{13}\) Not only did Indians come to employ scalping to terrorize European settlers, but they did so because it reflected long-established traditions of personal valor and belief that possessing the scalp of one’s enemy transferred that victim’s living spirit, power, and identity to the victor.\(^\text{14}\) Frederic Gleach has summarized this esthetic succinctly:

Such tortures...were part of the right way to live....The shrewdness, skill, and wit employed in these activities were the important performative elements in their aesthetics for the victors; the victim was expected to display strength and composure in the face of torture.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{10}\) Cited in Zeisberger.

\(^{11}\) Cited in Zeisberger, 51.

\(^{12}\) White, 454.


\(^{14}\) Axtell, 213–14.

\(^{15}\) Gleach, 50.
Reinforcing their respect for valor and enactment of ironic justice is the Indians' broader motive of simply punishing their enemy for crimes enacted. The acutely perceptive Moravian missionary John Heckewelder recorded this ideal. If people who pass themselves off as friends, Heckewelder wrote,

commit murder on another people, encroach on their lands, by making it a practice to come within their bounds and take the game from them, if they rob or steal from their hunting camps, or, in short, are guilty of any act of unjust aggression, they cannot be considered otherwise than as ENEMIES; they are declared to be such, and the aggrieved nation think themselves justifiable in punishing them.\(^\text{16}\)

Indeed, the horrible torments inflicted on the colonial soldiers and encroaching settlers reflected such punishment.

Increasingly, evidence now suggests that the Indians had evolved a strategy of terrorism intended not only to punish but also to strike such fear in the hearts of Europeans that they would think twice about encroaching on territory supposedly protected by treaties they had made with the Indians. In the perception of at least one historian, Indians were masters in the art of psychological warfare, rivaled only by the Turks during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.\(^\text{17}\) This terrorism was especially successful in Pennsylvania, where William Penn's unscrupulous sons and their proprietary administrators had set aside the long-established procedures Penn and the Delawares had worked out together; for although the Carolinas, Virginia and Maryland certainly endured their share of punitive warfare, Pennsylvania clearly was the principal target of the Indians' fury during the French and Indian and Pontiac's Wars. Historically, Indians rarely mistreated their captives, but during these wars they endeavored to create the greatest horror and terror by mutilating their victims, especially in the land between the Delaware and Susquehanna rivers.\(^\text{18}\)


\(^{18}\) Ward, 312.
conspicuously displaying them to be found later by pursuing soldiers and returning colonists. One official transmitted to the Pennsylvania Provincial Council that the “shocking Descriptions...given by those who have escaped of the horrid Cruelties and indecencies committed by these merciless Savages on the Bodies of the unhappy wretches who fell into their Barbarous hands,...has [sic] struck so great a Pannick and Damp upon the Spirits of the people, that hitherto they have not been able to make any considerable resistance or stand against the Indians.”

In some instances, bodies of those taken to be buried were intercepted, hauled out of their coffins to be scalped and mutilated. The Reverend Thomas Barton preserved a particularly detailed account of one such desecration:

On Friday last, at a Place call’d Salisbury Plains, as a Number of People were accompanying the Corpse of a young woman to her grave, who had been accidentally drowned, they were fir’d upon by a Party of Indians, who kill’d five the first fire, upon which they dispers’d, and fled....And what is unparallel’d by any Instance of Brutality, they even open’d the Coffin, took out the Corps and scalp’d her.

As a hallmark of frontier warfare, desecration of the dead has been documented as far back as the first years of the Jamestown settlement and was intended “to humiliate the defeated opponent, to demonstrate his relative weakness.”

Farms, so essential in defining to the British how civilized people differed from barbaric nomads, were burned, livestock mutilated and destroyed when not stolen. Many letters describe the devastation. Governor of New France Pierre de Vaudreuil boasted in 1756 of the strategy’s success:

All these provinces are laid waste for forty leagues [ca. 125 miles] from the foot of the mountains, in the direction of the sea. The number of prisoners in these territories since last

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19 CR, 6:768.
21 Gleach, 154.
April, is estimated at about three thousand men, women and children, in addition to thirteen hundred horses carried off to the River Oyo [Ohio], or the Beautiful River; the houses and barns that have been burnt, and the oxen and cows which have been killed wherever found, have not been counted.22

Marylander Adam Stephen succinctly captures the hopelessness and loss that drove the back country settlers from the frontier: the Indians "go about and Commit their outrages at all hours of the day and nothing is to be seen or heard of but Desolation and murders heightened with all Barbarous Circumstances and unheard of Instances and Cruelty...the Smouk of the Burning Plantations darken the day, and hide the neighboring mountains from our Sight."23

"The combination of organized strategy and tactics," as Matthew Ward put it, "produced a devastating effect on the British colonies."24 The frontier was virtually abandoned, and those who remained in the more strongly defensive centers became so demoralized that they actually appear to have contemplated making their peace with the French and Indians, as George Washington reported to Governor Robert Dinwiddie: some settlers, he said, were holding "Councils and cabals to very dishonourable purposes and unworthy the thoughts of a British Subject—Despairing of assistance and protection[,]...they talk of capitulating and coming upon terms with the French and Indians."25

Matthew Ward offers telling statistics. Although the figures pale when compared to the losses in modern warfare, they were significant to the struggling colonies affected, especially Pennsylvania and Virginia. "Nearly 1 percent of the total population" of those provinces were killed or captured; "more than 3 percent of the population of the frontier counties was killed or captured. Such figures," Ward concludes, "are not incomparable to the Revolutionary War and even the Civil War."26

22 Cited in Axtell, 316.
24 Ward, 313.
26 WP 3:316.
The British, however, missed the grim messages intended by the Indians, misconstruing the atrocities simply as evidence of mindless, defining indigenous barbarism. Remembering their successes in Ireland, their first colony, the British often resorted to policies that were genocidal, like distributing small-pox infected blankets to such Indians who had made their peace and signed new treaties\(^{27}\) and, on a daily, more individual level, murdering any Indians, peaceful or otherwise, they could find at hand. Cries for an increased scalp bounty mounted, and vigilante actions proliferated. We have seen the so-called Paxton Boys’ instance this already. There are numerous other examples. In 1768 Frederick Stump and John Ironcutter scalped and murdered 10 peaceful Indians at Middle Creek, northeast of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Although imprisoned in Carlisle, they were freed by the settlers and thus escaped punishment, as did the Paxton Boys.

One of the most notorious atrocities made its way into Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In 1774, frontiersman and trader Daniel Greathouse and his party wantonly murdered at Yellow Creek 10 relations (including his mother, sister and brother) of the powerful Indian leader James Logan, named by his Oneida father after the Pennsylvania provincial secretary and long a friend to British interests. Particularly barbaric was Greathouse’s desecration of Logan’s pregnant sister, whom he hanged from a tree upside down before cutting open her womb. For this massacre, many of the Ohio valley Indians pledged to destroy every White they came upon. In one instance, when Mingos attacked and killed a small party of travellers near the falls of the Muskingum, John Heckewelder relates they were then dismembered, their limbs and flesh stuck upon the bushes. The Delaware chief White Eyes later had the pieces assembled and buried, but when the Mingos discovered this, they tore up the ground, and endeavored to destroy, or scatter about, the parts at a greater distance. White Eyes, with the Delawares, watching their motions, gathered and interred the same a second time. The war party finding this out, ran furiously into the Delaware village, exclaiming against the conduct of these people,...and declaring at the same time, that

they would, in consequence of [Greathouse’s and Cresap’s cruelty toward women and children]...serve every white man they should meet with in the same manner.\textsuperscript{28}

Logan’s immediate retaliations contributed to initiating Lord Dunmore’s War in 1774. Heckewelder concludes that “times grew worse and worse.” Indeed, they did, as the eighteenth century neared its end. While the Europeans generally redoubled their genocidal policies, blind to the intended messages of Native American torture and killing, the Indians themselves gradually lost sight of their esthetic and judicial code, themselves succumbing to the easy invitation of spontaneous and furious violence they everywhere witnessed in the actions of the Whites. Their notorious torture and killing of Colonel William Crawford may be taken as a kind of touchstone revealing how far the Indians had come to accept western ways.

In 1782, Indian hater Colonel David Williamson killed 90 peaceful Moravian converts in their Ohio village of Gnadenhutten, beating them to death with mallets and hatchets. Defeated later near Sandusky, Williamson escaped, but the Delawares captured his commander, Colonel William Crawford. Though more humane than Williamson, Crawford was made to serve as the latter’s surrogate. Here is Hale Sipe’s account of Crawford’s horrible end:

He was tied by a long rope to a pole; his body was shot full of gun powder; his ears were cut off; burning faggots were pressed against his skin, and he was horribly gashed with knives. The unfortunate man endured this terrible agony for four hours in the presence of Dr. Knight and the renegades, Simon Girty and Matthew Elliott. He appealed to Girty to shoot him and end his misery, but in vain. Falling unconscious, his scalp was torn off, and burning embers were poured upon his bleeding head. The excruciating pain revived him; he rose to his feet and started once more to walk

around the pole, then groaned and fell dead. The Indians burned his body to ashes.\textsuperscript{29}

Historically, frontier warfare has occasioned the most sordid and barbaric behavior in human beings. Once buttressed by a code of valor, honor, and heroism, Indian practices degenerated under the continuous pressure of expediency, desperation, and greed as the Europeans upped their scalp bounties and terrorized all Indians, enemy and friend alike. The tragic cycle of revenge and violence caught up and destroyed the ideals of even the most compassionate British who could not and would not read the messages Indian warfare and justice were intended to communicate. The dehumanization resulting from this kind of murder, dying, and death thus wrought its own, subtler, spiritual vengeance on both Native American and European. In the resounding denunciation of Verona's Prince in Shakespeare's \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, "All are punished."

\textsuperscript{29} C. Hale Sipe, \textit{The Indian Chiefs of Pennsylvania} (Butler, Pennsylvania: Ziegler Printing Company, 1927), 430.