

# Of the Enemy: Scalping as Culture and Commodity on the North American Frontier

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In a February 1711 letter home, John Barnwell recounted his campaign's recent victories in the raging Tuscarora War. Fighting in the western reaches of colonial North Carolina, Barnwell and a group of South Carolina militiamen marched from one Tuscarora village to the next in search of Native American warriors to kill and civilians to harass, enslave, or otherwise brutalize. John "Tuscarora" Barnwell was thorough in his recollection of their campaign, going to great lengths to describe their "valient" task. Barnwell, like many other frontiersmen and militia commanders of his generation, added a flair for the dramatic to his retelling of the colonists' near mechanical destruction of each Tuscarora site they came across. In one such punchy section, he claimed that he and his men were "Terror to our own heathen friend to behold" and that their war "was Revenge, which we made good by the Execution we made of the Enemy." (Barnwell 1897) The colonial destruction of the Tuscarora was devastating in both style and scale. Barnwell and his men dehumanized their adversaries, which is obvious in the way his letter quantitatively recounted the outcome of their battles. While specific and descriptive about his own losses, carefully counting and naming those lost and wounded from each company, Barnwell lists the number of people enslaved and the quantity of enemy scalps each company produced, with an aptly titled section: "Of the Enemy."

Warfare between English colonists and their Native American neighbors escalated in frequency and intensity as English North America expanded its borders in the 17th and 18th centuries. Native American warriors widened the scope and scale of their warfare to compete with the cataclysmic tone of European warfare. At the same time, colonial militias and frontiersmen adopted Native American techniques and tactics to better match their foes in the backcountries of the North American frontier. Central to both experiences was the practice of scalp-taking. As colonials turned this ritual of Native American warfare into a tool of terror and revenge, their native adversaries intensified the scale of the practice in response.

This article is primarily interested in how the practice of scalp-taking was commodified across English North America during the 17th and 18th centuries. Much has been written on the global origins of scalping and the transfer and adoption of the practice by English colonists. However, this work seeks to identify the practice as a cultural, economic, and narrative commodity. In this aim, the project broadly defines commodity as something of noticeable use or value. Scalping was

both consciously and unconsciously exploited and implemented across English North America as a tool of colonial expansion, economic incentive, and manipulator of memory. Quickly cemented as a tool of terror and revenge within the confines of frontier warfare, colonial governments started incentivizing the practice through sanctioned scalp bounties by the late 17th century. The narrative was essential to scalping's adoption and evolution, cementing an otherwise worthless trophy of war into an economic and cultural commodity weaponized in history, fiction, and art as a malleable tool of memory and judgment.

## **The Role of Scalping in Colonial North America**

The act of scalping is simple. Whether a defeated foe is still alive or not, the victorious party normally stands over a victim lying face down on the ground. After securing a firm grip on the victim's hair, thus lifting the head directly upwards, the would-be scalper uses either a sharpened flint rock or a knife to cut a circular patch of skin from the victim's crown. A remaining and quickly knotted tuft of hair served as an easy handle. Severing the victim from their scalp was quick work for the experienced practitioner and was often completed during the heat of battle. Those unlucky enough to be scalped alive frequently bled to death, but some did survive the ordeal. Once a scalp was removed from its original owner, one had to scrape any remaining blood and tissues from the underside and light a small fire to dry out the skin. (Hulton 1977) 102-103. Many tribes on the eastern seaboard then cut small holes along the edge of the scalp and used small sticks to craft a hoop to stretch the scalp over. Others fashioned the dried scalps to their spears and tomahawks via the remaining hair or a punctured hole. Others looped several scalps together and attached them to their leggings at the waste. Either way, taking the scalp was only the first step, and its display was the crucial second. (Axtell and Sturtevant 1980)

Prior to European arrival, Native American groups practiced a highly ritualistic style of warfare. Predicated on individual glory and limited bloodshed, native groups across the eastern seaboard went to war in a carefully orchestrated manner. Central to many cultures' perceptions of war was the practice of trophy-taking. Securing weapons and, more importantly, body parts from a defeated foe was a symbol of martial prowess and manhood. Similar practices took place across the North American continent, varying dramatically from one culture to the next. To the Algonquin and Iroquoian language groups, primarily living along the northeastern coast through the Great Lakes regions, taking trophies was an essential and deeply significant piece of their culture.

Many of these eastern woodland groups, like the Huron, Mohawk, Narragansett, and Powhatan, practiced a form of "mourning war" or "Blood Revenge" prior to the arrival of European influences. (Lee 2007) ; Motivated equally by internal needs and external threats, this form of warfare sought to replace lost members. Whether someone died in a conflict or in a hunting accident, groups like the Iroquois looked to avenge that death while maintaining their population levels through warfare. The severity of a group's response depended on the relationship between themselves and the offending people. Often, these blood debts could be repaid diplomatically. When they could not be resolved peacefully, the young men of the group sought revenge through violence. (Steele 1995) 113-115. Characterized by quick and sporadic raids, combatants prioritized both the taking of prisoners and the slaughter of their opponents. Upon their victorious return, the villages' female elders passed judgment on the fate of any captives. The "mourning" process was completed through both the ritualistic torture and killing of certain prisoners, mostly men, and the familial acceptance and adoption of others. The ritualistic beating, torture, and ultimate burning of the less fortunate captives was part and parcel, to many practitioners, of the acceptance of the new members into the tribe. Often

essential to this process was the presence of a fresh scalp brought in alongside the captives awaiting adoption. (Armstrong 1998) 17-35. ; (Drake 2004)

Eastern woodland groups, like the Iroquois and Seneca, placed freshly taken scalps at the center of the “mourning” process. For the lost soul to find peace and simultaneously accept the replacement, many groups completed “requickening” ceremonies. (Williamson 2007) 216-217. The Seneca famously painted the skin and hair of fresh scalps red, along with the faces of the presumptive adoptees. Linking the two as “living relatives,” the scalps symbolized the dead relative or neighbor being replaced. Practices like these highlight the importance of scalp taking as much more than simple trophy taking. Upon reaching a certain age, young men had most of the hair on their heads shaved, save for a small lock that was braided near the crown. The scalp lock represented the soul and “living spirit” of the young man. These locks were decorated with paint and beads and left to grow. The honoring and taking of scalps was a spiritual and religious necessity. (Axtell 1981) 33-34.

Returning the scalps of defeated enemies served several purposes past the acceptance of new members. Many Iroquoian peoples believed that a person mutilated in death would be denied entrance to the afterlife. The Creek people of the American Southeast believed those scalped in battle would be forced to wander the limbo-esque “Caverns of the Wilderness” until their indignity was resolved. (Friederici 1990) By offering the taken scalp of another to a deceased person’s family, the slain warrior could finally move on to the next plain. Similarly, the abode of a slain warrior was often viewed as “haunted” until cleansed through the proper offering. Irish trader and anthropologist James Adair observed a Chickasaw ceremony in 1765, where two fresh enemy scalps were affixed to the eaves of a house to “appease” the spirits of the slain man. (Adair 2005) ; (Williamson 2007). For many across the Iroquois and Algonquin peoples, those who lost family members were in mourning until presented with a scalp taken in retaliation. Life partners of slain men often slept with taken scalps as a symbol of their loved ones’ revenge. In his now famous account of dealing with the Montagnai and their war with the Iroquois, French colonist and explorer Samuel de Champlain observed native women dancing with and adorning themselves with scalps “...as if they had been precious chains.” (de Champlain 1922) 2:106.

Most of the societies discussed here were matrilineal, meaning family lineage ran through the female members and their bloodlines. Female elders were looked to for guidance and wisdom. The role of men was simple: hunt and fight. Therefore, in addition to the obvious religious and spiritual value attached to scalping, the practice was paramount in the lives of young men. (Williamson 2007) 194-196. While returning from war with a prisoner was ideal, the possession of a fresh scalp bestowed prestige and an elevated status upon these warriors. An enemy scalp was a tangible token of both revenge and power and a credit to their individual abilities. Iroquois men achieved adulthood upon completing the grisly act and could, therefore, ascend the social hierarchy. (Armstrong 1998) 30. On the western plains, Pawnee men dutifully prepared their prizes and sacrificed them in a ritualistic fire to become “anointed men.” Osage religious leaders used scalps to bless the weapons of young men heading into combat. (van de Logt 2008) 73-74. Believing the soul of the defeated resided in the scalp, these ceremonies sought to empower the weapons of war. According to historians like Wayne Lee, the power of the scalping practice worked to both extend and restrict the scale and cyclical nature of native warfare. (Lee 2007) 713-720. In addition to vengeance for the initial injury, young men could not help themselves in seeking prestige for themselves in battle. Scalps held a tremendous power as motivation for conflict on both the individual and societal levels. (La Flesche 1995) 215. Despite a wide range of ritualistic violence among Native American groups, the practice of scalping stands out. Some groups, like the Cree in the Hudson Bay region, regularly imposed scalp tributes upon lesser people under their influence. The physical scalps and the practice of removing

them were culturally and spiritually essential to native warfare across the North American continent. (Hiltunen 2011) ; (Trigger 1976) 73-75. ; (de Champlain 1922) 5:231. ; (Thwaites 1896) 17:69.

### **European arrival and conceptions of “Ritualistic Violence”**

In general, warfare in Europe underwent revolutionary change in the 16th and 17th centuries. Spurred on by the centralization of power within Western European empires and advancement in technology, the way nations and their people were impacted by warfare changed dramatically. As these powerful nations grew, so did their commitments to border security, internal tensions, and increasing needs abroad. Accordingly, European militaries were a more constant fixture as they grew in scope and extended their capabilities. These larger and more complex institutions necessitated a more efficient structure and competent officer corps to better control and utilize the growing mass of infantry. On the one hand, these armies were more disciplined than previous iterations: warfare centered on the battlefield and the siege. On the other hand, the exponential demand for bodies allowed all levels of society to enter and partake in military service, resulting in often unbridled violence, pillaging, and other “savage” acts upon the civilians of Europe.

As warfare between these competing nation-states and their smaller adversaries grew in scale and frequency, the language and meaning of conflict came into view. According to historians like Wayne Lee, warfare can be viewed as cultural communication. Warfare in Europe in the Age of Discovery was largely defined by restraint in the levels of violence deemed acceptable. (Black 2006) ; (Parker 1996) In conflicts between like-minded groups, according to Lee, each side prosecuted an equal level of violence against each other and followed the same basic restraints when it comes to violence against civilians. When the two sides were unequal, in a war with “barbarians,” those restraints were less adhered to. Whether it was an internal rebellion or some foreign entity a European power was trying to subdue, they were more likely to adopt increasingly violent measures and tactics. This is on clear display in the 16th-century English putdown of the Irish rebellions. English forces were quick to destroy the livestock and crops of Irish civilians to devastate their lives logistically and materially. In extreme situations, English soldiers turned to rape, pillage, and mutilation in a clear departure from warfare against an “equal” opponent. The level of cultural equivalency mattered greatly when it came to violence and restraint in English and European warfare. These factors culminated in a more institutionalized but volatile military culture across the western half of Europe as these nations crossed the Atlantic and began interacting with Native Americans. (Lee 2011) 9, 26-27.

### **Scalping & Jamestown**

The practice of scalping is one of the defining components of warfare between European colonists and Native Americans on the North American frontier. As an obvious piece of Native American war-making, scalping factored heavily into the relationship forged between the two sides. English colonists were terrified and horrified by the practice and used it as justification to dehumanize and escalate the levels of violence employed against Native Americans and their way of life. Through Scalp bounties, the practice was commodified by the English in their wars against the French-aligned natives, taking a once spiritual and religious rite and appropriating it as economic motivation.

As Spanish, French, Dutch, and English explorers and soldiers arrived on North American shores, they all took note of the scalping practice. Across religion, language, and other cultural differences, eyewitness accounts all point to Native warriors proudly taking the scalps of their

enemies, painstakingly preparing them, and their central place in the post-battle celebrations. Spanish soldiers and monks in Florida were ambushed and scalped in the early 16th century, leaving grisly remains to be found by their allies. (Axtell and Sturtevant 1980) 456-461. Samuel de Champlain and other early visitors to Canada, New England, and the Great Lakes all reference the practice among the Huron, Iroquois, Oneida, and others in the region. Some struggled to find the words to describe what Captain John Smith referred to as a “terrible cruelty” in 1609. Most of the earliest records from Jamestown do not give the practice a name. However, there are clear references to colonists and soldiers having their “heads cut” by the Powhatan “savages” and archaeological evidence proving it took place. The bizarre and often bewildering practice was highlighted time and time again in European accounts, usually accompanied by intricate descriptions of the processes involved. (Barbour 1969) II, 372.

There are a handful of essential eyewitness accounts of the English settlement at Jamestown. John Smith, George Percy, Robert Beverley, Edward Wingfield, and others present a harsh and difficult opening for the first permanent English settlement. What the colony lacked in adequate personpower for agriculture and defense and proper provisions for the cold winter months, it more than made up for in the form of a massive cultural superiority complex. (Fausz 1990) The presence of the gargantuan Powhatan Confederacy in the region, a loosely aligned group of Algonquin-speaking Native peoples, gave the colonists a readymade and misunderstood enemy. While there were some peaceful and collaborative moments between the two sides early on, the English carry on about their “savage” neighbors and their increasingly hostile interactions with them. Even John Smith, who popular history has remembered more as a peacekeeper, escalated the hostility between the two sides. In one spring 1609 “trade mission,” Smith and a band of colonists snuck into a Pamunkey village and held their leader ransom at gunpoint. During the tense standoff, Chief Opechancanough pointed to 24 fresh scalps hanging on a line as proof of what he and his people could do. The message was not lost on Smith, who believed the Powhatan chief was “...supposing to half conquer them by this spectacle of his terrible cruelty.” (Barbour 1969)

This series of tit-for-tat raids and attacks in the spring of 1609 with the nearby Paspahegh tribes and others escalated tensions and caused the English to seek revenge, expansion, and provisions more aggressively. Most of these adventures were met with disaster and death, like Captain John Ratcliffe’s November trading expedition. While most of his men were killed in an ambush under the guise of peace, Ratcliffe was taken to the center of the village, tied to a stake naked, and ritualistically scalped while still alive. Other expeditions were cut down to two or three men at a time, unable to match the loose order fighting of the Native fighting style. None of these early accounts mention scalping by name, but almost all of them mention “cuts to the head,” which is widely believed to describe the ceremonial practice (Percy, 1922).

Over the next few decades, the relationship between these two devolved into outright war three times. During the first conflict, from 1609 to 1614, the English aggressively assaulted their nearest native neighbors’ villages and livelihoods. They burned houses and cornfields while killing any native warrior or civilian in their way. When George Percy and Captain James Davis led an attack on Paspahegh, they kidnapped the leader’s wife and two small children. In brutal fashion, the children were executed and dumped overboard on the return journey while the Paspahegh “queen” was executed by the sword upon their return to Jamestown. (Cave 2013) 83-84. The English assaulted the material life of the Powhatans, in a clear representation of their own priorities. While they brutally assaulted and executed civilians and warriors alike, there is little evidence that they had adopted the practice of scalp-taking. Theirs was a war of pure devastation, and the natives running from the flames and death took note. (Percy 1922)

In March 1622, the combined forces of Chief Opechancanough entered settlements near Jamestown under the guise of trade and launched a brutal and bloody assault on the English civilians. These newer settlements, like Martin's Hundred, Henricus, and Wolstenholme, had grown in the footprint of the previous war. Fields were set ablaze, homes were ransacked, livestock was massacred, and civilians were cut down by tomahawks and clubs, regardless of their age or gender. By the end of the day, more than 350 colonists, a full third of the colony, had been killed and twenty women taken captive. While there is little survivor testimony from this attack, archaeological evidence from multiple sites suggests that many of the victims were scalped during or after the assault. (Campbell 1860) 160-165. The gates of Jamestown were only closed when a friendly native warned the guards, sparing the colonists even further bloodshed and destruction. The scale of the attack and the deep grooves found on the crowns of excavated skulls highlight a shift in Native warfare. The violence of the previous war had convinced Opechcanough to increase the scale of violence against the English, abandoning the cultural tenant of preserving life above all else. In the all-out assault on the outlying settlements, he meant to send a message to the English and hoped the unrestrained violence would convince them to abandon their claims and leave. (Vaughan 1978)

In retaliation against the "viperous brood" and their "unnaturall brutishnesse," according to Virginian Edward Waterhouse, the colonists in Virginia launched a campaign of devastation and death each summer season for nearly a decade. Colonial raids focused on the "feed fight" and targeted villages, foodstuffs, and the people caught in the way. (Waterhouse 1622) ; (Steele 1995) 38-44. The balance in coastal Virginia shifted through the 1640s as the 3rd Anglo-Powhatan War followed the pattern of the second: A massive Native assault in 1644 mirrored the 1622 attack and killed another 400 settlers in outlying areas. This time, the deaths represented less than a tenth of the blossoming colonial society, and the Virginian response was more devastating than ever before. By 1646, the war was finished, and the Powhatan were too. Culturally, the Powhatan Confederacy had adopted the scale and butchery of the English way of war to their own tactics. Ceremonial aspects like scalping, captive taking, and ceremonial torture increased along the same scale. The terminology for the practice of scalping was not yet accepted among the English, but archaeological evidence points to its widespread use and even escalation in the period. (Axtell and Sturtevant 1980) 460-461. ; (Powell 1958)

## The Pequot

The Pequot War (1636-37) laid the true foundations for the commodification of scalp-taking and its grisly product. Violent raids and reprisals between the English, their Native allies, and the Pequot clashed with these competing cultures on a new scale. Fueled primarily by freshly introduced stress on Native groups interacting in the changing economic atmosphere of colonial New England, the war was the region's first large-scale and prolonged Anglo-native conflict. For the first time, colonial militias had to defend towns and mustered expeditions at scale, bringing ingrained European conflict elements with them. As the English fought alongside Native groups like the Mohegan against the Pequot, scalping and other trophy-taking rituals solidified cultural biases and became a powerful commodity to be exploited in the rapidly evolving Anglo-Native relationship.

The war originated from tribal rivalries among the various Algonquin peoples of New England, who found themselves ravaged by in-fighting, competition for trade with the English, and the loss of nearly 80% of their population from European-introduced diseases. (Grenier 2005) 26-28. The Pequot began openly attacking Mohegan, Narragansett, and English settlements in early 1636. One Pequot ambush surprised an English patrol from Seabrooke, and as the survivors fled to the safety of a

nearby fort, they witnessed the “fleshing” of their dead and dying compatriots. Scalping was an ever-present fear to colonial civilians and militiamen, and the significance of ritually severed body parts in warfare wasn’t new to either side. (Vincent 1637) 5.

Both the English and Algonquin in New England brought their own cultural understandings of violence and restraint into the Pequot War. The ceremonial and spiritual elements of Native scalping, trophy taking, and torture served multi-faceted roles within their societies, from diplomacy and vengeance to puberty and the mourning of loss. The English culture influencing the colonial societies had its own history of ritualized violence, especially with the decapitation of their enemies. (Lipman 2008) 7-10. Removing the heads of one’s opponents served several purposes in the English culture: primarily punishment for high crimes like treason and rebellion. The posting of severed heads on poles, often embalmed for longevity, served as a grisly reminder to those that would dare and defy English authority. Sir Humphrey Gilbert decapitated dozens of Irish rebels in the 1560s and used them to line the pathway to his tent. Beheading was all about power to the English, or as Gilbert put it: “the stiffe necked must be made to stoupe.” Colonists from New England to Virginia brought this assumption with them to the New World. (Lee 2011)

The Pequot War brought these competing cultural traditions together in a mess of conflicted meanings and escalating violence. As their Mohegan and Narragansett allies began providing the English with trophies of their victories, as their culture necessitated, a grotesque and physical avenue of cultural communication was opened. When native warriors returned from battle as victors, “... they carrie the heads of their chiefe enemies that they slay in the wars: it being the custome to cut off their heads, hands, and feete , to bear home to their wives and children, as true tokens of their renowned victorie.” Colonist William Wood clearly understood the significance of this practice and what it meant to the Native American cultures. These were gifts of love, service, reciprocity, loyalty, and victory. Trophies were “...a visible sign of justice done.” (Wood 1865) 95. To the English at large, these gruesome trophies represented nothing but power and loyalty, specifically to the Native Americans’ fidelity and submission to English authority. As the troubles with the Pequot dragged on, the supply of heads, hands, and scalps continued to roll into English hands as gifts and tributes. Favor with the English meant favor in the fur and weapons trade for the Narragansett and Mohegan, which increasingly represented a lifeline to the devastated Native American populations. A gift of Pequot scalps to an English captain became a spiritual message of friendship, loyalty, and economic necessity. The English took these gifts as evidence of their own authority and proudly displayed them. (Lipman 2008) 15-17.

Many believe the tensions and sporadic raids erupted into full-scale war because one of these trophies was given to the English. A single Pequot was killed and scalped in September 1636, but before the trophy was presented to the English as tribute, it was passed through the hands of all the allied leaders. This symbolic gesture bound the sachems and their people together in their alliance both against the Pequot and with the English. The war escalated quickly, and in May of 1637, a combined force of English militia and Algonquin warriors assaulted the Pequot at Fort Mystic. More of a village than a fort, the ensuing massacre witnessed the burning and killing of more than 400 people. As one of the more singular and devastating moments of bloodshed and violence between the English and native Americans, the massacre at Fort Mystic once again highlighted the scale of the Englishman’s war to their native enemies and allies. Famously the Mohegan and Narragansett protested the number of people killed, claiming the English way “...is too furious, and slaies too many.” (Winthrop 1825) 195. This is believed to be partly in shock but also in fear of the scale of the inevitable retaliation. (Grenier 2005) 26-29.

Nearly annihilated in the Mystic Massacre, the remaining Pequots were hunted down and

either killed or absorbed into other Native American groups as adoptees. The scale of the massacre frightened the Algonquin peoples in New England and caused many to seek safety in friendship with the English. Lion Gardener, the commander of Fort Saybrook in Connecticut, told inquiring neutral groups that if they wanted to trade with the English, they must "...kill all the [Pequots] that come to you, and send me their heads." The presentation of heads to the English became so numerous and constant that Governor Winthrop admitted to losing track of just how many he received. As the year dragged on, the incoming trophies increasingly became scalps. (Lipman 2008) 23-26. ; (Mason 1736). Easier to carry and take, the scalps represented loyalty, economic opportunity, and, ultimately, safety for many Native American groups. This one-way exchange increasingly dehumanized Native Americans in the eyes of many English, viewing them akin to obedient hounds and wolves offering their masters gifts. In the years following the Pequot War New England governors turned the tribute relationship into the colonies' first bounty system: paying Native warriors for the pelts of wolves. (Armstrong 1998) 25-26. While initially attempting to rid the region of its wolf population, this practice institutionalized a system that paid individuals to submit severed body parts for monetary reward. (Ode 2023) 73-74. Scalp tributes and the first colonial bounties during and after the Pequot War laid the groundwork for the first scalp bounties.

### **King Philips War and the proliferation of scalping**

The long-term consequences and fallout of the Pequot War and its tremendous violence would not be truly felt in New England for almost four decades. The opening of King Philip's War (1675-76) ushered in a new era of violence and warfare between the English and their Native American neighbors and the first true scalp bounties. Metacom, better known as King Philip by the English, assumed the throne of the Wampanoag people in 1662. Motivated by the plight of the Pequot and their steadily decreasing station in New England, the Wampanoag, Nipmuck, and other tribes in the area sought the outright destruction of the English. (Lepore 1999) 74-75. These raids and attacks killed anyone in their path and left as grisly a scene in their wake as possible. Houses and crops, the physical manifestation of English life, were tinder for native fires. English bodies, either dead or alive, were stripped of their clothes and desecrated, eliminating the cultural barrier between them and the "naked savage." (Hubbard 1677) 2:103 More than anything else, an abundance of English heads lost their scalps. The English responded by adopting scalping both culturally and institutionally. (Lepore 1999) 81, 92-93. ; (I. Mather 1676) 123-125.

After initially disastrous militia campaigns, where few men returned alive, some among the English decided to adopt the tactics of their enemies. Captain Benjamin Church and the first colonial "rangers" learned the "skulking way of war" from their Native American allies and scouts, taking an irregular and extirpative war to Wampanoag villages across the region. It was a Native American scout named John Alderman under Church's command who killed and scalped Metacom to end the war. At once, both a capitulation of English arrogance and a breaking of identity, a certain class of colonial frontiersmen took on the mantle of the "Indian way of war." They would be the first Englishmen to embrace scalp-taking as their own. (Steele 1995) 97-107. ; (Lincoln 1913) 127. ; (Grenier 2005) 32-38.

At this point, one of the most interesting facets of the Anglo-Native relationship was the massive blending of terminology surrounding scalps and their taking. According to James Axtell and William Sturtevant, many early European settlers struggled to account for the practice because they lacked the proper words. English accounts up to King Philip's War utilize a wide breadth of



terminology to describe the prize, including but not limited to head-scalp, flesh, head-skin, and the ever-ambiguous head. The act itself had its' own slew of descriptors: flay, excoriate, skin. In further confusion, the French and Dutch each used their own words to describe the act and its results. (Axtell and Sturtevant 1980) 462-463. It wasn't until the 1670s and the introduction of the first colonial scalp bounties and the increasing prevalence of the act did the colloquial "scalp/to scalp" become accepted and popular among English accounts.

As the war against Metacom and the Wampanoag evolved, the colonial governments of Massachusetts and Connecticut offered the first formal scalp bounty to its Narragansett allies. Building off the scalp and body part tribute traditions, warriors were promised payment in material for each enemy scalp produced. The initial bounty equated to five shillings per native scalp and twenty times that for the head of Metacom (Saltonstall 1676). The narrative was an essential and traditional part of the bounty process, and bounties were only paid out if a sufficient and believable story was told. Rewards were often withheld if a scalp was produced without credible witnesses to the act. Storytelling and narrative were always important elements of the Native American scalping ritual, and this value was confirmed as part of the new English bounties. The early English adoption and institutionalization of scalp bounties was an uneasy process. Historian Mairin Odle put this best, describing the English commodification of scalping as a hybrid development that matched colonial financial incentives to already established martial traditions of the Narragansett and other Native Americans (Odle 2023) 77.

As part of the successive Wars for Empire against the French and their Native American allies in Canada and the Great Lakes, Benjamin Church and other English rangers conducted extirpative expeditions against Native American settlements. As English war parties began torching Native American settlements deep in the backcountry, vengeful native assaults against English towns only increased. The colonies needed as many men on the frontier as possible to keep up in the arms race of extirpative and retaliatory raids. Convincing young colonials to venture into the woods to kill natives on their home turf was a tough sell. Their solution? Offering state-sponsored scalp bounties to colonial citizens. To motivate and recruit "Indian fighters," colonial governments in Massachusetts and Plymouth offered substantial cash payments for every "head skin" a colonist could hand over. (Grenier 2005) 38-39. Church and his men received five shillings per scalp during the war while chasing the one-hundred-shilling prize for Metacom's scalp. Church's son claims that they only ever received thirty shillings for Metacom's head, making clear the economic factor in their expedition. (Church 1975) 156. The demand continued for frontiersmen in successive conflicts. At the outset of King Williams War (1688-1697), Englishmen were offered £8 sterling per Native male scalp secured. The commodification of scalping shifted the practice from a barbarous peculiarity in the eyes of the English to a central yet morally questionable pillar of warfare on the frontier. (Axtell and Sturtevant 1980) 468-472.

Benjamin Church and ranging families like the Gorhams and Lovewells were well known for their backwoods adventures, and any story involving scalps spread like wildfire through the colonies. Perhaps the most famous of these early stories is that of Hannah Duston. In 1697, an Abenaki war party, allies of the French in the ongoing King William's War, attacked Duston's hometown of Haverhill in Massachusetts. Along with her one-week-old baby and nurse Mary Neff, Duston was taken captive and forced to march towards Canada. Shortly after leaving, one of the Abenaki men wrestled Duston's baby away from her and "dashed out the brains...against a tree" because the infant was slowing them down. After several hard weeks of marching through the backcountry, the party was left with an Abenaki family for safekeeping along with an English teenager who had been abducted and possibly adopted earlier that year. One evening Duston, Neff, and the young man

crept upon the sleeping family and killed them with their own tomahawks. Duston led the charge in the killing and subsequent scalping of 10 people, including six children, and then to a canoe on the Merrimack River and safe return home. Duston presented the ten scalps to the Massachusetts General Assembly and received the bounty of £50, worth more than \$10,000 today. (C. Mather 1699, 137-143; Cutter 2018; Nye, n.d.).

Stories like Duston's became legendary among the colonial population for several reasons: First, the nature of Duston's capture and the horrors of her journey enforced growing fears of colonists. Her courageous and violent fight to free herself and her fellow captives gave those same fearful colonists hope that maybe they too could rise and save themselves. Secondly, she never published her own version of what happened, allowing other chroniclers and accounts to tell her story. Cotton Mather's 1699 *Decennium Luctuosom, or The Sorrowful Decade*, was the first to share and disseminate Duston's tale. In this account, Duston is juxtaposed to other female captive stories and held high for not bowing to the inferior "savages." (Kennedy 2017) 230-231. To Mather and his readers, according to historian Kathleen Kennedy, Duston had assumed her rightful place in standing over the beaten and bloodied Native Americans. Instead of accepting Native American violence, she took agency and distributed it. Finally, her story stands out because of those ten scalps she delivered. Not only did she, a colonial woman and mother, survive the ordeal, but she returned with physical proof that she killed and butchered her "savage" captors and was handsomely rewarded for it (Grenier 2005) 40-41. As soon as English authorities and citizens adopted scalping as a tool of war and commerce, they also began shaping the narrative around the practice and those who undertook it. Depending on the situation, perpetrators and victims of scalping varied greatly in how they were remembered.

## The 18th Century & Scalp Bounties

As the 18th century opened, scalp bounties became relatively common across the English colonies. Regardless of the moral and cultural issues plaguing many Englishmen, the practice was widely popular and considered necessary to succeed against the Natives and their increasingly close French allies. These moral ambiguities presented themselves in the bounties. A 1694 law in Massachusetts offered the same bounty on any native scalp, head, or prisoner brought in, regardless of sex or gender. By 1704, that law changed and introduced a sliding scale of payouts and restrictions on acceptable targets. Only scalps from males "capable of bearing armes" received the full bounty. One adult male scalp was worth 100 days' wages for the average worker in New England (Axtell 1981) 233. The scalps of female natives were worth only a tenth and nothing was offered for children under the age of ten. There was a tremendous amount of room in these bounty laws for native civilians and friendly natives became a trade for colonial scalp hunters. Many, like Judge Samuel Sewall of Massachusetts, feared the privatization of the colonial military forces and the monetization of warfare. Sewall feared the extra incentives offered to men joining provisional ranger units over serving in conventional militias. He also had a serious issue with men building such a lucrative trade upon "butchery" at the colony's expense. He believed it a "bad omen" that men would rather show up to fight and butcher for cash instead of serving their community and defending their families. As the trade in scalps accelerated in the 18th century, their commodification became a critical part of an English colonial warfare increasingly designed to brutalize and destroy Native Americans. (M. Halsey 1973) II:691.

During the Tuscarora War of the 1710s, the colonies of North and South Carolina and

Virginia demonstrated not only the destructive power of colonial warfare in the 18th century but the centrality of incentivized scalping. Angered by Carolinian raids to enslave their people, the Tuscarora launched a series of raids on the English and their native allies, the Catawba and Yamasee. The resulting punitive campaigns from both North and South Carolina wreaked havoc and death upon the Tuscarora. South Carolina's John Barnwell led a force that, according to him, was "terror to our own heathen friend to behold." Tuscarora villages and crops were burned at an amazing rate, and the civilians fared no better. During one assault, Barnwell lamented that he and his men only scalped 52 people. In the 1713 battle at No-ho-ro-co the Carolinian army under James Moore scalped 192 Tuscarora men, women, and children. (Lee 2004) ; (La Vere 2013) ; (Barnwell 1897) 394-395. The colonial militia, scalp-hunting rangers, and friendly natives cashed in on the lucrative scalp bounties offered by each colony, which drove a greater lust for scalps, prisoners, and plunder. Even Virginia, which elected not to send any official forces to fight, offered a £20 per scalp bounty for privateering frontiersmen. By 1715, the Tuscarora were so diminished that they all either fled to safety among the Iroquois in New York or submitted to English authority. The economics and colonial bloodlust of the scalp and prisoner bounties eventually landed its' target on the Yamasee, the Carolinian allies. By 1717, they were so demoralized and broken up by scalping parties that the surviving Yamasee fled to Spanish Florida. (Ramsey 2008).

Scalp bounties motivated an entire generation of young colonists to venture out in search of adventure, fame, and fortune. Provisional ranger units proved an essential piece of fighting on the American frontier. The men leading these units, like John Gorham, John Lovewell, and Robert Rogers, became larger-than-life figures for their exploits in a cavalcade of small frontier wars in New England (Grenier 2005) 50-52. Perhaps the most famous was John Lovewell and his raids against the Abenaki during Father Rale's War in the 1720s. Lovewell petitioned the Massachusetts assembly for a commission in the Fall of 1724 to raid the north in search of native war parties. Seeking to cash in on the £100 per scalp bounty, Lovewell led two successful expeditions in rapid order and returned a celebrity. Each time, he and his men returned with native scalps and weapons, proving to the colonists that the rangers kept danger at bay. His newfound fame and fortune were short-lived, as his third expedition, in the spring of 1725, was his last. His most audacious raid to date, thoroughly bathed in arrogance, ended in a devastating ambush outside the Abenaki town of Pequawket. Thirty of the fifty-man force, including Lovewell himself, were killed in the trap and ensuing chase. Each one of them was scalped by the Abenaki. Despite such a quick and militarily insignificant career, the exploits of Lovewell, the scalp-hunting ranger, lived on in both physical and collective memory. He has a mountain, pond, and town named after him in New England, and his fight was chronicled by 19th-century literary giants like poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and authors Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne. (Symmes 1725) ; (Longfellow 1820) ; (Thoreau 1849)

By the 1730's, what John Smith had referred to as a "terrible cruelty" was part of colonial life, especially on the edge of English advancement. These frontier settlements had an intimate relationship with the practice, whether in Maine or Virginia and most probably had some personal or familial connection to a scalping. Even those in the larger cities regularly saw scalp bounties advertised in newspapers and pamphlets alongside stories depicting both horror and success. (Belknap 1813) 2:63. ; (Axtell 1981) 230-240. Scalps and their taking were increasingly seen as a necessary commodity, both as an essential facet of frontier warfare and a defining narrative of the colonial experience. Despite this acceptance and regularity, there was still a delicate moral balancing act going on within colonial society. Paying bounties to natives for hostile scalps and English scalp-hunters was one thing, but any English connection to the decidedly brutal and "savage" practice carried justifications. ("Jonathan Law to William Shirley, Aug 26, 1747," n.d.)

During the Wars for Empire, the English and French increasingly clashed over border disagreements, access to lucrative resources, and the right to continental power. These wars, fought from 1688 to the end of the 7 Years War in 1763, decided the fate of North America. Although they gradually increased in intensity and scale, they were primarily fought along the French-Canadian border, the Great Lakes region, and the Ohio region. Native allies played significant roles in these conflicts, with both the French and English relying on a revolving cast of allies. The practice of scalping played a large role in the intercultural relations between each European power. English bounties on scalps motivated colonial men to join frontier units and seek profit, ever-expanding the violence and reach of scalping. The French acceptance and encouragement of Native American warfare and tactics like scalping and trophy-taking initially made justifications that much easier for the English.

Among native peoples, the introduction of scalp bounties brought about dramatic change. According to Wayne Lee, this practice interrupted the traditions of Native warfare in several interconnected ways. The nature of Native American warfare, centering on the glory and achievement of the individual warrior, originally acted as a restraint on the scale and destructive power of native conflicts. Individual warriors had great power in deciding which conflicts to fight in and for how long. Once glory was achieved through victory and the taking of scalps, there was no need to keep fighting, thus limiting overall violence. (Lee 2011) 163. English scalp bounties, directed to increase Native American assistance against the French and other native groups, provided a new stream of motivation and mobilization for Native American warriors to take up the fight. The direct commodification of scalps spread and escalated the practice among both colonists and Native alike while putting a greater array of people in danger. Conrad Weiser, an influential diplomat and interpreter from Pennsylvania, believed this put friendly Native Americans in danger as they represented a closer and easier target. While this didn't exactly result in a widespread scalping spree, the combined effects were nearly as devastating (Wallace 1945, 434; Armstrong 1998, 30-31).

In 1756, the governor of Pennsylvania offered "huge bounties" for the scalps of any Delaware Indians. Following the deceitful "Walking Purchase" scandal perpetrated by the government of Pennsylvania, tensions built between the two sides for years. It erupted during the 7 Years' War, with Delaware and Shawnee raids backed by French supplies and frontiersmen. Governor Morris' scalp law convinced dozens of rural Pennsylvanians to try their hand at scalp-hunting. Envisioning themselves as hardy frontiersmen like John Lovewell, these groups were loud and bumbling masses. Instead of finding the people raiding their towns, they targeted friendly Native Americans like the Munsee in nearby areas. In addition to spreading violence and offensive war, these bounties motivated a greater swathe of colonists to at least consider joining the scalping ranks. In his landmark study *Our Savage Neighbors*, Peter Silver connects the effects of scalp bounties to the broader cultural landscape of colonial America. Native American raids, normally embellished in scale and scope, were used as a rallying cry in the mid-Atlantic colonies. According to Silver, this attention and focus on frontier suffering bound the diverse peoples together in opposition to the "horrors" of Native American violence. They ultimately played a role in the development and acceptance of American pluralism in the Revolutionary generation. (Silver 2008, xx-xxii & 161-165; Young 1957).

By the time the colonial crisis exploded into the American Revolution, the practice of scalping was firmly established within the English colonial culture as a barbaric "savagery" that was morally justified only because it was practiced by ones' enemies. Whether Native, English, or American, the practice of scalping was so widespread that any group didn't have to look far for vengeful justification. James Axtell argues that the practice had fully evolved, claiming that "Englishmen scalped Englishmen in the name of liberty." What had started as a retaliatory practice to quell native

aggression was now utilized to instill fear and pain upon their “cultural equals.” The first scalping accusation during the war occurred immediately at the Battle at Concord. The British unit involved, the 10th Regiment of Foot, claimed that four of their men killed were also scalped and had their eyes gouged out. Ensign Jeremy Lister believed “such barbarity could scarcely be paralleled by the most uncivilised Savages.” British newspapers and commanders assaulted the colonial character in print and speech, believing colonists embodied a “savageness unknown to Europeans” (Lister 1931, 27-28). Colonial refutations claimed the British fabricated the scalplings to undermine their cause, casting the patriots as “savage and barbarous” in character. While little evidence exists outside the eyewitness accounts on either side, the immediate action on both sides points to the sensitive understandings and cultural dealings with scalping. (Brown 2016)

By the end of the Revolutionary War, both the Patriots and English accused the other of stooping to “savage” and “barbarous” levels in the taking of scalps of the other. The practice was fundamentally altered from its native origins, having been physically and culturally coopted as a new weapon of war. The physical pain of scalping was intense and instilled a great fear in those within its reach. However, the wounds inflicted by scalping grew a mythology of their own in the decades and centuries after the American Revolution. The collective memorializing and re-imagining of scalping along the frontier further cemented the commodification of the practice. On the one hand, it was a “savage” and “terrible cruelty” let loose upon the civilized and defenseless colonial settlers. On the other, it was an equally justified weapon and financial tool that the American culture seized upon in a judgmental and celebratory fashion. The dueling way scalping stories were told and weaponized highlights the final way it was commodified: as a powerful manipulator of myth and memory.

Jane McCrea was a young loyalist woman seeking to marry a like-minded man when she was killed and scalped by Native American warriors in 1777. While little details of the actual event exist, it was memorialized and re-imagined as the precious innocence and virtue of a young woman savaged by the cruel and barbarous frontier. McCrea was remembered in poems and newspaper stories focusing on the grisly details that ended with her “drench’d in her gore” (Engels and Goodale 2009). The ultimate representation of her death is John Vanderlyn’s *The Murder of Jane McCrea*, finished and presented in 1804. The painting embodies the horror imagined by any young female colonist of her generation: helpless and alone in a dark wood before she is brutally killed and scalped by dark-skinned Native American men. This image and the countless that followed made McCrea a figure of mythological status, whose simplified story presented a singular image through time: Native Americans savagely scalping a helpless young woman. This imagery and narrative played right into the existing fears of American citizens and the establishing mythology of the frontier and Native American violence for decades to come. (Edgerton 1965)

On the opposite end of the same story lies Hannah Duston. Her infamous story of capture, escape, and brutality grew a life of its own after her safe return, and the ten scalps she presented to the colonial government increasingly took center stage (Carroll 2007; Caverly 1875). Duston’s story was originally told in a brief account in Cotton Mather’s 1699 *Decennium Luctuosum*, and she never produced her own version of what happened. She represents the opposing image of McCrea as she took matters into her own hands and killed a family of Native people, including two women and six children. Duston was far from criticized for this act and instead lauded as a hero. Her narrative appeared in several forms in the early 18th century but experienced a rebirth in the 1820s and 30s with nine new versions. Duston and her scalps were used as lessons on motherhood, Christian duty, and female agency alongside desires to memorialize the reconstruction of the violence of the 18th-century frontier struggles that Americans faced and triumphed against (Weis 1998).

Hannah Duston’s story remained popular in American culture and continued to be re-

investigated and narrated. Authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau, fresh off their scalping tales of John Lovewell, each took their turns with the Duston narrative and, like every other narrative of her life, focused almost solely on the night of her escape and scalping. The power of her story to Americans in the 19th century was one of triumph against “savage barbarity,” and was memorialized in the physical form of granite statues. In the Haverhill, Massachusetts statue, Duston is standing proudly and holding a tomahawk. (Cutter 2018) In a similar New Hampshire shrine, she is holding that infamous handful of scalps. Believed to be the first monuments built to an individual woman in American history, these statues embody the power of scalping as a tool in the American cultural memory of the frontier and how the practice came to be honored and “acceptable” in the right situation (Humphreys 2011, 151).

Scalping remains a powerful commodity of myth and memory in American history. As a dividing line between savagery and civilization, the practice reigns supreme in popular culture re-hashings of America’s past. In the 2016 film *The Revenant*, scalping plays a central role in the life and actions of the film’s principal 18th-century characters: fur trader Hugh Glass and rival frontiersmen John Fitzgerald, played by Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hardy respectively (Inarritu 2016). The Fitzgerald character’s life is defined by his harrowing experience surviving a scalping, as he vividly re-lives it repeatedly. He seeks recompense by subjecting others to the same fate. Much like the long glorification of Hannah Duston, the fictional Fitzgerald’s relationship to scalping is myopic and manipulative. Neither tales encompass the totality of the act, its origins, or its wider consequences. These two survived their ordeal and turned the practice against others, but the other participants are either absent or objectified into little more than props. (Odle 2016)

In the end, scalping is still a powerful historical commodity impacting our understanding and conversations about America’s past. As the United States reconciles with its colonizing past, the physical, economic, and mythic commodity of scalping is fair game. While some modern narratives like *The Revenant* still fall into recognizable patterns, some narratives are being re-examined. In recent years, the statues of Hannah Duston have come under scrutiny for their glorification of violence, racism, and the impact of settler colonialism against Native American people. In 2021, after much discussion, the town of Haverhill removed the tomahawk from its Duston statue, and changed the word “savages” on its descriptive pedestal. (Mitchell 2021)

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