The Bonaventure Hatchet

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It has long been known that the rival European colonial powers, especially England and France, but also Holland and Spain, often supplied the Indian nations that were in their alliance with iron hatchets and knives. These weapons varied in style with their European source, and were designed to promote more efficient killing of enemies, both European and Indian. However, detailed or specific information on these hatchets and scalping knives, their dates and places of manufacture, the numbers made and distributed, the extent of their use, and their special designs are wanting. There is scattered information recording isolated examples, and these specimens are usually accompanied by anecdotal and imprecise information. Examples are to be found in Washburn (1988:156, 158, 357).

Scalping has been discussed in detail by Axtell and Sturtevant (1980), who concluded that although scalping did exist in pre-Columbian America, the warring European powers promoted and commercialized the practice by their governments offering scalp bounties to both whites and Indians, and by supplying the metal weapons for a more efficient production of scalps. Scalping reached the nadir of barbarity and commercialization during the American Revolutionary War on the frontiers of Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, and the Ohio country. British Lieutenant-Governor Henry Hamilton stationed at Vincennes and Detroit received the sobriquet the "Hair Buyer". He distributed several thousand red-handled scalping knives to Indians in the British interest, chiefly Wyandots, Shawnees, and Munsee Delawares, and offered large rewards for American scalps and those of the Indian allies of the Americans. Some Indians learned the dishonest ways of the white man, and when they took a large or bushy scalp, cut it into two or more scalps, mixed them in with others, and increased the bounties they were awarded. Occasional victims, who were still alive when scalped, survived scalping and suffered slow-healing and ugly scars on their heads. The American frontiersmen were no humanitarians either and their cruelty attained its culmination in the savage massacre of the peaceful and innocent
Christian Moravian Delawares who had proclaimed their neutrality.

Hatchets or tomahawks had specific styles depending on their national source. Those of English origin usually had a calumet or small pipe at the head or hammer surface, and those of French provenance a curved spike at the head. However, original and dated examples of hatchets of known source seem to be uncommon.

The present Penobscot example was bequeathed to me by Penobscot Lewis Lolar at the time of his death on March 17, 1935. Lolar was a direct descendant of the famous Penobscot war-chief Loron (alias Saaguarum) during the intercolonial wars, and the hatchet had been handed down in the family. It is made of cast iron, and is considerably patinated and corroded by time. The hatchet head measures 6 and 3/4 x 2 and 7/16 x 7/16 inches and is illustrated in the accompanying photograph. The haft or handle is, of course, modern, having been replaced in the 19th century. This weapon is light enough to be thrown efficiently, and strong and sharp enough to render a severe cutting blow. The spike served another purpose. If wielded forcefully in hand-to-hand combat, the spike could be thrust between the ribs of an opponent, readily puncture the pleura, and cause a lung collapse or pneumothorax. This would produce a form of shock in the victim and render him hors de combat.

This hatchet of French manufacture was designed by the Simon-Pierre Denys de Bonaventure (1659–1711), a French naval officer. He had them cast in Paris in 1695 and had about 250 of them made. Bonaventure brought them to Acadia in the Envieux in the spring of 1696, and about 40 or 50 hatchets were distributed to the Maliseets on the Saint John River by Governor Robinau de Villebon, and 200 were given to the Penobscots in May 1696 by Bonaventure at Pentagoet (modern Castine, Maine). These distributions were in preparation for the assault by the French and Indian forces on the English stronghold, Fort William Henry, at present Pemaquid.

Denys de Bonaventure had a record of distinguished service to France during King William's War, otherwise known as the War of the League of Augsburg. He was largely responsible for French naval control on the coast of Acadia and captured many English ships. In 1691 he brought Robinau de Villebon, the new governor of Acadia, to Nashwaak on the Saint John River, the capital of Acadia. In 1692 he was given command of a new 34-gun frigate, the Envieux, and with Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville convoyed supplies and troops to Quebec and Acadia and took many English ships as prizes of war (Lunn 1969). In 1694 and 1695 Bonaventure continued to bring supplies to Acadia in the Envieux, and brought presents for the Indians from the King (O'Callaghan NYCD 9:617). In late 1695 Bonaventure captured at the mouth of the river Saint John an English frigate named the Newport which carried 24 guns and 80 men, after a fight of two hours,
without the loss of a single man on the French side (O’Callaghan NYCD 9:658).

In the spring and early summer of 1696 preparations were completed for an attack upon the English fort at Pemaquid which had long been a threat to Acadia and to the Abenakis. The original plans for the expedition had been made long in advance and were outlined in a letter of Governor Robinau de Villebon to the minister in Paris, M. de Pontchartrain, dated August 20, 1694 (O’Callaghan NYCD 9:574-577). The Indians of Acadia, especially the Penobschts, were to be encouraged to wage war against the English by providing them with 2000 pounds of gunpowder, 40 barrels of bullets, 10 barrels of swan-shot (in the Penobscot and Eastern Abenaki language sawanasiye INAN, plural sawanasiyai, a loanblend from English), 400 pounds of Brazilian tobacco, 200 tomahawks (of which Bonaventure was to furnish the pattern), 60 selected guns of recent make, 200 Mulaix shirts, 8 pounds of fine vermillion, and 200 tufts of white feathers to be selected and purchased in Paris by Bonaventure. The white feathers were to be given to the Penobschts to be worn in order to distinguish them as allies in case of an attack during the night. All these presents were to be distributed to the Penobschts when they had assembled at the rendezvous to be indicated to them at a later date (O’Callaghan NYCD 9:577). In May 1696 Bonaventure distributed at Pentagoet 200 of the hatchets he had designed to the Penobschts. Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville was the commander-in-chief of the proposed expedition, assisted by Denys de Bonaventure and Jean-Vincent D’Abbadie de Saint-Castine, the latter being in charge of the Indian allies. The French force consisted of two French warships the Envieux and the Profonde, and the captured English frigate, the Newport. Besides the ship crews, there were 240 Indians (200 Penobschts and 40 Maliseets), and 25 French infantrymen detached from Captain Claude-Sébastien de Villieu’s company stationed at Fort Nashwaak on the Saint John River. They were commanded by Villieu and his lieutenant, Jacques Testard de Montigny. When the entire force had assembled at Pentagoet, additional presents from the King were given the Indians (Bacqueville de La Potherie 1722:(4)47), and nearly all embarked for Pemaquid, although some of the Indians apparently marched from the rendezvous by land. The ships anchored on August 14 before Fort William Henry and summoned the commander, Pascho Chubb of Andover, Massachusetts, to surrender. At first Chubb refused. The English garrison consisted of 92 men, but a considerable number of women and children were present. The English fort was defended by 15 pieces of artillery.

The following day the French notified Chubb that if he failed to capitulate, the English would receive no quarter. Iberville had two field pieces and two mortars brought ashore, and the assailants fired four shells over
the fort. Chubb then accepted the French offer if the English could go out with their clothing only and be sent back to Boston to be exchanged for Abenakis and other Indians in the French interest who were held prisoners there (O’Callaghan NYCD 9:658).

The English garrison and occupants were shipped off to Boston. Captain Villieu and his troops occupied the fort and found an Abenaki prisoner in chains who was freed. He had been held there since the previous February when Chubb had attempted to seize or kill a group of Abenakis from the Kennebec Valley under a flag of truce. During that act of treachery the Caniba chief Edgerimet was killed, Taxous was rescued from death by another Abenaki, and another Indian was carried into the fort by English soldiers to be held a prisoner. The French destroyed the fort by cannon fire and demolition, and carried off the 15 artillery pieces. The captured muskets, powder, and munitions were given to the Indians as indemnity for the losses this fort had caused them (O’Callaghan NYCD 9:658).

Thus the New England frontier post built by Governor Edmund Andros, Fort William Henry at Pemaquid, surrendered and was destroyed on August 15, 1696, without any loss of life. The 200 Penobscot warriors who participated in this victory never got to use their new weapon, the Bonaventure hatchet, in this engagement. Undoubtedly it was used in later hostilities.

This hatchet is a genuine relic of 17th-century warfare in northeastern North America and perhaps the only one for which a detailed history can be sketched.

REFERENCES

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