

# “Both Brained His Foes and Soothed His Soul”: Using a Pipe Tomahawk to Teach Early American History

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As an early American historian interested in material culture, I often incorporate objects and images into my teaching. Over the years, I have collected a number of items associated with the colonial era fur trade and European-Indian diplomacy, including a beaver pelt and deerskin, woolen “stroud” cloth, and modern reproductions of trade beads and wampum belts. Students seem to enjoy the tactile experience of handling these objects, literally getting a feel (and in the case of the deerskin, a scent) for the goods that would have been exchanged in Native American encounters with Europeans. But none of these objects generates as much curiosity as my pipe tomahawk.<sup>49</sup> I purchased it many years ago at the annual trade fair held at Fort Frederick, an eighteenth-century historical site on the Potomac River in western Maryland. It features a brass head with a steel insert in the blade and a wooden handle with a smoke channel bored down the center. Having never been a smoker myself, I confess that the bowl has gone unused.

Pipe tomahawks resulted from the meeting of Native American and European cultures on the colonial Pennsylvania frontier. The first ones to appear in the documentary record were created by a German blacksmith working at Shamokin, an Indian town on the Susquehanna River. In 1748, the blacksmith told visiting missionaries about the Indians’ demand for the “new-fashioned pipes” he made by affixing pipe bowls to iron trade hatchets. Examples of these devices begin appearing in the archaeological record at this same time, sometimes because Native Americans included them as grave goods when they buried deceased loved ones.

The first visual images of pipe tomahawks appeared during the Seven Years’ War (also known as the French and Indian War in North America), when cartoonists, mapmakers, and painters used them to illustrate scenes of Native American warfare. By the mid-1750s, ironworkers in Britain were making pipe tomahawks for export to America, where royal Indian agents used them as diplomatic gifts to cultivate and maintain the alliance of chiefs and warriors. After the American Revolution, the United States government continued this practice, and pipe tomahawks appeared on peace medals that U.S. Presidents distributed to Native American leaders. By the time of the Civil War, Native American chiefs who traveled to Washington, D.C. to conduct diplomacy often posed for photographs holding pipe tomahawks as symbols of their authority.

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<sup>49</sup> To learn more about pipe tomahawks and for citations to the quoted material in this essay, see Timothy J. Shannon, “Queequeg’s Tomahawk: A Cultural Biography, 1750-1900,” *Ethnohistory* Vol. 52 (Summer 2005): 589-633.



In the classroom, students are usually first struck by the novelty of the pipe tomahawk. Most have already seen tomahawks in movies, television shows, or museums and so associate this item with Native American warfare and frontier violence. The presence of the pipe bowl, however, complicates this story. Students ask, did Indians really smoke out these devices? Why did someone think to add a pipe to such an item? Images that I show them of Europeans holding pipe tomahawks raise other questions. For what purposes did non-Indians use these devices? Did soldiers and other visitors to America regard them as souvenirs or collectibles? What did it mean when non-Indians posed for paintings or photographs with them?

In these discussions, I emphasize how the pipe tomahawk physically represents the hybridization that occurred on the frontier between Native and colonial people, combining European technology (metallurgy) with Native American cultural practices (tobacco-smoking) and aesthetics (the bowls on pipe tomahawks often imitated Native-made stone pipes). I try to shift the focus of the students' curiosity about tomahawks away from warfare and toward trade and diplomacy, so that we can discuss the role objects and gift-giving often play in overcoming language and cultural barriers.

The most important lesson I want students to learn from my pipe tomahawk centers on its function as an object of mediation rather than violence. When used in a diplomatic context, the pipe tomahawk gave material form to the Native American metaphors of "smoking the peace pipe" and "burying the hatchet."<sup>50</sup> Yes, its function as a striking device could make it an object of menace, but its pipe bowl also made it a symbol of peace and friendship. In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville grasped this duality when he made a pipe tomahawk the prized possession of Queequeg, the Polynesian harpooner and roommate of the novel's narrator Ishmael. Inclined at first to see Queequeg as a heathen cannibal, Ishmael gradually bonds with him over shared smokes from that "wild pipe of his,"<sup>51</sup> and he marvels at the remarkable utility of an object that for its owner had "both brained his foes and soothed his soul." When placed in the hands of my students, the pipe tomahawk still elicits similar admiration for its ingenuity and versatility.

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<sup>50</sup> Timothy J. Shannon, "Queequeg's Tomahawk: A Cultural Biography, 1750-1900," *Ethnohistory* 52 (Summer 2005): 589-633.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*