**Response Journal #5 – Who Scalped Whom?**

**Historians Suggest Indians Were As Much Victims As Perpetrators**

**By Diane E. Foulds** Originally published in the *Boston Globe*, **Date**: 12/31/2000

BOSCAWEN, N.H. - As monuments go, the one depicting Colonial heroine Hannah Dustin looks like any other, with one crucial exception: In her left hand she holds a fistful of human scalps.

The inscription underneath tells of her 1697 capture in an Indian raid, and how she slew her captors as they slept - 10 women and children. Later she returned for their scalps, having remembered they could fetch a bounty.

The idea of a settler **scalping** Indians might seem like a historical quirk. Most Americans assume that if there was any **scalping** going on in Colonial times, the Indians were doing it, not the English.

But the truth, it turns out, is more complex. In an era where Indian-nicknamed teams are under fire and even the meaning of Thanksgiving is being re-evaluated by Native Americans, the very word "scalp" has become culturally loaded - and the origins of the practice increasingly controversial. If one thing is certain, however, it's that Hannah Dustin was no fluke. "

Americans certainly scalped Indians during the Revolution and after," says Colin Calloway, who teaches history at Dartmouth College. "They also stripped Indian corpses of skin."

New England is littered with evidence if you know where to look. Some 35 miles north of the Hannah Dustin statue, at New Hampshire's Rumney rest area off Route 25, a discreet historic marker reading "Baker River" tells of Lieutenant Thomas Baker and his scouting party, whose 1712 razing of a nearby Pemigewasset Indian village earned a "scalp bounty" of 40 pounds sterling from Massachusetts Colonial authorities. The deed earned Baker a promotion to captain - and a namesake river.

In museums around the region, actual scalps were still available for viewing as recently as the 1980s. Museums with scalps in their collections included Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, the Fort Ticonderoga museum on Lake Champlain, and the Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology in Andover.

Then in 1990, the federal government passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which mandated the return of sacred Indian artifacts and of remains. As museums combed through their collections, they found scalps that were clearly Indian. Some even had documentation identifying the scalp-takers as colonists.

Historical records confirm that Colonial authorities offered a bounty on Indian scalps. Hannah Dustin, for example, collected a monetary reward and a pewter tankard. In Salem, redeemed scalps were hung along the walls of the town courthouse, in full view of the public, until the building was torn down in 1785.

Dartmouth's Calloway said it is unclear whether New England tribes took scalps before contact with Europeans. At least two tribal spokesmen say theirs did not.

Mashantucket Pequot spokesman Buddy Gwin says **scalping** "was not a practice traditional to first nations peoples" until becoming "a retaliatory act" against colonists.

John Brown, who is tribal historical-preservation officer for Rhode Island's Narragansett Indians, said that bodily mutilation was considered "dishonorable" until it was "learned" from Europeans in the mid-17th century.

It was such absolutist arguments on both sides of the **scalping** question that led James Axtell to the issue some years ago. A historian at the College of William & Mary in Virginia, Axtell vividly remembers walking into New York City's former Heye Museum of the **American Indian** in the early 1970s and seeing human scalps hanging in a glass case. One was blond, obviously a girl's. Another had African hair, perhaps taken from a slave. There were probably Indian scalps there too, he says.

Later, stories started to circulate that the Europeans had invented **scalping** - and that colonists had actually taught it to the Indians. Axtell paid little notice until he started hearing those stories from academics. At that point, he and fellow historian William Sturtevant decided it was time to sort out the record.

Based on markings on skulls, drawings, linguistic clues, and the diaries of 15th- and 16th-century explorers, their conclusions were ultimately published in a 1981 book, "The European and the Indian," which argues that the practice of **scalping** in North and South America predated the arrival of Christopher Columbus.

"Scalps were not mere trophies or booty of war, however," Axtell wrote. "The whorl of hair on the crown and especially male scalp locks, braided and decorated with jewelry, paint, and feathers, represented the person's `soul' or living spirit. To lose that hair to an enemy was to lose control over one's life, to become socially and spiritually `dead', whether biological death resulted or not."

English settlers adopted the practice as a retaliatory measure, he said - and then added a new twist by offering bounties to their Indian allies for scalps taken from hostile tribes.

According to Axtell's book, the English in Connecticut paid the Mohegans for the heads of Pequots, and the Dutch paid wampum for Raritan heads. After the start of King Philip's War in 1675, it said, Rhode Island's Narragansetts were paid for heads in lengths of cloth.

The arrangement worked, although scalps were substituted for whole heads, which were too cumbersome to carry over long distances. It also required some adjustment by the Indians, who were unused to giving up their hard-won war trophies to foreigners.

But the English took **scalping** into their own hands when the Indians could no longer be relied upon, and it became an accepted - if unpleasant - reality of Colonial life. By 1723, Massachusetts was paying 100 pounds sterling for the scalps of male Indians aged 12 and over, and half that for women and children. The scalps were then burned or buried.

Axtell even documents an Indian **scalping** by a Puritan minister, who managed somehow to reconcile it with his religious beliefs.

"Along with pious thoughts, I receive 165 pounds 3-3 . . . my part of scalp money," reads the 1757 diary of another clergyman, the Rev. Thomas Smith of Falmouth, Maine, who supplied provisions and ammunition to a **scalping** party made up of his parishioners.

**Scalping** continued up to the Revolutionary War, with Englishmen even scalping each other on the battlefields.

The idea of **scalping** continues to have powerful effects on the culture, particularly in its exclusive association with Indian warriors.

"Most people have bought into the concept that Indians are savages," says National Park Service archeologist Sam Ball.

"Prejudice over this sort of thing is just plain enormous," he says. "And it is being reinforced, rather than getting a clear, rational evaluation of what the evidence is and what reality is."

Calloway feels the misconceptions are part of a "complex process of dehumanizing Indians to justify taking away their land and culture, and attributing the brutality of frontier race wars to the `other side.' "

Axtell cautions against excess on either side of the argument - and suggests we shouldn't rush to judge our forebears' behavior by today's moral standards. "If white Americans have assumed that only `savage' Indians scalped, they were clearly misinformed," he says. "If they thought that **scalping** was particularly `savage,' they conveniently turned a blind eye to their ancestors' adoption and encouragement of the practice and to far more heinous acts and practices in America's military past."

But that still leaves the question of how the full story could have been widely ignored for so long. One reason is that Indian **scalping** has become part of our cultural mythology, incorporated into murals, prints, and even a Frederic Remington statue called "The Scalp."

The Hannah Dustin statue, by contrast, is decidedly obscure, secluded on an island next to a park-and-ride lot outside Boscawen. It gets few visitors, although vandals have broken off Dustin's nose.

As for those Indian scalps in local collections?

"My guess is that lots of 19th-century museums didn't want to know whether the scalps they had were Indian or Euro-American," says Dean Snow, who heads the Anthropology Department at Pennsylvania State University.

Then he added a more personal anecdote, overturning another misconception: that it was always a death sentence.

"For what it's worth," he said, "my own great-great-great-great grandfather was scalped and left for dead when he was young by a Mohawk - British allies then - raiding party during the Revolution."

Family tradition holds that someone shaped a silver skullcap to cover the scalped area.

"He woke up without his hair," Snow said, "and lived to be an old man with a silver plate on his head."

Questions to consider:

1. Does Boyden refute or perpetuate the stereotype of scalping and Indigenous cultural practice in Three Day Road? (See ‘Skinning’ Chapter)
2. How do you think that the stereotype of scalping influences the lives of Indigenous people?

See also:

Pawnee Attack from ‘Dances With Wolves’ - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hW4nTYNSEA>