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Looting of America Indian Graves: A Summary Review of the Historical Record

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A project that I began 30 years ago to identify archaeological sites in New Jersey from which human remains were removed is now beginning to yield some results. A review of burial sites in Monmouth County alone (Boyd 2005: 173-181) reveals the extent of archaeological research conducted by modern scholars as well as curious amateurs. In New Jersey as well as elsewhere, 19th century "scientists" and curiosity seekers were replaced by early professional archaeologists in the 20th century. By the end of the 20th century trained archaeologists had come to dominate basic archaeological recovery, but sites are still lost to developers and artifact hunters. The results of the past and present efforts throughout the state have yet to be documented. The data lost is extensive.

Of particular note is the complete absence in New Jersey of evidence and reports of the looting of Native American graves, whether by Natives or Colonists. This may be the result of several factors, one of which is that the simple grave offerings in the graves of any of the three distinct tribes in the state did not attract thieves. A second restraining feature may relate to the large numbers of Quakers who settled much of the state, and their efforts to retain friendly relations with the Native peoples. For whatever reasons, reports of grave looting that appear in other parts of the Northeast appear to be completely absent in New Jersey.

The looting of graves in ancient Egypt has been reported in scholarly and popular literature for hundreds of years. The looting

of those "high value" graves began as soon as they were "sealed." We also have records relating to grave robbing on behalf of King Tabnith of Sidon, an ancient city associated with the Phoenicians in the area of the eastern Mediterranean. Tabnith ruled during the sixth century BCE. His royal sarcophagus had been looted from a much earlier Egyptian tomb and then a Phoenician inscription was added to the original hieroglyphic text (Chantre 1894, in Schwidetzky and Ramaswamy 1981: 126). In recent decades, excavations in the area of the ancient lowland Maya reveals that the looting of earlier high status graves among these people has become better documented (Weiss-Krejci 1998: 778-780, also 2001: 769). We may assume that wherever valuable objects are interred with the dead, someone within or outside the culture will be motivated to recover such goods for their own use.

Curiosity also can be a strong factor in the opening of graves, or the uncovering of stone piles often used to cover the dead. The Vikings who settled in present North America are believed to have opened graves (Rowlett 1982), but given the few objects therein, and the rarity of the graves themselves, were not inclined to search for materials from within them.

Recently, Patricia Galloway (2006) devotes her final chapter to tracing what she portrays as the long history of "Euro-Americans" desecrating Native American graves. In her view Native Americans and Afro-Americans appear absolved of such activities, I assume based on ad hoc liberal politics. Typically she accuses the Pilgrim's at Plimouth Colony of looting Indian graves, based on faulty reading of the text of Mourt's relations (1622), or her acceptance of the long and faulty tradition of castigating these merchant-settlers of crimes they never committed. Misreading of the basic text (Mourt 1622) goes back at least to Edward Arber's (1897) edition of that early

account. Arber discusses the exploration of a Native grave, but does not mention the restoration of the goods and grave. Items later taken from a storage pit, and from a house are enumerated, but not the subsequent payments made for these items when the owners were located. In the actual report of the early exploration of the area by the "Merchants and others" at Plimouth, they stated that they:

... found a little path to certaine heapes of sand, one whereof was covered with old Matts, and had a wooden thing like a mortar whelmed on the top of it, and an earthen pot layd in a little hole at the end thereof; we musing what it might be, digged & found a Bow, and, as we thought, Arrowes, but they were rotten; We supposed there were many other things, but because we deemed them graues, we put in the Bow again and made it vp as it was, and left the rest [of the heaps of sand] vntouched, because we thought it would be odious vnto them to ransacke their Sepulchers (Mourt 1622:6).

Later this exploratory party had taken goods from a functioning storage pit, and also a "house," resolving that "... if we could find any of the people, and come to parley with them, we would giue [return to] them the Kettle again, and satisfie them for their Corne, ..." (Mourt 1622: 7). Soon after they did make contact, and gave items to the Native people that satisfied them for the things taken. These newcomers had come fully prepared to enter into trade. The Pilgrims were amply supplied with trade goods and distributed them liberally, along with a request that the Natives bring their peltry to trade; peltry that formerly was being traded to Dutch on the Fresh (Connecticut) River or to English who had established the Maine trading posts. This entire account of 1622 repeats the many

efforts to promote trade and provide the region's Indians with the kinds of goods they sought.

What was happening in Virginia and Maryland by 1620 was far different. Early reports of robberies of charnel houses are often documented. As early as the 1650s Peter Lindeström, who then was active along the Delaware River, made mention of grave robbing "by some of the Christians." His account, however, derives from a report originating somewhere south of the Lenape territory, and seems to refer to the theft of valuables that had been placed in a charnel house rather than taken out of a burial. Amandus Johnson, the translator of Lindeström 's work, notes a number of references taken from other authors who had written about American Indians.

During these their burials there is often robbery committed by some of the Christians. Some scoundrels go to the savages and help them to mourn, pretending to be very sorrowful and sad, lamenting and weeping much worse and more miserably than the savages, saying that the [deceased] also had been their good friend, which the savages think is well, that they get company. These scoundrels watching their time, in the night when the savages sleep, steal away their money chest, so that the sorrow and lamentation for the savages become through this, deeper and greater (Lindeström 1925:251).

On 14 January 1661, included in a letter written by William Beeckman in Altena (Fort Christina as renamed by the Dutch after 1655) to Director Stuyvesant in New Amsterdam, is a report of a recent grave looting that

took place near the house of Captain Marten Crieger of New Amstel, now New Castle in Delaware (Gehring 1981:159).

About 14 days ago the grave of one Hoppemink, an Indian chief, was robbed; he had been buried a short time before about opposite the house of Capt. Crieger. They took out of it a party of wampum. 3 or 4 pieces of duffels and further, what he had with him; the savages murmer about it and may perhaps undertake something bad against thost at New-Amstel,... (Linn and Egle 1890, Ser 2, VII: 694-5).

Gehring (1981: 229) translates this as the "grave of a certain Hoppemink Indian chief, who had recently been buried almost opposite Capt Crieger's house, was robbed" (also see in Hanna 1911). The name "Hoppemink," with its locative ending, may refer to the area or location of the Lenape band from which this Indian belonged, not his personal name. Gehring indicates that what was taken from the grave was Sewant, 3 or 4 duffel coats, and whatever else he had with him. The "Sewant" taken may have been a series of ornamental wampum belts or perhaps a bag of loose wampum, or both. Weslager (1972: 133) identifies Hoppemink not as a location, but as the Native also known as Ahopemack. Captain Crieger was then resident in New-Amstel, in the area of one of the many Lenape bands. Since the robbery took place about January first, the local band would have been off on their winter hunting rounds. The Indian who had been buried may have been too ill to leave with them and stayed behind. Digging a grave in the dead of winter would not have been easy, nor would digging it up shortly thereafter, to rob it, been a simple task

In Pennsylvania, west of Lenape territory, excavations at the Ibaugh Site, a Susquehannock village of the period 1600-1625, uncovered graves that had no evidence of looting, according to Witthoft et al. (1969: 105). They claim that the looting of Susquehannock graves became common during the period from 1640 to 1700. This would be in accord with the increasing raiding by the Five Nations Iroquois that led to the dispersal of the Susquehannock Confederacy in 1675 (cf. Becker in review). Kent (1970: 192) notes common use of grave looted beads by later Indians, citing Wray and Schoff (1953: 60), but also pointing out that the extent of earlier beads used by people at Conoy Town (Ganawese: see Becker in review) ca 1720 reveals that the gathering of beads "from 17th-century sites must have been rather prevalent."

In New York, Charles Wray (1985: 102-103) refers to the plundering of Seneca graves from about the same period as those looted among the Susquehannock (1650s; see Wray and Schoff 1953: 58-60, also Kent 1970: 192; Ceci 1990). Peter Pratt (1976: 129) specifies evidence from several Oneida cemeteries from which graves had been looted, but groups all of them without specifying dates. Pratt (1976: 145) notes that grave robbing was a continual problem, and suggests that among the Oneida it may be recognized as early as 1625. Pratt's suggestion that cemeteries were "fortified" to protect the graves may relate to Iroquoian practices of burying the dead within the palisades of villages. Donck indicated that Mohawk graves of the period around 1650 also were exceptionally rich in grave goods. Wray (1985) also indicates that both Natives and Europeans were engaged in the practice of looting. Peter Pratt (1976: 144-145) appears to be the first scholar to recognize that burial patterns of the Seneca, and possibly the Cayuga as well, differed from those of the Mohawk-Oneida-Onondaga group (cf.

the pattern of distribution for the white-dog sacrifice, see Becker and Lainey 2013). These differences appear to have been culturally derived, and unrelated to the fact that all Native graves were subject to looting.

An incursion from French Canada into New York, led by the Governor Marquis de Denonville during the summer of 1687, was directed specifically against the Seneca, mostly in an area south of present Rochester. This successful raid was followed by four days of grave robbing (Ceci 1985: 11). Carpenter (1991: 17) claims that later the same graves were looted for axes, and still later for copper objects. This sequence of looting episodes is not clearly documented. By 1688 New York's Governor Thomas Dongan had driven the French out of Fort Niagara, and out of Fort Frontenac the following summer.

A few years later the French and their Indian allies were back in New York. A message sent from Fort William Henry on 11 March 1692, reporting on a battle after the French and their Indian allies had "Invaded our Maquaes Countrey" includes an evaluation of the numbers of enemy dead. Among the French dead were:

2 Officers & 2 Indian Leaders [,]
they had buried the Officers in their
Fort but our Indians found them out
[,] Dug them up & with other Corps of
the Enemy most Barbarously Roasted
& eat [them] (Browne 1890,
VIII: 515).

The colonial literature is rich in reports of graves being looted. Included in these reports from later years are references to the Iroquoian and allied villages in the path of Sullivan's campaign. An account from 11 August 1779 reports that many soldiers took the time to loot some of the 100 Indian graves identified, although some of the men were

bothered by these activities (Eckert 1978: 399-400, notes 301-302). The cemetery at the Murray Garden site in Pennsylvania (36Br2), south of Waverly, NY may have been among of many targets in the Tioga Point area (see Marble 2003: I, 30-43). Thomas Jefferson's excavations of an ancient Native American mound are frequently noted as part of the gathering of skulls for comparative research.

Whether these searches targeted ornamental or even diplomatic wampum belts, or strings, or even loose beads is rarely stated. Orchard (1929: 69) quotes Arthur C. Parker regarding the "belt wampum" that was recovered from sites in New York, indicating that among them there were "many graves yielding from a pint to four quarts of it" (belt wampum). The actual accounts of well documented excavations of "wampum belts" found in graves had been very few. Detailed archaeological records associated with such finds had been very rare (cf. Kent 1970: 192, McCann 1972). Authors such as Snyder (1999: 363-367) fail to distinguish between archaeological and historical data, further obscuring the records. The outstanding excavations and detailed records made by Kevin McBride relating to his incomparable recovery of ornamental wampum bands from Pequot cemeteries remain unpublished (but, see references in Becker 2006). McBride (pers. Com. 1 Feb 2009) dates a large Pequot cemetery at Mashantucket to the 1660s, and estimates that some 800 graves from that site were looted between 1850 and the early 1920s, or perhaps harvested for their skulls. The results of his own excavations there remain unpublished, and I suspect that the numbers of graves in that cemetery are vastly overestimated, but extensive disturbances during the period that was part of an early phase of "anthropology" is not at all in doubt. Mary Lynne Rainey (pers. Com. 2 February 2009) reports that the Proceedings of the Nantucket Historical Association include

numerous notes on the looting of skulls from the Miacomet Indian burial ground on Nantucket Island, presumably during the nineteenth-century.

At least one Native burial in Ontario that held a wampum band has been dated by Kidd (1951) to about 1800. However, the context had been disturbed and the associated artifacts have yet to be studied. I suggest that this grave may date to 1700, and that the wampum in this grave was an ornamental band, but there is always a possibility that it had been used as a diplomatic belt. This, and other cases of graves from which wampum survived, may include wampum that was present in the form of clothing ornamentation. William Adams (1893) claimed to have "excavated" a number of wampum bands, including "five or six containing 1,000 to 5,000 beads." These numbers reflect the range of the average beads in the diplomatic wampum belts presented at treaties. All these "belts" are described by Adams as badly decayed. The poor quality of the records relating to this "recovery" leaves us to question the locations and configurations of these masses of beads, and they may simply have been bags containing loose wampum. Ornamental bands and other wampum ornamented artifacts recovered from graves in southern New England, such as Burr's Hill and others (see Simmons 1970) merit detailed study.

Clinton A. Weslager (1945: 104-107) is one of first modern authors to note that Colonists were as likely as Natives to loot graves of their Native enemies (anyone not themselves). Weslager's title (1945) is misleading as his evidence comes only from the Lindestöm and Beeckman reports. Modern looting of Native graves by phrenologists and various providers for biological supply houses have been widely reported, but I know of no specific example from New Jersey. Who were the people

contracted to conduct these excavations for biological supply houses has yet to be studied, but I suspect that Native Americans were involved. Graves from New England out to Oklahoma were mined to provide a demand for skulls.

This overview addresses grave looting, an old issue that lies behind the Federal Native American Graves Protection and Restoration Act (NAGPRA). The records of activities related to this act supposedly document the source of the human remains that are at the core of this Act. Study of these processes should provide a great deal of information regarding Native American human remains that had been curated across America, providing much more information about the people and excavations that dug them up than have been so briefly summarized here from the published literature.

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