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Source: *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1908), pp. 277-280

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the American Anthropological Association

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THE TERM TOMAHAWK¹

BY WILLIAM R. GERARD

ETYMOLOGY: From Renâpe of Virginia *tâmähâk*, an apocopated form of *tâmähâkan*, '(what is) used for cutting,' a cutting utensil, from *tâmähâkeu*, 'he uses for cutting,' from *tâmâham*, 'he cuts.' A name applied by the Renâpe Indians, among whom the English settled in 1607, to a stone ax or hatchet employed as a weapon of offense and an implement for cutting or, more accurately, chopping wood. Captain John Smith, who was the first to mention the instrument (*Map of Virginia*, 1612), under the name *tomahack*, describes it as "a long stone sharpened at both ends"; and to this Strachey (about 1616) adds "thrust through a handle of wood," and which "they were wont to use for hatchets to fell a tree, or to cut any massy thing in sonder." Strachey, in his "Dictionarie,"² gives, in addition, as names for an Indian hatchet, *cunsenagwuis*³ (contraction of *kunâstinakw*, 'hafted long-stone'), and *taccahackan* (*takâhâkan*), a word which Smith gives in the abbreviated form of

¹ Following the suggestion made by Mr Holmes in the preceding article, and at the request of the editor, Mr Gerard has kindly furnished these notes on the origin and application of the term *tomahawk*.

² Many synonymous terms in this vocabulary were not employed by the Indians around Jamestown, but were communicated to its compiler by colonists who had visited various places in Virginia where the words were in local use. In fact, the vocabulary shows that Strachey knew little about the language of the Indians with whom he came into contact during his short stay in Virginia, and that the words that he recorded were made known to him by men, some of them intelligent and others semi-illiterate, who had resided a greater length of time in the country. This is sufficiently shown, among other things, by the orthography not only of the Indian words, but that of the English definitions, many of which are erroneous.

³ In this word, as in very many others given by the same writer, the terminal *s* is an English addition. Eliot gives *quinahsinnonk* (*kwînâ'stinaⁿk*), the Massachusetts cognate of Renape *kunâsinakw*, as a name for 'pestle'. In one case the hafted stone was sharp edged, and, in the other, cylindrical and blunt. The Southern Renape name for pestle was *pocohaac* (*pâkâhâk*, abbrev. of *pâkâhâkan*) '(What is) used for striking'; coradicate with Northern Renape (or Lenape) *pâ'gâmâkan* 'cutlass', Ojibwe *pâgâmâgan* 'club', 'war-club', 'cudgel', Cree *pâkâmâgan* 'mallet', 'hammer', 'club'; from the root *pâk* 'to hit', 'strike'.

tockahack (*takähâk*) and defines as a 'pickaxe'. This implement, which Smith describes as being made of the "horne of a Deare put through a peece of wood in forme of a Pickaxe," was the common deer-horn war-club.¹ The word, which means 'striking utensil,' is cognate with the Massachusetts name for ax or hatchet, viz, *tokonk* (*tak' aⁿk*, abbrev. of *tak' aⁿkan*). The cutting of an object with a stone ax or hatchet was effected by a succession of blows in a slanting direction, a sort of chipping operation, as shown by the Narragansett term for a hatchet, viz., *chichegan* (*tchikhigan*), '(what) scrapes (lops off or prunes),' cognate with *tchikähikan*, the Cree name for an ax. When the Indians, says Beverley, "wanted any Land to be clear'd of the Woods, they chopp'd a Notch round the Trees quite through the Bark with their Stone Hatchets or Tomahawks,² and that deadn'd the Trees." The operation was completed by fire and a chopping away of the charred wood.³ The name tomahawk, like several other Virginia words (such as raccoon, opossum, hominy, etc.), soon found its way to Massachusetts, and was erroneously applied by Wood (*New Englands Prospect*, 1634), who was ignorant of the form and function of the Virginia implement, to a war-club or "head-breaker," which he describes as a "stave of two foote and a halfe long, and a knob at one end as round and bigge as a foote-ball." Wood's description (which fits that of the Iroquois *gajewa*, a heavy club about two feet in length, made of iron-wood with a large ball or knob at one end) was

¹ Capt. Arthur Barlowe, in his letter to Raleigh (1585), describes this weapon thus: "They [the Southern Renape] have besides a kinde of club, in the end whereof they fasten the sharpe hornes of a stagg or other beast." (Hakluyt, *Voyages*, III, p. 250.)

² Beverley, in another place, describes a visit made to a Virginia Indian house of worship in which he found, carefully wrapped and sewed in mats, "some vast bones," and some Indian war-clubs "finely grav'd, and painted." The war-clubs, which he unaccountably styles "tomahawks," were, from his description and figures, undoubtedly weapons captured from the Massawomeks (Iroquois), and the bones those of one or more of the Susquehanoks (Iroquois), whom Smith describes as men of gigantic stature. Both the bones and war-clubs had doubtless been carefully wrapped in mats and preserved in a house of worship as relics of a battle in which the Renape had been victorious over their deadly enemies, the Iroquois.

³ According to Hariot (1588), the Southern Renape, in the manufacture of their canoes ("dug-outs") from *rakiock* (*rokiak*, 'soft wood'; the wood of the bald cypress), employed in the process fire, stone hatchets, and shells. The shells used were possibly those of species of *Unio*, and the name of which, according to Strachey, was *tshecomah* (*tshikaman*, 'scraper').

plagiarized by Josselyn in his account of *Two Voyages to New England*, 1674; while Gookin, writing about the same date, describes a tomahawk as an instrument "made of wood like a pole ax with a sharpened stone fastened therein."¹ Another New England writer, Church (*Philip's War*, 1716), applied the name to a "wooden cutlass." The word "tomahawk" is, however, as above stated, of Virginian origin, since a vocable cognate with Virginia *tāmāhāk* would have had, in the Massachusetts dialect, the form of *tūmāha^k*, which would have been written *tunhonk* by the English. The names for a stone ax or hatchet in all the Eastern Algonkian dialects (except Massachusetts and Narragansett), were coradicate, but not cognate with the Virginia word under consideration: Pamlico *tāmāhik*; Lenape, *tēmāhikan* or *tūmāhikan*; Abnaki, *tēmāhigan*; Mohegan, *tūmāhikan*; Micmac, *tūmigān*. Each of these words (from the Eastern Algonkian root *tēm*, *tām*, *tūm*, 'to cut') means '(what) cuts' (an inanimate object understood), while *tāmāhāk* signifies '(what is) used for cutting,' any kind of an object, animate or inanimate. Previous to the publication of Smith's *Map of Virginia*, the Indians of Virginia had been supplied from England with small iron hatchets² of inferior quality manufactured for trade purposes, and to which, naturally, they transferred the name of the stone implement which the metal one superseded. Subsequently, similar iron hatchets were introduced among other Eastern Algonkians as well as Iroquoians, all of whom, after the manner of the Virginians, applied to these implements the name of the stone ones which they had used for similar purposes (Algonkian, *tēmāhigan* and its cognates, and Iroquoian *atokea*, *atoken*, *odogun*, *oskwesont*, etc.). It is therefore to the iron hatchet of the white man's manufacture and the adopted Virginia Indian name which English-speaking people everywhere applied to it, and not to the stone implement, that is due the widespread fame which this formidable implement of

¹ Gookin's description of Indian weapons, which is only a general one, bears evidence of having been written from information derived from reading Smith's *History of Virginia*. His description of a tomahawk is not very far from being correct, since a pole-ax is merely an ax with a longer helve than usual, and in the Indian instrument a stone head was substituted for an iron one.

² "Of the same forme," says Smith, that is, of the same general shape, as the stone hatchets that supplanted them

aboriginal warfare acquired. The tomahawk, except in actual war, was worn in the girdle, behind the back. It was used by the Indians with terrible effect, and also thrown by them with unerring precision at distant objects, and made to revolve in the air in its flight.

(1) With the Indians the tomahawk was the emblem of war itself. To bury it, meant peace; to dig it up, meant to declare the most deadly warfare. Hence the phrases "to bury the tomahawk," and "to dig up the tomahawk," sometimes used by writers and public speakers with reference to the settlement of past disputes or the breaking out of new ones. (2) TOMAHAWK (vb. tr.)—To cut or kill with a tomahawk. (3) TOMAHAWK RIGHT.—An inferior kind of land title, secured in the early period of the settlement of Virginia, "by deadening a few trees near the head of a spring, and marking the bark of some one or more of them with the initials of the name of the person who made the improvement. (4) TOMAHAWK PIPE.—A tomahawk with a hollow stem and a bowl at the back of the head adapting it for use also as a pipe.

TOMAHACKS. Axes.—Smith, *Map of Virginia* (1612). "The weopons they use for offense are Bowes and Arrowes with a weopon like a hammer and ther Tomahaucks:"—Spelman, *Relation of Virginia* (about 1613).

"Iron TOMAHAWKES or small hatchets."—Hamor, *True Discourse of the Present Estate of Virginia* (1615). TAMOHAKE, TAMAHAAAC.—Strachey, *Historie of Travaile into Virginia* (about 1616). TAMAHAWKES [war-clubs].—Wood, *New Englands Prospect* (1634). TAMAHAWKS [war-clubs].—Josselyn, *Account of Two Voyages to New England* (1674). Stone Hatchets or TOMAHAWKS.—Beverley, *History of Virginia* (1705). ". . . his men pull'd their TOMAHAWKS or Hatchets from under their Matchcoats, and kill'd several."—Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, p. 200, 1709. TOMHOG, or wooden Cutlash.—Church, *Philip's War* (1716). ". . . hatchets (which the Indians call tomahawks)."—Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line* (1728).

NEW YORK CITY.