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**A Case Study in Frontier Warfare: Racial Violence, Revenge,  
and the Ambush at Fort Laurens, Ohio**

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# A Case Study in Frontier Warfare: Racial Violence, Revenge, and the Ambush at Fort Laurens, Ohio

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## ABSTRACT

In February of 1779, a combined British and Native American raiding party ambushed a small group of American soldiers at an isolated fort on the Ohio frontier. The attack resulted in the deaths of at least 13 soldiers, many of who died from massive head injuries that, to modern researchers, do not appear to have been tactically necessary. However, rather than being an isolated instance of savagery or wartime atrocity this paper considers the ideological and cultural bases of violence behind the trauma, and will argue that the Fort Laurens ambush was just one example of violence in a long standing, and exceedingly brutal, conflict between Native Americans and white settlers on the American frontier during the 18th century.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, violence and warfare have attracted the attention of anthropologists and archaeologists (Arkush and Allen 2006; Haas 1990; Keeley 1996; Martin and Frayer 1997; Otterbein 2001, 2009; Thorpe 2003), and the study of trauma can answer questions regarding the nature and outcome of violent interaction between groups (Haglund et al 2001; Haglund 2001; Milner 1998; Owsley 2001). This paper will analyze the individuals in the soldiers' cemetery at Fort Laurens (pronounced "Lawrence"), a Revolutionary War fortification located in Ohio, and the historical context in which the dead men's injuries occurred. Prior investigations of this mass grave of American militiamen who served at the fort reveal horrific head injuries on the skeletons that, even for wartime, are considered exceedingly brutal. However, these presence and nature of these wounds can be better explained by examination of the possible ideological motivations of the attackers and the social and cultural context of violence on the American frontier during the late 18th century.

### *Archaeology and the Social and Cultural Nature of Violence*

Violence and warfare, in general, are complex sociocultural phenomena, which Otterbein (2009) suggests stem from several interrelated causes he defines as underlying and proximate. Underlying reasons fall under four domains: the physical environment, natural resources, social structure including sociopolitical organization and, finally, cultural values such as beliefs, rules, and laws. Proximate reasons include defense and revenge, material spoils, honor and glory, and subjugation and exploitation of another group (Otterbein 2009:35-36). The ideological components of warfare are often overlooked by archaeology because they are difficult to determine materially; however, they often serve as some of the most potent motivators for violence (Allen and Arkush 2008:8). When combatants consider the other to be less than human or have undesirable characteristics, it is easier for both sides to torture and kill their enemies, while ethnocentrism shapes young warriors and provides them with the motivation to fight (Otterbein 2009:102). Here, osteological evidence and historical and ethnographic accounts can provide strong evidence for these immaterial forces.

Because of their plasticity and sensitivity to the environment, the analysis of human skeletons provide a unique opportunity to study human behavior, including health, diet, social organization and other behavioral activities (Boyd 1996; Walker 2001). Therefore, bones can be considered a special kind of artifact. When supported by other forms of evidence, skeletal traces of violence and trauma can be explained by examination of its frequency, location, severity and archaeological context (Boyd 1996:230). For example, Boyd (1996:231-233) notes that indirect evidence of violence can be extrapolated from historical documentation of decapitation, dismemberment, and scalping, while the spatial and temporal patterning of trauma can be used to infer the social and cultural context of conflict and, accordingly, intra-group aggression can be documented from skeletal trauma. Thus, placing violence-related trauma frequencies into a temporal perspective can reveal change in warfare practices through time. On the other hand, the study of skeletal remains can provide strong evidence of interpersonal violence which cannot be recovered from historic and ethnographic accounts. Walker (2001:574-575, 582-584) also points out that social contexts influences the choice of weapon assailants use and, thus, the trauma caused by these weapons reflects social and cultural influences and acceptable practices of war.

Finally, the nature of violence itself can also provide insights into social interactions. Social violence, as a general term, is defined as a "genus of behaviors, made up of a diverse class of injurious actions, involving a variety of behaviors, injuries, motivations, agents, victims, and

observers [connected by] the threat or outcome of injury.” (Jackman 2001:404). Moreover, Jackman suggests that social violence “is not constant in all of its expressions but varies considerably in its presence, character, nature, and severity as do the means by which social actors use violence, the types of injuries inflicted, the purpose of those injuries, the targets and the severity of the injuries vary considerably through time and space, and are always historically contingent” (Jackman 2001:405-408). Therefore, the nature of violence can tell the researcher much about the motivation of the agent and the victim, whether the action is socially acceptable or repudiated, and how and why social institutions mediate or curtail the practice of different kinds of violence.

Archaeological research has largely dispelled the myth that the prehistoric indigenous populations of the New World were largely free from violence, although the level to which violence was endemic is uncertain, due in large part to the poor preservation of skeletal remains. Although there is much evidence of palisaded villages in the eastern United States (Nelson 1977), some prehistoric cemeteries contain little or no evidence of violence, while at others violence is quite clear. For example, of the 264 burials at the Norris Farms #36 site, an Oneota cemetery in Illinois dating to c. 1300AD, over one third exhibit some form of trauma. As at Fort Laurens, many of the victims were struck more times than was necessary to kill them, and perhaps several warriors joined in to share a kill (Milner 1998:114). These victims died from a series of ambushes over a period of many decades. At the well-known Crow Creek site, a fortified village site on the Missouri River dating to 1325AD, a mass burial comprising some 486 victims, including men, women, and children was discovered, and all of which exhibited evidence of violent death, including scalping, decapitation, and dismemberment. Similar patterns are found at village sites in the area around the Crow Creek site (Walker 2001:590).



**Figure 1:** Location of Bolivar, Ohio. Courtesy of geology.com

### *Brief History of Fort Laurens*

Fort Laurens is located in Bolivar, Ohio approximately 75 miles south of Cleveland (Figure 1), and was the only fort built by the Continental Army in the Ohio frontier during the American Revolution (Ohio Historical Society 2011). In late summer of 1778, a force of 1,200 men led by Lachlan McIntosh left Fort Pitt (present-day Pittsburgh) to launch an attack on the British garrison at Detroit and Wyandot Indian settlements in Ohio in response to the British encouragement of Indians attacking American settlers. In November of 1778, with the approaching winter weather McIntosh decided to suspend his assault on Detroit. The troops constructed a small, quadrangular fort approximately one acre in size with associated barracks and storehouses next to the Tuscarawas River. Fort Laurens was to serve as a

base for attacks on Detroit, discourage raids from British-allied Native groups on American settlers in eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania, and protect the neutral Christian Delaware Indians in the hope of convincing them to join the American cause. In December, McIntosh left with most of his troops, leaving behind a small garrison of 150 soldiers.

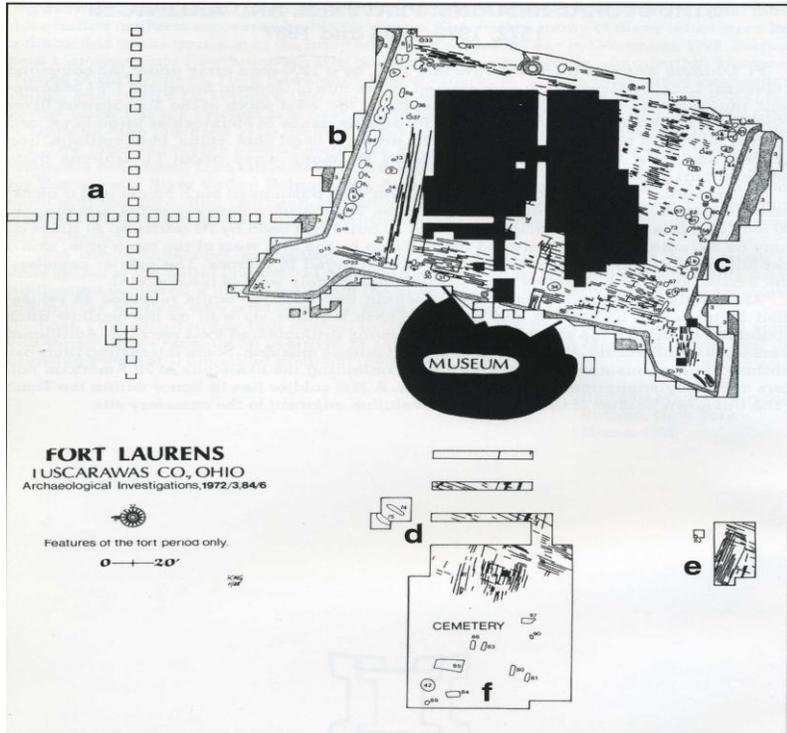
Almost immediately, Fort Laurens gained the attention of the British and their Indian allies. Raids from hostile Wyandot, Shawnee, and Mingo warriors caused casualties and made life difficult for the fort's garrison. A supply train from Fort Pitt was ambushed in January 1779, killing three men. In that same month, a force of 180 Wyandot, Mingo, Munsee, and Delaware Indians and a small number of British soldiers surrounded the fort and laid siege to it, and starvation quickly set in. When their food supplies ran out, the American soldiers were reduced to boiling moccasins and eating raw deer (Pieper and Gidney 1976).

On the morning of February 23rd, 1779, a small work detail of 19 men left the fort to collect firewood and round up stray pack horses (Pansing 2007:1). As the work detail passed beyond musket range of the fort's defenses, they were immediately set upon by attackers and wiped out. Historical sources are somewhat confused as to the body count (Mitchener 1876; Pieper and Gidney 1976), but it appears the general consensus from documentary sources is that seventeen of the nineteen were killed and two taken prisoner, although only 13 bodies are contained in the mass grave, discussed below. The Indians then employed maneuvers in which they moved single file in a large circle on the open space where the ambush had taken place and passed behind a hill. After re-emerging into the open, the Indians once again fell into a single file line and rejoined the marching line, creating the illusion that the attacking force was much larger than it really was (Pansing 2007:1). This ruse, combined with the ambush that took place right before their eyes, managed to terrify the fort's garrison into leaving their dead comrades where they fell for a month, where they were exposed to the weather and scavenging wolves until General McIntosh arrived with a relief force on March 23rd. The dead were then gathered up and buried in a mass grave. The garrison suffered four more deaths in March, two from combat and two from eating poisonous plants, and another two deaths in July from combat prior to the abandonment of the fort (Pieper and Gidney 1976; Sciulli and Gramly 1989).

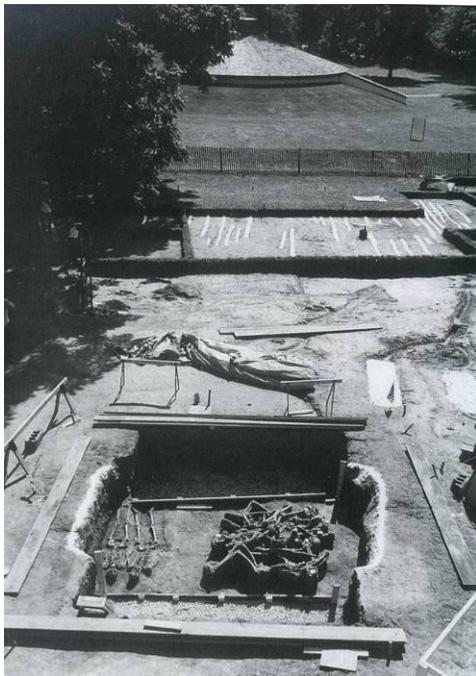
The siege was also difficult for the besiegers, and, running low on supplies, the British and Indian allies retreated on March 20th. A relief force of 700 men arrived from Fort Pitt three days later, and most of the Fort Laurens garrison returned to Fort Pitt, leaving only a token force behind. It had become clear that the fort was too far to easily attack Detroit and much too difficult to readily supply, nor was it close enough to protect the Christian Delaware settlements in Ohio. The fort was finally abandoned in August of 1779, and was burned by Native American raiders in 1780. After the abandonment of the fort, the Continental Army had no further presence in eastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania, and local militiamen became responsible for protecting American settlers in the area (Ohio Historical Society 2011).

## **OSTEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INDIVIDUALS IN THE FORT LAURENS CEMETERY**

Excavations at the fort were conducted in 1972-73, during which time the cemetery was rediscovered, and again in 1986-87 (Figure 2). The cemetery consists of seven individual graves and a single mass grave comprising approximately 21-27 people, with a minimum number of 21 individuals present. The remains varied in levels of preservation, as some individuals retained the small bones of hands and feet while others were represented only by more dense bones such as legs, arms, and skulls (Gramly 1999; Sciulli and Gramly 1989; Williamson et al 2003:114).



**Figure 2:** Location of the Fort Laurens cemetery (Gramly 1999:6).



**Figure 3:** Mass grave of the ambush victims at the Fort Laurens cemetery. The museum is in the background. View from the southwest (Gramly 1999:40)

Burial Features 80, 81, 83, and 88 contained single individuals, and Feature 84 contained two individuals. Feature 85 was the mass grave and contained 15 individuals; 13 were buried in a cluster and represent the victims of the ambush, while two individuals were buried in an extended position side by side immediately north of the cluster. These two were the men who had been killed trying to recover the bodies of the ambush victims (Figure 3). The soldier from Feature 80 was not available for study as the remains are contained in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution (Williamson et al 2003:114).

A brief, general

overview of the human remains found at Fort Laurens will be given here (Gramly 1999; Sciulli and Gramly 1989). Based on cranial characteristics, all of the dead in the cemetery were males of European descent and historical records indicate Irish, British and German surnames of those serving at the fort. Although some of skeletons in the cemetery are fragmentary, it does not appear women were among the dead. The soldiers ranged in height from 161-186 cm (5'3"-6'1"). Dental eruption data indicated the average age of death was 23.5 years, and perhaps as low as 16 years for some of the soldiers. Pathologies were noted on some of the individuals. Two cases of 5th lumbar spondylolysis were noted, one individual had fusion of the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae, and two other individuals had Schmorl nodes, all of which indicate a high degree of mechanical stress consistent with manual labor such as farming. One individual had a healed fracture of the

right distal radius, which also indicates moderate levels of mechanical stress. One individual had a periosteal reaction around right hypoglossal canal and first and second cervical vertebrae. Eighteen individuals had some form of oral pathology and 16 had at least one

carious tooth. Ten had at least one abscess and eight had at least one post mortem tooth loss.

Diet appears to have been standard for those living on the frontier during this time, and probably consisted of deer, turkey, bear, fish, pork, potatoes, pumpkins, squash, corn, and maple syrup. These foods would probably have been probably replaced or augmented with the standard Continental Army rations of corn meal and grains, supplemented infrequently by meat and corn. The oral hygiene problems suffered by the soldiers at the garrison would likely have been exacerbated by living on the frontier and the effects of the siege (Gramly 1999; Sciulli and Gramly 1989)

### ***Trauma***

Analyses of the trauma found on the skeletons were conducted by Sciulli and Gramly (1989), Gramly (1999) and Williamson et al (2003) (Table 1).

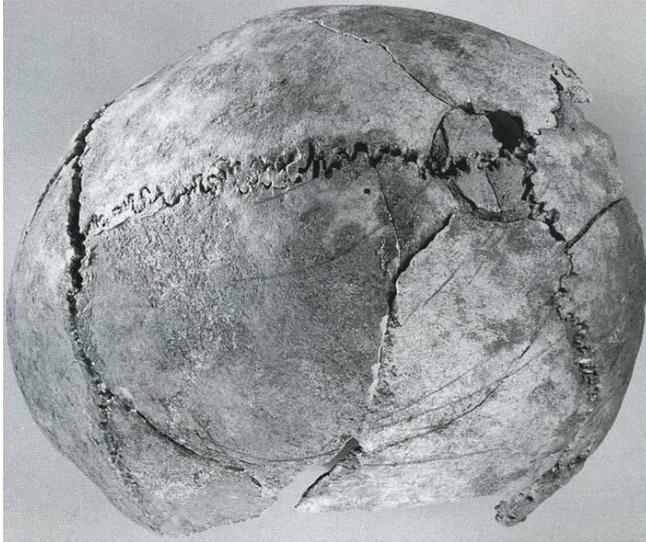
<b>Burial Number</b>	<b>Number of Lesions on Cranium</b>	<b>Location of Coarse Lesions</b>	<b>Fine lesions</b>	<b>Postcranial Trauma</b>
81	0	none	Yes	None
83	2	One coarse each on left/right parietal	Yes	None
84 Right	1	One coarse on left parietal	Yes	None
84 Left	1	One coarse on occipital	Yes	One coarse lesion on left scapula
85-1	1	One coarse on occipital/one blunt force on right parietal	Yes	None
85-2	1	One coarse on left parietal	Yes	None
85-3	3	One coarse each on occipital/right mastoid process/blunt force on right parietal	Yes	None
85-4	0	None	Yes	None
85-5	2	One on occipital/left parietal	Yes	None
85-6	3	One on occipital/ two on left parietal	Yes	None
85-7	2	One each on left/right parietal	Yes	None
85-8	7	Three coarse on right parietal/two coarse on frontal/two blunt force on front	Yes	Coarse lesions on 1st and 2nd cervical vertebrae

85-9	5	Three coarse on left parietal/one coarse on frontal/one blunt force on left parietal	Yes	None
85-10	3	One coarse on right parietal/two coarse on left parietal	Yes	None
85-11	3	One coarse each on right parietal, left parietal, frontal	Yes	None
85-12/13	4	One coarse on right parietal/one coarse on right side of mandible/one blunt force at lambda/one blunt force on right parietal	Yes	None
85-14	0	None	No	No skull present
85-North	3	One coarse on frontal/two coarse on occipital	Yes	One coarse lesion on left ilium
85-South	5	Four coarse on left parietal/one coarse on frontal	Yes	None
88	3	One coarse on right parietal/one coarse on left parietal/one coarse on right mastoid process	Yes	One coarse lesion on right rib

**Table 1:** Summary of trauma on Fort Laurens ambush victims. After Williamson et al 2003.

Initial research focused on finding evidence of gunshot wounds. However, there is some disagreement among the researchers as to whether any of the victims were actually shot. In the original survey, Gramly (1999) noted that musket balls, flattened from impact, were found in the graves of two individuals in Features 84 and 85, and stated that both of the men had been shot from behind. Feature 85 had been shot through the heart with a .50 caliber musket ball before having his upper left arm broken and left hand severed while defending himself. The young soldier from Feature 80 had been shot through the pelvis with a .50 caliber musket ball and had his left humerus broken with a club or tomahawk. However, Williamson et al. (2003:166) state that no evidence of gunshot wounds, such as bone lesions or lead splatter, was found during gross or radiographic examination. The researchers admit that this absence does not preclude the possibility that some individuals died of gunshots, as the ball could have passed through flesh without hitting bone, or taphonomic events such as scavenging animals, as suggested by the presence of a wolf's tooth and canine gnaw marks on the distal end of a femur of an individual in Feature 85 (Gramly 1999), could have obscured evidence of bone fragments exhibiting gunshot

wounds. Historical records suggest eyewitnesses saw guns used by the attackers (Pieper and Gidney 1976) and, Williamson et al.'s conclusions aside, there is little reason to suppose the ambushers would not have used firearms in the attack.



**Figure 4:** Skull from Burial 12/13. This individual was struck on the crown of the head with a war club. Note fine lesions which indicating scalping (Gramly 1999: 43).

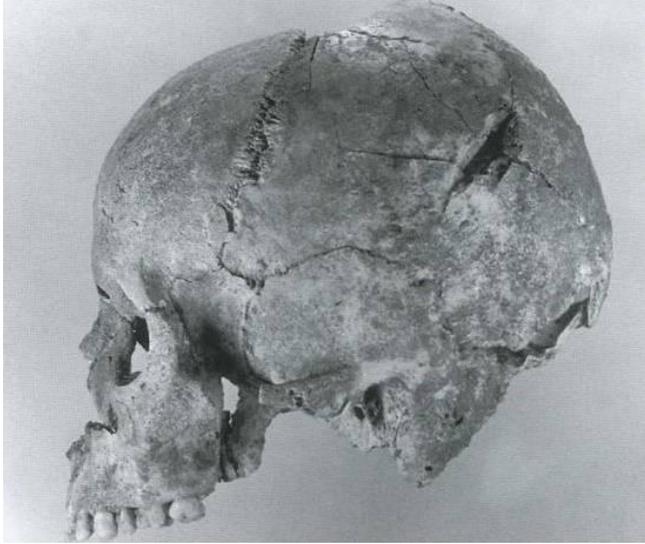


**Figure 5:** Skull from Burial 85-S. This individual was struck in the head five times with a war club (Gramly 1999:48).

All of the skeletons in the fort cemetery reveal trauma associated with close-quarters weapons (Figures 4, 5, 6). Twelve of the 13 individuals in the mass grave had crania complete enough for analysis of trauma. Of these 12, 11 of them had at least one mark associated with massive head trauma. These lesions measured between 17-88mm in length, with an average of 48mm. Lesions were noted as coarse, such as those caused by a heavy or bladed instrument such as a club or tomahawk resulting in a large or beveled wound, and fine, those caused by sharp, bladed instruments such as knives resulting in a shallow, fine wound (Williamson et al. 2003:114). A total of twenty-eight coarse lesions were identified, and are broken down as follows: four were on the frontal bone of the skull, seven on the right parietal, 11 on the left parietal, one on the right temporal, one on the right condylar neck of the mandible, and four on the occipital bone. The coarse lesions are consistent with wounds made with a tomahawk or hatchet, common weapons carried by Woodland Indians during this time.

Nine of the 12 crania had more than one lesion and five had three or more, with an average of two per individual and the high of seven on one skull (Feature 85-8). This individual had three lesions on the right parietal, a fourth on the right supraorbital margin, and a fifth to the left side of the frontal near the temporal muscle line. Five of the 12 individuals exhibited at least one blunt force trauma lesion, likely from a spiked Iroquois war club. One blow to an individual's occipital

bone went right through the brain and produced a corresponding lesion on the interior surface of the right parietal bone (Williamson et al 2003:115).



**Figure 6:** Skull from Burial 85-10. This individual was struck in the head three times with a tomahawk and scalped (Gramly 1999:42).

Finally, all 12 crania had fine lesions forming a semi-circular pattern around the posterior portion of the skull consistent with scalping. The scalping lesions appear to be made by steel knives carried by Native Americans. A cause of death could not be established for the individual in Feature 81, but he had been scalped. The two individuals in Feature 84 are missing hands and feet, which may have been amputated during battle or removed by scavenging animals (Williamson et al 2003:114). Other individuals buried in the cemetery, but not victims of the ambush, displayed similar coarse and fine wounds. However, none of these individuals possessed evidence of blunt force trauma like those of the ambush victims.

In sum, the ambush victims all suffered massive head trauma, often from more than one blow and in several cases likely from more than one attacker, and from weapons used by Native Americans. All of the victims were scalped afterwards and some had their uniforms stripped as trophies by their attackers (Gramly 1999).

### **A CASE STUDY IN FRONTIER WARFARE: LAND, RACE, AND REVENGE**

There is no denying that the soldiers in the mass grave at Fort Laurens died violently. However, the above analyses do not put the ambush into a larger cultural and historical perspective of interpersonal violence on the American frontier during this time. Williamson et al (2003:121-122) touch on this point:

“The ambush victims at Fort Laurens were outnumbered, which might account for the presence of multiple cranial injuries. But it is still not clear why this was tactically necessary. In this context it is even more confusing that three, four, or five blows were required to subdue a victim who had essentially no chance to fight back. We feel that the distribution of traumatic lesions at Fort Laurens may indicate something more than just warfare tactics, such as extreme anger...Obviously, a skeletal analysis is not required to suspect that Native Americans were angry about European colonization, but the treatment of the Fort Laurens victims would be a particularly stunning example of it.”

In the analysis of violent acts, Schmidt and Schroder (2001) argue that three observations are made. First, violence is never completely idiosyncratic, and always part of social relations between groups. Second, violence is never completely senseless and, thus, not epiphenomenal. Third, violence is never a totally isolated act or acts, and is always part of other, often broader, historical processes. Thus, violence is a historically contingent practice “informed by material constraints and incentives as well as by social structures and by the cultural representation of these two sets of conditions” (Schmidt and Schroder 2001:3).

The nature of the trauma suffered by the soldiers at Fort Laurens can be clarified by examining the sociohistorical context in which the trauma occurred, and the ideological factors which may have motivated it. Such an analysis reveals that these wounds were common on the American frontier during the time in which the Fort Laurens ambush occurred and, furthermore, they were likely fueled by a racial hatred centering on competition for land and a spiraling circle of violent reprisals, of which the ambush at Fort Laurens was just one instance.

### ***Historical and Cultural Context***

The defeat of the French during the Seven Years' War (1754-1763) expanded British territories in the Ohio County, and settlers immediately rushed to the new land holdings. Prior to 1781, only six of the original colonies - New Hampshire, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware - had defined boundaries (Viele 1882:168). Despite the 1763 Proclamation which defined the boundary of British North America from Indian lands at the Appalachian mountains, and which explicitly stated that "the several nations or tribes of Indians, with whom we are connected, and who live under our protection, should not be molested or disturbed in the possession of such parts of our dominions and territories as, not having been ceded to, or purchased by us, are reserved to them" (Rice 2008: 79), settlers ignored the Proclamation. In 1768, the Treaty of Hard Labor ceded Cherokee lands to the British at the boundaries of the Ohio and Kanawha Rivers, while the treaty of Fort Stanwix, ending Pontiac's War, extended the 1763 Proclamation to include most of West Virginia. However, the Iroquois did not own most of this land, which actually belonged to the Delaware, Shawnee, Mingo and Cherokee. Consequently, those tribes lost their traditional hunting grounds, and "the only thing that stood between them and the American frontiersmen was the Ohio River" (Rice 2008:80).

To add insult to injury, settlers did not respect these boundaries in the least, and increasingly encroached on forbidden lands (Adelman and Aron 1999; Rohrbough 1978). It is estimated that by 1774, there were 50,000 whites living on or near the Appalachian border, and violence between settlers and Indians quickly erupted. Although records from the time are incomplete, it is believed that fighting killed more than 2000 settlers and soldiers on the Virginia and Pennsylvania frontier between 1754 and 1758 alone. When placed into proportion of the total colonial population, these deaths accounted for nearly one percent of the entire population of Virginia and Pennsylvania, and more than three percent of the entire population along the colonial frontier (Mahan 1958:262; Ward 1995:310). It is unknown how many Native Americans were killed during this time but their casualties were almost certainly high as well, especially when it is considered that the native populations were comparatively smaller than the total colonial population.

Violence on the frontier was endemic, and was fueled by a number of ethnic, cultural, religious, and ultimately racial, differences between Euro-American settlers and Native Americans. At the core of these differences was a fundamental disparity in how these groups viewed the physical landscape. The Euro-American "homesteader ethic" held that ownership of land was synonymous with freedom and that land was only truly owned if it was cultivated (Aron 1992). This ideological notion was the driving force for the frontier settlers, most of who came from very poor or middling economic backgrounds, and the vast amount of land available for the taking gave ordinary people hope that they, too, could own land and support a family on it, making them independent and free.

The European idea of the right to land through working it put settlers into conflict with the various native peoples they encountered. Although Native Americans had practiced

agriculture for thousands of years before European contact, many settlers refused to distinguish variances in native practices and assumed all native peoples hunted exclusively. Because the Native Americans “lived off the bounty of the land without investing their labor...” they did not have legitimate claim to it (Perdue 1995:91). This belief set the precedent for future dealings and conflicts with Native Americans. As late as 1900, Teddy Roosevelt’s contention that “the Indians never had any real title to the soil...the man who puts the soil to use must of right dispossess the man who does not...” was a reflection of this long-standing attitude (Williams 1980:816). In addition, frontier settlers “distrusted any translocal establishment, religious or political... bent on expanding their power and property”; including colonial land speculators and native tribes (Taylor 1993:226). This racialization of land formed the basis for Euro-American versus Native land competition on the colonial frontier, and spurred the extreme between and among settlers, Native Americans, and governments. In response, the native groups in the Ohio frontier sought to drive out the encroaching settlers from their lands, and attacked American frontier settlements with the purpose of convincing settlers and the British government that these lands were not worth possessing (Ward 1995:301).

This ideological basis combined with the concept of killing for revenge (Milner 1998). In Native American societies this was embodied by blood revenge, which was predicated on the notion that the killing of a person, either accidental or on purpose, created an obligation on the part of the dead person’s kin to exact revenge on the killer and/or his people. Importantly, the timing and intent of the original killing were considered irrelevant and any killing required vengeance, but this ideology lacked a specificity of who would or who should serve as the target for vengeance. This meant that within the group, any member of the killer’s people, either himself or one of his relatives would suffice as a target. If the killer was outside one’s own people then any member of the killer’s people, relative or otherwise, was an acceptable target. This latter part is important because if the killer was inside the victim’s group, there was the understanding that his relatives would withdraw support for him. If from outside the group there was no expectation that the killer’s relatives would cease to support him, and therefore the killer’s individual identity ceased to matter (Lee 2007:714-715). Similarly, white settlers believed that all Indians, regardless of group, were responsible for attacking their property, family and friends (Knouff 1994). As Lee (2007:716) observes, “[m]aterially they may have been seeking land, but ideologically they justified their efforts at wholesale destruction by citing the ‘treacherousness’ of the Indians.”

On the frontier, differing views between Native American and European notions of acceptable war practices also contributed to this ideological component. When two groups with differing conceptions of warfare practices fight each other, the battlefield can become a medium of cultural, and thus ideological, change in how warfare is conducted as each side reacts to the behavior of the other (Abler 1992:6). In addition to scalping, discussed below, a central component of Indian warfare was the taking of prisoners, both to replenish village populations and replace dead relatives but also for torture and eventual execution and cannibalistic feasting (Abler 1992; Knowles 1940; Kolodny 1993; Richter 1983). Europeans were horrified by this practice, while the concept of total war practiced by Europeans, including the slaughter of women and children and the destruction of crops and entire villages, angered many native groups (Lee 2007). This misunderstanding of warfare practices served as the part of the ideological component to justify the racial violence on the frontier and, combined with the jockeying for land, contributed to failure of restraint on both sides and served as the justification of increasing numbers of revenge killings (Abler 1992; Sandberg 2006).

Unfortunately, physical evidence of this violence is comparatively rare and, apart from Fort Laurens, very few burials dating from the 18th century have been examined in the frontier region of Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee (Herrmann n.d.). As such, assessments of trauma are frustratingly incomplete. However, a burial from the Logan's Fort Site in Kentucky shows similar head trauma to those from Fort Laurens. The skeleton was in an advanced state of decomposition, and was missing its facial region and most of the skull but dental eruption rates was determined to be of a white male between 18-22 years of age. The skull was determined to have several linear marks on the remaining portion of the cranium consistent with scalping. Electron microscopy revealed trace amounts of iron particles in the marks, suggesting that victim was scalped with an iron or steel knife (Hermann n.d.). Documentary evidence suggests that such incidents happened at Logan's Fort and other places in the Kentucky backcountry and, undoubtedly, other areas on the American frontier.

Although the victims at Fort Laurens were scalped, this practice cannot be described as a case of "savagery" on the part of the Indian ambushers. Rather, scalping was practiced by both Indians and whites on the frontier. Milner (1998:111) notes that the removal of body parts was a tangible sign of victory, expressing both a warrior's prowess and disdain for fallen enemies. As is clear from the evidence at Crow Creek and other sites, scalping was present in North America long before European contact (Axtell and Sturtevant 1980). For Indians, the taking of an enemy scalp was thought to restore balance after a blood feud or mourning war (Abler 1992; Richter 1983). For American settlers, scalping emerged as a means by which colonial governments encouraged settlers to kill Indians by paying for Indian scalps (Axtell and Sturtevant 1980), and by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, scalping was adopted by settlers on the frontier and, ultimately, became a customary practice of violence there. For example, at the Battle of Bushy Run in western Pennsylvania in 1763, the Indian dead were not scalped by the British soldiers but by frontier troops assisting them, and a year later, peace negotiations with the Shawnee nearly collapsed after a Shawnee hostage was murdered and scalped by an officer in the Pennsylvania volunteers (Abler 1992:8). Indeed, scalping had become such a common and powerful practice of violence on the frontier that in 1763 a military chaplain wrote:

"the general cry and wish is for what they call a Scalp Act. . . . Vast numbers of Young Fellows who would not chuse to enlist as Soldiers, would be prompted by Revenge, Duty, Ambition & the Prospect of the Reward, to carry Fire & Sword into the Heart of the Indian Country. And indeed, if this Method could be reconcil'd with Revelation and the Humanity of the English Nation, it is the only one that appears likely to put a final stop to those Barbarians" (Axtell and Sturtevant 1980:471).

Historical documents shed further light on the nature of frontier violence. Accounts suggest that most soldiers and militiamen from the colonial frontier lands were ambivalent about fighting the British in distant places on the eastern coast, when duties to their farms or families took precedence (Knouff 1994). For these soldiers, the British did not pose much of a threat to their livelihoods. In 1778, a militiaman from Cumberland County in central Pennsylvania offered this anecdote about his experience with Hessian mercenaries on the frontier:

"We approached near the house and discovered a large Hessian standing in the yard with his gun...and...we cast lots, and it fell to my lot to shoot the Hessian. I did not like to shoot a man down in cold blood...and I concluded to break his thigh. I shot with a rifle and aimed at his hip. He had a large iron tobacco box in his breeches pocket, and I hit the box, the ball glanced, and it

entered his thigh.... At length one of the Hessians came out of the cellar with a large bottle of rum and advanced with it at arm's length as a flag of truce" (quoted in Knouff 1994:55).

This is illuminating when compared to the experience of another militiaman on the Pennsylvania frontier in 1781. After a skirmish against a small group of Indians the militiaman, at the request of his commanding officer, "sent out a small party to look for some...dead Indians...Toward noon [the party] found them and skinned two of them from their hips down for boot legs; one pair for the Major and the other for myself" (quoted in Knouff 1994:65). This contrast is indeed striking. American settlers and Native Americans viewed each other as threats to their families, lands and livelihoods, and the extreme acts of brutality such as that described above was an expression of this racial hatred held by both sides. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the perpetrators of the scalping and murders of prisoners at Bushy Run were conducted not by regular British troops but by frontier militiamen. It is also a reason, perhaps, why the garrison at Fort Laurens was comprised of men from Pennsylvania and western Virginia (Gramly 1999), who had the most to gain (and lose) by serving on the frontier.

Yet even before the ambush at Fort Laurens, similar patterns of violence were visible throughout the backcountry. During the French and Indian War, Native American war parties captured British soldiers who lagged behind the main column, and nailed their scalps to trees ahead of the column as a warning to the other British soldiers (Ward 1995:310). Later, in 1779 American soldiers came upon the body of a comrade who had been captured by Indians: the man's "head [was] entirely taken off and eyes pushed out ... [his] privates was nearly cut out and hanging down ..." (quoted in Knouff 1994:64, see also Clark 1879 for similar experiences during Sullivan's campaign on the New York frontier).

Likewise, the end of the American Revolution was not the end of these vicious tactics. In 1782, a small force of white soldiers and settlers in Ohio rounded up a group of neutral Christian Delawares in their village church and set it on fire, killing 90 men, women, and children (Tuscarawas Country Convention and Visitors Bureau 2008). Other acts of extreme violence would continue to be perpetrated by Americans settlers and Native Americans against one another long after the end of the American Revolution (Hurt 1996).

## CONCLUSION

Given the historical context, geographical situation and the beliefs about acceptable practices of warfare between Euro-Americans and Indians, it is perhaps unsurprising that the ambush victims at Fort Laurens suffered the wounds that they did. As Sandberg (2006:22) points out "All wars involve the forging of conventions between groups of combatants regarding the appropriate means and forms of violence; however, these conventional practices of warfare and restraints on violence are periodically violated and can at times break down".

Although violence and warfare was certainly not unheard of in North America prior to European contact, the increasingly endemic and brutal character of warfare on the American frontier centered on a strong racial component and a continuing cycle of retaliatory violence and revenge killings on both sides, which often led to a loss of restraint by both Native Americans and white settlers. Racial tensions, driven in part by ideological conceptions of land ownership and retaliation, also fueled the incessant violence at the far reaches of colonial America.

In this light, the massive head trauma suffered by the soldiers was not a tactical necessity at all. Nor can it be explained away as simply the result of extreme anger. As it stands, the ambush at the fort was a brutal, but certainly not unprecedented, event in the bloody history of

the American Frontier, whose effects began long before and continued long after the ambush on that February morning in 1779.

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