

Revealing the Culture of Conflict



DURING THE COLONIAL WARS and the Revolution, many American soldiers carried the gunpowder for their flintlock muskets in hollowed cattle horns, plugged at both ends. (Fig. 1) These lightweight containers “kept their powder dry” and were obtained from the hundreds of cattle driven behind the troops so that “the army could travel on its stomach.” Powder horns were less expensive alternatives to manufactured leather boxes with pine inserts drilled to hold paper cartridges. (Fig. 2) When dexterous comrades elaborately engraved them with the owner’s name, location, date, and illustrations from the soldier’s world, the horns became a kind of early-day ‘dog tag’ and, for posterity, a canvas for one of the few indigenous art forms of colonial America.

Today, we enjoy carved powder horns in several ways: from art history and social satire, to documentary identification and the cultural history of military life far from home, to everything from military architecture, maps, and troop movements to poetry and genealogy, and finally to the technical side of design, fabrication, and engraving. As personal possessions, the horns are rare artifacts from a world that was almost entirely male, mobile, outdoors, and non-domestic, but they are most sobering as a window on the deep ironies of war. Several powder horns, collected since the 1950s by the late William H. Guthman of Westport, Connecticut, and recently acquired by Historic Deerfield, are also signed by their carvers and are the only surviving records that identify these men. Incredibly rich as transient survivals from public service 250 years ago, each horn carries a personal history lesson from the mid-18th century about the owner and the carver — both soldiers — pressed into near anonymous roles in securing and then later destroying a major portion of the British Empire.

One horn in a hundred is noteworthy, and the best of them are distinctive and beautiful. The unidentified carver of

Fig. 1. Powder Horn of William Patterson Jr. (1729/30–1761), of Stratford, CT, probably Lake George, NY, 1759. Horn, wood, black paint, iron. OL: 15 1/2”, OW: 3 1/4”. Inscribed: “William / Paterson / 1759” 2005.20.37

the horn signed for William Patterson Jr. (1729/30–1761) created a bold composition of three detailed components centered by the wonderful sailing ship racing the fish around it.¹ (See fig. 1) The artful animation is compelling because the carver’s “canvas” is a tapered spiral that cannot be seen in its entirety at any one time. As a result, the best carvers had to design an overall composition comprised of essentially three parts that evolve into the next as the viewer rotates the horn. Some horns have little or no decoration on the inner curve concealed against the wearer’s body.



Fig. 2. Cartridge Box, probably American, late 18th century. Leather and white pine. OH: 6 1/4”, OW: 10”, OD: 4” (without strap). 1124

Engraved Powder Horns from The French & Indian War

by Philip Zea, President, Historic Deerfield

The cow's horn itself is a natural, bone-like material similar to your fingernails. It is malleable when heated and can be shaved to create a thin, smooth, translucent surface. The carved wooden plug on the Rufus Hill powder horn contains a paper label protected by a thin horn window. (Fig. 3) The plastic nature of horn explains the origins of the word "lantern," or light horn. Horn was also used for purposes other than storing gunpowder. Inkhorns are rare containers for transporting ink. (Fig. 4) After Joseph Catlin died during the Deerfield Raid in 1757, his estate inventory listed a Bible, "two books & Inkhorn" appraised at five shillings six pence.² In the 18th century, ladies commonly used elaborate hair combs manufactured from horn.³ (Fig. 5)

Although some powder horns bear dates before the 1750s,⁴ the artistic roots of the great, engraved American



Fig. 3. Detail, Powder Horn of Rufus Hill, attributed to the Hill-Tyler Carver (working 1755), Lake George, NY, 1755. Horn, wood, paper. OL: 14 1/4", OW: 3 1/4". Inscribed on paper: "RUFUS HILL: / Lake George Call'd by / The French Sauceman / Sepr ye 7th A:D:" Inscribed on horn: "RUFUS HILL / Lake George / September Ye 5 1755 / July 1755 Ye 3rd / Allbone [Albany] / Sept Ye 8th 1755 / Our Battle At The / Lake St George / Was Fought With 2300 / French. / RH" 2005.20.5

Fig. 4. Ink Horn, England or America, 18th century. Horn. 5 5/8" Ink horns are rare artifacts of literacy that allowed for the storage and transportation of expensive ink. Mr. and Mrs. Hugh B. Vanderbilt Fund for Curatorial Acquisitions. 1993.31.1

Fig. 5. Hair Comb and Box by Alfred Willard, "Boston Comb Manufactory," Boston, MA, ca. 1832. Horn, cardboard. OH: 7", OW: 7 3/8", OD: 3 1/4" (comb); OH: 7 7/8", OW: 8 1/4", OD: 3 1/2" (box). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur H. Ruggles Jr. in memory of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur H. Ruggles. 1986.9&10



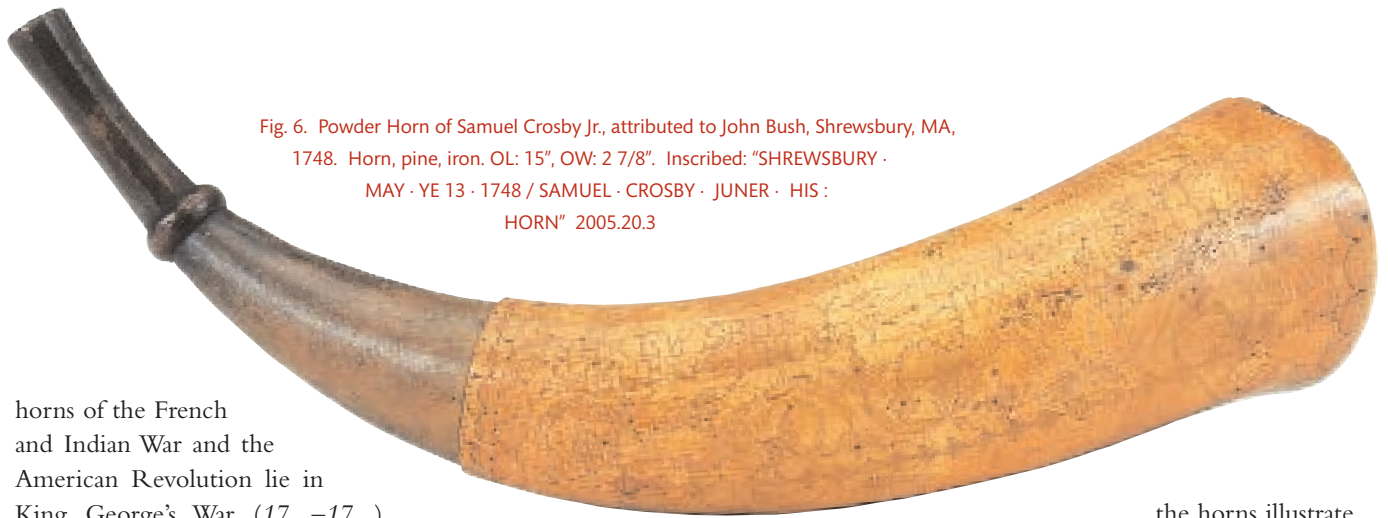


Fig. 6. Powder Horn of Samuel Crosby Jr., attributed to John Bush, Shrewsbury, MA, 1748. Horn, pine, iron. OL: 15", OW: 2 7/8". Inscribed: "SHREWSBURY · MAY · YE 13 · 1748 / SAMUEL · CROSBY · JUNER · HIS : HORN" 2005.20.3

horns of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution lie in King George's War (1754–1760). The horn inscribed in 1748 for Samuel Crosby Jr., of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, introduces the importance of that town to understanding the artistic genre of powder horns and the carving style later developed in the Lake George region of eastern New York during the French and Indian War. (Fig. 6) The prototypical Crosby horn presents neat double lines, uppercase block letters with diagonal line shading and gothic lettering interspersed with geometric devices and a scrolled border of shaded tulips. The circle of lunettes at both the throat and plug is likewise found on the later Lake George horns, and the row of shaded diamonds is also similar to the incised chevron device found on Lake George horns perfected by John Bush (born 1717), soldier and clerk, and others in the 1750s. In fact, the Crosby horn may well be the early work of Bush, who hailed from Shrewsbury and was 31 years old in 1748.⁵

The French and Indian War, or the Seven Years' War as it was called in England and Europe, raged from Quebec to the Carolinas, yet the most elaborately engraved horns were carried in New York, New England, the eastern Great Lakes, and the St. Lawrence Valley. Their colonial owners were the pawns of conflict in the inter-continental struggle of England and France for supremacy. This struggle continued through a series of wars between 1689 and 1763, ending with the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo by Lord Wellington. While history always remembers the generals and the diplomats, few artifacts from this time reveal the world of the rank-and-file, especially the part-time militia soldiers who filled the muster rolls for each summer's campaign in the woods of North America. Powder horns are a window on that world and illustrate the ethos of camp life far from home. The soldiers from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire in particular carried their emotions on their hips. Their horns capture love gained and lost, pride, and ego, or homesickness and deprivation; natural wonders observed along the way; tedious drudgery, hopelessness, disease, and fear; and the ubiquitous suspicion of authority — hurry up and wait. While

the horns illustrate the mood of men who worked and waited for the unknown, the rare words of diarists like Colonel Seth Pomeroy (1766–1777) of Northampton, Massachusetts, capture their aimless toil:

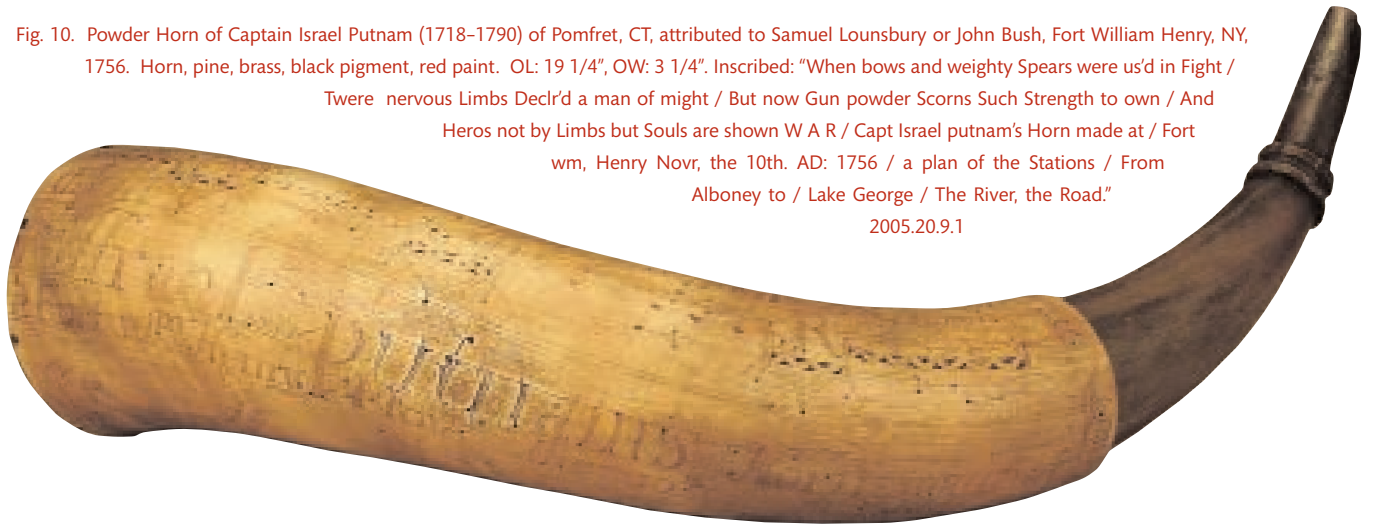


Fig. 7. Powder Horn owned by Colonel Nathan Payson of Hartford, CT, attributed to the Memento Mori Carver (working 1756–1760), Lake George, NY, October, 1756. Horn, wood, iron. OL: 16 1/2", OW: 2 7/8". Inscribed: "NATHAN. PAYSON Esq Col / LAKE. GEORGE. OCT 1756 / FORT. WM. HENRY / FORT. EDWARD / MEMENTO . MORI" 2005.20.18

Fig. 8. Detail, Powder Horn of Thomas Smith Diamond, attributed to the Goldthwait-Smith-Diamond Carver (working 1756), Lake George, NY, 1756. Horn, iron, cherry, leather. OL: 12", OW: 2 1/4". Inscribed: "Tho: Smith Diamond / His horn Camp At Lake / George Octbr 23: 1756 AD / Fort / William / Henry / Gate / The Road" 2005.20.10



Fig. 10. Powder Horn of Captain Israel Putnam (1718–1790) of Pomfret, CT, attributed to Samuel Lounsbury or John Bush, Fort William Henry, NY, 1756. Horn, pine, brass, black pigment, red paint. OL: 19 1/4", OW: 3 1/4". Inscribed: "When bows and weighty Spears were us'd in Fight / Twere nervous Limbs Declr'd a man of might / But now Gun powder Scorns Such Strength to own / And Heros not by Limbs but Souls are shown W A R / Capt Israel putnam's Horn made at / Fort w m, Henry Novr, the 10th. AD: 1756 / a plan of the Stations / From Alboney to / Lake George / The River, the Road." 2005.20.9.1



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