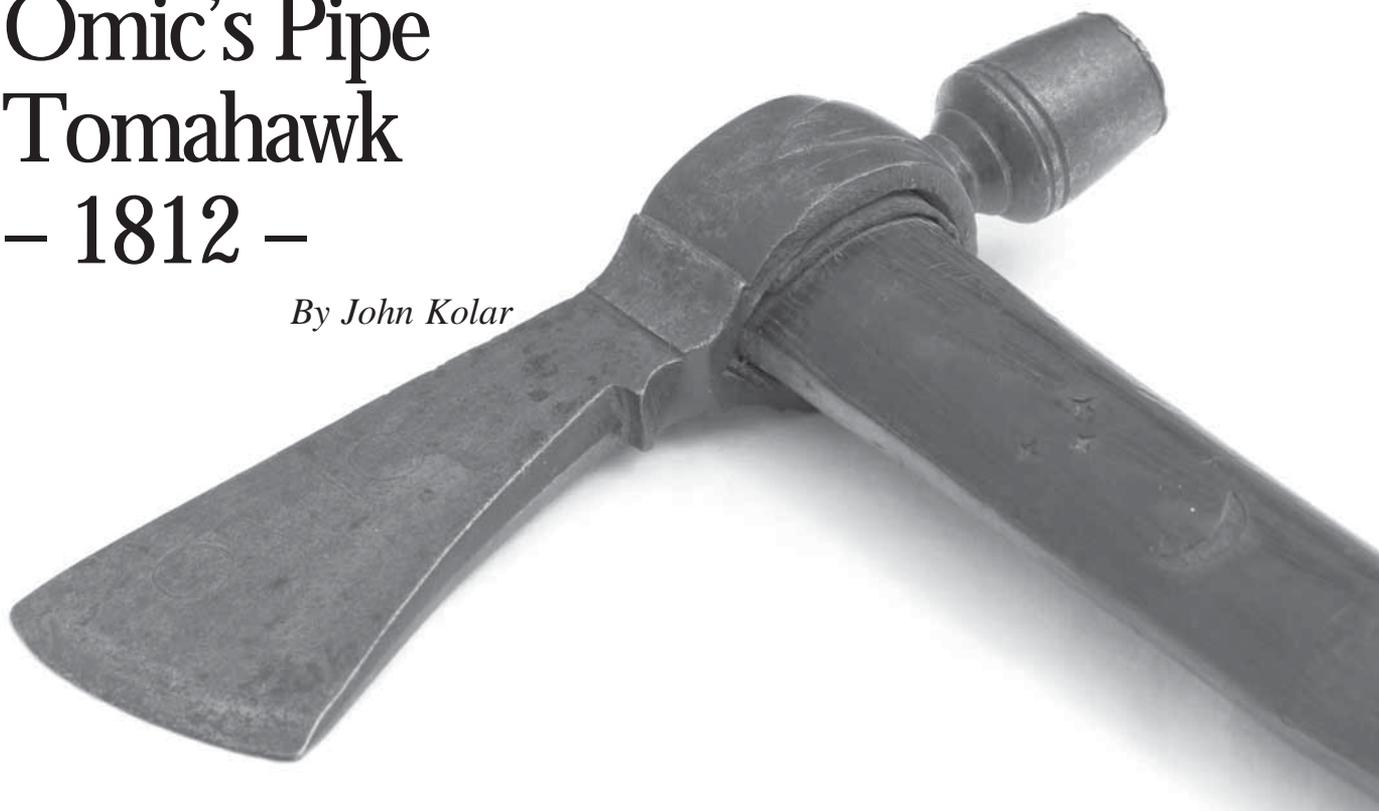


Omic's Pipe Tomahawk – 1812 –

By John Kolar



Prologue

Much has been written about John Omic, a 21-year-old Native American of the Mississauga band of the Chippewas. Most of what has been told about this tragic story is contained in a few local histories written prior to 1900. Some of the information contained in these histories is based upon personal recollections. Other descriptions are those of individuals one or two generations distant relating their own oral history.

Until recent times a great deal of what had been written about Native Americans was very prejudicial. This is even true of the accounts written in the late 19th or early 20th centuries. Memories of the Western Indian Wars and Custer's defeat at The Little Big Horn were less than a generation removed. Even if the individual telling a person's story was not prejudiced, time still tends to cloud the narrative. Trying to give an accurate description of an event that took place twenty to forty years in the past is difficult at best. This is just as true for the words of Elisha Whittlesey, upon whose eyewitness account some versions of the Omic story are based, as it is for the Draper Manuscripts, which were written much earlier. Because of this, I have tried to use a number of different and unrelated sources to tell the story of Omic.

The Ohio Country 1812

Settlers living on the Ohio frontier in the spring of 1812 were very anxious. Congress had been debating war with England for months. In the little settlement of Cleveland, (originally spelled Cleaveland after Moses Cleaveland) at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River, with a population of fewer than 70 people, the fear was palpable. They were living next to Native Americans who were just on the west side of the river as required by the 1795 Treaty of Greenville. The allegiance of these Indians, for the most part, was to the British. At best, in the

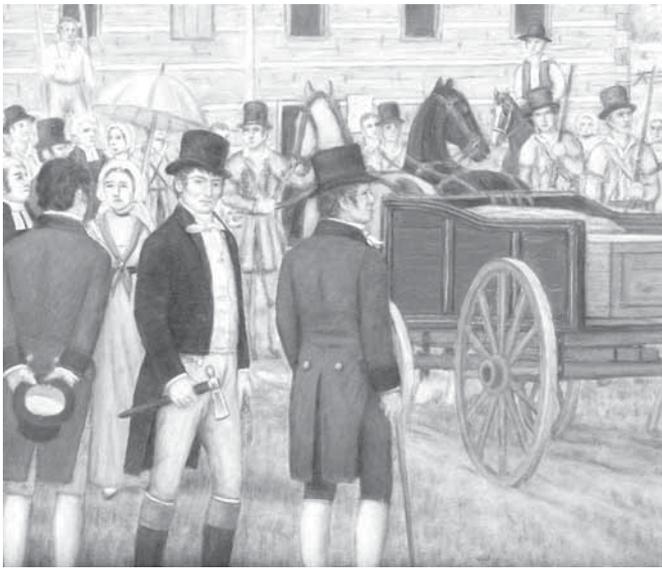
event of war, they would remain neutral. Adding to the settlers' concern, the whole north side of the settlement bordered Lake Erie and was vulnerable to attacks by the British, who had warships on the lake.

On April 3rd the bodies of two trappers, Buel and Gibbs, were found in their burnt-out cabin on Pipe Creek about a mile south of Lake Erie in present day Sandusky, Ohio. They had been murdered and presumably robbed for their furs and traps. A group of local men, most of them settlers, were looking over the grisly scene. One of them, Alfred Ruggles, a blacksmith, recognized a spontoon-style belt ax that was buried in Gibbs's skull. He had recently manufactured this ax for an Indian by the name of Semo.

This group of about twenty men, knowing where he lived, set out to the west to arrest Semo. Other Native Americans warned him that they were coming and he crossed the Portage River (present day Ottawa, Sandusky, and Wood Counties, Ohio) and entered the Great Black Swamp to evade them. Van Wormer, a local trader living near the Portage River, told them that Semo and another Indian, Omic, had been seen together for months. Omic, who lived close by, was surprised and captured by the men.

Another Indian, a boy of about 15 years of age, was thought to have been forced to commit the crime with Omic and Semo. Because of his age he was allowed to go free. Four years later this same Indian lad and two others murdered two other trappers, John Wood and George Bishop, west of the Carrying or Portage River (Wood County, Ohio). All three natives were executed in Huron County in 1817.

In 1812, the murders of Buel and Gibbs had taken place in what was then Huron County. Although fifty-four miles away, the new settlement of Cleveland had legal jurisdiction. A reward was posted for Semo. Captured by his own people for the reward money, Semo was able to seize a rifle



and chose to kill himself while still in the Maumee Swamp, rather than face hanging.

Most historical accounts suggest that all three Indians, when found, had some of the property of the murdered trappers in their possession. Omic was taken to Cleveland for trial. Cleveland had no jail at the time so Omic was held in the inn built by Lorenzo Carter, a frontiersman who had been Cleveland's first permanent settler in May of 1797. Omic was also known as John Omic or Poccon to distinguish him from his father, old Omic. There are a number of stories told about him. A daughter of Judge John Walworth, who knew him as a child, said that he "was not a bad Indian towards the whites. When we were children we used to play together on the banks of the Grand River at my father's old residence called Bloomingdale in the town of Painesville."

The trial took place on April 29th. It was a court held in the open air at the corner of Water and Superior Streets (see Spafford's 1801 map of Cleveland) under the shade of several large oak trees. The Judges of the court were William W. Irvin

and Ethan Allen Brown. There were 13 primary jurors and 12 substitute jurors, all white men.

It is often reported that Alfred Kelley, the prosecuting attorney, was the only lawyer in the Ohio Country and that Omic was not represented by proper legal council. However, that is not the case; Omic was represented by Peter Hitchcock. Hitchcock, who was from Cheshire, Connecticut, graduated from Yale in 1801 and studied law with the famous Barzillai Slosson of Kent, Connecticut. He was admitted to the bar there in 1804. In 1806 he and his wife Sarah and their children moved to Burton, Ohio. Peter Hitchcock later served in the Ohio Legislature and became a Chief Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court.

The indictment charged Omic with the murder of Daniel Buel, the crime being committed "with a certain Tomahawk, made of iron and Steele." The trial lasted less than a day. Omic was found guilty and sentenced to be hanged on June 26th.

From all witnesses, the execution, which probably took place on June 24th rather than the 26th, was a circus that would have rivaled any thing P.T. Barnum would stage 70





years later. This was the first public execution in Northern Ohio or the Western Reserve, and people came from near and far to witness the event.

The contemporary painting by Hal Sherman, which was completed about twenty years ago, depicts the event. The gallows were erected on the northwest corner of Public Square in front of the Old Court House. Omic had been brought to the square sitting upon his coffin in an open wagon that had been freshly painted black for the occasion. Fearing an attempted rescue or reprisal by the Native Americans, a company of local militia was present under the command of Major Samuel Jones. Major Jones ineptly made three attempts to guard Omic by forming a hollow square around the wagon with his troops as Omic was driven to the gallows. Finally he gave up and just followed the wagon to the execution.

Sheriff Baldwin, Lorenzo Carter, and Omic mounted the stairs to the gallows together. From that point on everything went wrong. Omic had boasted to Carter after the guilty verdict "That he would show the white man how to die. That he would jump from the gallows." Omic's arms were loosely fastened with a rope at his elbows, and a rope with a noose was put around his head. From the top spar of the gallows hung another rope, with an iron hook at the end to which the first rope was fastened. As soon as Sheriff Baldwin tried to put a shroud over Omic's head, Omic panicked and grabbed one of the vertical posts supporting the gallows. It took two pints of whiskey and two more attempts before the sheriff cut the rope which held the platform and Omic's body fell the length of the rope, swung to and fro several times, and finally came to rest.

All the while a storm of biblical proportions came up rapidly from the northwest end of the lake. Sheriff Baldwin, fearing that Omic wasn't really dead, and doubting that his neck was broken, attempted to draw the rope up and let it down sharply. The rope broke and Omic's body fell to the ground. He was hastily placed in the coffin, and the coffin in a shallow grave that had been dug near the gallows. All of this took place in minutes in a torrential rain storm amidst terrible thunder and lightning.

Dissection of cadavers was a major teaching tool for the medical profession in the 18th and 19th centuries. Even though it was illegal in most communities, grave robbery for sale of corpses to the medical profession was a very

lucrative business. Nearly all the physicians of the Western Reserve were present at Omic's execution and were determined to obtain his body. That evening Doctors Allen, Long, and Town retrieved Omic's corpse.

Statements made by a number of witnesses suggest that Omic may not have been dead when recovered by the good doctors. We will never know. The doctors completed the dissection and the skeleton of Omic became the possession of Dr. Long, and later decorated the office of Dr. Town of Hudson, Ohio. It finally wound up in Pittsburgh in the office of Dr. Murray, the son-in-law of Dr. Town.

Two days after Omic's execution, an express rider galloped into Cleveland with the news that the United States had declared war on Great Britain on June 18th.

The pipe tomahawk shown on the adjoining pages engraved *Omic* was probably the one he used to murder Daniel Buel. In the contemporary painting it is depicted as being held by Dr. Town of Hudson. It has an overall length of 17" and the head measures 8 1/8" from the top of the pipe bowl to the bottom of the blade. Although we cannot be absolutely sure, it was possibly manufactured by Nathaniel Doan, a blacksmith from Middle Haddam, Connecticut who had settled in Cleveland in 1798. He opened a blacksmith shop on Superior and lived in a cabin in the woods along the Cuyahoga River.

Photographs of Omic's Pipe Tomahawk, and painting by Hal Sherman courtesy of the Steve Fuller collection.

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