

The Ball-Headed Club of the North American Indian

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This early weapon of the American Indian shows up in historical references under many different names: it is often referred to as a tomahawk, but sometimes called a death mallet, club hammer or ball club.

“Tomahawk” is a general term used to describe clubs and other striking weapons of the Indians of the Eastern Woodlands of North America. Derived from the Algonquin word TAMAHAK or TAMAHAKON of the Lenape Indians of Virginia, it first appeared in the English language in the early Seventeenth Century. Then it referred to aboriginal war clubs, and to iron trade hatchets. Since that time the term “tomahawk” has expanded to include about all forms of these hatchets.

In McCulloh’s *Researches*¹, published in 1829, the following is found on page 134: “The Tomahawk was originally a club carved into some convenient shape. It was most commonly a stout stick about three feet in length, terminating in a large knob, wherein a projecting bone or flint was often inserted.”

A proper description of the club comes from Zeisberger²: “Their weapons were the bow and arrow and a wooden club, this last a piece of wood of not quite arm’s length having at the end a round knob about the size of a small child’s head and made of very hard wood.”

When the Europeans first arrived in this country they found the ball-headed club used by the Indian not only as war weapons, but also as ritual and political symbols of authority. Their use as war weapons continued until after the end of the Eighteenth Century, but they were still made and used for ritual purposes throughout most of the Nineteenth Century.

An excerpt from the book, *American Pioneer*³, Vol II, states:

The Indians having completed their murderous work and collected their prisoners, left a war club in a conspicuous place near the blockhouse, which is their mode of letting their enemies know that war is begun, and is equal to a written declaration amongst civilized powers. The early rangers and border inhabitants well understood this signal. The war club is a neat article of offence: it is made of very solid wood, the handle is curved, with a ball the size of a four pound shot, firmly attached near one end.

Another reference to the ball club being used as a symbol of war comes from Knox in his book, *Voyages and Travels*⁴, Vol II:

Another instrument of great esteem and importance among them is the tomahawk. This is an ancient weapon universally used by them in war, before they were taught the use



of iron and steel, since which hatchets have been substituted for them. But this instrument still retains its use and importance in public transactions, and, like the pipe, is often very significant. This weapon is now formed much like a hatchet, having a long stem or handle. The tomahawk is likewise ornamented with feathers and paintings, disposed and variegated in many significant forms, according to the occasion and end for which it is used, and on it they keep journals of their marches and most important and noted occurrences in a kind of hieroglyphics.

When the council is called to deliberate on war, the tomahawk is painted all over red, and when the council sits it is laid down by the chief, and if war is concluded upon, the captain of the young warriors takes it up and with it in his hands dances and sings the warsong, as before mentioned. When the council is over, this hatchet, or another one of the kind, is sent by the hands of some warrior to every tribe concerned, and with it he presents a belt of wampum and delivers his message, throwing the hatchet on the ground, which is taken up by one of their most expert warriors, if they choose to join, if not, they return it and with a belt of wampum suitable to the occasion.

Prior to the Nineteenth Century, references can be found showing use of the ball-headed club by most all the tribes east of the Mississippi River, it being more commonly attributed to the Five Nations of the Iroquois during the Seventeenth Century. A very important reference from Capt. Wm. Hyde’s *Observations of the 5 Nations of Indians at New York*, 1698⁵, says: “Now when These Men Goe a Scalping to Cannada, they scratch the markes they have on their faces and bodyes upon their Clubhammers which they alwayes leave behind them with the dead body, that it might be knowne who did the action.”

Also the *Historical Account of Bouquet’s Expedition Against the Ohio Indians in 1764* by Wm. Smith⁶ states: “Their arms are a fusil, or rifle, a powder horn, a shot-

pouch, a tomahawk, and a scalping knife hanging to their neck. When they are in want of firearms, they supply them by a bow, a spear or a death hammer, which is a short club made of hard wood.”

I have found many references which substantiate the manner in which the clubs were used, such as Col. Fleming’s Journal, *Travels in Kentucky, 1779-1780*:⁷ “At Noon this day three men and a negro came in to us who belonged to a party of 12 from Lexington that were defeated about five miles before us, we marched in silence and pritty good order to the place and found John and Robert Davis from Amherst lying scalped and much mangled on the road. There was two war clubs left. On the head of one was the figure of a Lizard cut which I supposed belonged to the Spring Lizard of Chickamaga it appeared to me there was two parties out.”

In John Brown’s *Out Frontiers*,⁸ p. 340: “While Watts and Doublehead were away in Pensacola, two subordinate chiefs, Bench and Shawnee Warrior, had kept the torch and scalping knife busy on the American frontier. On April 6, 1792, Bench visited the Holston settlements and killed the wife and three children of Harper Ratliff, in Stanley Valley. He left beside the scalped bodies, a declaration of war: three war clubs, a bow, and a sheaf of arrows.” In the same book, on p. 387, “Two war clubs of an unusual make were left beside the mangled bodies of the Gillams, indicating that it was not the Cherokees who had committed the crime.”

Also, from the *Journal* of Major James Norris:⁹

July 13, 1779, Col. Butler shewd us a death Mallet, or war Mallet that the Indians left by a Man that they had knocked on the head: the handle resembles that of a hatchet, with a string drawn thro near the end to hold it by. It is made of the Root of a Tree with a large ball worked on the head of it, & looks not much unlike a four pound Shott in the Bill of an Eagle, with a tuft of feathers on the Crown: the end of the handle shows the face of a Wild-Cat.

In conclusion, the ball-headed club was used primarily as a symbol of war, with great ceremonial importance as

a killing weapon. Although I can’t document the ball club prior to the Seventeenth Century, I feel sure it goes back to prehistoric times in one form or another. It had been around long enough to have been used by nearly all the tribes in the Eastern half of America.

The use of the ball club as a weapon to be carried is proven by many references. The ritual importance is quite evident by the beautiful art form which graces so many of the clubs. Probably many an old warrior, too feeble to participate in the raids, spent much of his time sitting around the village carving out these works of art. Imagine the excitement some young warrior felt going on a raid, hoping to find some victim to kill with his death mallet!

Notes and Bibliography

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*No further details given—Ed.

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My first early club. It’s form is similar to the No. 3 club in Peterson’s book, *American Indian Tomahawks*¹⁰. Holding this club, you can feel the fine balance and weight that would make it a very deadly weapon. The ball is tight burl and the wood appears to be maple. The facets on the handle have retained a black color. This club could easily date back to the early eighteenth century or before; its length is 24½” and the ball diameter is 3¼”. Originally from the Milwaukee Public Museum, it is marked “Deposited by Dr. Alphonse Dorend.”



This very fine club has good documentation that it was left on a raid in Virginia in 1774; it was made sometime after the French and Indian War, and from the patination and wear, it seems to have been used for some period of time. It is carved with a medium-size ball held in the mouth of an otter, with a short round spike, obviously for the sake of easier extraction from the victim. At the rear of the handle two letters "I G" are cut in the wood. It is 22" long with a 3" ball. This club was obtained with some furniture in the vicinity of Kingsport, Tennessee, by an antique dealer who sold it to Mr. Garnett Powell as a table leg. It is mentioned in the Draper Manuscripts (30075)¹¹ in a letter of James Robertson to Col. William Preston:

Culbersons 11th August 1774

Sir — I was Expecting Orders to Gone Home to Seen Some What About my Affairs. I have a good deal to do before I Can Start to the Expedition Which I would by no means miss if I Can Possibly make out to go. There has been three or four Indians Visiting the Waste Plantations Above us on the river they Burnt a House About five miles above the fort Last Sunday, we got word that night of it and I Set out monday morning Early and was Constantly on Search of them untill Last night but there was So few of them they made not the Least Sign that we Could follow. I will send out A party to day and Watch About Old Plantations as they will Perhaps be Sculking About, the men Seems Resolute for a Sculp or two, and I have offered £5 for the first Indians hand that will be brought in to the fort by any of the compy. John Draper set out Sunday Last with 20 men up Blue Stone as far as the Clover Bottoms, on their march they Came Across the Tracks of four or five Indians they folow'd them Some way but they Scat ered so they Could not folow them they were making into new River by their Course about the place where they Burnt the House, they Left a War Club at one of the wasted Plantations well made and mark'd with two Letters I G (well made) So that I think there Party to Range with though they are all Distracted Eight or Ten men that Came with me and mastin I with the Rest that Came with me will Continue untill monday when we must Start as there is Severels of them going on the Expedition.

In Luther Addington's book, *History of Scott County Virginia*¹², he relates a story about the Mingo Chief Logan. It seems that Logan and his blood-thirsty band were raiding in the neighborhood of Kings Mill, near the present site of Kingsport. Here they brutally killed and scalped John Roberts, his wife and children, except the eldest child, James, who was carried into captivity. This bloody event occurred on Saturday, Sept. 24, 1774.

Logan's connection with these events is shown by Col. William Christian's letter to Col. William Preston dated November 8, 1774. In it he says, "Last Friday was two weeks (Oct. 21) Logan a famous chief went home with a little boy, a son of Roberts on Holston & two of Blackmores negroes. He said he had taken them on the Frontiers next to the Cherokee Country & had killed I think either 5 or 7 people. The boy and negroes will soon be in."

On September 29, five days after the murder of The Roberts family, Logan with his warriors proceeded to Moore's Fort and killed John Duncan, leaving behind another war club beside the scalped and mangled body.

Although we can't prove that Logan and his men left the club marked with "I G," he is the most likely candidate to have been in that area at that time.



The incised face on the ball of the club above.



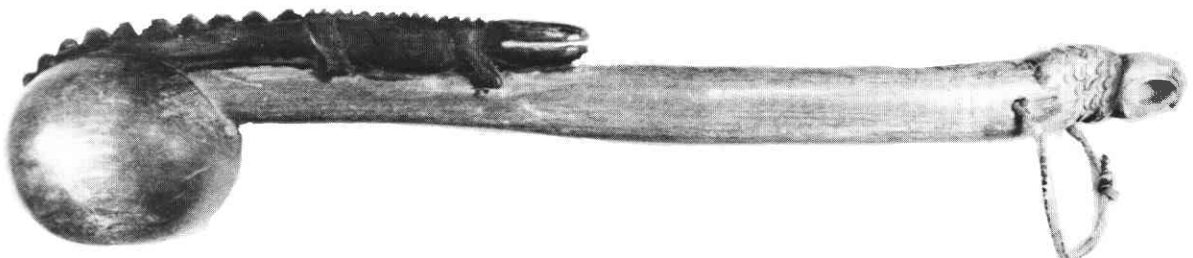
This petite little ball club of curly maple is so stylized that you must look a second time to see the animal head holding the ball. This club is 17½" long and the ball diameter is 2¾". Circa late Eighteenth Century.



Victor Rankin of Indianapolis, Indiana, collected this ball club from the Kickapoo in New Mexico in the year 1890. It was possibly taken West with their removal from Indiana 70 years before. It is a real weapon with 23" length and 2¾" ball, and probably dates back to the eighteenth century.



Of the very simplest form, none-the-less the ball has a very tight and heavy burl and has the feel of being an effective weapon. I cannot give an idea of it's age, but it is 20" long with 2¾" diameter ball.



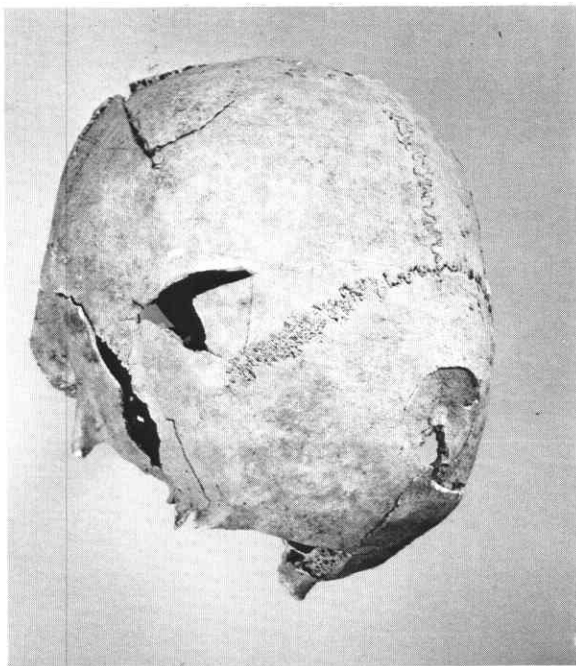
With a eagle head on the handle and an alligator over the ball, you automatically think of a Southern tribe. Which one, I don't have a feel for at this time. The 3¼" ball has some burl in it, but it lacks the weight to be an effective weapon; overall length 18 inches. Circa 1800-1840.



A finely carved club with a nice burlled ball and many symbols on both sides of the handle, 22" long with a 3" ball. Another ball club apparently by the same hand is known. They probably date from the early 19th century. From the collection of William Myers, Perrysburg, Ohio.



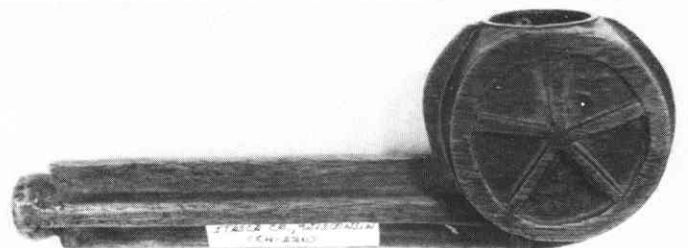
Here is an example of a slightly later ball club which has degenerated from being a true weapon and is probably more representative of the clubs shown in some of Catlin's paintings. It was collected from a trunk in Tama, Iowa, from the Sauk and Fox. There were two 18th century pipes with it. Circa 1820-1830.



Dr. Michael Gramly of Buffalo Museum of Science excavated some Revolutionary War soldiers known to have been massacred by Indians; the site was at Fort Laurens, near Bolivar, Ohio. Skull 8 Feature 85 shows trauma caused by a spiked, ball-headed club on frontal and also three areas of damage seen in lower half of this view. The trauma was caused by a thin tomahawk blade of one type or another. Note marks left by the scalping knife. (By permission of R.M. Gramly and the Buffalo Museum of Science. Photo by Pamela Schuyler-Cowens.)



Two miniature ball clubs probably used in rituals and kept in the sacred bundles. The smaller of the two still retains its original red paint. It's interesting to note the handle end of the club is carved in the form of a cleft hoof, which is also found on some prehistoric stone pipe stems.



Although not a ball club, this little wooden Indian pipe from Itasca County, Wisconsin, certainly represents a stylized ball club. There are several pipes in museums and collections which are carved to represent ball clubs.