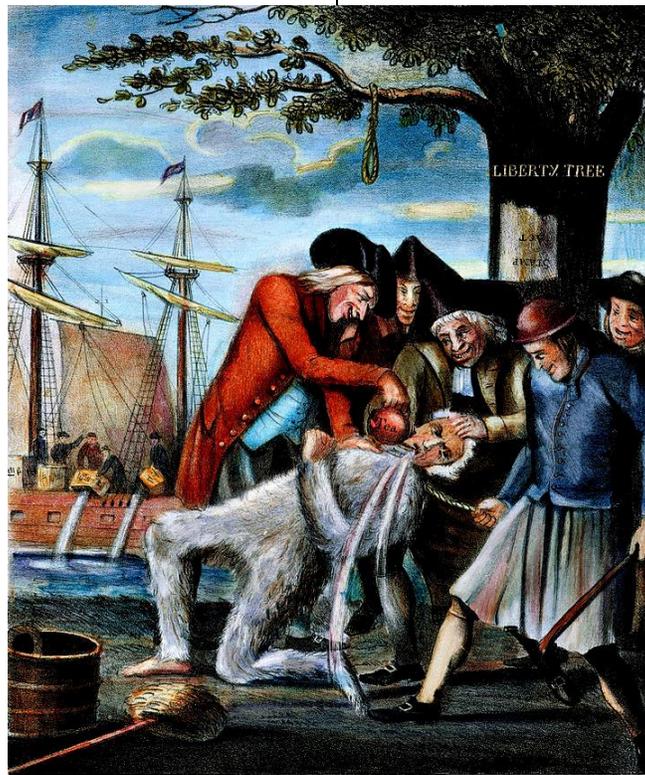


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## Tarring And Feathering

Tarring and feathering was a common form of protest during the Colonial Period. Most people have a stereotype image of what occurred when someone was tarred and feathered in the Eighteenth Century. The usual stereotype was that the victim was stripped stark naked, then boiling hot coal tar or bitumen would be poured over him and finally a bushel basket of goose feathers would be dumped over him. The scenario continued with the tarred and feathered victim either having his wrists and ankles tied together and suspended from a pole or straddling a pole upright. The victim would then be carried through the town and onlookers would pelt him with rotten tomatoes, eggs and small stones. The victim would then have to try to scrape the sticky mess off his body, or suffer with the results of the

burns and the resultant itching until the residue naturally wore off his skin.



THE BOSTONIANS PAYING THE EXCISE-MAN OR TARRING & FEATHERING

That stereotype had its basis in some reports of the day. The 30 March 1775 issue of the *New York Journal* included a report from Massachusetts: “As the populace of Boston have thought fit to repeal the tarring and feathering act, the King’s troops have thought fit to revive the said statute; and in consequence of such determination, to-day they gave us a specimen of a royal mob. The soldiers have been encouraged by their officers to take every method of tricking the unwary. Yesterday, and honest countryman was inquiring for a firelock, when a soldier hearing him, said he had one to sell. Away goes the ignoramus, and after paying the soldier very honestly for the gun, (which was only an old one without a lock) was walking off when half a dozen seized him and hurried the poor

fellow away under guard, for a breach of the act against trading with the soldiers. After keeping him in duress all night, this morning, instead of carrying him before a magistrate, who on complaint would have fined him, (as has been the case in several

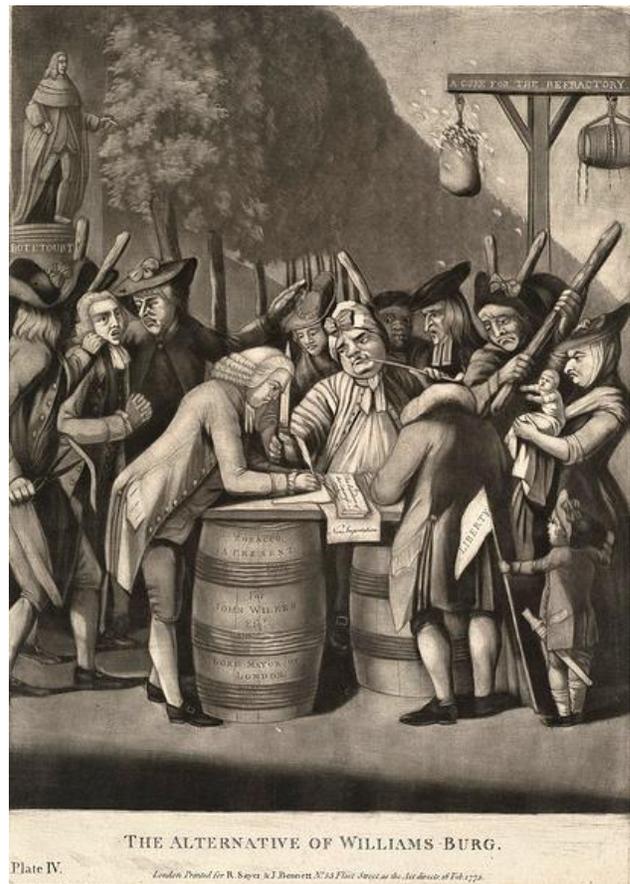


instances,) the officers condemned him without a hearing, to be tarred and feathered, which sentence has been executed. After stripping him naked and covering him with tar and feathers, they mounted him on a one-horse truck, and surrounding the truck with a guard of twenty soldiers with fixed bayonets, accompanied with all the drums and fifes of the regiment, (forty seventh,) and a number of officers, Negroes, and sailors, exhibited him as a spectacle through the principal streets of the town...”

That was the stereotype and although it might have been true in a few cases, the reality was often a bit different. To start with, the victim was seldom stripped completely naked. In the Eighteenth Century the concept of being ‘naked’ often referred simply to a man without his shirt. Secondly, the sticky material that was poured on the victim was seldom a type of petroleum based asphalt with a melting point of 300 degrees F that would cause severe burns to the skin. The material most often used for tarring and feathering was tree sap, variously called *pine tar*.

Pine tar’s melting point is closer to 140 degrees F and although capable of causing a burn to exposed skin, does not cause severe burns. Exposure to pine tar does not cause the burns to the body resulting in disfiguring scars that the stereotype suggests. It did, though, provide a very sticky material to which goose feathers would stick. The goose feathers would indeed have caused discomfort and immediate irritation, but the ‘tar’ and feathers could be washed off the body quite easily and quickly using some form of alcohol. At the present time, we would use isopropyl, or rubbing, alcohol for the task. In the 1700s, any alcohol near at hand ~ such as rum or whiskey ~ could be used.

The example published in the 1775 *New York Journal* does not note if being stripped naked meant stark naked or just to the waist or if the tar was boiling hot ~ or indeed if the tar was petroleum based or the less harmful pine tar. The incident, though, was recorded in the *American Archives* [Fourth Series, Volume II, Page 93]. The victim was Thomas Ditson, and in his deposition to Edm. Quincey, Justice of the Peace, he stated: “I was then made to strip, which I did to my breeches; they then tarred and feathered me; and while they were doing it, an



Officer who stood at the door said, tar and feather his breeches, which they accordingly did, and I was

*then tarred and feathered from head to foot...*" So by this victim's own account, being stripped meant being bare chested. Application of the tar and feathers over his breeches was possibly to give the impression that his entire body was covered. Mr. Ditson, even in his own words, does not claim to have suffered agonizingly hot or chemically abrasive burns due to the temperature or caustic nature of the 'tar.'

So while being tarred and feathered would certainly have been uncomfortable, it was nowhere near deadly or even long-lasting in most cases. And although some victims might have suffered temperature burns, there are very few records of victims of chemical burns.

Tarring and feathering is usually considered to have been used for the expression of protest. A protest against high taxes would be expressed by an effigy of the tax collector being tarred and feathered. A protest against harsh rule by a Colonial Governor would be expressed by an effigy of the governor being tarred and feathered. A protest against the Parliament would be expressed by an effigy of the Prime Minister being tarred and feathered. The simple threat of being tarred and feathered might have been enough to persuade a public official to concede to the protest. But tarring and feathering was sometimes used as a method of punishment. The practice, as punishment, was first noted in the year 1189. King Richard I (the Lionheart) gave orders to

crusaders who were about to embark by sea including the warning: "A robber, moreover, convicted of theft, shall be shorn like a hired fighter, and boiling tar shall be poured over his head, and feathers from a cushion shall be shaken out over his head, ~ so that he may be publicly known; and at the first land where the ships put in he shall be cast on shore."

General George Washington, in his General Orders issued on 03 September 1777 from his camp at Wilmington, Delaware, ordered tarring and feathering as a punishment for two soldiers. At a court martial, Peter Linch a matross in Capt. Gibbs Jones's company of artillery, was "charged with 'Desertion'; found guilty and sentenced to have the hair on the front part of his head shaved off without soap, and a quantity of tar and feathers fixed on the place as a substitute for hair..." In the same General Orders, a second man, James Martin of the 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment was charged with "Being drunk and asleep on his post while sentinel over prisoners." In addition to being sentenced to receive one hundred lashes on his bare back, Martin was also to have his forehead "shaved off without soap, and tar and feathers substituted in the room of the hair."

There is no denying that tarring and feathering was practiced during the 1700s. The factual nature of the practice, though, often differs from the *traditional* assumptions we have about the subject.



The next meeting of the Frontier Patriots Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution will be held at Hoss's Steak & Sea Restaurant, 4308 Business 220, Bedford, PA on Saturday, June 8, 2019 starting at 12 Noon.

Time flies . . . Do you remember what we did in November 2016? The Frontier Patriots Chapter hosted a Quarterly Meeting of PASSAR on 12 November 2016. Now guess what we are scheduled for on 02 November 2019? Yes, you probably guessed correctly ~ we are scheduled to once again host a quarterly meeting. The particulars of that upcoming meeting were discussed during our Chapter's March quarterly meeting. Any suggestions for activities or whatever that any of you who didn't attend the March meeting want to offer will be very welcome.



# A General & A Gentleman

Among everything else that might be said about George Washington is that he was a kind-hearted man when the situation called for compassion. The demands of transforming hundreds of rough recruits into a cohesive fighting machine commanded much of his attention. He still found time, though, to correspond and attend to routine tasks such as issuing General Orders to the troops to keep them informed of how things were going and what was expected of them. At times, the General dictated letters or other correspondence and his aides-de-camp put pen, or rather quill, to paper. The sentiments, nonetheless, were

Washington's. Certain of those letters reveal the General's more 'human' side.

On 06 October 1777, George Washington dictated a letter to his aide-de-camp, Alexander Hamilton. The letter, addressed to General Sir William Howe, stated: "*General Washington's compliments to General Howe. He does himself the pleasure to return him a dog, which accidentally fell into his hands, and by the inscription on the Collar, appears to belong to General Howe.*" That was just two days after the two armies had met in battle at Germantown. Would anyone, other than a gentleman, have done the same?

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## A Pinch Here, A Pinch There

In 1493, arriving at the New World in the second voyage of Christopher Columbus, the Franciscan friar Ramon Pané was fascinated by the use of tobacco in the form of snuff by the Taino and Carib peoples. He took his discovery back to Spain. In the 1560s, Jean Nicot likewise carried the dried form of tobacco to the French court and the 'taking of snuff' spread through European society.



Snuff was, and still is, simply tobacco which has been air dried and ground into a fine powder. In recent times, various flavorings are added to the tobacco, but in the 1700s, the tobacco was used in its natural form. Snuff, the name derived from the Dutch *snuif*, should not be confused with 'dipping tobacco' which is moist ground tobacco and deposited between the gums and teeth of the user's mouth. The ground, dry form of tobacco was given the name of 'snuff' because it was literally snuffed, or inhaled into the nose rather than lit afire and smoked. The act of pinching a small bit of the tobacco between the thumb and first finger and introducing it to one's nostril was called 'taking snuff.'

The taking of snuff, during the period of the American Revolutionary War, was generally considered to be the domain of the genteel, or refined, class. The tobacco would be stored and carried about in beautifully decorated wooden or papier maché boxes. The example shown here, in my collection of Revolutionary War artifacts, is made of papier maché with the scene of a youth in a garden on the top.

For those of you that receive this newsletter by US mail, if you have an email address, we would appreciate you sending it to us to use for future newsletters. Printing and mailing these newsletters is very expensive. Please send to our Secretary Melvin McDowell at [melvin.mcdowell@gmail.com](mailto:melvin.mcdowell@gmail.com)

Frontier Patriots Chapter website: <http://www.motherbedford.com/FrontierPatriots.htm>