

Buried in Plain Sight: Indian “Curiosities” in Du Simitière’s American Museum

Sometimes the most interesting items in an archive are those that point to what is missing. While perusing a box in the Pierre Eugène du Simitière Collection at the Library Company of Philadelphia, I came across a remarkable document that illustrates a number of losses—both archival and personal.

In July 1782, Du Simitière received a human scalp from the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council, along with an explanation of its provenance. As Du Simitière noted in his records of “curiosities” and their donors, the scalp was “taken from an Indian killed . . . in Washington County near the Ohio in this State by *Adam Poe* . . . it has as an ornament a white wampum bead a finger long with a Silver Knob at the end the rest of the hair plaited and tyed with deer skin.”¹ In the archive, I had located the original account of the battle on the banks of the Ohio that had resulted in the death of the anonymous Indian man. What I could not locate, however, was the scalp itself, long gone.

Pennsylvania had offered a bounty for Native American scalps in 1780—the reason that Poe had submitted the object, along with his story, to the government.² Both items had a financial purpose: the scalp was worth 2,500 Continental dollars, while the account not only verified the scalp’s origins but also acted to solicit charity on Poe’s behalf. Having been wounded during the fight, his arm was “rendered Useless,” and, the account petitioned, “he is a Poor Man, and has a large Family of Children. . . . Such Bravery, and Perserverance, Merits the reward of his Country [and] the Notice of the Charitable.”³ After resolving Poe’s reward—

¹ William John Potts, “Du Simitiere, Artist, Antiquary, and Naturalist, Projector of the First American Museum, with Some Extracts from His Note-Book,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 13 (1889): 369. The original notebooks excerpted in Potts are found in the Library of Congress. Du Simitière’s papers are largely distributed between the Library of Congress and the Pierre Eugène du Simitière Collection at the Library Company of Philadelphia.

² Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council, *By His Excellency Joseph Reed, Esq. president, and the Supreme Executive Council, of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. A proclamation.: Whereas the savages in alliance with the King of Great Britain, have attacked several of the frontier counties . . .* [Philadelphia, 1780].

³ *Account of Adam Poe’s Indian encounter*, box 8, folder 129, Pierre Eugène du Simitière Collection, 1492–1784, Library Company of Philadelphia.

“twelve pounds ten shillings specie”—officials transferred both items to Du Simitière.⁴

An artist and prodigious collector, Pierre Eugène du Simitière had a wide-ranging curiosity that led him to continually gather information and artifacts, from insects to Chinese calligraphy to stone tools from Tahiti. His collection became one of the first public museums in America.⁵ Living in Philadelphia, Du Simitière knew many leading figures of the revolutionary era, drawing their portraits and corresponding with them to request new items for his proposed “American Museum.” A native of Geneva, he had first traveled in the West Indies with the intent of writing and illustrating a history of the islands before coming to the American mainland in 1764 or 1765. Du Simitière made various efforts to secure income from his findings, but they failed to come to fruition.⁶

He finally turned, perhaps reluctantly, to the idea of opening his house and his collection to paying visitors. The American Museum opened in the summer of 1782, only a few weeks before the scalp was donated. Du Simitière was particularly intrigued by “indian antiquities”; as he explained to Governor George Clinton of New York, this was “a new subject and not touched upon . . . every new specimen I get is different from the former ones, so that where there is such variety one cannot increase the number too much.”⁷

Du Simitière’s announcement of the “natural” and “artificial” curiosities to be seen in his home near Fourth and Arch Street mentioned fossils, preserved animals, and seashells as well as Indian clothing, weaponry,

⁴ *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council*, Apr. 2, 1782, in *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania*, ed. Samuel Hazard (Harrisburg, PA, 1838–53), 248. Continental currency stopped circulating in 1781, having rapidly depreciated, so 2,500 Continental dollars, if treated as worth one seventy-fifth of their face value by 1782, would have amounted to “Twelve pounds ten shillings specie.” My thanks to Dror Goldberg for this observation.

⁵ Hans Huth, “Pierre Eugène Du Simitière and the Beginnings of the American Historical Museum,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 69 (1945): 316. There are mentions of visits to Du Simitière’s “museum” as early as 1775 in letters of members of the Continental Congress, although he did not begin to advertise and sell tickets until 1782.

⁶ His proposals included writing a history of “the Origin and Present State” of the new nation, based on his meticulous collection of pamphlets, broadsides, and newspapers relating to the American Revolution. While the idea was approved by a congressional committee, it was dropped after other members apparently objected to paying a foreigner (who had avoided military service during the conflict) to write a history of the Revolution. See Huth, “Pierre Eugène Du Simitière,” 319–20.

⁷ Potts, “Du Simitiere, Artist, Antiquary, and Naturalist,” 348. Clinton gave Du Simitière a “Mask of an Indian conjurer” a few years later. See Potts, 372.

and “utensils.”⁸ The unadvertised scalp almost certainly joined the rest of the collection, viewable by anyone who had a half-dollar for a ticket. Whether the scalp would have been placed alongside “artificial” items such as weapons or “natural” biological specimens is unknown.

Backcountry turmoil wove itself into the lives of all eighteenth-century Philadelphians, including early naturalists, ethnographers, and museum organizers. While Du Simitière refused to travel in the countryside—confiding to a correspondent in 1789, “if I was to lose sight of Christ Church steeple I would think myself bewildered”—the backcountry came to him in the Indian artifacts he solicited from his military and political contacts.⁹ In November 1779 he acquired a “mask of wood representing a ghastly human face [found] in an Indian town called *Chemung* which was burnt by the Contl army under Gen Sullivan in his expedition last Summer . . . a long horse tail that belonged to it . . . was destroyed by the soldiery.”¹⁰

The violent provenance of many such “Indian curiosities” is discernible in Du Simitière’s papers, but the objects themselves are conspicuously absent.¹¹ With Du Simitière’s death in 1784, his estate went to auction, and the Library Company purchased much of his manuscript collection, including his invaluable compilation of Revolutionary War pamphlets and broadsides. The fate of the “curiosities” is uncertain; Ebenezer Hazard, one of the estate’s administrators, may have sold them to Charles Willson Peale as the basis for Peale’s own museum, which opened the following year.¹²

That a human body part took on the status of “curiosity” is itself revealing of the relationship between Philadelphia and the backcountry. The violence behind the scalp’s presence in the city was obscured when it entered a museum, even while many of the other artifacts in the collection were also acquired by force. Displaying the scalp in the backcountry, as Adam Poe and his friends likely did before transmitting it and its story to Philadelphia, must have prompted rather different reactions from viewers. Curiosities were curious not least in their spatial, temporal, and

⁸ Pierre Eugène du Simitière, *American Museum. The subscriber having been induced from several motives, to open his collection . . .* [Philadelphia, 1782].

⁹ Huth, “Pierre Eugène Du Simitière,” 316.

¹⁰ Potts, “Du Simitiere, Artist, Antiquary, and Naturalist,” 366.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹² The Peale collections went on to be bought by P. T. Barnum for his own “American Museum.”

emotional dislocation; Philadelphians could learn about the backcountry without leaving the city, a scalp could exist without a body, and a story could be separated from an object.

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