“A Very Great Ornament”: Slit Ears

The Fort Pitt Museum displays a variety of depictions of 18th-century American Indians, from period artists such as Benjamin West to the contemporary works of Robert Griffing and John Buxton, as well as life cast figures. Visitors often ask about the unusual looking ears depicted on many of the Natives, with their outer edges, or auricles, hanging free.

Most tribes in Eastern America practiced ear piercing for both men and women. Often for men only, they slit the ear’s rim away from its main body. It appears that the practice was encouraged particularly for young men who were becoming warriors. A European traveler in New York’s Indian country during the late 18th century recorded, “The origin of the custom is said to have been to demonstrate that they do not quail at shedding their own blood, nor at suffering.”

Former Indian captive James Smith related this about his own encounter with the practice: “a number of young Indians were getting their ears cut, and they urged me to have mine cut likewise, but they did not attempt to compel me, though they endeavored to persuade me. The principal arguments they used were, its being a very great ornament, and also the common fashion. The former I did not believe, and the latter I could not deny.”

The Rev. David McClure personally witnessed the procedure involved after he traveled through Pittsburgh into the Ohio Country in 1772: “He laid his patient on his back, and placing a piece of wood under his ear, he cut, with his jack knife, which was rather dull, the rim of each ear, from top to bottom, leaving the ends adhering to the source.” Apparently because of the pain and the discomfort, another period observer reported that, “they generally slit but one at a time; so soon as the patient can bear it.”

Yet as traumatic and dramatic as the slitting appears, this was only the first step. Most witnesses then described lead weights hung from or wrapped around the rim to force the flesh to stretch to a size of the owner’s liking. One commonly encountered ear adornment was described by French soldier Charles Bonin, who was stationed for a time at Fort Duquesne: “When it is healed,
they remove the lead and substitute brass wire twisted like a cork screw, and bent into a half circle as large as the opening. This amounts to sometimes to five or six inches. When the man walks, this flaps and looks like a pump going up and down.\textsuperscript{5}

For active woodsmen and warriors, having this delicate ribbon of flesh attached to one's head might seem illogical, but fashion in most cultures can often trump practicality (think high heeled shoes and neck ties in our own), and American Indians were no exception. For simple preservation, Bonin continued that they “tie the two ears together behind the head, when they go to war or go hunting.”\textsuperscript{6} A French officer described a similar practice, noting that when traveling the Indians put a strap around their heads to “hold in their ears so they are not torn in the bush.”\textsuperscript{7}

Even a ripped ear might yet be salvaged. Indian trader John Long observed that: “When they are only torn, they cut them smooth with a knife and sew the parts together with a needle and deer's sinews, and after sweating in a stove, resume their usual cheerfulness.”\textsuperscript{8} Long had good reason to know about the importance of slit ears to their owner. He once accidently discharged a gun near the face of an Indian chief, completely blasting one ear away, and causing the Native to threaten revenge. As Long later recalled, “I soon convinced him it was an accident, and giving him some presents, he consoled himself for the loss of his ear, which was very large and handsome and without a single break, which made it very valuable in his estimation.”\textsuperscript{9}

Perhaps the strangest incident involving a Euro-American and ear slitting happened during the Revolutionary War at Fort Pitt. In June 1779, a soldier named Joseph Neal faced court-martial, as he was suspected of planning to desert. Though Neal denied the charge, the evidence against him was plain enough to see, “the suspicion arising only from Cutting one of his Ears & painting like the savages.”\textsuperscript{10} Presumably he had found help or inspiration in both of these endeavors among the American allied Indians present at the fort. In spite of the drastic alteration to his appearance, Neal was acquitted of the charges, as the court’s opinion was that, “the prisoner did it through wantonness & not with the Design of Deserting.”\textsuperscript{11}

By the end of the 18th century, ear slitting had begun to wane as high fashion among younger Eastern Indians. Still, portraits of older Native warriors and statesmen rendered from that period to the 1830s show some of the best examples, revealing both magnificent intact pairs, as well as ears with losses.

Lest the reader believe that such practices are all in the past, several types of radical ear alteration are again being practiced. Some include procedures not dissimilar to the 18th-century Native method to create a large opening in the lobe. At the Fort Pitt Museum, slit and distended ears can always be seen in our exhibits, and occasionally on our visitors.

\textsuperscript{1} Dean R. Snow, Charles T. Gehring, & William A. Starna, eds., \textit{In Mohawk Country} (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1996), 320.

\textsuperscript{2} James Smith, \textit{An account of the remarkable occurrences in the life and travels of Col. James Smith} (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1870), 77.


\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.