

# UP FRONT



## MEADOWCROFT

By Andrew Donovan, Program Coordinator,  
Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village

### My Gun and My Axe Broken

Trade goods brought many changes to Native American culture and these changes, in turn, produced a cycle of dependence on these incoming goods: the more a kettle was used to boil water, the less likely a return to ceramics became. By the middle of the 18th century, these cultural shifts created a demand for new skillsets to locally produce and service those goods. As Indian reliance on these new trades grew, European empires began to use them to win political favor with indigenous American nations. For no other craftsman is this more evident than for the blacksmith.

There was a great demand for the skills of the smith as Indians' reliance on metal goods increased in the post-contact world. Not only was the fur trade putting iron tools into the hands of Native Americans, but so was the practice of gifting, done by both the British and the French in their effort to wrest control of the upper Ohio valley for their empires. Tools such as tobacco tongs, kettles, scissors, guns, hoes, hatchets, and knives were all a regular part of the packages given by provincial Pennsylvania as a part of the peace process in the early 18th century, each bringing some new semblance of luxury to Indian life.

Along with the presentations of these gifts and the obligatory wampum exchanges, the mending of iron tools became a part of the



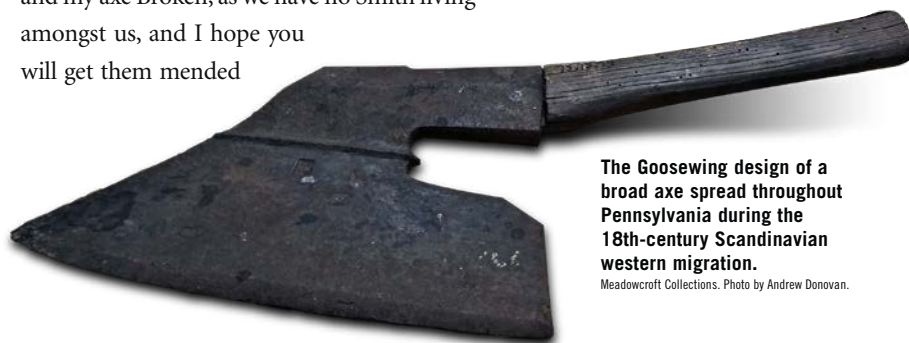
An 18th-century reproduction of a five-foot anvil and the uniquely American pattern felling axe.  
Meadowcroft Collections. Photo by Mark Kelly.

political process as well. American Indians' reliance on hunting as their primary means of production in the evolving American economy meant that their livelihood depended on the tools of their trade being in good working condition. There was only a small segment of society that could restore those tools, and that segment had to be sought out. Early on, the usual way for Indians to find a smith was to visit an area already settled by whites.

With this in mind, Native American representatives often brought iron goods with them when coming to hold council with Pennsylvania officials. On August 1, 1740, a Delaware named Sesounan, who lived in the Allegheny region, came to council in Philadelphia, saying at the outset, "I have brought down my gun and my axe Broken, as we have no Smith living amongst us, and I hope you will get them mended


for me."<sup>1</sup> The mending stipulation, therefore, was a crucial act of diplomacy in a period that saw the French and British crowns in heavy competition for the headwaters of the Ohio. Indians had already proven quite adept at pitting the European nations against one another, and if mending was not offered, an opportunity for tribal support in the region could be lost. In order to earn the cooperation of native inhabitants, mending requests had to be honored by European nations.

The requests for mending during councils continued to be practiced for years to come. As Indian Agents brought councils closer to the frontier, hunters sought to avoid covering great distances in search of a smith. By 1751, George Croghan records the request for mending as a routine way to conduct



The Goosewing design of a broad axe spread throughout Pennsylvania during the 18th-century Scandinavian western migration.  
Meadowcroft Collections. Photo by Andrew Donovan.

business on the frontier. According to the transcript of an assembly gathered at Logstown, the point was raised at the conclusion of the ceremony that, "it was a custom with their Brothers whenever they went to council to have their Guns, Kettles, and Hatchets mended, and desired I might order that done, for they could not go home till they had that done."<sup>2</sup> Assurances that their tools would be fixed remained an important part of the political process, but now the smiths were making it to their own neighborhoods. By ordering the mending, Croghan preserved the tradition of fixing the trade goods Indians relied upon. And, with it, settlers maintained the goodwill of Native Americans living around the river's forks. So important was the maintenance of Indian tools for their own economic well-being, and therefore their political affiliations, that the work of the smith continued to be an important part of Indian Affairs departments into the 19th century.

Although no longer in use as a political tool, the blacksmithing trade is alive and well in Western Pennsylvania. Professionals, re-enactors, and hobbyists alike continue to strike their forges, keeping the tradition alive in our region. Come experience the sights, smells, and sounds of blacksmithing when Meadowcroft opens to the public May 3, 2014, by visiting our recreated 19th-century smithy. 

<sup>1</sup> *Pennsylvania Colonial Records* (Harrisburg: Theo. Fenn & Co., 1851), 4:434.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:536.

