

FORT PITT

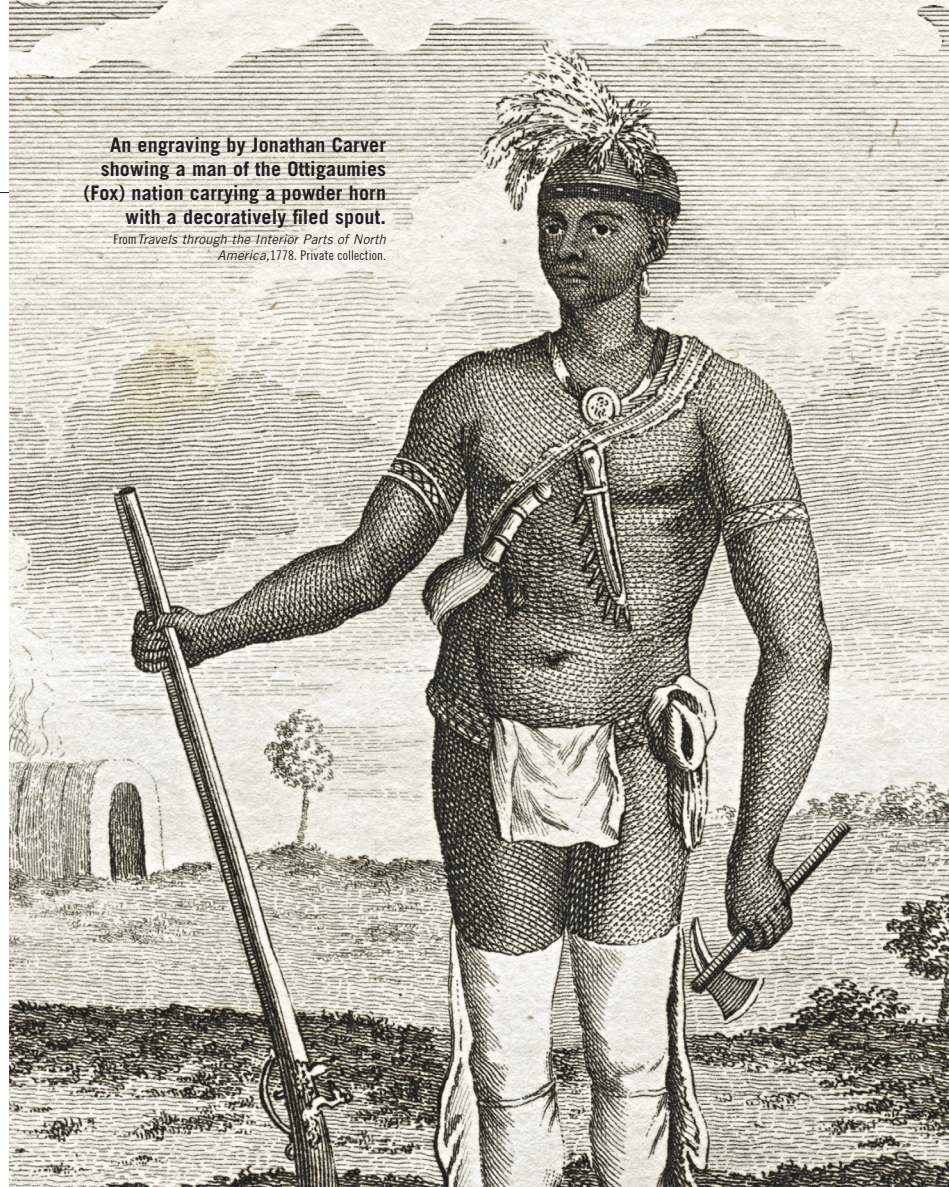
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“If horns you love, if horns you crave...”: A Closer Look at Early American Powder Horns

Observing the frontiersmen he encountered in the Carolinas on the eve of the American Revolution, English traveler J.F.D. Smythe paid particular attention to their attire. Along with their fringed linen hunting shirts—a garment known mostly in Pennsylvania and points south prior to the war—he noted that their powder horns, carved with a “variety of whimsical figures,” were a key element of the backwoodsmen’s style. By the 1770s, they had also become important recordkeeping tools on which soldiers, settlers, and American Indians etched their names, war records, and other significant information.

While carved powder horns were not invented in North America, two major colonial wars—King George’s War (1744-48) and the French & Indian War (1754-63)—sparked a craze for owning them that lasted through the end of the colonial era. A close look at these handmade objects provides clues to the military and frontier experience in early America, as well as a window into an important form of early decorative art.

Though a small number of prior examples exist, some of the earliest American powder horns were carved by soldiers serving




An engraving by Jonathan Carver showing a man of the Ottigamies (Fox) nation carrying a powder horn with a decoratively filed spout. From *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*, 1778. Private collection.

on the frontiers of northern New England in the 1740s. Stationed at cramped and dirty outposts, many carved horns in their spare time, trading their work to their officers and fellow troops. Signature elements of this early style include fanciful depictions of animals and imaginative, almost psychedelic, scrolls trailing from bold capital letters. Practitioners of an emerging art form, these early artists established much of the decorative vocabulary for powder horn carvers in the decades to come.

During the French & Indian War, powder horn carving experienced another resurgence at the chain of forts along the New York frontier. Here, many soldiers, enlarging upon the themes laid down in the previous conflict, took the art form to a new

level. Makers like the brilliant African American carver John Bush, and an anonymous artist known to collectors as the “Master Carver,” created elaborate commemorative horns that highlighted the complexity of the frontier experience. John Paemberton’s horn, made at Fort Edward in October 1758, draws attention to the tenuous nature of life during the conflict. Though the circumstances are lost to time, the horn features the young soldier’s name and inscription on one side, and the full war record of an American Indian warrior on the other. While it provides tantalizing insights, the horn also leaves us with a mystery, a common trade-off in researching these objects.

In June 1770, Connecticut resident Zachariah Howes—pre-dating Smythe’s observation of a few years later—carved a

horn with an unusual inscription. “If horns you love, if horns you crave,” he declared, “now for one crown, this you may have.” Over two centuries since it was made, Howes’ words still call out to us. While the horn is no longer for sale, the advertisement draws us into a world punctuated by warfare, but inhabited by people much like ourselves. Reading between the lines etched on these once-indispensable tools and prized possessions allows us temporary access and invariably leaves us with new questions about their experience. 

Visit the Fort Pitt Museum to view *From Maps to Mermaids: Carved Powder Horns in Early America*, an exhibition where visitors can explore numerous powder horns made or used on the Pennsylvania and Virginia frontiers, their practical uses, and their representation of early American folk art.

“Whimsical figures.”
The Thomas Fletcher/
Daniel Semons horn
features fanciful
depictions of animals,
including a peacock, doe,
and fox.

Mr. and Mrs. T.C. Roth. Photo by author.

**The Zachariah
Howes powder horn,
made in 1770, showing
his inscribed advertisement
for potential customers.**

Stephen D. and Marcia P. Hench. Photo by author.