Anti-Indian Propaganda’s Role in Uniting the
Thirteen Colonies and Laying the Groundwork for
American Identity Formation

History 489

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Abstract

This research examines how racist anti-Indian propaganda leading up to, during, and immediately following the Revolutionary War contributed to the unification of the colonies under a common American identity. Up until the dawn of the revolution, the thirteen colonies had little to do with one another and unification seemed a near impossible task. A war for independence could not be won, or even started, if the colonies wanted nothing to do with one another. One of the only things that these states had in common was their fear and hatred of American Indians that surrounded and inhabited the land. Capitalizing on this fear, printers and politicians printed mass propaganda that used Native Americans as a savage and British ally that would threaten the safety of colonists. This was widely utilized in the printing of newspapers full of misinformation and manipulation tactics. These tactics were not halted on the onset of war or even upon victory, they were continually used to maintain American Identity for years to come. Existing scholarship on this topic has extensively looked at race in propaganda during this era but only a few scholars have looked at Indians specifically and how it shaped relations following the war. This project contributes a perspective that looks at racist Indian propaganda in the revolutionary period and the implications it had going forward in American history. Fear mongering and race baiting of American Indians played an important role in the victory of independence and identity formation of the United States and layered the groundwork for racial formation and Indian policy going forward in the United States.
Introduction

Before the founding fathers wrote their names on the Declaration that would solidify thirteen colonies one independent nation, the colonies had far more differences than anything in common. The colonies were all extensions of the British empire that up until the end of the 7 years’ war were allowed a level of sovereignty where each colony could develop its own distinct culture, economy, and government. ¹ One of many issues facing the colonies at this time was the lack of unity they had with one another. Although they had improved throughout the 7 years’ war, shedding their British identity altogether wasn’t in many colonists’ minds. But when the British began imposing taxes on the colonies that posed a threat to the previously laissez-faire relation with the colonial elite, everything changed. The wealthy and political men who were involved in writing colonial newspapers saw that to maintain the power they had, they must try to unite the colonies to fight for independence. To the Colonial elite, uniting thirteen distinct colonies that wanted nothing to do with each other seemed an impossible task. The solution to this was finding a common enemy that they could capitalize on: American Indians. This paper will primarily focus on the use of racist rhetoric and propaganda in the press, more specifically toward the Indigenous people that resided on the land far before any Europeans. The use of anti-Indian press and propaganda leading up to, during, and after the American Revolution was one

¹ Carl Berger, *Broadsides and Bayonets* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 51
of many vital factors in unifying the thirteen conflicting colonies into one soon to be independent nation and and solidified itself as a catalyst for American identity formation.

The large sum of the research that went into the formation of this paper is from reading colonial newspapers. The printing press in this era was a revolutionary weapon for swaying public opinion. Many historians who write on this subject agree that the passing of the stamp act that taxed any paper products in 1765 solidified that most news printers at the time would sympathize with the patriot cause. I was able to draw up much of my research from colonial publications from this period. The *Boston Gazette, Massachusetts Spy,* and *Pennsylvania Packet* are just a few examples of publishers drawn upon in this project.

The start of this research paper will investigate the use of Newspapers as a tool of manipulation at the hand of printers and the symbiotic relationship they had with the wealthy elite. It will focus on displaying the partnership between printers and politicians so that the examples of fear mongering of race baiting are displayed as political agenda. The next portion of the paper will focus on the character of Michael Cresap and his portrayal in the media. I intent to use primary source material to show the overnight switch in public opinion toward him as a character from being an Indian killer to a national hero and symbol of freedom. The story of Michael Cresap serves as good transition for it demonstrates both the effectiveness of the press and the widespread fear and hatred of American Indians. Following the story of Cresap this project will tell the story of Jane McCrea and how her murder serves as a juxtaposition to the story of Michael Cresap in American history. Benjamin Franklin’s role will be referenced in this spread through his publication of children’s picture books that portray Indians as merciless killers to be feared as well as his publications that feature made up stories that villainize Native Americans.
This project finds significance in serving as an explanation for racism towards Indians that defines much of American history. Centuries of enslavement, genocide, and the forced removal of Indigenous peoples played a big role in turning this once small and divided nation of colonies into the global superpower that it is today. It is often overlooked just how separated the thirteen colonies were from one another at the dawn of the revolution. It also serves significance in looking at how politicians exploit fear and racism towards groups of people to serve their own agendas. By exploring the way that the rich and powerful identified racism as a commonality and exploited that for unification, one can better understand the core values of the United States that allowed for the coming centuries of policy driven by white supremacy.
Historiography

The utilization of propaganda to sway the thirteen colonies toward independence is a topic widely written about across many different veins of scholarship. This research project narrows it down and focuses on the use of propaganda that aimed to use racist Indian propaganda as a catalyst in fueling the revolution. The central piece of secondary literature that guided much of my reading of both secondary and primary sources is *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence* by the American Revolution historian Robert Parkinson. Parkinson’s main argument is that the revolution in America contributed to the creation of modern racism and that the fight for independence did not slow that process, it accelerated it. Parkinson opens his book by discussing the role that newspapers played in this spread of propaganda. He draws upon many colonial publications through newspapers as his primary evidence. This is a connection made with much of this project’s secondary research. Newspapers act as the primary tool for evidence with some examples of letters and accounts scattered within. Parkinson wrote another piece in the form of a journal article titled “From Indian Killer to Worthy Citizen: The Revolutionary Transformation of Michael Cresap.” This article looks more specifically at the figure of Michael Cresap and his various portrayals in the

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2 Robert Parkinson, *Thirteen Clocks: How Race Untied the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence* (The Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2021)
press at the time and how it reflects the usage of anti-Indian racism.\(^3\) Secondary scholarship that documents the life story of Cresap is hard to come by and this paper relies on this piece to fill in the cracks of his story beyond primary documents. It tells the story of how Cresap went from being a murderous criminal to being a national celebrity overnight. This project utilizes much of Parkinson’s material and arguments in this article to then juxtapose it to the story of Jane McCrea. Parkinson’s two pieces of work here are highly influential in this projects argument being the most influential sources of much of the secondary research.

A vital piece of secondary literature that has contributed a lot to this project’s advancement is American Indian historian Philip Deloria’s book *Playing Indian*. Deloria argues that at the time of the revolution, American identity and consciousness was incomplete. To fill this lack of identity, colonists adopted Indian identity as their own which shaped identity formation going forward.\(^4\) His main evidence used is in the Boston Tea Party in how the Americans who threw the tea in the Boston Harbor were dressed in traditional Indian clothing. This argument widely connects to evidence that Parkinson draws up in the characterization of Michael Cresap in the backcountry. Both show the usage of Indian imagery on white men as a symbol for American identity. Despite the violence and hatred put forth by Americans in their language towards Indians, the freedom and adventure that surrounded their perception in the eyes of Europeans offered intrigue to many colonists and served as a method of Identity formation in a culture that lacked shared identity. Although this project doesn’t directly reference Deloria’s

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work, in reading his book the idea of a lack of American identity was inspired by this book and helped with further research.

*Broadsides and Bayonets: The Propaganda War of the American Revolution* by Carl Berger is another book that greatly contributed to this project. This book takes an extensive look at propaganda from both a patriot and loyalist point of view, but there is one chapter in particular that connects to my topic in the telling of the story of Jane McCrea. Jane McCrea was a woman taken from her home and scalped and murdered by a band of Indians partnering with the British. Although these actions were condemned and not encouraged by the British partnering with them, the American press aligned these actions with the actions of British troops in the colonies and used it to enact a message that encouraged Colonists to fight or be killed. It was one of many events that put American Indians as being British allies and created fear around their “savagery”. A large population of colonists had a hard time letting go of their connection with the British. The culture and way of life was all they had known their whole life. Berger exemplifies in his book how race was as a tool to draw hatred towards a country that so many still held dear. The murder of Jane McCrea was printed in every newspaper across the colonies and her name would go down as one of the most well-known names of the Revolution. This source goes hand in hand in using Parkinson’s *13 Colonies: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence* book in connecting the use of Newspapers to more specific events like Jane McCrea’s murder. Primary sources show that her name would be used as a method of propaganda in print for decades following Independence. This will help me argue how the racial propaganda used leading up to the revolution contributed to the foundation of the United States as an Independent nation.

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5 Berger, 64.
A journal article titled “‘Our Battle Cry Will Be: Remember Jenny McCrea’ A precis on the Rhetoric of Revenge” by Jeremy Engels and Greg Goodale is a source that specifically analyzes Jane McCrea as America’s first Martyr and the way that her murder was used in and beyond the revolution. They look at McCrea’s as a revenge story that has resurfaced itself through historical scholarship throughout the 18th and 19th century. This source can be used in addition to Broadsides and Bayonets to recount them murder of McCrea but goes deeper than the details. It serves as analysis into how her murder represents an intersection of racism, misogyny, and violence in American history and goes far beyond the context of the revolution. This paper uses this source to explain the complexity of this event and how it goes much deeper than serving as patriot propaganda.

“Benjamin Franklin’s Printing Network and the Stamp Act” by Ralph Frasca is a journal article that provided key information and context to Franklin’s role in the Patriot movement. It explains how Franklin created a network of newspapers that were negatively affected by the Stamp Act in 1765 and how this development contributed to his rise to power as a colonial leader. The article also goes into Ben Franklin as a self-made American who worked his way up the latter to be one of the most influential men in American history. His accumulation of capital and power explains why he and other powerful and rich men would be so opposed to the British meddling in colonial taxation and government. This source can be put to conversation with Broadsides and Bayonets in how propaganda made its way into the newspaper network of the colonies in the first place. This article will be used in this paper to effectively show how Franklin

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and his newspaper network provided necessary transportation of information across the colonies and supported primary sources that give insight into Franklin’s superiority complex over Indians.

It is important to acknowledge that this race baiting spanned beyond Indians and was also relevant to black Americans, but for the sake of this research, anti-Indian messaging will be the primary focus. In this period, racial formation was something that happened at a wide scale to unite the colonies under one voice. Although this paper focuses on how this was done with Indians, it is important to at least acknowledge the similar treatment of African Americans at this time. One of the obvious examples of this is the treatment of Crispus Attucks in media portrayals of the Boston Massacre. The way that the media responded to this event was aimed at drawing sympathy towards the crowd who were shot at by British soldiers. In doing so the event was mis told and has been through much of history through imagery that makes it appear that this crowd was shot at unprovoked in a firing squad manner. The painting “The Boston Massacre” that is portrays this event in this way while also completely leaving out the black man who was killed first in the conflict, Crispus Attucks. Karsten Fitz writes a journal article about Attucks erasure from this event and how his removal demonstrates how important visual images of this massacre were for the construction of American identity. The role that the painting plays in this construction is key to understanding how the inclusion of a black man in this event would draw no sympathy from Americans who were racist and tolerant of slavery. His absence from this painting and other media coverage at the time was an intentional and strategic way of keeping white people at the center of the formation of America. This is similar in every way to the way that American Indian’s were portrayed in the media at the time.

There is a wide array of secondary scholarship that has contributed to both the use of propaganda in the American revolution as well as a wide array of scholarship that studies the way that colonists thought about race in this time. Aside from Parkinson, there is a much greater lack of scholarship that explores the connection between these two things. This research project seeks to draw a connection between these two and explain how this connection played a vital role in the fight for independence and the nation that would follow this fight.
Newspapers and the Elite

Colonial newspapers brought forth by the relatively new printing press were extremely influential in shaping public opinion. Newspapers were a revolutionized the way that the relationships between colonies and the way that they interacted with one another. With conflict increasing with the British in the 1760s, the papers saw a large increase in politicization. Writers either wrote from a Loyalist or Patriot point of view and it was rare to find print that remained entirely neutral on the conflict. The turning point to this struggle was the passing of the Stamp Act in 1765 that placed a tax on paper products, thus hurting the economy of the paper business. This act pushed a strong majority of printers to the patriot cause. A telling of the Revolution by public official David Ramsey in 1789 claims:

“It was fortunate for the liberties of America, that News-papers were the subject of a heavy stamp duty. Printers, when uninfluenced by government, have generally arranged themselves on the side of liberty, nor are they less remarkable for attention to the profits of their profession. 1765 a stamp duty, which openly invaded the first, and threatened a great diminution of the last, provoked their united zealous opposition.”

The Stamp Act upset many printers who had been profiting off their trade for decades without interference. The most notable printer affected at this time was Benjamin Franklin. Franklin had his own paper in Pennsylvania and an alliance of papers across the colonies. With such power and profit-making men like Franklin powerful colonial figures, the idea of Britain taking even a fraction of this away through a tax was threatening and set a new precedent for what Britain could do in the future. This caused a shift in the papers where not only did the Patriot cause have the majority, but they attacked any Loyalist ideas and printers. It reached a point where Loyalist

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9 Parkinson, Thirteen Clocks, 14
11 Frasca, 404
newspaper editors were forced to flee from their states in fear of physical violence. Robert Fowle, the nephew of New Hampshire’s first printer was accused of being a loyalist and was forced to flee the state despite there being no evidence in his paper of Loyalist sympathy. With a press whose own self-interest is wound up in Independence, there is provided context to why much of the propaganda and misinformation were sympathetic to the Patriot cause.

The Stamp Act’s effect on colonial newspapers had much to do with the relationship that had formed between printers and politicians. Further studying the character of Benjamin Franklin and his hand in the press can more deeply analyze this phenomenon. Franklin established the Pennsylvania Gazette in 1728 and went on to create partnerships with other printers that created a printing network that lasted well through the 1780s. This printing network stretched from New England to the West Indies and was made up of over twenty printers. This network of printers partnered with Franklin served as a standard for how the press would communicate ideas and morals to a massive audience. With so much power over what was being printed, Franklin’s own views on Indians must be considered in analyzing how his politics bled into the press. In a letter on Germans and Indians in Pennsylvania dated 1753, Franklin makes his views on Indians, blacks, and foreigners clear: “as the Tartars in Europe and Asia, the Indians in America, and the Negroes in Africa, continued a Wandering Careless Life, and refused to Live in Cities, and to Cultivate the Arts they saw practiced by the civilized part of Mankind.” Throughout the entirety of this letter he speaks of Native Americans and their ways of life as inferior to the lifestyles of colonists. He goes on to claim that Indians, “visit us frequently, and see the

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13 Frasca., 404
advantages that Arts, Sciences, and compact Societies procure Us, they are not deficient in Natural Understanding and yet they a have never shown any inclination to change their manner of life for ours, or to learn any of our arts.”

In Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette* from this time period he speaks down upon Indians frequently in this manner. One of many examples is a publication from 1765 in which reads, “the spreading of the gospel among the savages, is certainly the most effectual way to civilize them.”

Through his language in his own writing and his newspaper, Franklin has no respect for American Indians and their ways of life. He believes that they would be better off if they assimilated to western culture. Franklin’s attitude towards Indians is evidence of early American white supremacy in the elite class that saw white people are far more advanced than Indians. This attitude present in his writings serve as a justification the many horrible depictions of Indians that would circulate in colonial newspapers in the years to come.

Politicians in America understood the influence that papers had on public opinion, and in years prior to the revolution they would strategically insert themselves into the business to push their agenda. An example of this happening is the conflict with loyalist printer John Mein in Boston, 1767. Mein printed an article in the Boston Gazette that threatened the reputation of the Patriot movement and John Adams himself stepped into the printshop to mend the damage that Mein had done. He spent an entire night in the shop with other printers working on the new days paper, writing in his diary: The evening was spent preparing for the Next Days Newspaper. A curious Employment. Cooking up Paragraphs, Articles, Occurrences et. Working the political

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15 Aldridge, 392
16 "Family; Imitation; Agriculture; French; Circumstances; Country." *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), June 13, 1765: 2
This excerpt from Adam’s diary gives an astonishing look into the symbiotic relationship between politicians and the press. His diary is unclear on what he meant by “cooking up”, but it seems as though he was referring to the fabrication of news for the benefit of the Patriot cause. It is impossible to be sure to be certain of this, but within the paper there were an assortment of letters, poems attacking loyalist politicians, and news of the importation of tea etc. They were presented in the *Gazette* as undisputable facts from reliable sources.\textsuperscript{18} Given the phrase “cooking up” and the context of Mein’s article it is likely that Adams was producing fake news. This is also evidence of the symbiotic relationship between the politicians of Boston and the press. All things considered, much of the news in this pre-revolutionary era in Boston and much of Franklin’s network should be considered altered and unreliable.

With the understanding of how the patriot cause had control of the press in mind, the reasoning for why Indians were targeted as tools of propaganda must be explored. Right up until the dawn of Independence, colonists in North America saw and considered themselves British. To fight a war for Independence against the British, it was extremely necessary for the Patriot cause to not only remove this British identity but fill it with something else. One of the major issues of filling this Britain sized hole within colonists was identifying something that all colonies could agree on. Colonists had very little interest in building any sort of intercolonial relationships with one another largely due to the conceptions they had for one another. Benjamin Franklin wrote about the colonies in 1760 stating:

“Those we now have, are not only under different governors but have different forms of government, different laws, different interests, and some of them different religious persuasions and different manners. Their jealousy of each other is so great that however necessary an union of the colonies has long been, for their common defence and security against their enemies, and how sensible soever each

\textsuperscript{17} Parkinson, *Thirteen Clocks*, 16
\textsuperscript{18} Parkinson, *Thirteen Clocks*, 17
colony has been of that necessity, yet they have never been able to effect such an union among themselves, nor even to agree in requesting the mother country to establish it for them.”

Southerners viewed New England as a land of intolerant religious extremists. New Englanders saw southerners as immoral and lazy evil doers who made their livings off the backs of slaves. These same conceptions ran in relationship to east and west relationships as well, as the colonies largely labeled western colonists as western savages with little between them and the Indians that lived on these lands. In a Journal by Charles Woodmason, an Anglican clergyman from England, he documents his own perceptions of the people living in the Backcountry of the Carolinas:

“They were as rude in their Manners as the Common Savages, and hardly a degree removed from them. Their Dresses almost as loose and naked as the Indians, and differing in nothing save Complexion.” Historian Joshua Piker refers to the relationship between Europeans and American Indians in this western backcountry territory as a “frontier exchange economy” in which colonists and Indians had systems of mutually beneficial trade systems of goods and services. With such strong divisions between colonies existent, getting them to unite for war and maintain this unification seemed an impossible task. Soon the colonial press would advance in finding unification through a common enemy: American Indians.

One of the most common examples of propaganda that were spread in patriot press was the idea that the British were inciting Indian violence upon colonists. It is documented that


20 Parkinson, *Thirteen Clocks*, 38


Colonists were in constant fear of Indian violence. The act of scalping was one thing that was often mentioned to incite fear of colonists alongside the idea that Indians would show no mercy to women and children. The *Virginia Gazette* printed in 1755:

> “Amidst the shrieks of women, the wailings of children, the hideous shouts of savages, and the dreadful din of arms, to what method of opposition would we betake ourselves? Distracted with fear, and the prospect of death in a thousand forms, should we not fall an easy prey to an unrelenting adversary? And what heart can conceive, what language describe the sequel? Virgins deflowered by merciless savages: Children pluck’d from the fond grasp of a screaming mother, and deashed by barbarians against the bloody pavement, less obdurate than the unpitying murderers: The recking scalp, stripp’d from the hoary head”\(^{23}\)

This fear of ruthless violence at the hand of American Indians was strategically used in the press during the revolution. Twenty years later, the *Pennsylvania Packet* made the claim in July of 1775 that, “The wild and barbarous savages of the wilderness have been solicited, by gifts, to take up the hatchet against us; and instigated to deludge our settlements with the blood of innocent and defenseless women and children”.\(^{24}\) In 1777 the Virginia Gazette published a letter from American general Horatio Gates that, “That the savages of America should, in their warfare, mangle and scalp the unhappy prisoners who fall into their hands, is neither new nor extraordinary, but the famous Lieut General Burgoyne,… should hire the savages of America to scalp Europeans and descendants of Europeans; nay more, that he should pay a price for each scalp so barbarously taken.”\(^{25}\) Not only does this printed letter by Gates capitalize on the fear of ruthless Indian violence being carried out on Colonists, it insinuates that the British generals were paying for each scalp they take. In many cases, including these examples, the threat of

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\(^ {23}\) “From the New-York Mercury” The Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Virginia) March 21, 1755

\(^ {24}\) "Legislative Acts/Legal Proceedings." *Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet or, the General Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) IV, no. 198, August 7, 1775

\(^ {25}\) “Head Quarters of the army of the United States.” *The Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg, Virginia), no. 1383, October 3, 1777
unsolicited Indian violence was greatly exaggerated by printers and isn’t news as much as it is propaganda. Publishers chose to use language that appealed to colonial emotion and fear in highlighting innocent women and children as victims of violence. In researching this topic through both primary and secondary documents it is evident that although there were Indians that fought alongside the British and occasionally carried out senseless acts of violence (that will be studied later in this project), there is little evidence that backs the idea that they were going to raid towns to purposelessly murder women and children. It also ignores the fact that Patriots also sought out partnership and neutrality agreements with tribes. This narrative is largely fabricated for the sole purpose of inciting fear aimed at unifying the colonies. The fear sends a message to colonists that were once loyal to the British to make the choice: fight or be killed. The threat of Indian attack was enough for many to override their attachment to their British Identity and join the fight for Independence. Although both sides were actively trying to ally with tribes for their own self-interests when the British did it was capitalized on in the press to incite fear.

**Case Study: Michael Cresap**

The story of Michael Cresap and his portrayal in colonial media acts as a case study in analyzing the use of Anti-Indian sentiment. Cresap was once condemned a brutal murderer for his uncalled-for violence against Shawnee Indians in western territory, but the context of the looming revolution shifted the way that his actions were portrayed. Cresap was a settler living in Maryland who participated in violence west of the Proclamation of 1763 between Indians and colonists for land. Later in 1772, in response to conflict between a group of Shawnee Indians

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26 Berger, 53-57
27 Parkinson, “Revolutionary Transformation of Michael Cresap”, 99
and a colonial surveying party in modern day Ohio, colonists residing in an abandoned British fort once known as Fort Pitt sent out letters that declared war on Ohio Indians who were attempting to reclaim the fort.\textsuperscript{28} Given this opportunity, Cresap did not hesitate to act. He and a party of men attacked two Indians fishing in a canoe on the Ohio river and scalped them. This event inspired other settlers in the area to take unwarranted action in murdering and scalping Indians in the area with no reason other than for an excuse to kill. This violence sparked a long summer of violent conflict known now as Dunmore’s war. News of this conflict began to print in the eastern colonies with Cresap falling in the center of the narrative as the perpetrator. On May 30\textsuperscript{th}, 1774, the Boston Evening-Post printed news that Cresap alongside a party of Virginians “has Killed 39 Ohio Indians in revenge for some murders sometime once committed upon the Ohio.”\textsuperscript{29} It was at this time that Cresap was known by the press as a murderer. Despite the hatred of American Indians, colonists still viewed his violence as unwarranted. This was evident across many newspapers in 1774 with Dunlap’s Pennsylvania Packet writing that Cresap threatened, “to put every Indian to death that he could meet on the river” and told the story of Cresap and his crew of Virginians unwarrantedly firing on Indians in canoes and scalping them.\textsuperscript{30} Two months following this initial report, the Pennsylvania Journal called the actions of Cresap “misfortunes” and a “barbarous murder.”\textsuperscript{31} The initial spread of news of Cresap’s activities in the west were met with criticism in the press and the colonists reading them. He was much to blame for the

\textsuperscript{28} Parkinson, “Revolutionary Transformation of Michael Cresap”, 100
\textsuperscript{29} “New-York, May 19.” Boston Evening-Post (Boston, Massachusetts), no. 2018, May 30, 1774
incitement of war between western colonists and Indians. The language chosen to identity his actions as “murders” and detailed the action of scalping are evidence of this.

As the revolution inched closer, the rhetoric surrounding Cresap began to shift. The outbreak of war at Concord and Lexington in April of 1775 proved to be a fortunate break for Cresap’s reputation. He and his crew of men did not hesitate to march east upon hearing the news. His intentions for doing so are unclear: primary sources surrounding this march don’t fully explain why they set out on this journey. It could be that that Cresap saw an opportunity to save his reputation or that just wanted an excuse to kill the British. The word choices and rhetoric within newspapers took a complete shift in 1775 surrounding Cresap on his march east. As previously mentioned, backcountry white men were known as being an uncivilized to easterners and considered to be one in the same as Indians. The idea that these backcountry men were one in the same as Indians meant that newspapers could use their “savagery” and violent tendencies as a symbol for the revolution. On their march east in 1775, the Pennsylvania Mercury wrote of Cresap’s passing, stating his crew to be full of “Health and vigor, after what they had undergone, declared them to be intimate with hardship and familiar with danger. Joy and satisfaction were visible in the crowd that met them.”

Similarly, the Pennsylvania Packet spoke of Cresap and his crew as appearing “entirely unacquainted with, and had never felt, the passion of fear. With their rifles in their hands, they assume a kind of omnipotence over their enemies.”

This is a switch in narrative that shows the way that Cresap’s image was transformed in the press. In comparison to the Boston Post newspaper that once condemned Cresap and his gang as

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32 “Extract of a Letter from Frederick-Town, August 1”. Story & Humphrey’s Pennsylvania Mercury, and Universal Advertiser (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) no. 20, August 18, 1775
33 “Philadelphia, August 23.” Dunlap’s Pennsylvania Packet (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) no. 201, August 28, 1775
barbarous murderers, he was now regarded as a strong and dangerous man who would fight for liberation in America. This switch in language is telling of how the colonial press strategically used Michael Cresap as a symbol of savagery for their own benefit and completely disregarded the violence that he took out against American Indians.

An aspect of Cresap’s actions that cannot be ignored is the way that he and his men dressed while on their murdering sprees. They wore traditional Indian paint and clothing and used weapons such as tomahawks to imitate traditional Indian appearance. A newspaper entry from the Story and Humphrey’s Pennsylvania Mercury in August of 1775 recalled that Cresap and his company were “painted like Indians, armed with tomahawks and rifles, dressed in hunting skins and mockasons”. The traditional clothing that Cresap wore was the clothing he stripped off the Indians he had murdered in the backcountry. Alongside their physical appearance, the company of men would publicly perform war dances in very similar fashion to traditional Indian dances. Around the same time of Cresap’s march east is when printers began to create made up stories that broadcast the idea that the British were recruiting Indians to fight alongside them in the war. By creating fear surrounding Indian violence while using Cresap as a symbol of hope, printers were able to identify Cresap as a “good Indian” despite being a white man while labeling the tribes surrounding the colonies as a threat, or a “bad Indian”. The savagery that they displayed was labeled as patriotic and a tool for freedom. His appearance and actions displayed savagery that was previously feared by many colonists, but now that it could be directed towards the British meant that the press and colonists celebrated Cresap as a hero to the patriot cause.

34 “Extract of a Letter from Frederick-Town, August 1”
35 Parkinson, “Revolutionary Transformation of Michael Cresap”, 109
The media coverage of Michael Cresap and his band of men acts as a microcosm for how American Indians were used as a tool of propaganda leading up to and during the revolutionary war. A man once frowned upon for being a brutal murderer went on to become a colonial celebrity and a symbol of savagery against the British. Cresap’s march east was cut short by his passing in which he was then buried in Trinity Churchyard where he now rests next to early American heroes such as Alexander Hamilton, John Peter Zenger, and Horatio Gates. The way that his public perception was completely altered by the media is telling of how powerful the press was at the time. The press excused the unwarranted murder of Indians and the incitement of Dunmore’s war in favor of symbolizing savage like violence towards the British and uniting the western backcountry into the rest of the colonies. While colonial press capitalized on the fear of unwarranted violence at the hands of Indians while Cresap was excused from the horrific and unwarranted acts of violence that he committed against Indian people. The story of Cresap is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of how Indians were victimized as a tool of propaganda in this period that would taint the future of tribal and U.S. history.

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36 Parkinson, “From Indian Killer”, 1
The propaganda that helped form a common cause and start the war against Great Britain did not stop after the first shot at Lexington and Concord. The Patriot movement was very fragile. The movement was heavily based on manipulation that if not carefully maintained, could easily come unraveled. Following the start of the revolution the press continued to push stories that villainized American Indians and used fear mongering tactics on colonists. An event in 1777 that circulated through every colonial newspaper was the scalping of Jane McCrea. Known by many as America’s first martyr, the true events following her death will never be fully known, for her story has been constantly tampered with and embellished in many eras of American history. A scouting party of Indians who were allied with British general John Burgoyne seized Miss McCrea from a home in which was staying on her way to visit her husband who was serving with the British. A scuffle between the Indians and Jane led to her getting shot, scalped, and stripped of her clothing.\footnote{Engels and Goodale, 93-95} The 1804 painting depicted in figure 1 serves as the most iconic
paintings of this event. This murder was frowned upon by General Burgoyne himself who had previously set rules that read, “I positively forbid bloodshed when you are not opposed in arms. Aged men, women, children, and prisoners must be held sacred from the knife or hatchet, even in the time of actual conflict. You shall receive compensation for the prisoners you take, but you shall be called to account for scalps.” Following McCrea’s murder Burgoyne is documented claiming that the act was “no premeditated barbarity” and saying that these Indians would be defected and punished if it weren’t for the fact that he would lose partnership with the whole tribe. Despite Burgoyne’s obvious disproval of this violence, the story spread like wildfire across the colonies in the press. Political leaders ensured that her name was plastered across every newspaper in America. In researching the event of her murder, it is clear that this story has been tampered with so extensively that details of what truly happened may never surface. The one thing for certain was that she became one of the first martyrs in American history whose story would be retold for centuries to come.

The story of Jane McCrea varied from paper to paper, but a commonality often present was the exaggeration of violence to a horrific degree while emphasizing the innocence and beauty of Miss McCrea. A letter posted in the Virginia Gazette claimed that Jane McCrea was “of good family, and some share of beauty” and the Indians “butchered the poor innocent girl and scalped her in the sight of those very men who are continually preaching up their tender mercies.” As evident in this example, a common thread in the narrative surrounding Jane McCrea.

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38 Berger, 65
39 “Lieutenant General Burgoyne, September 6, 1777.” The Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Virginia) October 3, 1777
40 Parkinson, Thirteen Clocks, 165
41 “Extract of a letter from a Gentleman at Snook-kill.” The Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Virginia) July 27, 1777
McCrea is that the British were synonymous and complicit with the Indian slaughter of innocent civilians. This narrative intentionally disregards Burgoyne’s own rules that prevented this type of violence from happening. It makes the British out to be villains who condone the murder of innocent and beautiful women. The way that the scalping of Jane McCrea was treated in in the press stands at a sharp juxtaposition with how the Indians scalped by Michael Cresap were treated in the press. Both events depict the unprovoked murder and scalping of innocent people, but racial bias had a large grip on the narrative being presented. Through the creation of racist anti-Indian propaganda, the press formed a racialized double standard in which white men could act with savagery while Indians who engaged in similar violence could not. Cresap’s murder of Shawnee Indians was swept under the rug so that his figure could be elevated as a hero who would bring liberty to America. Meanwhile, the murder of Jane McCrea was being exaggerated and misconstrued to villainize Indians as British subjects in every New England newspaper.

This meticulously crafted narrative surrounding British cooperation with murderous savages was used as a tool to rally colonists to join the militia in fighting against Great Britain. Many of the previously discussed sources describe methods in which Indians were subject to propaganda that aimed to get colonists on board with going to war, but now that the colonies were at war the narrative shifted. The methods of portraying Indians stayed the same while the projected outcome shifted to getting people to enlist in the army and fight. Responses to the death of Jane McCrea demonstrates this shift. A letter published in the Virginia Gazette in 1777 recalls the brutality of McCrea’s murder and then makes a call for arms: “If the New England militia will not turn out to our assistance, our wives and children must fall into the hands of bloody Burgoyne, and his merciless savage allies, and this country will be lost… Will our
southern brethren and allies remain idle spectators of our misery.” \(^{42}\) Calls to arms such as this following the murder of McCrea were successful in drawing troops in New England, most notably poor farmers. \(^{43}\) Many Americans now saw it as a choice: either wait in their homes for their inevitable massacre at the hands of Indians or to march together against the enemy.

### Beyond the Revolution

The way that Indians were treated in the media did not cease following the Independence and formation of America. In fact, political leaders took it upon themselves to consistently remind the American public of the horrors that the British and Indians committed on them so that they remained loyal to their new government. Benjamin Franklin enlisted the help of French artist marquis de Lafayette to craft a picture book that was aimed at children to imprint a sense of horror surrounding the British from a very young age. In a letter dated 1780 Franklin wrote, “It is expected of me to make a schoolbook of them, and to have prints designed here by good artists and engraved each expressing one or more of the different horrid facts, to be inserted in the book, in order to impress the minds of children and posterity with a deep sense of your bloody and insatiable malice and wickedness.” \(^{44}\) Within this picture book there were intense pictures of Indian and British relations where Indians were offering colonist scalps to English officers in exchange for payment. Aside from imagery that villainized Indians and the British, there were also images of slaves taking up arms and killing their masters and innocent colonists. \(^{45}\) This

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\(^{42}\) “Extract of a letter from Sullwater (un miles on this side Saratoga, and twenty five miles above Albany), August 4, 1777” *The Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg, Virginia) August 29, 1777

\(^{43}\) Berger, 65

\(^{44}\) “From Benjamin Franklin to David Hartley, 2 February 1780,” *Founders Online*, National Archives

\(^{45}\) “Franklin and Lafayette’s List of Prints to Illustrate British Cruelties, [c. May 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives
book was in development from 1780-1782 and fortunately was never printed for the public. Despite this failure Franklin was able to publish fabricated stories that sent similar messages through his network of newspapers. In 1783 he published a completely made-up story of bags of American scalps being presented to King George III as a gift: “At the request of the Senneka Chiefs, I send herewith to you Excellency, under the care of James Boyd. Eight packs of scalps, cured, dried, hooped, and painted with all the Indian triumphal marks.”  

Regardless of its failure, the intentions of Franklin and Lafayette’s book demonstrate the lengths that political leaders sought to maintain their falsified narrative that Indians and the British terrorized their lands and sought to destroy America’s freedom. Many other writers followed suit with Franklin’s fantasy in the postwar years including David Ramsay, William Gordon, and Jedidiah Morse.  

Despite there being no evidence of this type of terror on colonial lands, this idea was constructed before and during the revolution, and Franklin had no intention to let this idea go. Instead, he and other men in power doubled down on this fantasy to brainwash a young America under racist fantasies that would create a foundation of racial stereotypes for Indians in the coming centuries. Propaganda that racialized and fear mongered Indian was an important part of Patriot identity, and if this propaganda ceased to exist then colonists might start to see through the cracks of the carefully crafted movement that succeeded in creating America.

The previously discussed story of Jane McCrea in 1777 is an encapsulation that in how propaganda in this era lived well beyond the revolution. Her murder was depicted time and time again by artists and printed well through the 19th century. The 1804 painting by John Vanderlyn

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46 “From the Supplement to the Boston Independent Chronicle. Boston, March 12.” *THOMAS's THE Massachusetts Spy: Or, WORCESTER GAZETTE.* (Worcester, Massachusetts) XII, no. 612, January 23, 1783: 4
47 *Parkinson, Thirteen Clocks,* 169
serves as one of the most iconic depictions of the event, yet artists continued to paint the event in the coming decades. Figure 2 displays a depiction of McCrea’s murder in 1846 that highly resembles this 1804 painting. Both display angry looking Indians murdering a small, beautiful woman in a dress yet are spread over forty years apart. There is a strong intersection in depictions of McCrea’s murder between gender and race that deserve a research project in of itself. She is consistently depicted as a frail and beautiful woman while the Indians are depicted as horrifying villains. The need to repeat displaying this act of violence beyond the initial purpose in 1777 to rally the colonies against the British is telling of how foundational racism towards is in American history. The genocide of Indian people’s and the dispossession of their land remain one of the biggest tragedies in American history and the racism that fueled this tragedy can be traced to depictions of Indians present in the press during the revolutionary era.

Fig. 2 Murder of Miss Jane McCrea A.D. Painting by N. Currier, 1846. Library of Congress Prints Devision, Washington D.C. https://www.loc.gov/item/2002710603/.
Conclusion

The use of propaganda that painted Indians as violent and horrific beings was vital to forming a common cause to win Independence from Britain while also setting a foundation for Tribal and U.S. relations for the coming centuries. This propaganda was highly selective and strategic in its execution for it sought to villainize Indians while also covering up and ignoring comparable atrocities that white colonists were committing at the time. It created a racial double standard in which white people were allowed perform violent acts while Indians could not. The relationship between the press and politicians allowed for powerful politicians such as John Adams and Ben Franklin to push their own agenda through the press. This project makes a connection between racist Indian propaganda and the Identity formation of early America. Many secondary scholars discuss its importance in the war while this project looks at both the war and beyond. In further studying this field of research, historians can better understand how minoritized groups of people are used as tools by the rich and powerful to achieve their own selfish goals with no regard to how it affects people. Further research could go on to study how this is a pattern that weaves throughout world history in Nazi Germany, U.S. Japanese internment camps, and the rhetoric surrounding of Mexican and Muslim Americans in the 2016 election. With an understanding of how the United States foundation as a free country was based upon the constructed lies surrounding Indians, the more this pattern is observable in American history and the more evident it is that this pattern persists today.
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