Tomahawks are a quintessential part of North American history and culture, as one was added to every frontiersman’s kit. In New France these light hand-held axes were considered no less important. Because it was found that lighter hatchets could be more conveniently carried by an individual than an actual axe while traveling in the dense forest or participating in the ever increasing, now offensive “petite guerre” (war party wilderness fighting), especially during the colonial wars beginning in 1689, a smaller Canadian blacksmith-made version eventually developed but was still loosely based on traditional imported French axe patterns.

These not only gradually replaced the imported small axe as a belt accessory, but at the same time, the French Canadians also gave it a new local nick-name more befitting their ultimate use during this new era of colonial wilderness warfare: the “casse-tête” which can be translated as meaning “head breaker.”

Although the light-weight casse-tête served foremost as a utilitarian tool to perform menial wilderness tasks, it was clearly thought of as a striking weapon by the French and Natives (and occasionally as a throwing weapon), because it increasingly replaced the bayonet and sword on long range, offensive wilderness campaigns against the English settlements. For example, one report written in the late 1670s by a friend of L’Abbé de Gallinée (an explorer and missionary to the Natives) described how the Iroquois would throw what were probably casse-têtes at the enemies’ heads: “We do not wear any swords in this country, as much by the fact that they are useless against axes that we wear, the Natives having the strength to throw these axes at 30 pas (paces), and with so much skill that ordinarily the axe’s head lodges itself in the head of the one with whom they are dealing.”

In the early 18th century, the French residing in Canada almost universally adopted the word “casse-tête” to identify a small, common hatchet. This ironic term was a direct analogy to the Native war clubs, which were all too familiar to the French because of their long involvement in the Iroquois wars of the 17th century.
Origin of the term *casse-tête*

The old French word “casse-tête” which can be translated to modern day English as meaning “head/skull cracker” or “head breaker,” derives directly from the North-American Native use of a war club. Because there were several regional styles and/or tribally identifiable aspects of these clubs,1 we should not be surprised that each Indian Nation had a name for various clubs in their own language or dialect, although most commonly used Native terms today are from one of the Algonquian dialects, which translated, originally referred to a wooden, ball-headed war club. The Baron of Lahontan, an enemy who visited Canada where he traveled extensively in the 1690s and early 1600s, stated: “Casse-tête. This word signifies club. The Natives call it Assan Ouastik, that is to say, Assan means ‘break’ and Ouastik means ‘head.’1 Therefore these two words mean ‘head-breaker.’”. Although “assan” translates as a “stone,” and “Ouastik” means “head,” in most Algonquian dialects, these two words nevertheless imply a “head-breaker.” Both Lafitau2 and Charlevoix3 describe in detail what these clubs originally looked like.

Although the term frequently translates to a striking or cutting implement in many Algonquian Native dialects, curiously, the French in colonial North America never adopted the Proto-Algonquian word “tomahawk” throughout the colonial wars, even though most of their allies were Algonquian speaking. They did, however, adopt the “concept.” Coincidentally, the English slowly replaced the term “hatchet” with “tomahawk” at approximately the same time the French adopted the term “casse-tête” for the same implement, although their forms are distinctive, as we shall see. It seems that in the atmosphere of the colonial French and Indian Wars beginning in the late 1600s, both European nations seemed to relate these small, light-weight, locally-made hatchets to a weapon instead of just a tool which was held by one hand (like a Native war club). It is therefore understandable why both terms are derived from an Indian war-club. Carried by a number of individuals, the *casse-tête* would become a distinctive category of weapon over time, with several notable variations (a particular blade shape,_added spike or pipe etc...), and used throughout New France.

### From A Wooden Club To A Hatchet

*Images (Above, Right) © Line drawings representing details from images contained in the Code Canadien dating to the late 17th century. These otherwise identical hatchets are depicted in two different Native images from the Codes, each of whom holds a hatchet in one hand. Take note of the tapered profile of the handles suggesting that the handles may have been inserted from the top-down. Likely decorated (painted) for war, each of these weapons is given a different Algonquian name in the text next to the image of the respective Native figures. The “Noamikinhach tiriinwak” (i.e. Neopiomish hatchet) is a *hachette de guerre* which combines the French “hache de guerre” (battle axe) with what is clearly an Algonquian word for axe where the word “Ouakacoual” (as in an Innuqaus and apparently a Seneca) carries a hatchet with the name, “Attouge de guerre” (Similar to the Iroquoian Mohawk word for axe or hatchet, “Aho-de gerih”) with the addition of the French words (glaude de guerre), meaning “battle axe.” It does not seem to be a “tomahawk,” an Algonquian term which implies a “cutting tool instrument,” which can similarly, for example, be seen in the Alenaki words for a sable (i.e. “teminfilteguan”), axe (i.e. “temkoush” and beaver (i.e. “temkousk”), because of its cutting teeth.

Almost as though the writers felt they needed to further clarify or explain this term to their European readers by using comparatives. What is clear is that most of these French synonyms all seem to reference small single-hand-held axes. For instance, even the 1726 edition of Saugnitz’s dictionary, *casse-têtes* are now compared to battle-axes while describing a Native incident, “We place a pipe to the right of this Manitou…and we place around him as trophies, clubs, bows, arrows, quivers and *casse-têtes* or battle-axes.” In fact, the Canadian *casse-têtés* was so well known that these small axes are not only occasionally made in France, but the term was officially also used by them as early as 1732, because even the Department of the Marine storehouses in Rochefort mention “small battle-axes or *casse-têtes*” (petites haches d’armes ou assestettes) priced at 1 livre each were listed to be stowed aboard the ship La Gironde bound for Louisiana.15

The term *casse-tête*, which was used several times on a list of goods distributed to a number of voyages in the upper countries during the Fox wars, was specified on two separate occasions as representing an axe: “assestette ou hachet (casse-tête or hatchet).” Officials drafting the yearly inventory list at the King’s storehouses at Montreal also officially adopted the term *casse-tête* as of 1747 when they made a point of indicating that a *casse-tête* corresponded to a small axe when they noted “…small axes or *casse-têtes*” whereas previous years they simply used the term
"petites haches" or "haches petites" (small axes). Lastly, French military personnel serving in New France provide further insights and supplementary data concerning the casse-tête as a weapon. Echoing the lack of reference to "tomahawk" in French documents, the French use of a casse-tête in wilderness warfare was clearly emphasised by Joseph-Charles Bonin, a soldier serving during the Seven Years War, who wrote the following: "...he seized a casse-tête with which he wanted to strike me on the head..." (Small axe that is worn in the sash when travelling. The English call them tomahawks).

Here, a primary source highlights this critical point to modern researchers and frontier folklorists, that the French did not use the term "tomahawk." Numerous French accounts from all over North America verify the universal use of the term casse-tête. A French military official wrote in 1756 that when the Natives living in Canada left for war they were armed with "...a fusil, a small axe that we call casse-tête, and a lance (spear)." That same year, the Chevalier de la Pauze wrote that during the storming of Fort Bull: "The order was executed so quickly that the English had barely time to close the gate that we tried in vain to break through with small axes called casse-têtes..." 22 Of New France from 1752 to 1775, had added on his family crest: "...the arm of a Native, armed with a battle-axe, called in the Native language, casse-tête..." 23 In 1755, Malartic, while describing what happened at General Braddock's defeat, used parentheses to show that a casse-tête was a type of axe: "Then the savages fell upon them from all sides, the casse-tête (an axe) in hand." 24 While the Marquis Duquesne de Menneville, who served as French Governor General of New France from 1747 to 1756, stated in his Journal, supported by a subsequent account from Bougainville, 25 that one casse-tête be distributed to all men, both Canadien and soldiers, at Saint-Jean in the winter of 1755. 26 Bourlamaque also lists them as part of the supplies issued to Canadian militiamen during the Seven Year War, 27 as do others in a few separate accounts. 28 In April of 1760, instructions for the officers of the Troupes de la Marine, who were to walk with the milice to fight Quebec, were to do the following: "They shall inspect the firearms, the kettles, casse-têtes and generally all that we depend on in order to be well armed and equipped, that we shall not lack anything at the time of departure." Some five years earlier, Le Mercier at Quebec wrote that he did not wish to see the casse-tête removed as a weapon from the Canadian militiamen's kites "...due to their usefulness in marches for the encampments." 29

Casse-têtes provided in campaigns likely corresponded to plain or common hatchets although finer versions were also recorded on rare occasions. A statement of war munitions provided to a war party of Frenchmen returning from Acadia and Île Royale (Cape Breton Island) in 1745 listed what may have been a very finely-made casse-tête with file work. This last one was described as a "casse-tête, with file work, one for...6 livres" (Casse-tête Lime, un pour...6). Interestingly enough, Casse-têtes were also found in the homes of the Canadian Habitants such as Jean-Baptiste Charly, ex-voyageur turned interpreter, cadets, and guides. 30 During the Chickasaw campaign of 1739, a number of officers along with an interpreter and a few other men received a total of 14 casse-têtes along with a guide named Richardson who was given a single one. 31 The following decade, documents outlining the expenditures incurred at Fort St. Frédéric in 1746 reveal that these axes were again distributed to various military personnel, including officers, canonier soldiers, Habitants and others. 32 During the Seven Years War, casse-têtes were stocked in high number in the King's storehouses and distributed in great numbers. For instance, at Fort Frontenac in 1756, a quantity of 880 of these, recorded as stored in 4 separate casks, were included on an official statement prepared by the engineer named Le Mercier. 33

The ensuing year, Montcalm wrote in his Journal, supported by a similar account from Bougainville, 34 that one casse-tête be distributed to all men, both Canadien and soldiers, at Saint-Jean in the winter of 1757. 35 Bourlamaque also lists them as part of the supplies issued to Canadian militiamen during the Seven Year War, 36 as do others in a few separate accounts. 37 In April of 1760, instructions for the officers of the Troupes de la Marine, who were to walk with the milice to fight Quebec, were to do the following: "They shall inspect the firearms, the kettles, casse-têtes and generally all that we depend on in order to be well armed and equipped, that we shall not lack anything at the time of departure." Some five years earlier, Le Mercier at Quebec wrote that he did not wish to see the casse-tête removed as a weapon from the Canadian militiamen's kites "...due to their usefulness in marches for the encampments." 38

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As early as 1721, blacksmiths were recorded as making “casse-têtes” for local merchant-outfitters. The smith named Lavallée was credited by Monière, a Montreal merchant-outfitter, for the supply of 57 casse-têtes priced at 15 sols each. From 1721 to 1753, a number of different blacksmiths (e.g., Boutin, Brunet, Campot, Dubule, Dumouchelle, Jean-baptiste Coton dit Fleur-d’épée, and Lapronemada) were all documented in making hundreds of casse-têtes on petits casse-têtes (small casse-têtes) priced anywhere between 15 sols to 50 sols apiece, for this same Montreal merchant who outfitted many fur traders for the upper country. In the interior, the blacksmiths Charles Chauvin (Detroit), Amiot (Chicago), Beauchêne (Fort Ouaiatenon), Michel Durivage Baillargeon (Fort St. Joseph), Antoine Dehaultre (Fort St. Joseph), and Charles Bonneu (Fort Ouaiatenon) were recorded on invoices as manufacturing and/or repairing casse-têtes for different parties. Besides their normal repairs and restocking of firearms and mending kettles, a few of these artisans are recorded as receiving both iron and steel bars for the axe bodies and strong edges respectively. They not only added steel cutting edges to existing axes, but are also recorded as making a number of different types of casse-têtes from scratch. For example, Amiot at Chicago had made 12 fancy casse-têtes at a very high price of 6 livres each, whereas Louis Lefebre, blacksmith at Michilimackinac, made two casse-têtes priced at 3 livres each and repaired one for 1 livre 10 sols. That same year, Lefebre forged a casse-tête for the price of 4 livres and inserted a steel cutting edge on another casse-tête for the price of 2 livres.

The usefulness of this style of a military weapon in New France becomes clear as we observe the surge of this tool in the King’s storehouses at Montreal during the War of the Austrian Succession. The situation as far as the casse-têtes issued or given during war time came with their own pre-fabricated handles.

Casse-tête Handles

Many of the casse-têtes heads taken from the King’s storehouses may have been already hafted or provided with a separate pre-made handle, since handles for casse-têtes turn up on many inventories. During the 1740s, examples, weapons and munitions purchased by the King from certain individuals included 456 casse-têtes at 28 sols each along with a quantity of 450 “casse-tête handles” at 2 sols 6 deniers apiece, while the King’s storehouses at Quebec in 1747 show a quantity of 5,464 “handles for axes, adzes, and casse-têtes at 3 sols [apiece].” These records therefore indicate that many of the casse-têtes issued or given during war time came with their own pre-fabricated handles.

Size and Weight of Casse-têtes

Since no official account defined the exact weight of a casse-tête, we may speculate that these hatchets may have been made light enough to lift using one hand, carried around tucked in a sash, though efficient enough to use adequately as a small axe. Initially, it is likely that very light Biscayan axes sent to New France may have taken on the name of “casse-têtes” once in the colonies. The wish list of goods needed for Quebec in 1721 included large axes from Bayonne and “400 small hand-axes of ½ livre [livre poids de marc] at 15 sols [each]” revealing that these small axes (presumably casse-têtes), likely also from Bayonne, were to weigh 0.81 lbs if we are to convert to modern pounds using the 18th-century French the livres poids de marc measurement unit. Another two records point to the weight of the colonial-made versions. The first account, dating to 1740, includes a total of 18 casse-têtes supplied by an unknown blacksmith for Monière, a Montreal-based merchant-outfitter, where each hatchet was recorded as weighing 1 ¼ livres (poids de marc) each (approximately 1.34 lbs per unit). Some ten years later, Monière took note of 80 locally-made casse-têtes weighing together 107 livres, which were credited to the smith named Dumouchel. Each axe would have then presumably weighed approximately 1.44 lbs (1.33 livres in poids de marc) respectively, indicating that they were slightly heavier than those recorded a decade earlier.

The Casse-tête in the Gulf Colonies

The situation as far as manufacturing local hatchets in Louisiana was far different than in Canada since the blacksmiths located in these newly established colonies were either unknown blacksmiths for Monière, a Montreal-based merchant-outfitter, or small axe heads recorded anywhere between 15 sols to 50 sols apiece.
colonies may not have been as active, or fully established/equipped, in forging metal implements onsite as opposed to artisans working in the towns up and down the St. Lawrence River. Many of the axes sent to Louisiana were therefore likely manufactured in France. Apparently starting in 1716, a Minister in France wanted to equip the troops sent to Louisiana with powder horns, shooting bags and hatches (hachots). Some three years later, four newly arrived reinforcement companies received “small hand-held axes” (petites haches à main) instead of swords. When Bénard de la Harpe went to Baye St. Bernard in 1721, on the present day Texas Coast, his bales of goods included: “40 middle-sized axes or cassette,” indicating that certain mid-sized axes brought to the Gulf colonies may have been viewed as a case-tête, which, significantly, may have all been imported from the mother country. In 1732, 1,200 “cassette” or hachots (case-têtes or hatchets) were included on a statement of merchandise necessary for the Natives at Mobile. What is interesting here is that the official who wrote out this statement used the French term “hachot” to designate a case-tête. We have found that the word “hachot,” in fact, was a French sailor’s term that meant a small hand-held hatchet, or small axe that they use when sheltering in the woods. In 1754 Louisiana Governor Kerlerec wrote that the bayonets used by soldiers in Louisiana were “a case-tête or small axe that they should be replaced with case-têtes: “So I felt that the case-tête, which is a small hand ax, would anyway be more suitable, in that it is a good weapon of defense, and it is very useful for the soldier either to cut the stakes for his shelter, his firewood, serves to clear a passage in many circumstances or to make a carriage (pirago) in other cases, or finally to dig holes for the stakes used in an entrenchment that they would want to force.”

While writing a definition of the word case-tête, Dumont de Montigny, an officer in colonial French Louisiana, revealed that there were further subcategories of case-têtes, where he describes a common hatchet type, as well as a specialized Native flat triangular dagger-shaped blade, as both having the name case-tête: “It is a small portable axe or else a bayonet in which the handle is reversed so that a wood handle can be inserted.” A few years later, Bossu, a French marine officer who travelled through Louisiana starting in 1751, stated that Native warriors carried “...a case-tête or small axe that they use when sheltering in the woods.” In 1754 Louisiana Governor Kerlerec wrote that the bayonets used by soldiers in Louisiana were useless when fighting against Natives in the woods and that they should be replaced with case-têtes: “So I felt that the case-tête, which is a small hand ax, would anyway be more suitable, in that it is a good weapon of defense, and it is very useful for the soldier either to cut the stakes for his shelter, his firewood, serves to clear a passage in many circumstances or to make a carriage (pirago) in other cases, or finally to dig holes for the stakes used in an entrenchment that they would want to force.”
French axes exhibit a “choil” immediately after the eye/blade junction. Although there are several variations of this common French axe feature and degrees of quality in workmanship, it seems that the “choil” is a characteristic of a French axe trait most frequently encountered in North American examples, from the 17th century Biscayan to the fall of Canada in 1760. English examples usually either have no “choil” at all, or when present, the bottom of the axe eye merges into the bottom of the blade in a straight line with no separation, or that a “choil” is found at the end of an extended flange. Even though there may be numerous examples from both nations with none of these particular features, it is nevertheless one useful identifying feature that can often differentiate a French colonial-made axe or a casse-tête from a similar English colonial example. Besides a wide, slightly triangular blade with a straight bottom, French axe blades also typically overlap the eye slightly at its base and have a defined “choil” below it, with one of several fillers or ground eye terminations.

1. French, Canadianmade military axe with a flange-de- remarked on the opposite side.
2. Presumed French casse-tête with an angled eye bottom.
3. Presumed French casse-tête with a straight eye bottom.
4. French Pipe tomahawk or casse-tête-pipe marked “A. Lepoivre F.P. Leoncino 1761.”

French

English

Images (Left) & Image 1. French axe comparisons: English “tomahawk” style axes typically either have a continuous bottom line from the eye (fig. 1), all along the blade bottom, or if a “choil” is present, it is found at the end of an extended, sometimes long flange (fig. 2) at the eye blade junction, unlike a French axe in which the “choil” immediately rises to meet the blade bottom. Although these two distinctive blade/eye transitions are common on English colonial “tomahawk” style axes, if used, may be considerable subtle variations (fig. 3). These features are especially evident on the well-known “English standard Pattern” pipe tomahawks.

Images (Right)

3. “English” tomahawk from Tomotley, TN, (ca. 1751-76).
4. "English" pipe tomahawk engraved “I. Fraser,” from PA. (ca. 1750-60), done in a “French” style but exhibiting an extended flange “choil”.

In conclusion, by introducing the various categories and terminology of common axes, hatchets and their features as well as the introduction of the casse-tête used by the French in North America, and addressing several misunderstood notions, the authors hope that any future archival research will now have a “face” to the name. Further, by using a much tighter sample of known French axes (albeit a very small group indeed), it is hoped that by laying more a firm foundation for identifying common and apparent “French” axe features, other presumed French axes can be identified by their comparison to the known examples, verification by French archival records, and careful scrutiny of the source and circumstances of any collected example.

It was hoped that articles II and III in this series were able to introduce some of the fascinating layers of inter-connected and overlapping Native, French and English historical axe expressions and terminology that abound in North American Frontier folklore, as well as point out the physical differences between the axes of the two European colonies. After the gradual emergence of the French casse-tête, and the subsequent adoption of the “tomahawk” by the English, the two distinctive hatchet styles paralleled each other until after the surrender of Canada. Then, except for pockets of lingering French influence by blacksmiths in the old French territories, the English style dominated and almost completely replaced French hatchet forms, especially seen in the British Indian Department “standard pattern” pipe tomahawks through the War of 1812. However, other than occasional hints of French decorative influences in specialized local pipe tomahawks, several old specialized casse-tête forms introduced by the French in the early 18th century continued to be widely used on the Prairies throughout the 19th century. In a future work the authors wish to expand the important topic to include the various French specialty casse-têtes, including dagger tomahawks (casse-têtes à dague), spontoon tomahawks (casse-têtes à fleur de lys), spike tomahawks (haches d’armes or casse-têtes pointés), and of course, pipe tomahawks (casse-têtes à pipe).  

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