

**SCALPING MEDICAL TREATMENT:
LEAH SMOCK RYKER (1774 Conewago PA - KY – 1858 Jeff Co IN)**

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Leah (nee Smock) Ryker "was captured by Indians, scalped, escaped, married, and raised a large family." [The Demarest Family (1964 edition), under the children of 5-196.] She lived to bear 14 children and die in 1858 at age 84. She always wore a leather skull cap and was blind her last 20 years. Near present Shelbyville Kentucky in March 1794 (she was married in 1791), one of her brothers was killed, two captured (Draper Mss. 16S179, 207; later ransomed), and one wounded by indian attack, but it seems that she was victimized at a different ambush. Nor is there any family lore about any medical treatment that she received. (Most often, scalping occurred with other more severe injury, eg, tomahawked.)

Probably, at least in some aspects, the scalping of Leah was similar to that of Peggy Chenoweth. A detailed account was recorded and reveals the horror. The Chenoweth family with others came down the Ohio River with the troops of George Rogers Clark in 1778 and occupied Corn Island at The Falls of the Ohio (Louisville). Peggy's husband was militia Captain Richard Chenoweth; John Ryker, Leah's brother-in-law, served under him.

The Chenoweth massacre occurred July 17, 1789, the same year that George Washington was inaugurated as our first President. The frontier was in flames; The Kentucky Gazette, during the months of June, July, and August mentioned fourteen instances of indian attacks. Supposedly, the Revolutionary War was over, but, on the Kentucky frontier, hostility, raids, ambushes, and war continued unabated. Indians burst into the Chenoweth home, killing soldiers and some of the children. Peggy ran towards the two story fortified springhouse. An indian shot her with an arrow between her shoulder blades, and she stumbled and fell. The indian, probably supposing her killed, pulled out his arrow and, placing his foot upon her, began his triumphant work of the scalping, as her full head of jet black hair composed a grand trophy. At last (after the scalping knife had severed the scalp just above her ears), taking his bloody blade between his teeth, the warrior leaned his entire weight upon the foot upon the arrow wound in her back and by main



From Elizabeth Shelby Kinkead,
A History of Kentucky, 1896, p. 30.



The scalping

force of both hands intertwined in her 'glory locks,' he tore off and stripped away the entire scalp from her naked skull. He then struck it twice with the butt of his tomahawk.

All this time of her flight, wounding, stumbling, falling, and scalping, Peggy was vividly conscious. But upon falling, she played dead. Though terrified and suffering excruciating pain, somehow she summoned incredible self-control to neither move nor make the slightest sound. Either would have alerted her indian attacker that she was still alive. The next day, she was found at the springhouse, almost dead.

Peggy lived to be more than 80 years old. Under the surgical ministrations she received (* What were they?; "She rode horseback the 12 miles to Louisville for treatment of her wounds." *Legendary Locals of Louisville*, By Kris Applegate, p. 108. *), she was restored to health and vigor, but went through life with a naked skull instead of her former glory of hair, a deformity she was able to conceal by the dexterous use of a cap, which she always wore. Blaine A. Guthrie, Jr., "Captain Richard Chenoweth," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, Vol 46, #2 April 1972, Louisville, KY (* <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~glendasubyak/ch144.html> *)

A brief account has been found that specifically links scalping and "pegging. "My uncle, Thomas Linn, also was scalped & thwd (tomahawked) & left laying in the sand all night. Next morning was found. Ty. Bored his head full of gimblet holes to get the blood out. Was made blind by being scalped. Many AM I've led him. Had fits too, sometimes. Died a while after I came to Ky." Draper Mss. 11CC1-4 [John D. Shane] interview with Isaac Clinkenbeard, published in Dale Payne, *Frontier Memories III* (2008), pp. 75-80. Apparently, other injuries eventually caused death.

There is a constructed historical narrative dialogue, a first person account by a man having his scalped skull bored into, in *The Frontiersman* by Allan W. Eckert. His source was probably Robertson, referenced in JAR.



Chenoweth Farm Springhouse,
R. C. Ballard Thurston
Photograph Collection, 1934.

“For a man, woman, or child living through a scalping, the treatment – ‘pegging the head’ – was almost as bad as being scalped. A ‘doctor’ of sorts seated the victim in front of him and, with a sharp leather awl, bored scores of holes into the bare skull to allow the pink cranial fluid to ooze through to form a scab. After a generous swabbing of poultices, the head was wrapped and the wound slowly healed, as long as it did not get infected.” Lyman C. Draper, ed by Ted Franklin Belue, “The Life of Daniel Boone,” Stackpole Books, 1998, p 162, footnote n.

If the scalped head were left untreated, the exposed bone would typically become bare, dry, and black, leading to necrotic bone or osteomyelitis, inevitably fatal after about eight years. The preferred treatment was pegging, or boring small holes in the skull, every half inch or so. The diploe, the region between two layers of compact bone containing red bone marrow, had to be reached (approx 1/8 inch deep) in order for new skin to grow. Once the diploe is pierced, granulation occurs, fleshy projections formed on the surface of a gaping wound. The average recovery period was two years. Hugh T. Harrington, How to Treat a Scalped Head, J of the Amer Rev (JAR), May 14, 2013. (* <http://allthingsliberty.com/2013/05/how-to-treat-a-scalped-head/> *)

Beginning in the 1600s, it was documented that the red bone marrow had to be penetrated for a scalping victim to survive. In 1776 at the Long Islands of Holston River (present Kingsport Tennessee), Dr Patrick Vance discovered that the technique of “pegging” the skull of scalping victims was successful. In 1806, Dr. Felix Robertson of Nashville documented the improved technique. A retired medical professional observed that perhaps the penetration into the bone marrow for the purpose of regenerating some kind of “skin” was the first application of Stem Cell Therapy as a medical treatment. Tapping into the bone marrow of the skull was the essential step in medical treatment of a scalping victim. It obviously released growth and repair agents, including stem cells, not fully understood by medical science even to this day.

A gimlet/gimblet is a hand tool for drilling small holes, mainly in wood, without splitting. It was defined in Joseph Gwilt's *Architecture* (1859) as "a piece of steel of a semi-cylindrical form, hollow on one side, having a cross handle at one end and a worm or screw at the other." (An auger was for larger holes.) There are also spoon bit gimblets, and other types as well.



Vintage Gimblet



Vintage Awl

Was a “gimblet” or a “sharp leather awl” used for “pegging”? Apparently, either. A gimblet was used to bore the hole in your cabin door for the latch string, as in “the latch string is always out,” or to tap your sugar maple trees for their sap, etc. Awls were essential for leather working, eg, harness repair. “A flat pointed straight awl (spear or screwdriver chisel point?) is the best instrument to bore with” is documented in JAR.

Metal-working: So, what is a “flat pointed straight awl”? Consider “flat-bladed awl.” A flat-bladed awl looks like a tiny screwdriver, where the cross section of the tip is rectangular of constant width and thickness tapering to zero, a straight line sharp edge. The modern twist drill has a fluted cylindrical shank with a fluted conical tip; when twisted, the advancing edges of the flute cut, as they are sharp. The 1776AD version would have had some kind of cutting edges, as practical for period metal-working (blacksmithing?) technology. Was the cross section of the tip diamond, rectangular, hexagonal, or

lenticular (fabrication practicalities)? Just curiosity, since we don't have to actually "peg" a scalping victim.



Vintage 1880 straight flat-bladed awl

The photo is of a vintage 1880 straight flat bladed awl. Its blade is lenticular in cross-section, tapering at the sides to cutting edges, and at the tip to a spoon shaped cutting edge.

The pioneers were tough.

The End.

Later; more:

<http://frontierfolk.org/ruddles.htm>

There had been a lot of rain that Spring and the settlers were not expecting an attack from the North. They did get a warning of potential indian trouble and Monday June 30, 1780 gathered in Ruddles Station. Tuesday, some of the boys were sent across the creek to drive some stray cows into the Stockade. Heavy rain had fallen the night before the settlers thought it would delay any attack. Unfortunately McKee and his Indians and cannon had landed at Falmouth and had arrived early that morning. The boys were making a lot of noise and Joseph Conway was climbing up the opposite bank when he was shot and scalped. The wound was not fatal and after an hour or two managed to crawl across the creek and into the Stockade.

The attack resumed at one when Byrd and the rest of the British and Indians arrived. The settlers defended themselves vigorously. After two shots from the cannon broke the forts walls in, it was clear they could not hold out. They were promised they would not be killed if they surrendered. They surrendered, and the indians promptly set on them tomahawking and scalping the old people and infants. Everything in the fort was stolen or destroyed and by 4pm, the remainder of the captives were begun on the long walk to Detroit. Among them the Conway family. This was the first Kentucky fort to surrender.

The next morning, Joseph's scalped head was bleeding badly. A woman noticed and reached down into an old tree stump and got a handful of spider webs and matted them on the wound, which stopped the bleeding and saved the boy's life...