

JAMES ADAIR'S ACCOUNT OF A CATAWBA WARRIOR

Louise Pettus

James Adair, appointed Indian agent in 1735 by King George III, visited the Catawba nation, probably in the 1740s. Adair wrote that since "time immemorial" the "Katahbas" had been at war with the Iroquois Confederation, or "northern Indians." The Confederation was originally made up of five nations, the Senecas, Mohawks, Oneidas, Onandagas and Cayugas. About 1722 the Tuscaroras joined them to make up the Six Nations.

The Iroquois were known for their fighting ability and were considered the strongest confederacy in the colonies. In spite of this, they were defeated in battle by the Catawbas many times.

Based on Adair's account, Robert Mills in 1826 tells an interesting story of a Catawba warrior out hunting who ran into a party of Seneca Indians obviously come to attack Catawba villages. The Catawba ran, firing his gun as he did so. He killed 7 of the enemy but there were too many and he was captured.

It was a long journey to the Seneca headquarters. Walking hundreds of miles, fed little, and sleeping on the bare ground with his feet and hands tied to stakes, the captured warrior behaved in such a manner that he was treated with respect by his captors, says Adair. However, when they stopped in Seneca towns the women and children beat and whipped him. Eventually a trial of some sort was held and the Catawba was condemned to "die by the fiery tortures."

While being led to the spot where he was to be executed by burning at the stake, the warrior suddenly dashed for freedom. He threw himself into the nearby river and swimming underneath the water "like a otter," he managed to avoid the bullets. [Mills, throughout his account, writes of the Indians using guns and bullets and not of bows and arrows.] Emerging on the opposite bank, the Catawba made "several signs of contempt.[and] put up the shrill war-whoop, and darting off in the manner of a beast broke loose from its torturing enemies, he continued his speed so as to run, by about midnight of the same day, as far as his eager pursuers were two days in reaching."

After a short rest the Catawba found 5 Senecas camping. Waiting until the camp was asleep, he crept in and killed them all with one of their own tomahawks. "He stripped off their scalps, clothed himself, took a choice gun, and as much ammunition and provisions as he could well carry in a running march, set off afresh, with a light heart, and did not sleep for several successive nights."

The Catawba then headed for the spot where he had first slain 7 of his enemies. He dug up their bodies, scalped them, burned the bodies and went home "in singular triumph."

The Seneca pursuers are said to have found this last camp and gone into shock. They decided the Catawba was an enemy wizard and that it would not be wise to pursue him any longer. They turned and went home.

Adair told this story in order to make the point that the Indians (speaking of all the tribes he knew in the 17th century) were determined to take revenge on the enemy, "like the Israelites." He wrote, "I have known the Indians to go a thousand miles, for the purpose of revenge, in pathless woods; over hills and mountains; through large cane swamps, full of grape-vines and briars; over broad lakes, rapid rivers, and deep creeks. . .exposed to . . . hunger and thirst. . .to satisfy the supposed craving ghosts of their deceased relatives."

While Adair stressed the element of revenge of blood, other observers point out that the taking of scalps also brought great prestige and titles to revenge-seeking warriors.