

EDWIN FORREST (“*SPARTACUS*,” “*METAMORA*”)

AND THE CULT OF AMERICAN MANLINESS¹



“Early in life, I took a great deal of exercise and made myself what I am, a Hercules.”

1806

March 9: Edwin Forrest was born in Philadelphia.

1. The biographer Richard Moody has characterized this man as “the first actor who refused to subscribe to the nation’s cultural inferiority complex.” We might consider him rather as the actor who made a career out of loud and incessant proclamations of defiance of the idea of the superiority of the British over the American. If we had lived in his era, I suspect, our attitude might well have been “Oh, give it a rest.”

1814

Washington Irving served as a colonel in the New York Militia and as an aide-de-camp to Governor Daniel Tompkins. His “Philip of Pokanoket” constructed the sachem Metacom of the Wampanoag as “a patriot attached to his native soil — a prince true to his subjects, and indignant of their wrongs — a soldier, daring in battle, firm in adversity, patient of fatigue, of hunger, of every variety of bodily suffering, and ready to perish in the cause he had espoused”:²



While the Mathers had considered Philip a devilish, barbarous villain and even, in Cotton’s words, a “blasphemous leviathan,” Washington Irving recast the Wampanoag leader as an honorable, patriotic hero, nobler than the noblest of Noble Savage. In effect, Irving reversed the version of King Philip’s War that had been popular during the American Revolution. In 1775 Americans had been asked to think of the British as simply “more distant savages” than the Indian neighbors their forefathers had fought in 1675. They had seen King Philip’s War (American colonists vs. redskins) as a crude rehearsal for the American Revolution (American colonists vs. redcoats). Washington Irving disagreed. He asked Americans to identify less with Mather, Church, and Hubbard and more with Metacom and his warriors. Philip, in Irving’s estimation, was a courageous leader struggling to free his people from the foreign tyranny embodied by colonial authorities.

“The People make their recollection fit in with their sufferings.”

— Thucydides, HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR

2. Here the actor Edwin Forrest is posing in his sachem stage costume in the studio of Mathew B. Brady in about 1860 as the tragic hero “Metamora” of the oft-staged play about Metacom designed for him in 1828 by Concord’s John Augustus Stone (*METAMORA: OR THE LAST OF THE WAMPANOAGS*). The pose minimizes the actor’s immense calves, which were notorious in his era. Brady used his impressive Imperial format, with a collodion negative that measures 20 x 17 inches uncropped, a format that needed to be prepared and exposed while still wet. This is a bitmapped image of a modern salted paper print from that original collodion negative, which is a gift of The Edwin Forrest Home at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

1820

Edwin Forrest made his theatrical debut at the Walnut Street theatre in Philadelphia, in the tragedy *Douglas*.



At a demonstration of the effects of nitrous oxide, this 14-year-old continued to recite a long passage from Shakespeare's *Richard III* even while under the influence.

1826

Edwin Forrest was back from the Wild West, where he had been wielding a Bowie knife given to him by Jim Bowie himself, challenging people on paddle steamers to knife fights, etc. His ultra-manly performances at the Park Theatre in New-York in the lead role of Shakespeare's *Othello* were propelling him into a then unparalleled career of critical success and public renown. His loud jingoism was making him especially popular with a certain type of America-Firster theater buff. Privately, Forrest was hanging out with a Choctaw named Push-ma-ta-ha whose savage body he very much admired. He very much enjoyed getting out into the woods with his friend and persuading him to strip and parade naked at night around their campfire. Of course, this was all strictly business, homoerotics were not involved, for the artist was simply preparing himself to enrich his stage presence as the sachem Metacom of the Wampanoag and the prototype of a new type on the world stage, the American Ultramanly Man.

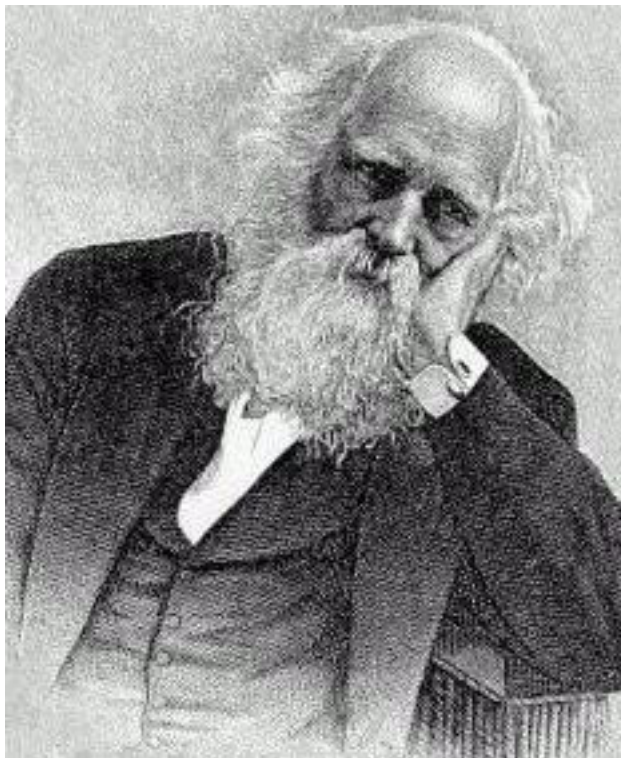


1828

November 28: The celebrated American actor Edwin Forrest advertised in the Critic for a role appropriate to his bulky talents. He would pay, he said, \$500.⁰⁰ for “the best tragedy, in five acts, of which the hero, or



principal character, shall be an aboriginal of this country.” William Cullen Bryant headed the committee that evaluated the submissions.



The award went to Concord’s own John Augustus Stone.³ He wrote a tragedy about the race tragedy we know as “King Phillip’s War”, in which the sachem Metacom of the Wampanoag was of course presented as the

3. A total of 14 plays had been submitted. In a series of such prize competitions, some 200 plays would be offered, and eight other such plays would be rewarded. Included among these eight others would be another play by John Augustus Stone, this one titled THE ANCIENT BRITON.

heroic primary character, suitable for this American to portray. This *METAMORA: OR THE LAST OF THE WAMPANOAGS* would be enormously popular on tour from city to city over many years.⁴



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4. There are towns named Metamora in Michigan, in Ohio, in Illinois, and in Indiana, as marked in pink on this map:



Here Edwin Forrest is posed in the studio of Mathew B. Brady in about 1860 in costume as the “Metamora” of the oft-staged play. Brady used his impressive Imperial format, with a collodion negative of 20 x 17 inches uncropped, exposed while wet.

1829

December 15: 1st staging of John Augustus Stone’s *METAMORA: OR THE LAST OF THE WAMPANOAGS*, at the Park Theater in New-York, starring Edwin Forrest. In a stunningly sarcastic evocation of chauvinism the audience of Americans was begged, after as well as before the performance, not to disdain this play merely because it had been authored by an American rather than a foreigner.



1831

October 13-17: The following, about Robert Montgomery Bird’s melodrama *The Gladiator* in which the role of Spartacus was played by Edwin Forrest, is a snippet from Charles Haskell’s *REMINISCENCES OF NEW YORK BY AN OCTOGENARIAN*:

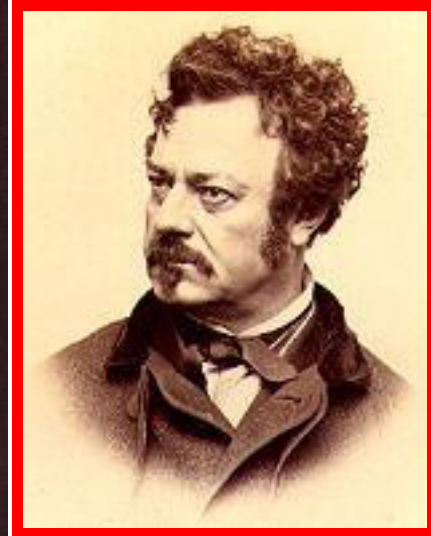
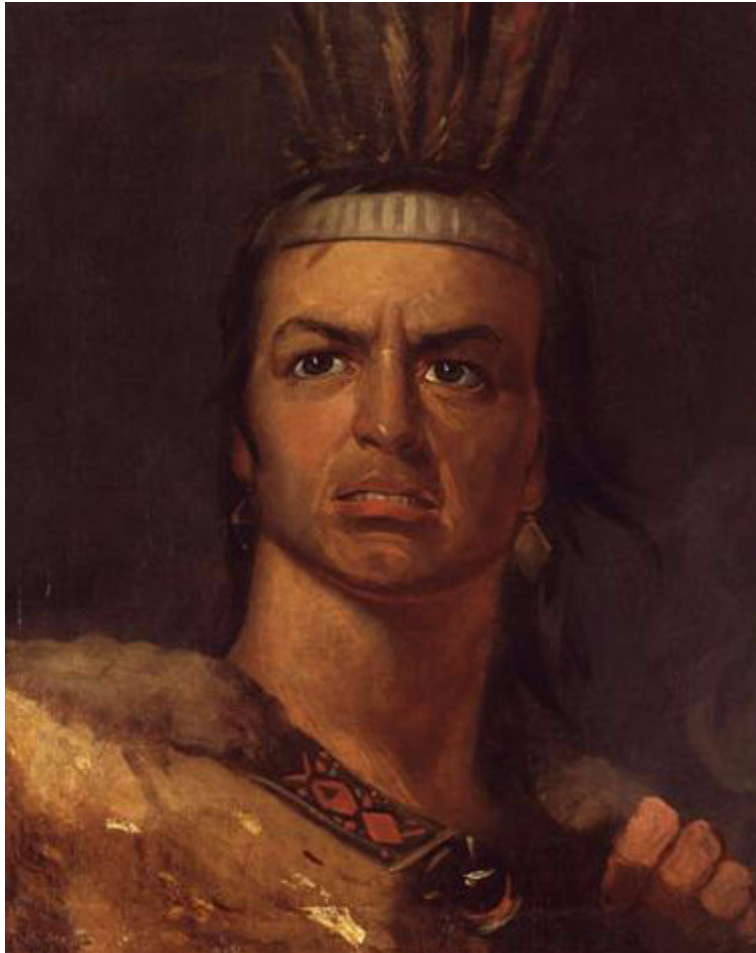
Late in September, Forrest was first seen in “The Gladiators,” the well-known play written for him by Dr. Bird of Philadelphia. A Mr. Anderson, an English actor, on his arrival here was charged by a fellow-passenger, an American, with having made some very unjust and ill-natured remarks during the passage regarding Americans. Upon the announcement of his engagement at the Park Theatre the charges were publicly reported, and as a result, the house on the evening of his appearance, October 13, was filled with some of our indignant citizens who had individually assembled, without any previous association, and upon the entrance of Anderson on the stage he was greeted with hisses, missiles, etc., so persistently maintained that the performance was arrested. Nevertheless, Anderson was announced for the evening of October 15, in the same part (Henry Bertram, in the opera “Guy Mannering.”) On this occasion the theatre was filled to overflowing with men only, who were determined to prevent Anderson’s performance. When it was attempted to read his apology, a riot broke out which was not the least diminished by announcement that the actor’s engagement had been cancelled and that the play would be changed. As usual in such cases, the riot spread far beyond the designs of its originators and became the

causeless, silly, or malicious outbreak of evil-disposed persons. It continued during the next day (Sunday). And in the evening of that day an attack was made on the theatre, the doors and windows being battered in. "Old Hays" and his men after a time restored comparative order, and on Monday the mob was appeased by sight of the front of the theatre covered with American flags, patriotic transparencies, etc., and no further violence occurred.



1833

November: Edwin Forrest played the lead in John Augustus Stone’s *METAMORA; OR THE LAST OF THE WAMPANOAGS* in Boston.

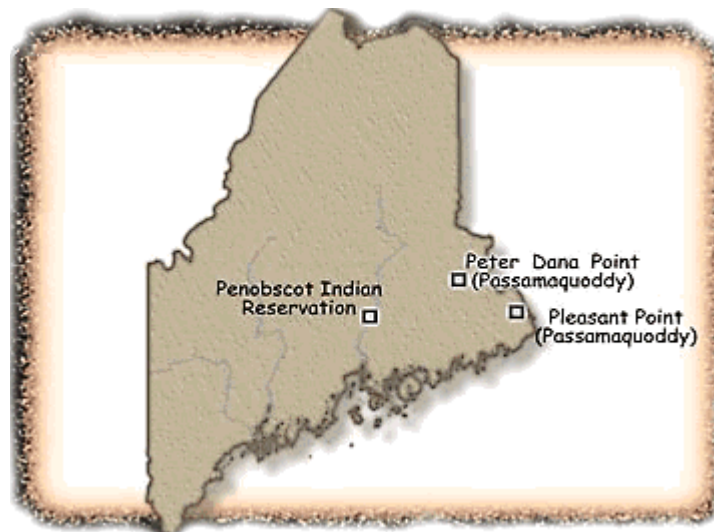


Titillation was created among the white majority of the audience by the presence of a delegation of Abenaki (Penobscot). These men had come down from Maine to petition that they be allowed to create an independent

tribal government on their remaining tribal lands.⁵



The Penobscots' claims were largely ignored, but while the delegation was spurned by the State House, it was welcomed in the theater district. Instead of regaining their land, the Penobscots were sent on a short walk across Boston Common to attend a performance of *METAMORA* at the Tremont Street Theater.



One may wonder how much excitement was being created in Concord by the fact that here was this most famous actor, Forrest, playing in downtown Boston in a prizewinning play written about famous local events by Stone, a favorite son of the town!⁶

5. Here the actor Edwin Forrest is posing in his sachem stage costume in the studio of Mathew B. Brady in about 1860 in such manner as to minimize the size of his calves.

6. (Of course, after the fact, with John Augustus Stone having committed suicide later and all that, one can understand how it came about that he has now been written entirely out of the town's history.)

1834

June 1, Sunday: John Augustus Stone committed suicide by throwing himself into the Schuylkill River. There were some who were not obviously impressed either by this successful attempt at a play or by this successful attempt at a suicide:

Mr. Stone did what he could to atone for the injury he inflicted upon the world by the production of this play ... he drowned himself on 1 June 1834, in the Schuylkill River. We will accept his presumptive apology.

Edwin Forrest, who had paid Stone \$500.⁰⁰ for his play *METAMORA: OR THE LAST OF THE WAMPANOAGS*, an often-staged play which usually grossed approximately that amount per night (as well as another \$500.⁰⁰ for



another less performed play entitled *THE ANCIENT BRITON*), would thoughtfully fund the monument for the grave.⁷

**IN MEMORY OF THE AVTHOR OF “METAMORA”
BY HIS FRIEND, E. FORREST**

After the drowning, Stone’s wife, the actress Mrs. Legge, would remarry to N.H. Bannister. During this year Forrest anticipated Waldo Emerson’s 1837 declaration of American literary independence at Harvard College, by declaring with enviable simplicity:

Our literature should be independent.

7. You can go visit this headstone/billboard, if you choose, in Machpelah Cemetery.

1836

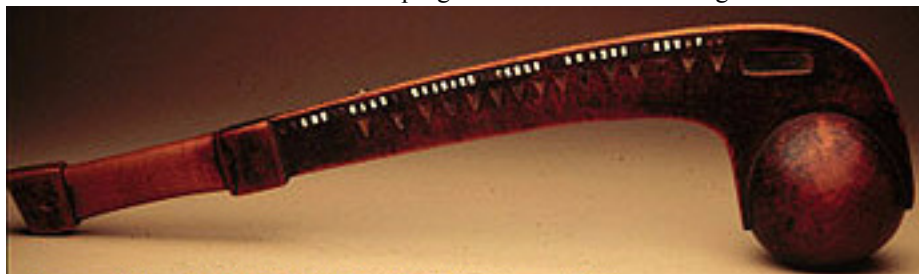
The famous American actor Edwin Forrest was reported to have been hissing from a balcony seat in a theater in England, during a performance of his British competitor William Macready. Witnessing Macready's effete, reserved, delicate, aristocratic, in a word **effeminate**, style of acting had simply been too much, and the visiting American actor had been unable to moderate his American contempt for woman-like weakness.⁸ Attempts to excuse this behavior as some sort of cultural misunderstanding would not be generally appreciated in the British press.



8. Bear in mind that during this period the weakness of the female element and the sexual depletion of the male element were linked in the popular mind, so that an "effeminate" man, seeming to be lacking in proper masculine vigor, would be assumed to be a victim of the "spermatorrhea" associated with the secret vice of masturbation. He had wasted his ammo and his gun was empty. Just as an obese person might be sneered at by pleasure-denying Puritans, as self-indulgent and lacking in self-control in regard to a personal indulgence in regard to eating, so the unmasculine male might be sneered at as self-indulgent and as lacking in self-control in regard to an assumed private manipulation of private parts. (In women, however, the diddling of the passions was believed to so increase sexual energy as to create not an unsuitable weakness but instead an unsuitable strength, to wit, a "furious, noisy and filthy" monster.)

1842

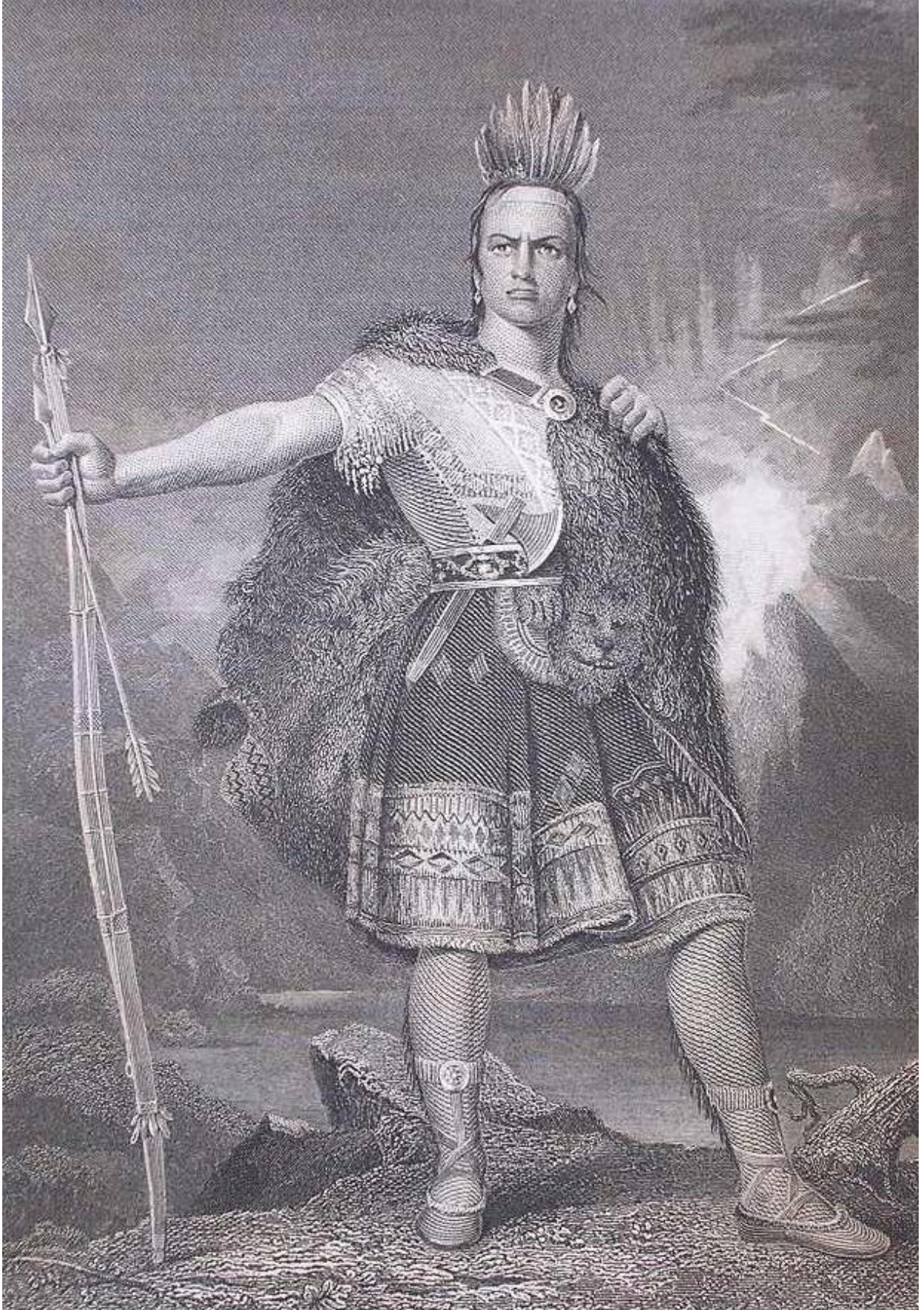
Apparently an object that was being purported to have been Metacom’s war club was at this point known to be in the possession of the descendants of the Reverend John Checkley of Providence, Rhode Island. Whether this object representing the gradual decay and extinction of a most marked race, recording a chapter in the world’s history, that of the fate of the Indian race, than which there is no more saddening, had been inherited from the Reverend Checkley or had been acquired by some other family member from some other source is unknown. It is not known from whom the purchase had been made, or when. Whether the object in question ever was King Phillip’s war club is of course quite unknown, but obviously as of 1842 it was already serving its purpose, its purpose of course being to allow members of the surviving white race, viewing it, hefting it, secure in victory, no longer under any threat, to be appropriately saddened at the slow retreat of the wigwam and the tomahawk and the onward progress of the axe and the log cabin.⁹



In this year the actor Edwin Forrest was depicted in costume for his Metamora role in the play “Last of the Wampanoag” (on a following screen).¹⁰

9. This object, which purports to be a native American war club 22 inches in length and weighing 28½ ounces, was made from the ball root of a maple tree. A ball root is something that develops when the root system of a tree hangs over a stream bank in such a way as to expose the roots and cause them to grow at an angle. The object is inlaid with white and purple wampum. White wampum is made from the central column of a whelk shell. Purple wampum is made from quahog shell. There are also several triangular horn pieces inlaid along one side of the club. The holes were made to fit individual beads. There are two lines of wampum along the top width of the club, although most of this wampum is missing. Also, there are two bands of wampum along the adjacent surfaces of the handle, 44 beads to a side. Then on one side there were spots for 15 triangular inlaid horn pieces, two of which are still in place. Also, on the other side, there is a lower band of wampum beads, only partially completed. Two parallel lines can be detected in the wood, that were made with something sharp, clearly to outline where the bead inlay was to be continued. There are also three rectangular sections engraved into the club near the ball, perhaps for a brass inlay that is now missing.

10. Forrest was able to achieve a massive aspect on stage despite the fact that he was not taller than the average man of his generation (that would have been five feet seven and a half inches).



1845

Edwin Forrest was mercilessly hissed by British audiences while touring as the male lead in *MacBeth*, bellowing the lines of William Shakespeare in his trademark Americanist style. He alleged that his competitor, the British actor William Macready whose performance he had been observed to have hissed in 1836, was responsible for this critical reception, and initiated a vitriolic and very public feud that would play itself out, in a manner exacerbated by jingo sentiments on both sides, between mobs of theater fans.



(One thing you should definitely grasp about the United States of this period is that it had embraced Shakespeare as its own. For instance, in camp awaiting action against the Mexican army in Texas, a young lieutenant named Ulysses S. Grant took up the role of Desdemona in Shakespeare’s play *Othello*.)

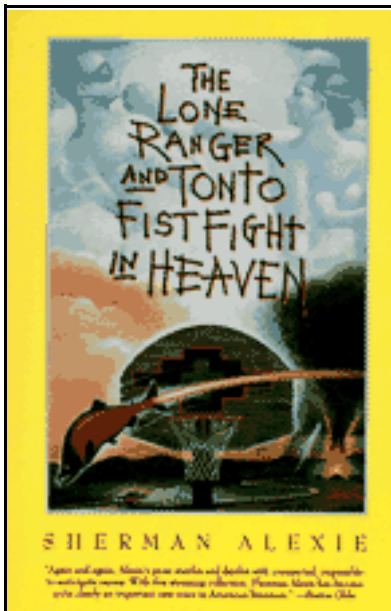


1847

November 29: Cayuse tribespeople killed the Oregon missionary Marcus Whitman and his group. The Adelphi Theater of Boston featured a burlesque version of "King Phillip's War" titled *METAMORA; OR, THE LAST OF THE POLLYWOGS*. This marginally humorous, inane derogatory, and offensively racist performance was marked by the repeated popping of popguns and the repeated resort to the use of the word "Ugh." At the culmination of the dying scene, the sachem Metacom of the Wampanoag was made to leap lightly to his feet and exclaim directly to the audience, as the curtain fell, "Confound your skins, I will not die to please you!"

"The People make their recollection fit in with their sufferings."

— Thucydides, HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR



1849

May 7, Monday: There was an uproar in front of the New-York opera house in Astor Place which was, ultimately, about whether a British actor, as a foreigner, would be allowed to play a role when there was an American actor available for this work. The demonstration of this date had its ties to an inflammatory book by Ned Buntline, *THE MISTERIES AND MISERIES OF NEW YORK*, which blamed the city’s problems on its recent waves of immigrants. Down with immigrants! Jobs are for Americans! The popular American actor Edwin Forrest, an outspoken Know-Nothing, had been attracting chauvinists as, excuse my French, flies gather to shit.



May 10, Thursday: Edwin Forrest’s 20-year rivalry with the British actor William Macready put the torch to a powder-keg of nativist sentiment when –due to head-on competition between simultaneous New-York productions of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, and due to Macready’s status as a mere foreigner, and due to Forrest’s Americans-first Know-Nothing jingoism– that professional rivalry induced a riot of 25,000 nativists at the Astor Place Opera House during which 22 of his manly fans were killed by the police and militia, and 36 very seriously wounded.

Commenting on the Scorsese movie “Gangs of New York”:

“In my own research of New York history, through first-person accounts and newspaper reports, I have found that our past was often at least as violent and squalid, if not more so, than the movie depicts.”

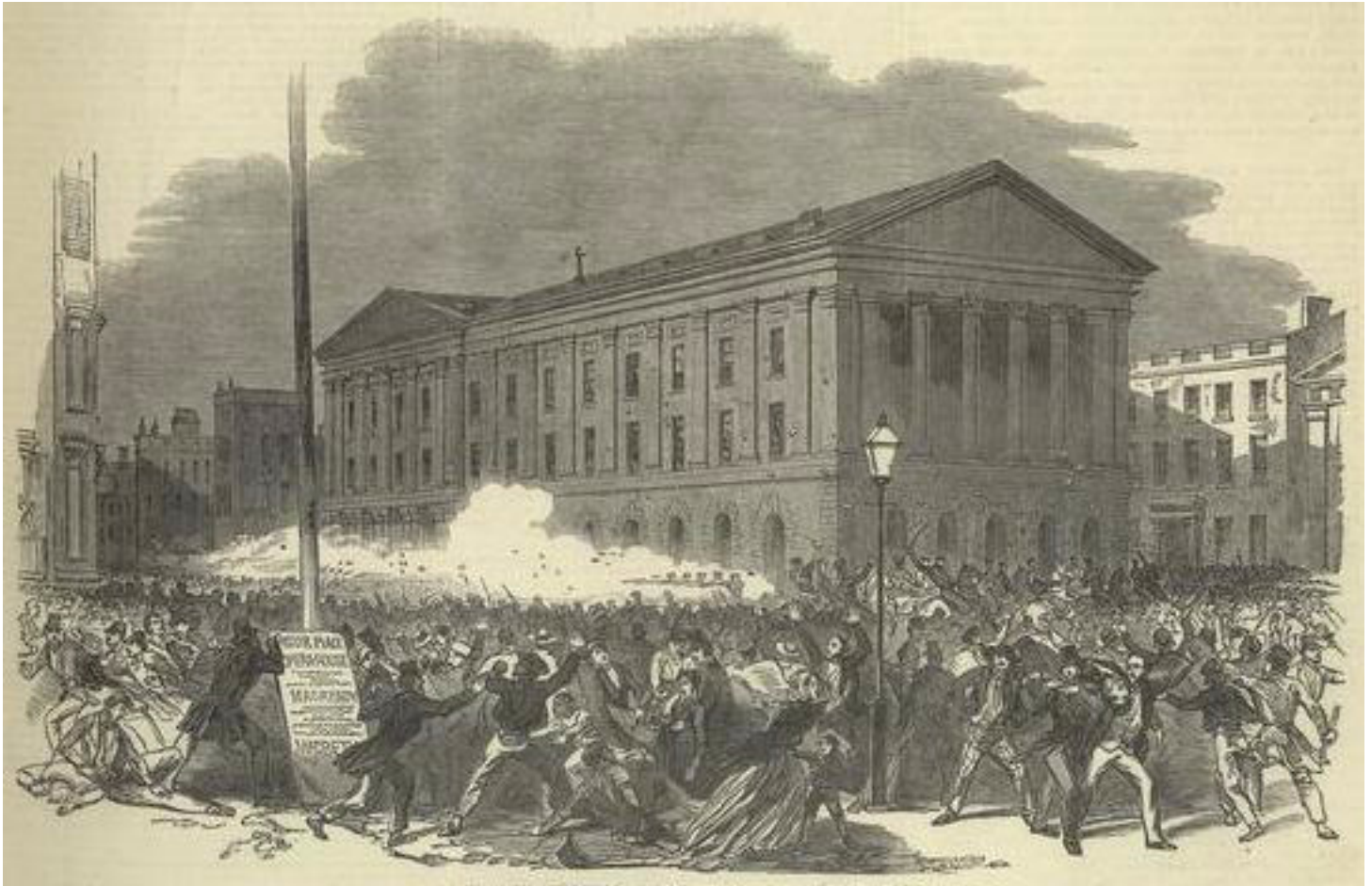
— Kevin Baker




Though Edwin Forrest was only indirectly responsible for the New-York militia's having fired into this mob he had so endeavored to create, as his manly fans attempted to invade and disrupt Macready's effete performance, his reputation would suffer, and then he would fall further in the eyes of his public due to a protracted and, once again, very public attempt at divorce.

For Edwin Forrest, reenacting "King Phillip's War" was a step on the path toward an American national drama. Like so many other artists of his generation, Forrest appropriated Indianness and Indian ancestors to make himself American, to distance himself from all that was English. In this he exactly reversed what writers like Increase Mather and William Hubbard had tried to do so furiously -and so prolifically- a century and a half earlier. Late-seventeenth-century colonists had tried to purify themselves of the contamination of America's indigenous inhabitants and make themselves more English. Early-nineteenth-century Americans tried to take on the attributes of Indianness to make themselves less English.

On the 2nd of June, the Illustrated London News would be providing its readership with a front-page illustration of the rioting in front of the New-York opera house, complete with the powder smoke from the police volley into the crowd:



May 10, 11, 12: A 3-day riot outside the Astor Place Opera House in New-York:

 New York in 1849 was a very different city from the one [Lydia Maria Child] had known when she first came there eight years earlier. The economy had rebounded and a building boom was underway. On lower Broadway the private residences which had once lined this elegant promenade had either been converted into business establishments or torn down and replaced by new and bigger buildings. Here the first great American department store of Alexander T. Stewart had opened in 1846. Here also stood the new luxury hotels complete with gas lighting, interior plumbing, and steam heat. With the spreading commercialization of lower Manhattan, the well-to-do moved their homes farther and farther uptown; Fifth Avenue began to replace Broadway as the fashionable heart of the city. While growth and expansion were clearly benefiting the rich in New York, the same could not be said for the poor, whose numbers were added to yearly by the thousands of immigrants who poured off the docks and into the city in search of housing and employment. Wages remained low while rents rose as the value of property increased. City residents became particularly alarmed during the winter of 1846-1847 when a flood of homeless, destitute foreigners sought charity from the already overcrowded almshouses and other public institutions. At mid-century, New York gave the appearance of two hostile cities – one rich, progressive, and Protestant, the other poor, foreign, and Catholic. Less than two months after Maria returned, the latent hostility between the two classes erupted into open warfare. The occasion was the appearance of the famous English actor William Macready at the Astor Opera House on May 10, 1849. For some time a feud had been raging between Macready and Edwin Forrest, a popular, if crude American actor whose great public following did not include the rich and fashionable. Forrest was an ardent democrat and promoter of a national "American" theater. He scorned the aristocratic and European influence which Macready represented, and so, with the help of the Sixth Ward boss, Isaiah Rynders, Forrest deliberately goaded his supporters to form a mob outside the Opera House where Macready was appearing in Macbeth. For three days the mob raged, setting fire to the Opera House and tearing up the pavement outside. Not until soldiers were brought in was order finally restored.

1851

Guess what, there was a sexual double standard — and it wasn't even the 20th Century yet! Up to this point in time, the statistic is that legislative divorces were being granted to just under 70% of (white) American husbands who had charged their (white) wives with having committed adultery with a black man but to only 55% of (white) American wives who had charged their (white) husbands with the keeping of a black mistress.

The very popular and very wealthy Americanist actor Edwin Forrest involved himself in a very public and very nasty attempt at divorcing his wife, the actress Catherine Sinclair, the very unsavory ramifications of which would severely damage his standing in the eyes of his fans. The court having been unpersuaded that he had any ground to put his Catherine aside in favor of a live-in mistress, he would be constructing legal appeal after legal appeal, unable to take no for an answer, from his dark mansion in Philadelphia, for all of the following 18 years.



1860

At around this point in time, Edwin Forrest commissioned the Matthew Brady studio to depict him in his most popular roles. Portraits of Forrest attired for his roles as Macbeth and as Spartacus and as Metamora (the sachem Metacom of the Wampanoag) reveal how, in very different costumes, he presented one unchanging heroic image, an image which this bulky actor preserved even when attired for the street. He was the man's man, the John Wayne, of that era. When the actress Fanny Kemble saw him as Spartacus in "The Gladiator," she called Forrest "a mountain of a man!" He became famous not only for his outsized heroes but also for his accumulating wealth and his estate on the palisades of the Hudson River, and over the years the formula that had brought this success was never altered.¹¹



"What the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending."

— William Dean Howells

Daniel Pierce Thompson (1795-1868)'s *THE DOOMED CHIEF; OR, TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO*, about "King Phillip's War," was published in Philadelphia.

"The People make their recollection fit in with their sufferings."

— Thucydides, *HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR*

11. Here Forrest is posed in the studio of Mathew B. Brady in costume as the tragic hero "Metamora" of the oft-staged play about Metacom designed for him by Concord's John Augustus Stone (*METAMORA: OR THE LAST OF THE WAMPANOAGS*). Brady used his impressive Imperial format, with a collodion negative that measures 20 x 17 inches uncropped, a format that needed to be prepared and exposed while still wet. This is a bitmapped image of a modern salted paper print from that original collodion negative, which is a gift of The Edwin Forrest Home in our National Portrait Gallery.

1865

Increasingly debilitated by sciatica, dragging a bent leg, Edwin Forrest would seldom again be making appearances on stage. The actor whom the gods would destroy, having always been mad, had been rendered unsightly.



1872

December 12: Edwin Forrest died in Philadelphia. Today he is remembered not for his larger-than-life masculism or his larger-than-life estate or his larger-than-life divorce petition against actress Catherine Sinclair but for his larger-than-life rivalry with British actor William Macready, which in 1849 had put the torch to a powder-keg of nativist sentiment and induced a riot at the Astor Place Opera House which had resulted in the deaths of a number of his manly fans.



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Prepared: August 13, 2007

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