

Jeffrey Amherst and Smallpox Blankets

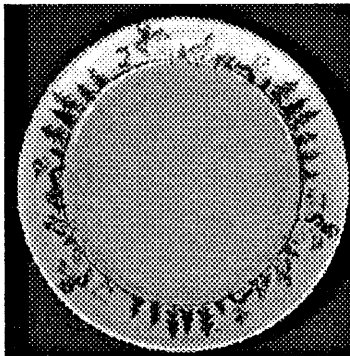
Lord Jeffrey Amherst's letters discussing germ warfare against American Indians

"... every Tree is become an Indian...." Colonel Henry Bouquet to General Amherst, dated 29 June 1763. [63k]

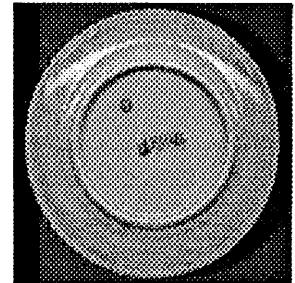
Lord Jeff

Lord Jeffrey Amherst was commanding general of British forces in North America during the final battles of the so-called French & Indian war (1754-1763). He won victories against the French to acquire Canada for England and helped make England the world's chief colonizer at the conclusion of the Seven Years War among the colonial powers (1756-1763).

The town of Amherst, Massachusetts, was named for Lord Jeff even before he became a Lord. Amherst College was later named after the town. It is said the local inhabitants who formed the town preferred another name, Norwottuck, after the Indians whose land it had been; the colonial governor substituted his choice for theirs. Frank Prentice Rand, in his book, *The Village of Amherst: A Landmark of Light* [Amherst, MA: Amherst Historical Society, 1958], says that at the time of the naming, Amherst was "the most glamorous military hero in the New World.the name was so obvious in 1759 as to be almost inevitable." [p. 15]



Amherst College china plates depicting mounted Englishman with sword chasing Indians on foot were in use until the 1970's.



Click on the pictures to see full-size images.

Smallpox blankets

Despite his fame, Jeffrey Amherst's name became tarnished by stories of smallpox-infected blankets used as germ warfare against American Indians. These stories are reported, for example, in Carl Waldman's *Atlas of the North American Indian* [NY: Facts on File, 1985]. Waldman writes, in reference to a siege of Fort Pitt (Pittsburgh) by Chief Pontiac's forces during the summer of 1763:

... Captain Simeon Ecuyer had bought time by sending smallpox-infected blankets and handkerchiefs to the Indians surrounding the fort -- an early example of biological warfare -- which started an epidemic among them. Amherst himself had encouraged this tactic in a letter to Ecuyer. [p. 108]

Some people have doubted these stories; other people, believing the stories, nevertheless assert that the infected blankets were not intentionally distributed to the Indians, or that Lord Jeff himself is not to blame for the germ warfare tactic.

Lord Jeff's letters during Pontiac's Rebellion

The documents provided here are made available to set the record straight. These are images of microfilmed original letters written between General Amherst and his officers and others in his command during the summer of 1763, when the British were fighting what became known as Pontiac's Rebellion.

Pontiac, an Ottawa chief who had sided with the French, led an uprising against the British after the French surrender in Canada. Indians were angered by Amherst's refusal to continue the French practice of providing supplies in exchange for Indian friendship and assistance, and by a generally imperious British attitude toward Indians and Indian land. As Waldman puts it:

... Lord Jeffrey Amherst, the British commander-in-chief for America, believed ... that the best way to control Indians was through a system of strict regulations and punishment when necessary, not "bribery," as he called the granting of provisions. [p. 106]

The British Manuscript Project

The documents provided here are among Amherst's letters and other papers microfilmed as part of the British Manuscript Project, 1941-1945, undertaken by the United States Library of Congress during World War II. The project was designed to preserve British historical documents from possible war damage. There are almost three hundred reels of microfilm on Amherst alone.

The microfilm is difficult to read, and paper copies even harder. Nonetheless, the images obtained by scanning the copies are sufficiently clear for online viewing. The images are of key excerpts from the letters. An index is provided to show by document number the location of these images in the microfilm set. Ascii text of the excerpts is also provided.

The documents

These are the pivotal letters:

- Colonel Henry Bouquet to General Amherst, dated 13 July 1763, [262k] suggests in a postscript the distribution of blankets to "inoculate the Indians";
- Amherst to Bouquet, dated 16 July 1763, [128k] approves this plan in a postscript and suggests as well as "to try Every other method that can serve to Extirpate this Execrable Race." (This postscript spans two pages.)

These letters also discuss the use of dogs to hunt the Indians, the so-called "Spaniard's Method," which Amherst approves in principle, but says he cannot implement because there are not enough dogs. In a letter dated 26 July 1763, Bouquet acknowledges Amherst's approval [125k] and writes, "all your Directions will be observed."

Historian Francis Parkman, in his book *The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War after the Conquest of Canada* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1886] refers to a postscript in an earlier letter from Amherst to Bouquet wondering whether smallpox could not be spread among the Indians:

Could it not be contrived to send the *Small Pox* among those disaffected tribes of Indians? We must on this occasion use every stratagem in our power to reduce them. [Vol. II, p. 39 (6th edition)]

I have not found this letter, but there is a letter from Bouquet to Amherst, dated 23 June 1763, [189k] three weeks before the discussion of blankets to the Indians, stating that Captain Ecuyer at Fort Pitt (to which Bouquet would be heading with reinforcements) has reported smallpox in the Fort. This indicates at least that the writers knew the plan could be carried out.

It is curious that the specific plans to spread smallpox were relegated to postscripts. I leave it to the reader to ponder the significance of this.

Several other letters from the summer of 1763 show the smallpox idea was not an anomaly. The letters are filled with comments that indicate a genocidal intent, with phrases such as:

- "...that Vermine ... have forfeited all claim to the rights of humanity" (Bouquet to Amherst, 25 June) [149k]
- "I would rather chuse the liberty to kill any Savage...." (Bouquet to Amherst, 25 June) [121k]

- "...Measures to be taken as would Bring about the Total Extirpation of those Indian Nations" (Amherst to Sir William Johnson, Superintendent of the Northern Indian Department, 9 July) [229k]
- "...their Total Extirpation is scarce sufficient Attonement...." (Amherst to George Croghan, Deputy Agent for Indian Affairs, 7 August) [145k]
- "...put a most Effectual Stop to their very Being" (Amherst to Johnson, 27 August [292k]; emphasis in original).

Amherst's correspondence during this time includes many letters on routine matters, such as officers who are sick or want to be relieved of duty; accounts of provisions on hand, costs for supplies, number of people garrisoned; negotiations with provincial governors (the army is upset with the Pennsylvania assembly, for example, for refusing to draft men for service); and so on. None of these other letters show a deranged mind or an obsession with cruelty. Amherst's venom was strictly reserved for Indians.

The French and the Indians

The sharpest contrast with letters about Indians is provided by letters regarding the other enemy, the French. Amherst has been at war with the French as much as with the Indians; but he showed no obsessive desire to extirpate them from the earth. They were apparently his "worthy" enemy. It was the Indians who drove him mad. It was they against whom he was looking for "an occasion, to extirpate them root and branch." [J. C. Long, *Lord Jeffrey Amherst: A Soldier of the King* (NY: Macmillan, 1933), p. 187]

Long describes Amherst's "kindliness to the French" and refers to Amherst's "intensity of feeling on these issues":

Amherst's kindliness to the French civilians was more than a military gesture. He had a warm sympathy for the countryside, an interest in people and the way they lived. "The Inhabitants live comfortably," he observed in his journal, "most have stone houses....

This humane attitude was reflected in his rules for the governing of Canada. As its de facto military Governor-General he established a temporary code ... a program of tolerance and regard for colonial sensibilities....

Perhaps most statesmanlike of all was Amherst's recognition of the French law, ... a recognition which permitted change of national loyalty without social upheaval. [p. 137]

In contrast to these kindly feelings, Long says that Pontiac's attacks on British forts at Detroit and Presqu'Isle "aroused Amherst to a frenzy, a frenzy almost hysterical in its impotence." Long then quotes from Amherst's letter to Sir William Johnson:

... it would be happy for the Provinces there was not an Indian settlement within a thousand Miles of them, and when they are properly punished, I care not how soon they move their Habitations, for the Inhabitants of the Woods are the fittest Companions for them, they being more nearly allied to the Brute than to the Human Creation. [p.186]

Colonel Bouquet's poetic line, "... every Tree is become an Indian," [63k] quoted above, was his description of a contagion of fear among soldiers and settlers, for whom the Indians were a part of the wildness they perceived around themselves. These warriors would not stand in ordered ranks; they fell back into the forests only to emerge again in renewed attack; their leaders defied British logic and proved effective against a string of British forts; these were the enemy that nearly succeeded in driving the British out, and became the target for British genocide.

Conclusion

All in all, the letters provided here remove all doubt about the validity of the stories about Lord Jeff and germ warfare. The General's own letters sustain the stories.

As to whether the plans actually were carried out, Parkman has this to say:

... in the following spring, Gershom Hicks, who had been among the Indians, reported at Fort Pitt that

the small-pox had been raging for some time among them....

An additional source of information on the matter is the Journal of William Trent, commander of the local militia of the townspeople of Pittsburgh during Pontiac's seige of the fort. This Journal has been described as "... the most detailed contemporary account of the anxious days and nights in the beleaguered stronghold." [*Pen Pictures of Early Western Pennsylvania* , John W. Harpster, ed. (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1938).]

Trent's entry for May 24, 1763, includes the following statement:

... we gave them two Blankets and an Handkerchief out of the Small Pox Hospital. I hope it will have the desired effect.

Trent's Journal confirms that smallpox had broken out in Fort Pitt prior to the correspondence between Bouquet and Amherst, thus making their plans feasible. It also indicates that intentional infection of the Indians with smallpox had been already approved by at least Captain Ecuyer at the fort, who some commentators have suggested was in direct correspondence with General Amherst on this tactic (though I have not yet found such letters).

- [Go to microfilm index of documents and ascii text of excerpts](#)
 - [Go to discussion of smallpox and Indians](#) archived from the discussion list on early American history, IEAHCNET
 - [Go to Journal of William Trent, 1763](#)
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Additional Sources of Information

Some readers question whether smallpox can be spread by such methods as infected blankets. There is a smallpox virus *Variola minor* that is transmitted by inhalation, communicable for 3-7 days. There is a smallpox virus *Variola major* that is transmitted by inhalation and by contamination; it is communicable by the former method for 9-14 days and by the latter method for several years in a dried state.

See Ann F. Ramenofsky, *Vectors of Death: The Archaeology of European Contact* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987):

Among Class I agents, *Variola major* holds a unique position. Although the virus is most frequently transmitted through droplet infection, it can survive for a number of years outside human hosts in a dried state (Downie 1967; Upham 1986). As a consequence, *Variola major* can be transmitted through contaminated articles such as clothing or blankets (Dixon 1962). In the nineteenth century, the U.S. Army sent contaminated blankets to Native Americans, especially Plains groups, to control the Indian problem (Stearn and Stearn 1945). [p. 148]

See also Robert L. O'Connell, *Of Arms and Men: A History of War, Weapons, and Aggression* (NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989):

Marking a milestone of sorts, certain colonists during the French and Indian Wars resorted to trading smallpox-contaminated blankets to local tribes with immediate and devastating results. While infected carcasses had long been catapulted into besieged cities, this seems to be the first time a known weakness in the immunity structure of an adversary population was deliberately exploited with a weapons response. [p. 171]

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