

How did the Indians start scalping their victims? One theory is that they learned it from the European settlers. A few Indian tribes had practiced scalping to a very limited extent before the Europeans arrived.

More often than not, scalping was practiced as a response in kind. The Europeans had taught them, first hand, the horror of viewing the mutilated remains of their families and friends after an attack by white settlers. By inflicting the same mutilation on their enemies they had hoped to stem the onslaught of these white settlers that were invading their land. To some Indians, if the attacks could not stop the whites, at least it would send the message that they were prepared to be as unscrupulous as the Europeans. The Iroquois in particular, used scalping to this purpose.

In the 11th century, the Earl of Wessex scalped his enemies. When the English and the Dutch came to the new world they brought the custom with them. This activity was brought not so much as an official method of warfare, but as a bounty to ease the anger of the frontiersmen.

The western border of the colonies was being populated with settlers that were comprised of a dubious lot. They were outlaws and runaways. With them they brought disease and alcohol. The frontier was a breeding ground for conflict with the Indian population. Initially the frontiersmen turned on the Indians in an attempt to move them off the land. When the Indians retaliated, the settlers turned to the government for help. The settlers demanded retribution for the Indian reprisals. The Dutch, and soon after the English, government created the [scalp](#) bounty as a means to pacify the settlers. Simply, they paid a fee for each scalp that was delivered to the locally appointed magistrate.

## **THE PRACTICE OF SCALPING**

Although the army was accomplishing the task of displacing the Indians, the bounty encouraged settlers to mount attacks on the Indians whenever they could. In 1703, Massachusetts paid 12 pounds for an Indian scalp. By 1723 the price had soared to 100 pounds. To the frontiersmen, it did not matter if the scalp came from an Indian or a white man. All that mattered was the bonus. The practice eventually became widespread. The French used the bounty on scalps to eradicate a peaceful tribe in Newfoundland. During the French and Indian Wars, the English offered their troops a bounty of 200 pounds for the scalp of the chief of the Delaware tribe, Shingass. This was 25 times the price that they offered their Indian allies for the scalp of a French soldier. This practice of paying a bounty for Indian scalps continued into the 19th century before the public put an end to the practice.

This practice of paying a scalp bounty inspired a widespread retaliation from the Indians. White frontiersmen would scalp not only the warriors but also the women and the children. In many cases the scalp was not even taken from an Indian. The government could not tell the difference. However, the Indians were blamed for initiating the practice, because no European would stoop so low as to take a scalp. It should also be noted that only the Indians were held accountable for the practice.