

SQUAKHEAG ETHNOHISTORY: A PRELIMINARY STUDY
OF CULTURE CONFLICT ON THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY FRONTIER

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Introduction

Between 1630 and 1690, a number of Indian groups along the Connecticut River went through a series of radical cultural and social changes. The Squakheag community from the Northfield, Massachusetts area was one such group. I would suggest, therefore, that an ethnohistorical study of the Squakheags may serve as a useful model for understanding Indian-English-French interaction on the middle Connecticut frontier. It should be noted at the outset, however, that portions of the following study are still rather tenuous. In trying to reconstruct Squakheag ethnohistory, a number of approaches must be tried before a definitive position can be reached. At present, what we know of the Squakheags is what can be reconstructed from a few documents and the archeological data just becoming available.

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By 1670, all of the Indian communities in the Connecticut River Valley were feeling the influence of European expansion which had begun in the early years of that century. Since the fur trade was a basic part of the economic foundation of the New England colonies, it contributed heavily to the milieu of Indian-white relations. Slightly later, the movement of English agricultural settlements northward in the valley also created substantial problems for socio-cultural interaction. Between 1623 and 1670 the Squakheags were affected to varying degrees by the expanding fur trade and from 1671 to 1689 by intermittent British settlement within their territory.

The valleys of the Connecticut River and its tributary streams were for several decades one of the highest fur yielding territories in New England. Geographically, the Squakheag were well situated to participate in the developing trade. In the immediate vicinity of their settlements, the Millers, Ashuelot and West rivers flowed into the larger Connecticut. The Ashuelot and Millers river formed part of the drainage system for southern New Hampshire and north central Massachusetts. The West River was of even greater importance for southern Vermont. The central location of the Squakheag community must have meant that considerable amounts of furs and European trade goods passed through their area by the mid-seventeenth century.

The earliest European trading contact in the Connecticut Valley probably occurred in 1614 when the Dutchman Adrian Block sailed 50 miles above

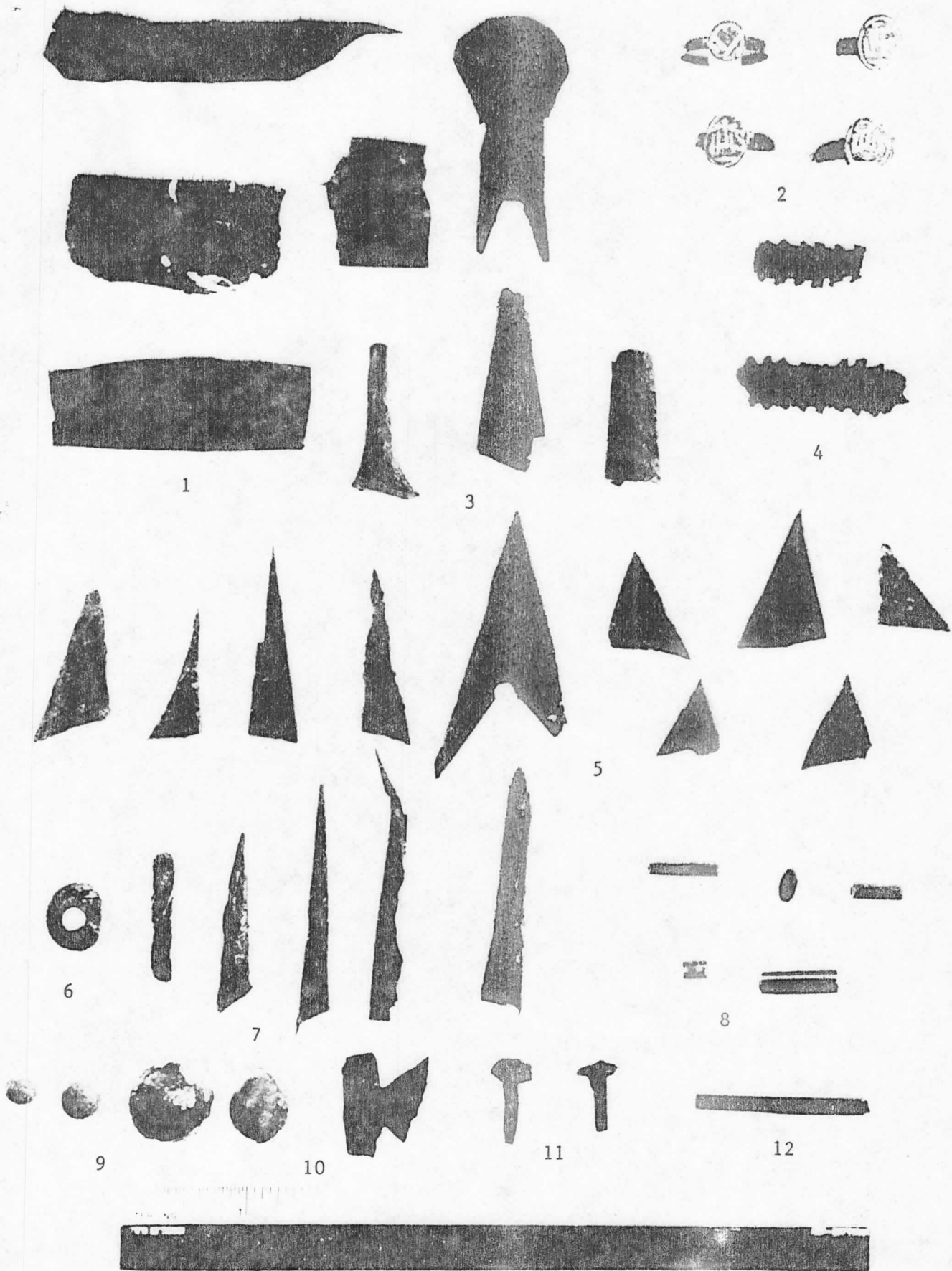


PLATE IV: SQUAKHEAG ETHNOHISTORY

1. Items of reworked copper (5). 2. Jesuit rings (4). 3. Copper "Jinglers" (3). 4. Cobs, Eight Row Flint Corn (2). 5. Triangular Copper Points (10). 6. Thimble Top with Drilled Hole. 7. Tubular Copper Points (5). 8. Glass Trade Beads. 9. Lead Musket Shot. 10. Copper Tool (?). 11. Iron Nails. 12. Tubular Copper Bead.