Adapting to Native American Life:
The Significant Story of Mary Jemison and Other Captivities

Jennifer Lucas

While most Americans know the infamous story of Pocahontas, few know the narratives of American men and women who gave up their lives and were adopted into Native American society. Mary Jemison is a prime example and she would eventually share the triumphant story of her adopted life with the rest of the world in the early 1800s. Later in life, Jemison recited her life to Dr. James Seaver as he meticulously filled the pages with her story; a story that demonstrated a different perception of Native Americans. With the clashes between the American Indian tribes and the United States, many Americans overlooked the basic humanity of the tribes. With her account, Jemison shed light onto the love and camaraderie that was present among within Native American tribes. During times of war and times of peace, Jemison struggled through many hardships but she survived with the support of her new family, the Seneca Indians. While some Americans wondered why anyone would want to leave the "American" way of life, her story answered these questions while sharing the love of her new family. Captivity narratives, such a Mary Jemison's, allow modern readers to see a fresh and different angle of Native American history. Through her

story, readers can better understand other captivity narratives from this time, and from these accounts, questions of race, individuality, and culture come through the tales of white Americans who were adopted into Native American society.

Like Jemison's story, there are numerous encounters of young women and men who were taken captive by Native Americans and these narratives have a particular history all of their own. From Americans such as Frances Slocum, Mary White Rowlandson, and Jemison, a reader is able to experience the past as they divulge their epic tales with words that would both capture the despair and prosperity that was present during these times. In the introduction of *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*, editor June Namias states that during this time, "A story of son, daughter, husband or wife captured by Indians was big news. Hundreds of captives were taken in the colonial wars between 1675 and 1763."[1] When dealing with a situation that involved kidnapping of innocent white Americans, it was going to be big news, no matter in which era it took place. At times whole families would be taken captive or just a son, daughter, wife, or husband. In some cases, the captives would witness or experience personal trauma, as is the case of Jemison,

[1] James Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* (New York: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 7.

who saw her own mother's scalp hanging from a tree as she rode away with her Indian captors. Incidents like this would gather public attention. The main characters within these stories would sometimes stay with their new adoptive families whereas others would return to their old lives.

The previously mentioned Mary Rowlandson was captured during King Phillips War in 1676. Along with her, others were taken captive during an attack on their village. Rowlandson, however, did not give up her previous lifestyle for that of her Native American captors. Instead she would return to the life she had always known and, like Jemison, she would share her story with the world. Another captive, John Williams, also returned to colonial society and together with Rowlandson's story, they became quite popular. Namias states that, "Mary Rowlandson and John Williams wrote what became widely read narratives of their captivity. Later, with the growth of the popular press and increased literacy, such stories enjoyed continued popularity and were often greatly exaggerated."[2] Namias shares with us just a few of the narratives that were written at the time. She explains how they also became popular with the advancement in education and an increase within the national press. These two alone would initiate a long history

[2] Ibid.

of captivity narratives, but it would not be just these factors that contributed to the popularity of these books.

Reading was the easiest and most accurate way to disseminate information. Newspapers and books provided enjoyment, and during this time narratives were extremely popular. Namias contends that the reason these stories were so popular was because they, "pitted white men and women against the forests, the mountains and other natural elements of the North American Continent. It was also a drama that scripted white actors against a field of native inhabitants."[3] She goes on to explain that, "white men, women, and children in relation to, and often in conflict with, Indians provided the substance of the first and perhaps most lasting of American true stories."[4] To many Americans these stories were interesting and they gave a view into a life that many would never experience, it was a different world from their own which left them enticed, wanting, needing to know more. They knew these narratives were true stories as well, which made them all the more attention-grabbing and invigorating.

Mary Jameson was a particularly interesting woman. Her story alone would be exemplified for readers as she relived it years later while

[3] Ibid, 11.
[4] Ibid.

discussing it with Dr. Seaver. The beginning of her epic tale as Namias explains would begin on, "April 5,1758, when Mary was about fifteen, the Jemison family and visiting friends were attacked by Shawnee and French forces. Mary's parents, two brothers, a sister, and a visitor were killed. Only she and the friends' young boy were spared . . . She recognized her mother's red hair as she watched them dry, clean, and paint scalps."[5] This would be the beginning of Mary's strange and fascinating new life. As she rode away, she would leave her past life for a new one, one that would produce culture shock. Even from the start of the story, readers are aware of the brutality that was present as she describes the graphic details of her mother's scalp. At this time many, people had their perception of Native Americans, and the start of Jemison's journey, especially her account of her family's murder and scalping, corroborates their perceptions. She would soon be given away to two Seneca women, and this is where she would settle and make a new life for herself.

Why would Mary Jemison choose to stay with her new captors? Many would assume that if one was captured their first motivation would be the instinct to escape. Many of the older captives would attempt this but Jemison was just a young girl at the time. When she explains her

[5] Ibid, 13.

situation within the tale she argues, "What could I do? A poor little defenseless girl; without a home to go to, even if I could be liberated; without a knowledge of the direction or distance to my former place of residence; and without a living friend to whom to fly to for protection. I felt a kind of horror, anxiety and dread, that to me, seemed in supportable."[6] Prior to this Jemison would describe these unknown Indian captors as savages, but as her story progresses she stops using this term. When she was first taken away from her family, to the life of the unknown, she was rightfully scared, knowing she had no other choice but to stay with these people. If she chose to run she knew she may not survive and that she would not have anyone or anything to return to. In the end, she decided to stay and engage with the new Indian culture and her new family.

When Mary Jemison was a young teenage girl, the fear of death and torture subsided and she began to embrace her new culture. In the first few years she would regularly question whether or not it was right to stay. Of course, she missed the interaction of her own people, the English language, and the life she once knew. Even though she had been with the Seneca for over a year now, she would still long to return to her old life. Jemison stated that, "the site of white people who could speak English

[6] Ibid, 70.

inspired me with an unspeakable anxiety to go home with them, and share in the blessings of civilization."[7] She was becoming more comfortable as a member of the Seneca nation but her thoughts would still linger on her past life, the life she had known for more than 10 years. She would have great difficulty picking up and learning the new language of the native peoples, yet she would soon be helping with small tasks and working around her home. This would help Jemison keep her mind off her past life and focus on building her new one.

While most of the men were busy hunting, many of the women took care of household chores, planting, maintaining gardens and crops, and taking care of kin. Theda Perdue explains, "[Native American] women performed back-breaking work and then surrendered the fruits of their labor…Farming, in particular, was linked to women's identity, sexuality, and procreative role."[8] Even though many women did, some did not and Perdue uses Seneca women, quoting Mary Jemison herself, as an example of corroborative effort. Jemison felt that the women within her community worked together, stating that their labor "was not severe…In the summer season, we planted, tended and harvested our corn…their task is probably not harder than that of a white women…and

[7] Ibid, 16.
[8] Theda Perdue in Frederick E Hoxie, *Native Americans and the Early Republic* (University Press of Virginia, 1999) 108-109.

their cares certainly are not half as numerous, nor as great."[9] Jemison compares the labor of white women to that of her Native American sisters, thinking they were quite comparable. These tasks would soon begin to define her womanhood as she labored on the land and gave birth to several Indian children that she came to love.

As Jemison was welcoming the new labors of the land into her life, she married, and had children with her Native American husband. Interestingly enough, Jemison tells the account in a manner that indicates that she was forced to marry a Native American man. Historian James Axtell quotes Jemison, "my sister's told me that I must go and live with one of them, whose name was She-nin-jee. Not daring to cross them, or disobey their commands, with a great degree of reluctance I went; and Sheninjee and I were married according to Indian custom."[10] Axtell goes on to analyze her marriage to this Native American man, stating that, "Mary Jemison, at the time a captive for two years, was unusual in implying that she was forced to marry an Indian…Considering the tenderness and kindness with which most captives reported they were treated, it is likely that she was less compelled in reality than in her

[9] Ibid, 109.
[10] James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press,, 1985), 319.

perception and memory of it."[11] Axtell implies that Jemison's perception of the events may have been slightly altered, making it difficult to decipher whether she chose to marry her first husband or was forced to do so. However, when she did marry she would slowly leave her past behind and become defined by the Native American culture that was already starting to change her life.

Over the course of her captivity she would marry twice, both to Native American men and she gave birth to eight children. Her first husband, Sheninjee, was an Indian among the Delaware tribe, who was living among the Seneca along the Ohio River. Jemison would describe her husband as a noble man, who was largely built in stature and a handsome fighter and lover. She shares with readers that he was, "courageous in war; a friend to peace, and a great lover of justice. He supported a degree of dignity far above his rank, and merited and received the confidence and friendships of all tribes with whom he was acquainted."[12] From Jemison's description of this Native American man, people could see true human emotions and characteristics, which at the time many whites felt were traits that the Indians lacked. He was a fighter when needed but also a man of peace. He held relationships with

[11] Ibid.
[12] Seaver, 16.

others in confidence. Mary Jemison's story show readers, specifically white Americans that it did not matter the color of skin, or what culture one was a part of to be human. However, Jemison still had her doubts about her first husband, due to his Native American heritage.

As Jemison shared her story with Dr. Seaver she would also share the doubts that she once felt about her new family. She previously described him as a lover and fighter, as well as a keeper of peace. But one thing lingered on Jemison's mind;

> Sheninjee was an Indian. The idea of spending my days with him at first seemed perfectly irreconcilable to my feelings; but his good nature, generosity, tenderness, and friendship towards me, soon gained my affection; and strange as it may seem, I loved him!-To me he was ever kind in sickness, and always treated me with gentleness; in fact he was an agreeable husband, and a comfortable companion.[13]

Jemison's "forced" marriage to Sheninjee, and her description of him, would bring scrutiny from white Americans. How could a white women feel this way about a Native American man? But many readers were able to understand the compassion she felt toward him. Her perception of the man she was to marry was far from the racial ideologies that many held of the Native Americans. Yes, he was a warrior as many Indian men were but he was not the "savage" that some whites would claim. Jemison allowed many to understand these people as human beings; ones who

[13] Ibid.

loved, cared, and cherished their families' not brutal, fierce warriors out to destroy American lives.

As was mentioned earlier, Jemison would have eight children between her two marriages, but they would not all survive. Her first born, with Sheninjee would pass away two days after birth. After Jemison's first husband was killed, she would remarry to a much older Native American man, Hiokatoo, a Seneca warrior. When Jemison described Hiokatoo, he shared many of the characteristics of her first husband. In his book, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, Anthony F.C. Wallace uses Jemison's words to describe this Indian chief: "During the term of nearly 50 years that I lived with him, I received, according to Indian customs, all the kindness and attention that was due as his wife. Although war was his trade from his youth till old age and decrepitude stopt his career, he uniformly treated me with tenderness, and never offered an insult."[14] Here Hiokatoo is described as a caring and compassionate man. Jemison shared with readers the softer side of Indian men, but also their warrior status. Wallace goes on to share with readers the dark side of Hiokatoo. Jemison says that her husband also, "showed signs of thirst for blood, by attending only the art of war, in the use of the

[14] Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca (*New York: Random House Inc., 1972), 33.

tomahawk and scalping knife…He could inflict the most excruciating tortures upon his enemies and prided himself upon his fortitude."[15] From Jemison's description of her husband, one can see both sides of the Indian warrior within one man. Additionally, her husband acquired the "savage" persona, which was also distinguishable. However, Jemison loved him throughout their marriage and overlooked his warrior tendencies. Jemison showed a side of the America Indians that many felt did not exist. However, at the same time, white American men and the government would commit the same brutality and atrocities to these Native American tribes as many felt they were committing to America. Jemison would be a witness to these phenomena and live the life that was chosen for her. She would continue to love her husband and bring more children into the world.

With Hiokatoo, she would have her first son, Thomas, who she would name after her father, Thomas Jemison. After the birth of her children, the feeling of wanting to leave had subsided as she truly began to feel that she had become a part of the tribe. Jemison states that, "With them was my home; my family was there, and there I had many friends to whom I was warmly attached in consideration with the favors, affection and friendship with which they had uniformly treated me, from

[15] Ibid.

the time of my adoption."[16] Referring to her Indian family she now knew the life she once had prior to being adopted was a life that was no longer attainable. She had a new family, a family among the Indians that she was beginning to cherish and fully understand.

As one reads through Jemison's work they realize her words do go against the dominant racial ideologies that many believed during the late 1700s and early 1800s. Because of her story, and others at the time, race relations became the talk of the nation. Did America want to try and blend the two races, or keep the races segregated? Thomas Jefferson believed that whites and Indians should meet and "blend together…intermix and become one people…your blood will run in our veins and will spread with us over this great island."[17] Jefferson wanted the coexistence of both races, however this would be a difficult process. Jefferson explained his ideas for race relations among the Native Americans and whites within a letter to William Henry Harrison from February 27, 1803. He states that, "When they withdraw themselves to the culture of a small piece of land, they will perceive how useless to them are their extensive forests, and will be willing to pare them off from

[16] Seaver, 17.
[17]Thomas Jefferson in Gary Nash, "The Hidden History of Mestizo America," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (Dec. 1995): 943.

time to time in exchange for necessaries for their farms and families."[18] In order to coexist and make race relations work within the United States, the Indians would need to form their ideals to that of "American" way of life. If they were Americanized it would be an easier way to live on the land as one. Jefferson wanted them to be placed on farmlands, learn to cultivate the land, and live like most Americans, but only a few tribes fully adapted and survived. With the intermixing of white and Indian blood, Jefferson would build a peaceful nation built on Enlightenment principles, yet many people would still feel uncertain about this.

Even though people of political influence, such as Jefferson, felt that Native Americans and whites could coexist, many felt they could not. Reginald Horsman states that, "Political power was exercised by those who believed the Indians to be inferior, who did not wish them to be accepted as equals within American society, and who expected them ultimately to disappear." However, many also viewed Indians as "tragic and in some ways noble figure and were far more human than the bestial savage portrayed in so many frontier descriptions."[19] In the end, those who had political power would decide their fate and the government's

[18] Thomas Jefferson "President Jefferson to William Henry Harrison, February 27, 1803," In *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha, 22.
[19] Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 191.

power would corrupt the Native American land, and it would no longer be their possession.

When reading captivity narratives many tend to ask why these innocent Americans were taken in the first place. Was it as simple as an issue of race or the clashing of cultures? In a time of widespread disease and war, many people would not overcome sickness or injury, and the American Indian tribes sought to replace the kin that they lost. At the beginning of Jemison's tale she explains that, "It was my happy lot to be accepted for adoption; and at the time of the ceremony I was received by two squaws, to supply the place of their brother in the family; and I was ever considered and treated by them as a real sister; the same as though I had been born to their mother."[20] Prior to this, Jemison goes into detail describing that if the death or capture was still fresh in Native American minds, and anger was present, the captured victim was unlikely to be spared. However, if they were more accepting of what had happened and had time to grieve they would sometimes choose to adopt the new kin, such as Jemison.

When someone was chosen to replace a loved one, they were not always the same sex or the same age as the lost loved one. Axtell explains this in great detail: "most young captives assumed places of

[20] Seaver, 78.

Indian sons and daughters, but occasionally the match was not exact…Although their sex and age may not have always corresponded, the adoptive captives succeeded to all the deceased's rights and obligations-the same dignities, honors, and often the same names."[21] There were instances when captives would replace the roles of grandfathers, such as 26-year-old Titus King or even uncles such as Thomas Peart, a 23-year-old Pennsylvanian. Jemison herself would be the replacement for a Seneca boy, a brother who had been killed in the French and Indian War. When these adoptions took place, there was a ceremonial induction that consisted of the captured taking the place of the deceased.

An example of the ceremonial induction was that of James Smith, who was captured by the Caughnewaga nation. Soon after his abduction he went through the adoption ceremony. Historian Howard Peckham describes Smith's induction ceremony with the following words:

> My son, you are now flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. By the ceremony that was performed this day, every drop of white blood was washed out of your veins. You are taken in to the Caughnewaga nation and initiated into a war-like tribe. You are adopted into a great family and now received with great seriousness and solemnity in the room and place of a great man. After what has passed this day you are now one of us by and old

[21] Axtell, 309.

> strong law and custom. My son you have nothing to fear. We are now under the same obligations to love, support and defend you that we are to love and to defend on another. Therefore you are to consider yourself as one of our people.[22]

This passage gives an example of the deep devotion that the Indian nations felt towards their newly adopted family members. The new member would presume the role of their lost loved one and would be treated as their own. As spoken by the chief they would be the "flesh of their flesh and the bone of their bone." Through Smith's induction ceremony into the Caughnewaga, people can see the sincerity of these adoptions.

Another example similar to Mary Jemison is Frances Slocum also known as the Lost Sister of Wyoming. She was captured by the Delaware Indians at a young age and in her teens she married a Delaware Indian and later a Miami war chief. However unlike Jemison, Slocum was only five years old at the time of her capture, but just like Jemison's story she was captured from her home with other family members. Both of these stories are similar and demonstrated how white Americans perceived the actions of Native Americans. Historian John F. Meginness writes that, "One of the Indians quickly drew up his gun and shot the young man dead. The discharge of the gun quickly brought Mrs. Slocum

[22] Howard Peckham, *Narratives of Colonial America* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1971), 91-92.

to the door, when he was horrified at seeing a stalwart savage scalping the young man with the knife which he had been grinding."[23] In both Slocum and Jemison's stories, they are tipped off with violent encounters, and both narratives involve the scalping of family members. Even though violence is shown in the beginning, readers learn through these stories that this is not entirely indicative of Native American culture. As Frances Slocum and Mary Jemison's captivity narratives coincided with one another they also share differences.

One major difference is in each woman's account of marriage to a Native American man. To many, the meeting of Slocum and her Miami husband was that of a romantic tale. Meginness shares this story by stating that,

> In Central Ohio, while her parents were floating down a river in a canoe, and she was riding a horse on the shore, she discovered an Indian lying in the path and suffering from a wound which he had probably received in some skirmish with the whites. She dismounted and dressed his wounds, and when her parents came up they took him in their canoe and carried him to the point of their destination. There they cared for him until his wound was healed. He remained with them for some time and kept them well supplied with game, as he was a good hunter. At last, thinking that he had done enough to "pay for his doctor bill,' as the tradition goes, he proposed to leave them and pass on. They would not hear to his departure, but insisted on his remaining with them, proposing, as an inducement, that they would give him their daughter in marriage. He did so, and became the

[23] John F. Meginness, *Women in America From Colonial Times to the 20th Century: Biography of Frances Slocum The Lost Sister of Wyoming* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 13.

> husband of Frances. That this union proved a congenial and happy one there is no reason in doubt.[24]

This story shows and gives readers a true account of humanity of the American Indian. Taken away is the "savage" like persona and replaced with compassion, tenderness, and love. It also shows that the white Americans when adopted by the Indian tribes referred to them as their own family; Slocum refers to them as her parents. Visible is the realness of the situation and how serious these adoptions actually were, and just like Mary Jemison, Frances Slocum shows us the generosity and the sincerity of these Native American families.

As Mary Jemison's story comes to an end she truly begins to reflect on her life among the Seneca Indians. Having changed her life completely and incorporating herself into a new culture, she willingly made a new life for herself. The compassion that many foresee within her story comes together as she describes each of her children individually. As described earlier, she knew once she felt the love for her children she would not be able to return to American society and live among whites Americans. Dominant ideology of society would not allow her to be accepted back into the white America that she had long ago been ripped from, regardless of her skin color. At one point in her life

[24] Ibid, 79.

she was offered the option to leave and return to her old life, yet she decided to stay. Her oldest child Thomas would be the deciding factor among this situation. Jemison states that, "soon after the close of the revolutionary war, my Indian brother, Kau-jises-tau-ge-au, offered me liberty, and told me that it was my choice I might go to my friends."[25] Although her Indian brother suggested that she was free to leave, her oldest son Thomas must stay with his tribe. Jemison's Indian family felt that, "his appearance, actions, and a few warlike exploits, Thomas would be a great warrior, or a good counselor, refused to let him leave them on any account whatever."[26] Consequently, Jemison decided to stay with her Native American family and pursue the life that they deemed acceptable.

Through strength and willpower, Jemison and other captives became adopted into the Indian way of life. As a woman divided by two cultures, Mary Jemison experienced a life that many cannot imagine. Being forced to give up a "normal" life to a live a life that many thought of as "savage," is a story of empowerment, courage, strength, and willpower. However, it is not only Jemison's story that shows these attributes. It is in the many captivity stories of this time that we see these characteristics. And with each new tale the individuality among Native

[25] Seaver, 119.
[26] Ibid.

Americans is more apparent. Instead of focusing on a tribe as a whole, readers are allowed to focus on an individual, allowing one to see the camaraderie that was present within the Indian nation. Because of this, Jemison would show the other side, the more human side, of Indian culture that until this point, many white citizens could not fathom. From the beginning of her story the Seneca Indians would adopt her into their life, culture, and tribal duties. In the end, it would be Mary Jemison and other captives that would adopt many readers into the Native American world. Jemison would share a history and redefine what many thought of as the stereotypical Indian. Through strength and willpower she would strive and become a women defined by two cultures.

Bibliography

Axtell, James. *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Horsman, Reginald. *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Hoxie, Frederick E. *Native Americans and the Early Republic*. University Press of Virginia, 1999.

Meginness, John F. *Women in America From Colonial Times to the 20th Century: Biography of Frances Slocum The Lost Sister of Wyoming.* New York: Arno Press, 1974.

Nash, Gary B. "The Hidden History of Mestizo America." *Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (Dec. 1995): 941-964.

Peckham, Howard. *Narratives of Colonial America.* Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1971.

Prucha, Francis Paul ed. *Documents of United States Indian Policy*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Seaver, James. *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison.* New York: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995.

Wallace, Anthony F.C. *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca.* New York: Random House Inc., 1972.