“AN OLD STRONG LAW & CUSTOM”

INDIANS, COLONISTS, & CAPTIVITY

ON THE FRONTIER

By Mike Burke
In 18th-century America, tens of thousands of poor, landless immigrants and their families made the harrowing journey from Western Europe to the shores of North America. Forced by their low economic status to the fringes of colonial society, these relative newcomers made their homes along the frontier region separating Native and colonial America. As a series of bitter wars pitted English, French, and Indian peoples against each other, these border settlements became easy targets for Indian raids in which thousands of European settlers and African slaves were taken prisoner. While some individuals were killed after their capture, many were adopted into Indian communities, taking the place of deceased family members and filling a crucial void in a dwindling population.1 In the years following their capture, some remained among their adoptive people, living out their days as Indians, while others eventually returned to the frontier settlements from which they were taken. For all captives, however, the memory of their time among the Indians remained with them for the rest of their lives. Captured by Indians: Warfare & Assimilation on the 18th Century Frontier, a new exhibition at the Fort Pitt Museum, explores this critical element of the frontier experience, and its enduring legacy in Euro, African, and Indian communities.
BEFORE THE MAYFLOWER

Long before the first Europeans arrived in North America, Native peoples engaged in countless wars throughout the continent. Despite the diverse nature of those involved, many groups ascribed to a relatively standard code of warfare that had spread over vast distances and between groups without so much as a common language. Its tenets reflected a common ancestral origin, or perhaps the common influence of a once strong, but vanished people. From this unwritten protocol, the majority of tribes east of the Mississippi derived a surprisingly universal set of rules, expectations, and consequences that guided their behavior in wartime.

In addition to killing as many of the enemy as necessary or possible, taking prisoners was among the key motivations of any conflict. Seized in the heat of battle or during a raid, the choice to take a particular prisoner might have seemed entirely random, but the circumstances of their captivity were anything but chance. Most were chosen according to their age, physical attributes, behavior, or other characteristics that their captors judged desirable. For their part, Native warriors had to be particular. While some of their prisoners were destined for ritual execution or a life of servitude, the destruction wrought by warfare, disease, and other causes meant that they were increasingly obligated to bring back a precise number of replacements for deceased family members. Following their capture, the prisoners were bound and marched, sometimes hundreds of miles, to distant villages that eagerly awaited their arrival.

The adoption of members of rival tribes was remarkable in an era that preceded modern notions of pan-Indianism by several centuries. Indeed, many Indian peoples’ names for themselves—Lenni Lenape for instance—translate to the real, true or original people. To pre-contact Indians, members of other tribes...
were often regarded as less than “full human beings,” which makes the development of the captivity ritual all the more remarkable as a model of practical adaptability. Later, when a few clusters of isolated settlement turned into a full-scale invasion from across the sea, it provided a valuable mechanism for survival.

When Europeans arrived in North America in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, clinging to survival and vastly outnumbered by Native peoples, they unwittingly became players in a struggle for power that extended centuries into the past. While their presence did not fundamentally alter existing modes of Indian warfare and captive taking, it did influence them in several important ways. First, as European settlements grew in number and pushed further west, they gradually displaced coastal Native groups and generated friction with those further inland. The wars sparked by these continual infractions in turn claimed the lives of many warriors, creating an increased demand for captives even as those who did the capturing were being killed. Second, while European settlement advanced somewhat slowly across the continent, the diseases they brought with them spread rapidly, triggering a nearly endless cycle of epidemics to which Indians bore no natural immunities. The devastation wrought by warfare and disease caused further tension with Europeans and drove the demand for captives to replace those lost to the destruction. Throughout the early period of colonialism, the “old strong law and custom” of captivity and adoption provided Natives with a framework well suited to incorporate the newcomers.

By the mid-18th century, both colonists and Indians could look back on a long history of warfare, disease, and retribution. As the increasing value of the North American continent set the French and British Empires on a collision course, a string of progressively
brutal colonial wars brought unprecedented destruction to both Indian communities and border settlements. Often pitting one group squarely against the other, the level of violence and the number of casualties transformed captivity from a facet of Native warfare to a primary motivation, at the same time establishing it as a central element of the frontier experience.12 By the mid-1760s, there was hardly a backcountry settlement or Native village that was not in some way affected.13

THE FRONTIER

The continued migration of large numbers of Scots-Irish and German settlers prior to the French and Indian War created a long frontier of settlement stretching from New York to Georgia. During the French and Indian War these settlements effectively functioned as a buffer to Indian attacks on eastern settlements, a fact that many colonial legislators were content to accept without interference.14 Following Braddock’s Defeat in 1755, both raiding and captive-taking accelerated at an alarming rate, with the primary recipients being the Delaware, Shawnee, and Western Seneca towns scattered throughout the Ohio Country.15 By the mid-18th century, these groups had developed a strong regional identity apart from their tribal affiliation and established dozens of multi-ethnic communities to the west of the mountains.16 Beyond the effective control of the British-allied Iroquois who claimed dominion over the region, they raided with virtual impunity absorbing hundreds if not thousands of captives from the Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland frontiers.17

A young girl named Mary Jemison was typical of those who were taken captive. Born on the sea voyage from Ireland to Pennsylvania in 1743, her family settled on the frontier west of Philadelphia. In 1755, she and her family were captured by
a mixed French and Shawnee war party and marched toward Fort Duquesne at the Forks of the Ohio River. Fearing pursuit, the warriors killed and scalped the rest of Mary’s family, keeping only her and a young boy as captives. Following their arrival at the French fort, she was given to two Seneca women and later adopted in a ceremony that expressed not only their joy at her arrival, but also their sadness at the loss of the great warrior, whose place she took.¹⁸

And why do we mourn [him]? Though he fell on the field of the slain, with glory he fell, and his spirit went up to the land of his fathers in war! Then why do we mourn? With transports of joy they received him, and fed him, and clothed him, and welcomed him there! Oh friends, he is happy; then dry up your tears! His spirit has seen our distress, and sent us a helper whom with great pleasure we greet. Dickewamis [Jemison’s Indian name, which meant “a pretty girl, a handsome girl, or a pleasant, good thing”] has come: then let us receive her with joy! She is handsome and pleasant! Oh! she is our sister, and gladly we welcome her here. In the place of our brother she stands in our tribe. With care we will guard her from trouble; and may she be happy till her spirit shall leave us.²⁰

In the years following her capture, Jemison, who honored the final request of her biological mother by maintaining her English name and language skills, became a beloved and accepted member of her community, marrying twice and raising several children. Despite nearly being returned to Fort Pitt during the French and Indian War, she remained with her adoptive people for the rest of her life. Ironically, her tribal identity allowed her a unique opportunity to honor the memory of her original family, which would not have been possible in white society. In accordance with the matrilineal structure of Seneca culture, her children were all known by the surname Jemison, and her descendants in Iroquoia still proudly trace their lineage to her to this day.²¹
THE BRITISH ADVANCE

Though continually vulnerable to Indian attack, the settlers’ prolonged exposure on the frontier ensured that each successive generation was better equipped in the art of forest warfare than the last. By the end of the French and Indian War, the western counties of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland supplied not only a steady stream of settlers, but legions of young men who had grown up fighting Indians on the frontier. Unlike settlers of earlier generations, these young backwoodsmen entered the forest on a more equal footing with their Native adversaries and saw little merit in passive settlement of the backcountry.22

Following the French and Indian War and the ill-fated revolt of Great Lakes and Ohio Country tribes led by the Ottawa war chief Pontiac, an expedition was organized to reclaim all the captives taken during the previous decade. Departing from Fort Pitt in the fall of 1764, the expedition was led by Colonel Henry Bouquet and manned by soldiers of the Royal American and Highland Regiments as well as a volunteer regiment of backwoodsmen from Pennsylvania and Virginia. Unlike the soldiers of British regiments, the volunteers were drawn directly from the frontiers and many looked forward to reclaiming family and friends from among the captives.23

One such soldier was William Kincade, whose pregnant wife Eleanor had been taken, along with their three children, near the Calf Pasture River in Augusta County, Virginia. After enduring the murder of two of her children and a grueling march to the Delaware towns in present-day Ohio, a family history recounts that Eleanor was adopted into the family of the noted chief Tamaqua, or King Beaver.24 Though their names were not mentioned, her reunion with her husband William was described in William Smith’s 1765 account of the expedition:

Among the captives, a woman was brought into the camp at Muskingum, with a babe about three months old at her breast. One of the Virginia volunteers soon knew her to be his wife, who had been taken by the Indians about six months before. She was immediately delivered to her overjoyed husband. He flew with her to his tent and clothed her and his child in proper apparel.25 Days later, her only other living child, who had been adopted into another family, was returned to her. They are mentioned along with 21 others on a roster of captives being escorted to Fort Pitt by the Virginia volunteers.26

THE BLOODY RIVER

While many frontier residents became the unfortunate victims of Indian raiding, they also ignored repeated royal mandates to remain east of the Allegheny Mountains in their aggressive settlement of the western country. Viewing Indians as an obstacle to their progress, and led by uncompromising men such as Michael Cresap and George Rogers Clark, these backwoods residents increasingly crossed borders for offensive actions against Indians.27 By the spring of 1774, British authority in the West had eroded and a flood of settlers had drifted down the Ohio River from Fort Pitt to Wheeling and beyond.28 Emboldened by the lack of authority in the region, rogue bands of frontiersmen began committing atrocities of their own, renewing the cycle of bloodshed that had hardly ceased for a moment during the previous two decades.29

In retaliation for the massacre of Cayuga leader John Logan’s family at Yellow Creek, which Charles Lee called an “impious, black piece of work,” Shawnee and Mingo war parties descended on the frontiers with renewed vengeance.30 The Virginians, both in Williamsburg and in the backcountry, were quick to take advantage of the situation, mounting a brief but decisive campaign known as Dunmore’s War, named after the colony’s royal governor.31 As a condition of the Shawnee defeat at the Battle of Point Pleasant in October, most of the prisoners taken since the commencement of hostilities were returned.32

The triumph was short lived, however, as less than a year later, longstanding tensions between the British and their colonial subjects finally came to a head at the battles of Lexington and Concord. With the British now eager to attack the frontiers from their western outposts at Detroit and Niagara, the colonial American leaders at Fort Pitt soon found themselves struggling to keep the peace between the Indians and their own unruly people.33
THE REVOLUTION IN INDIAN COUNTRY

The years of the American Revolution witnessed not only a shift in power, but also a shift in the nature of the captivity ritual. As British and colonial forces met on the hallowed battlefields of the East, most Native groups in the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes struggled to maintain neutrality before eventually siding with the British. Finding peace with the encroaching Americans to be unsustainable, the war in the West was often characterized by mixed Indian and British raids on frontier settlements to the west of the Blue Ridge Mountains and south of the Ohio River. Though captives continued to be taken and adopted throughout the war, captured white frontiersmen, particularly the hated Virginians, were often treated as enemy warriors, enduring brutal torture and death to satisfy the grief of the community. Following the massacre of 96 Christian Delawares at the Moravian mission town of Gnaddenhutten in 1782, the Ohio tribes could stand no more. Subsequently defeating an American force led by Colonel William Crawford, they burned many of their prisoners, including the commander, at the stake.34 According to John Slover, a former captive and guide for Crawford’s army, the Great Lakes and Ohio tribes also made a pact, which reflected not only their exacerbation at the seemingly endless war, but also a fracture in the ancient ritual of captivity.

When prisoners are brought in, we are obliged to maintain them, and still some of them run away and carry tidings of our affairs to the enemy. When any of our people fall into the hands of the Rebels, they show no mercy—why then should you take any prisoners? My children, take no more prisoners of any sort—man, woman, or child.35

While survivors’ accounts from the battle must be read with a critical eye, due to heavy editorializing by their compiler, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, the sentiments are in line with Ohio and Great Lakes Indian
frustration following the cold-blooded killings at Gnaddenhutten. As the endemic cycle of raiding and retribution steadily intensified through the years of the Revolution, Indians saw fewer chances of reconciliation with Americans who had no mind for peaceful coexistence, a situation that ultimately caused them to question the continued relevance of one of their most cherished customs.

Even in the midst of a brutal war with an increasingly racial component, Indians still found desirable adoptees among their most bitter enemies. Jonathan Alder was a young man when he was captured in southwestern Virginia in 1782. Alder lived with the Indians in present-day Ohio for 13 years, gradually becoming a trusted hunter and friend to his adoptive people. An impartial observer of the latter years of the long Indian war that began in 1755, his memoir recounts his love for his Indian family and friends and sensitivity toward their plight as their country was gradually overrun with white settlers. Remaining in the area of Plain City, Ohio, through the early pioneer period, the former captive became an important mediator between his white neighbors and the Indians with whom he always identified.
In the years following the American Revolution, the few Indians remaining in the Ohio Country were gradually pushed west.38 Despite their great victory over Arthur St. Clair in 1791, a united group of Great Lakes and Ohio Indians was soundly defeated by an American army under Anthony Wayne in 1794. The Treaty of Greenville the following year became, as many treaties past, another opportunity to repatriate large numbers of captives who had been taken in the previous conflicts.39 Former captive Williams Wells was one of the interpreters, and among those returned was a young man named John Brickell, taken just two miles from Pittsburgh in 1791, who faced a difficult decision.40 His elderly Indian father, Whingwy Pooshies, explained the choice to him:

My son, these are men the same color as yourself; there may be some of your kin here, or your kin may be a great way off from you; you have lived a long time with us; I call on you to say if I have not been a father to you?… If you choose to go with the people of your color, I have no right to say a word; but if you choose to stay with me, your people have no right to speak. Now reflect on it, and take your choice; and tell us as soon as you make up your mind. 41

After a few moments, during which he reflected on his Indian family and friends, as well as “my people, whom I remembered,” Brickell announced his decision to leave. His heartbroken Indian father expressed his grief in words that characterized the hope he placed in his adopted son:

I have raised you—I have learned you to hunt. You are a good hunter—you have been better to me than my own sons. I am now getting old and cannot hunt; I thought you would be a support to my age; I leaned on you as on a staff. Now it is broken—you are going to leave me, and I have no right to say a word—but I am ruined.42

After his repatriation, Brickell never saw his Indian father again, though the memory of their parting clearly haunted him. His decision to leave reflected the complexity of the captive experience and the notions of family, friendship, race, and ethnicity that it challenged. Like so many others, Brickell carried the memory of his time as a captive with him for the rest of his life. His experience and theirs, recorded in numerous narratives, remind us that the frontier and its people often defied not only territorial boundaries, but also those between white and red, freedom and confinement, and war and peace. Through their trials and triumphs, joys and heartbreaks, they also affirm that compassion and understanding are possible, even in a world of profound cruelty and seemingly endless violence. 43

Mike Burke is the Exhibit Specialist at the Fort Pitt Museum. He would like to acknowledge the FPM staff for their assistance in compiling the research materials used in this article and the Captured by Indians exhibit.

3   Compare the various elements of the captivity ritual among groups as diverse as the Kanawake
John Norton, Jr., whose Cherokee father was captured by a Highland soldier during the French & Indian War, was the product of a rare instance of reverse captivity. Raised in Scotland, he joined the British Army and came to North America following the Revolution. After deserting from the army, he met and became a favorite of the Iroquois war chief Joseph Brant, eventually being adopted by the Mohawk. A man of mixed ancestry who deftly navigated cultural boundaries, he served as an interpreter and advocate of Native rights, eventually leaving Canada for the Cherokee settlements in modern-day Arkansas.
The spread of Anglo-European settlements along the Pennsylvania frontier is a prime example. As settlers pushed further west in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, large numbers of Delaware chose to relocate to the Ohio Country. When the French and Indian War escalated after Braddock’s Defeat in 1755, the same Indians, joined by Shawnee, Western Seneca, and various French allied Natives relentlessly raided the Pennsylvania frontier, taking large numbers of captives.


While 70 warriors were tortured and killed, many others including most of the women and children were later adopted. As described in The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest, the Iroquois had ravaged Algonquin peoples in series of conflicts known as the Beaver Wars, taking many lives and capturing large numbers of the enemy for purposes both torture and adoption.

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