

“a large and powerful army of the rebels . . . was making rapid progress towards our settlement”

The Revolutionary War experiences of Mary Jemison, (Dehgewanus), an Indian captive adopted by the Seneca

*A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison, 1824*__SELECTIONS

The teenaged daughter of Scotch-Irish immigrants in Pennsylvania, Mary Jemison was captured in 1758 by French soldiers and Shawnee Indians raiding her family's farm in Pennsylvania during the French and Indian War. With the sure knowledge that her parents and siblings had been killed, she feared for her life but was traded to two Seneca women as a replacement for their brother recently killed in battle. Soon given in marriage to a Delaware Indian, she settled in Seneca territory in western New York and lived there for the rest of her life. As an aging widow in 1823, she related her life experiences to a local physician who published her memoir the next year. Deemed accurate by historians, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* became one of the most widely read and reprinted captivity narratives in American history.

At the outset of the Revolutionary War, Jemison was a wife and mother in her thirties, living in the Seneca village of Little Beard's Town in western New York. (see maps, pp. 2-3). The war came directly to her village with the Sullivan Campaign of 1779, ordered by Gen. Washington to eradicate Iroquois support for the British by destroying the Indian villages and farmland of the region.

Thus, at peace amongst themselves and with the neighboring whites,¹ though there were none at that time very near, our Indians lived quietly and peaceably at home till a little before the breaking out of the Revolutionary War, when they were sent for, together with the Chiefs and members of the Six Nations² generally, by the people of the [United] States to go to the German Flats and there hold a general council in order that the people of the states might ascertain, in good season,³ who they should esteem and treat as enemies and who as friends in the great war which was then upon the point of breaking out between them and the King of England.

At the council with American delegates in August 1775 at German Flats, New York, the Iroquois elected to remain neutral.

Our Indians obeyed the call and the council was held, at which the pipe of peace was smoked and a treaty made in which the Six Nations solemnly agreed that if a war should eventually break out, they would not take up arms on either side, but that they would observe a strict neutrality. With that the people of the states were satisfied, as they had not asked their assistance nor did not wish it. The Indians returned to their homes well pleased that they could live on neutral ground, surrounded by the din of war without being engaged in it.

About a year passed off, and we as usual were enjoying ourselves in the employments of peaceable times, when a messenger arrived from the British Commissioners requesting all the Indians of our tribe to attend a general council which was soon to be held at Oswego. The council convened and being opened, the British Commissioners informed the Chiefs that the object of calling a council of the Six Nations was to engage their assistance in subduing the rebels — the people of the [United] States —

At the council with British delegates in July 1777 at Oswego, New York, the Six Nations opted to fight with the British.

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¹ After the French and Indian War (1765-1763), during which Mary Jemison was captured.

² Six Nations, or Iroquois Confederacy. The original "Five Nations" of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca, were joined in the 1720s by the Tuscarora, resettled after their defeat in the Carolinas. Later in the war, the Seneca and Tuscarora changed allegiance and served as guides, scouts, and occasionally as soldiers with the Americans.

³ I.e., while peaceful relations existed with the Iroquois, and before they aligned with either side in the war.

who had risen up against the good King, their master, and were about to rob him of a great part of his possessions and wealth, and added that they would amply reward them for all their services.

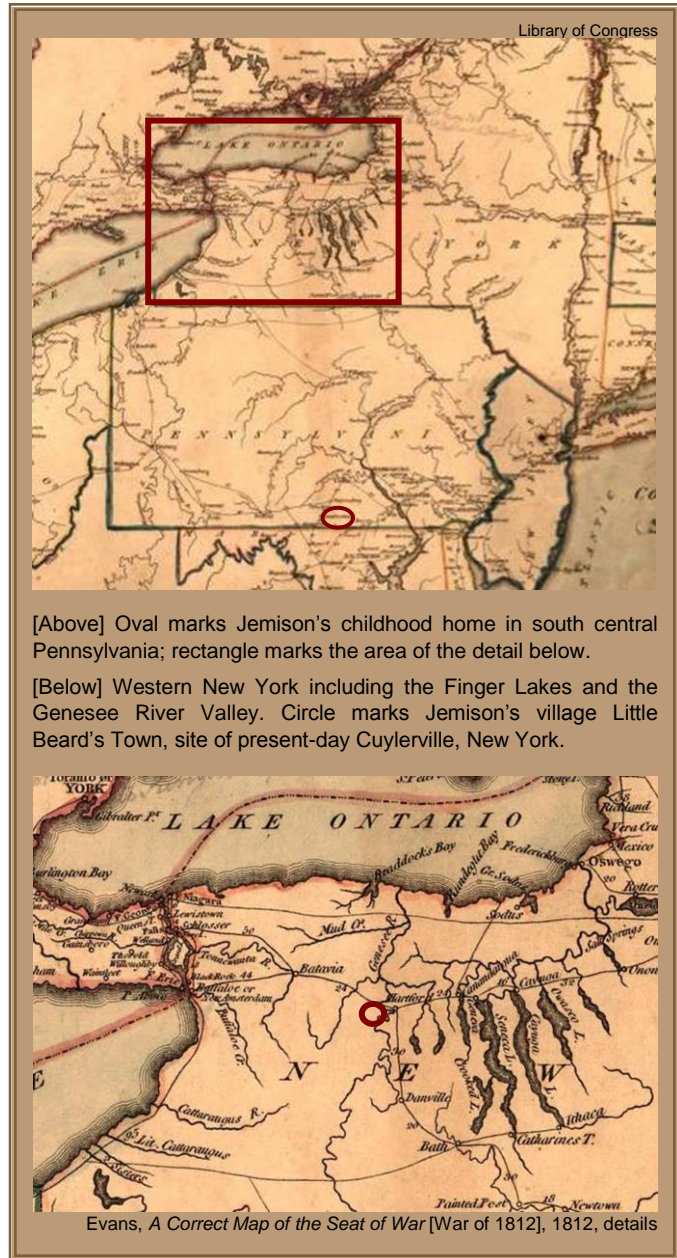
The Chiefs then arose and informed the Commissioners of the nature and extent of the treaty which they had entered into with the people of the states the year before, and that they should not violate it by taking up the hatchet against them.

The Commissioners continued their entreaties without success till they addressed their avarice by telling our people that the people of the states were few in number and easily subdued; and that on the account of their disobedience to the King they justly merited all the punishment that it was possible for white men and Indians to inflict upon them; and added that the King was rich and powerful, both in money and subjects: That his rum was as plenty as the water in Lake Ontario, that his men were as numerous as the sands upon the lake shore — and that the Indians, if they would assist in the war and persevere in their friendship to the King till it was closed, should never want for money or goods. Upon this the Chiefs concluded a treaty with the British Commissioners in which they agreed to take up arms against the rebels and continue in the service of his Majesty till they were subdued, in consideration of certain conditions which were stipulated in the treaty to be performed by the British government and its agents.

As soon as the treaty was finished, the Commissioners made a present to each Indian of a suit of clothes, a brass kettle, a gun and tomahawk, a scalping knife, a quantity of powder and lead, a piece of gold, and promised a bounty on every scalp that should be brought in. Thus richly clad and equipped, they returned home after an absence of about two weeks, full of the fire of war and anxious to encounter their enemies. Many of the kettles which the Indians received at that time are now in use on the Genesee Flats [in Seneca territory along the Genesee River; see map above].

Hired to commit depredations upon the whites, who had given them no offense, they waited impatiently to commence their labor till sometime in the spring of 1776, when a convenient opportunity offered for them to make an attack. At that time, a party of our Indians were at Cau-te-ga, who shot a man that was looking after his horse for the sole purpose, as I was informed by my Indian brother who was present, of commencing hostilities.

In May following, our Indians were in their first battle with the Americans, but at what place I am unable to determine. While they were absent at that time, my daughter Nancy was born.



[Above] Oval marks Jemison's childhood home in south central Pennsylvania; rectangle marks the area of the detail below.

[Below] Western New York including the Finger Lakes and the Genesee River Valley. Circle marks Jemison's village Little Beard's Town, site of present-day Cuylerville, New York.

The same year, at Cherry Valley, our Indians took a woman and her three daughters prisoners, and brought them on, leaving one at Canandaigua, one at Honeoy, one at Cattaraugus, and one (the woman) at Little Beard's Town, where I resided. The woman told me that she and her daughters might have escaped, but that they expected the British army only and therefore made no effort. Her husband and sons got away. Sometime having elapsed, they were redeemed at Fort Niagara by Col. Butler, who clothed them well and sent them home.

The Sullivan campaign of 1779 was directed to eliminate Iroquois support for the British by destroying the Indians' villages and crop fields. Forty villages were burned, including Mary Jemison's village of Little Beard's Town. Thousands of uprooted Indians endured a harsh winter of deprivation and starvation before resettling within British protection at Fort Niagara, along Lake Ontario, and in Canada. Iroquois raids soon recommenced on frontier American settlements.

In the same expedition, Joseph Smith was taken prisoner at or near Cherry Valley, brought to Genesee, and detained till after the Revolutionary War. He was then liberated and the Indians made him a present, in company with Horatio Jones, of 6,000 acres of land lying in the present town of Leicester in the county of Livingston.

One of the girls just mentioned was married to a British officer at Fort Niagara by the name of Johnson, who at the time she was taken took a gold ring from her finger without any compliments or ceremonies. When he saw her at Niagara he recognized her features, restored the ring that he had so impolitely borrowed, and courted and married her.

Previous to the battle at Fort Stanwix, the British sent for the Indians to come and see them whip the rebels, and at the same time stated that they did not wish to have them fight, but wanted to have them just sit down, smoke their pipes, and look on. Our Indians went, to a man; but contrary to their expectation, instead of smoking and looking on, they were obliged to fight for their lives, and in the end of the battle were completely beaten, with a great loss in killed and wounded. Our Indians alone had thirty-six killed and a great number wounded. Our town exhibited a scene of real sorrow and distress, when our warriors returned and recounted their misfortunes and stated the real loss they had sustained in the engagement. The mourning was excessive and was expressed by the most doleful yells, shrieks, and howlings, and by inimitable gesticulations.

The British with hundreds of Indian and Loyalist allies attacked Fort Stanwix in central New York in August 1777. After three weeks they abandoned their siege due to the imminent arrival of (they thought) a large number of American troops and to the Indians' reluctance to continue the siege after suffering many casualties.



During the revolution, my house was the home of Colonels Butler and Brant⁴ whenever they chanced to come into our neighborhood as they passed to and from Fort Niagara, which was the seat of their military operations. Many and many a night I have pounded samp⁵ for them from sunset till sunrise, and furnished them with necessary provision and clean clothing for their journey.

For four or five years we sustained no loss in the war, except in the few who had been killed in distant battles, and our tribe, because of the remoteness of its situation from the enemy, felt secure from an attack. At length, in the fall of 1779, intelligence was received that a large and powerful army of the rebels under the command of General Sullivan was making rapid progress towards our settlement, burning

⁴ Joseph Brant (Thayendanege) was an influential Mohawk leader who had been educated in white schools and had converted to Christianity. He sided with the British and led forces in New York with Loyalist John Butler.

⁵ *Samp*: a food from cracked, pounded, and cooked corn kernels.

and destroying the huts and cornfields, killing the cattle, hogs and horses, and cutting down the fruit trees belonging to the Indians throughout the country.

Our Indians immediately became alarmed and suffered everything but death from fear that they should be taken by surprise and totally destroyed at a single blow. But in order to prevent so great a catastrophe, they sent out a few spies who were to keep themselves at a short distance in front of the invading army, in order to watch its operations and give information of its advances and success.

Sullivan arrived at Canandaigua Lake and had finished his work of destruction there, and it was ascertained that he was about to march to our flats when our Indians resolved to give him battle on the way and prevent, if possible, the distresses to which they knew we should be subjected if he should succeed in reaching our town. Accordingly they sent all their women and children into the woods a little west of Little Beard's Town in order that we might make a good retreat if it should be necessary, and then, well armed, set out to face the conquering enemy. The place which they fixed upon for their battleground lay between Honeoy Creek and the head of Conessus [Conesus] Lake.

At length a scouting party from Sullivan's army arrived at the spot selected, when the Indians arose from their ambush with all the fierceness and terror that it was possible for them to exercise and directly put the party upon a retreat. Two Oneida Indians were all the prisoners that were taken in that skirmish. One of them was a pilot of Gen. Sullivan and had been very active in the war, rendering to the people of the states essential services. At the commencement of the revolution he had a brother older than himself who resolved to join the British service, and endeavored by all the art that he was capable of using to persuade his brother to accompany him, but his arguments proved abortive. This [brother] went to the British and that [brother] joined the American army. At this critical juncture they met, one in the capacity of a conqueror, the other in that of a prisoner; and as an Indian seldom forgets a countenance [face] that he has seen, they recognized each other at sight. Envy and revenge glared in the features of the conquering savage as he advanced to his brother (the prisoner) in all the haughtiness of Indian pride, heightened by a sense of power, and addressed him in the following manner:

“Brother, you have merited death! The hatchet or the war-club shall finish your career! — When I begged of you to follow me in the fortunes of war, you was deaf to my cries — you spurned my entreaties!”

“Brother! you have merited death and shall have your deserts! When the rebels raised their hatchets to fight their good master, you sharpened your knife, you brightened your rifle and led on our foes to the fields of our fathers — You have merited death and shall die by our hands! When those rebels had drove us from the fields of our fathers to seek out new homes, it was you who could dare to step forth as their pilot and conduct them even to the doors of our wigwams to butcher our children and put us to death! No crime can be greater! — But though you have merited death and shall die on this spot, my hands shall not be stained in the blood of a brother! *Who will strike?*”

Little Beard, who was standing by, as soon as the speech was ended, struck the prisoner on the head with his tomahawk and dispatched him at once!

Little Beard then informed the other Indian prisoner that as they were at war with the whites only and not with the Indians, they would spare his life, and after a while give him his liberty in an honorable manner. The Oneida warrior, however, was jealous of Little Beard's fidelity,⁶ and suspecting that he should soon fall by his hands, watched for a favorable opportunity to make his escape, which he soon effected. Two Indians were leading him, one on each side, when he made a violent effort, threw them upon the ground, and ran for his life towards where the main body of the American army was encamped. The Indians pursued him without success, but in their absence they fell in with a small detachment of Sullivan's men, with whom they had a short but severe skirmish in which they killed a number of the

⁶ I.e., was suspicious of Little Beard's statement of mercy for Indians of other tribal groups.

From James Seaver's Introduction

[Mary Jemison] speaks English plainly and distinctly, with a little of the Irish emphasis, and has the use of words so well as to render herself intelligible on any subject with which she is acquainted. Her recollection and memory exceeded my expectation. It cannot be reasonably supposed that a person of her age has kept the events of seventy years in so complete a chain as to be able to assign to each its proper time and place; she, however, made her recital [reciting/narrative] with as few obvious mistakes as might be found in that of a person of fifty.

She walks with a quick step without a staff, and I was informed by Mr. Clute that she could yet cross a stream on a log or pole as steadily as any other person.

Her passions are easily excited. At a number of periods in her narration, tears trickled down her grief worn cheek, and at the same time, a rising sigh would stop her utterance. . . .

Her dress at the time I saw her was made and worn after the Indian fashion, and consisted of a shirt, short gown, petticoat, stockings, moccasins, a blanket and a bonnet. . . . Such was the dress that this woman was contented to wear, and habit had rendered it convenient and comfortable. She wore it not as a matter of necessity, but from choice, for it will be seen in the sequel that her property is sufficient to enable her to dress in the best fashion and to allow her every comfort of life.

Her house in which she lives is 20 by 28 feet, built of square timber with a shingled roof and a framed stoop. In the centre of the house is a chimney of stones and sticks, in which there are two fire places. She has a good framed barn, 26 by 36, well filled, and owns a fine stock of cattle and horses. Besides the buildings above mentioned, she owns a number of houses that are occupied by tenants, who work her flats upon shares. . . .

Her neighbors speak of her as possessing one of the happiest tempers and disposition, and give her the name of never having done a censurable act to their knowledge.

Her habits are those of the Indians—she sleeps on skins without a bedstead, sits upon the floor or on a bench, and holds her victuals [food] on her lap or in her hands.

Her ideas of religion correspond in every respect with those of the great mass of the Senecas. She applauds virtue and despises vice. She believes in a future state in which the good will be happy and the bad miserable, and that the acquisition of that happiness depends primarily upon human volition and the consequent good deeds of the happy recipient of blessedness. The doctrines taught in the Christian religion, she is a stranger to.

Her daughters are said to be active and enterprising women, and her grandsons, who arrived to manhood, are considered able, decent and respectable men in their tribe.

enemy, took Capt. or Lieut. William Boyd and one private, prisoners, and brought them to Little Beard's Town where they were soon after put to death in the most shocking and cruel manner.

Little Beard, in this as in all other scenes of cruelty that happened at his town, was master of ceremonies, and principal actor. Poor Boyd was stripped of his clothing and then tied to a sapling where the Indians menaced his life by throwing their tomahawks at the tree directly over his head, brandishing their scalping knives around him in the most frightful manner, and accompanying their ceremonies with terrific shouts of joy. Having punished him sufficiently in this way, they made a small opening in his abdomen, took out an intestine, which they tied to the sapling, and then unbound him from the tree and drove him round it till he had drawn out the whole of his intestines. He was then beheaded, his head was stuck upon a pole, and his body left on the ground unburied.

Thus ended the life of poor William Boyd, who, it was said, had every appearance of being an active and enterprising officer of the first talents. The other prisoner was (if I remember distinctly) only beheaded and left near Boyd.

This tragedy being finished, our Indians again held a short council on the expediency of giving Sullivan battle, if he should continue to advance, and finally came to the conclusion that they were not strong enough to drive him, nor to prevent his taking possession of their fields: but that if it was possible they would escape with their own lives, preserve their families, and leave their possessions to be overrun by the invading army.

The women and children were then sent on still further towards Buffalo to a large creek that was called by the Indians Catawba, accompanied by a part of the Indians, while the remainder secreted themselves in the woods back of Beard's Town to watch the movements of the army.

At that time I had three children who went with me on foot, one who rode on horseback and one whom I carried on my back.

Our corn was good that year, a part of which we had gathered and secured for winter.

In one or two days after the skirmish at Conissius [Conesus] Lake, Sullivan and his army arrived at Genesee River where they destroyed every article of the food kind that they could lay their hands on. A pan of our corn they burnt and threw the

remainder into the river. They burnt our houses, killed what few cattle and horses they could find, destroyed our fruit trees, and left nothing but the bare soil and timber. But the Indians had eloped⁷ and were not to be found.

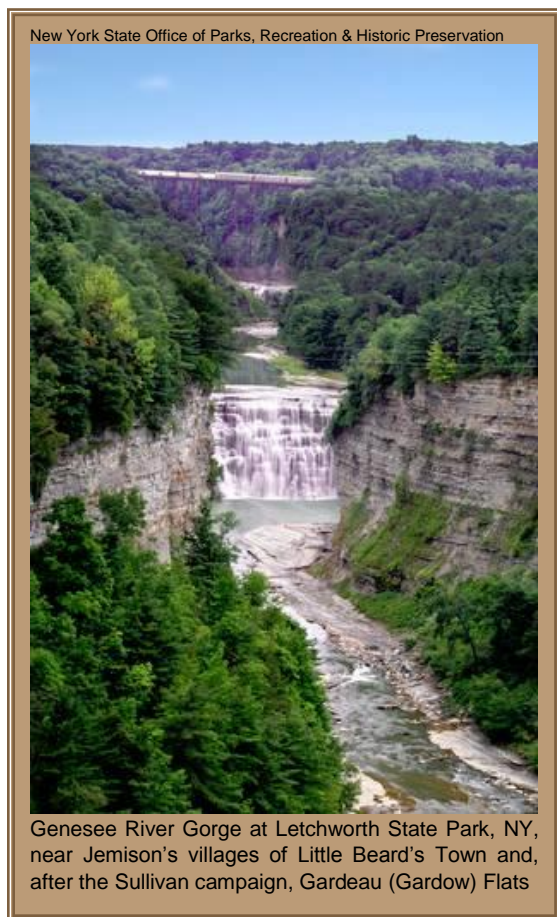
Having crossed and recrossed the river, and finished the work of destruction, the army marched off to the east. Our Indians saw them move off, but suspecting that it was Sullivan's intention to watch our return and then to take us by surprise, resolved that the main body of our tribe should hunt where we then were till Sullivan had gone so far that there would be no danger of his returning to molest [attack] us.

This being agreed to, we hunted continually till the Indians concluded that there could be no risk in our once more taking possession of our lands. Accordingly we all returned, but what were our feelings when we found that there was not a mouthful of any kind of sustenance left, not even enough to keep a child one day from perishing with hunger.

The weather by this time had become cold and stormy, and as we were destitute of houses and food too, I immediately resolved to take my children and look out for myself without delay. With this intention I took two of my little ones on my back, bade the other three follow, and the same night arrived on the Gardow [Gardeau] flats, where I have ever since resided.

At that time, two negroes who had run away from their masters sometime before were the only inhabitants of those flats. They lived in a small cabin and had planted and raised a large field of corn which they had not yet harvested. As they were in want of help to secure their crop, I hired to them to husk corn till the whole was harvested.

I have laughed a thousand times to myself when I have thought of the good old negro who hired me, who fearing that I should get taken or injured by the Indians stood by me constantly when I was husking



with a loaded gun in his hand, in order to keep off the enemy, and thereby lost as much labor of his own as he received from me, by paying good wages. I, however, was not displeased with his attention, for I knew that I should need all the corn that I could earn even if I should husk the whole. I husked enough for them to gain for myself, at every tenth string, one hundred strings of ears, which were equal to twenty-five bushels of shelled corn. This seasonable supply made my family comfortable for sump and cakes through the succeeding winter, which was the most severe that I have witnessed since my remembrance. The snow fell about five feet deep and remained so for a long time, and the weather was extremely cold — so much so indeed, that almost all the game upon which the Indians depended for subsistence perished, and reduced them almost to a state of starvation through that and three or four succeeding years. When the snow melted in the spring, deer were found dead upon the ground in vast numbers, and other animals of every description perished from the cold also, and were found dead in multitudes. Many of our people barely escaped with their lives, and some actually died of hunger and freezing.

But to return from this digression: Having been completely routed [forced out] at Little Beard's Town, deprived of a house and without the means of building one in season, after I had finished my husking, and

⁷ *Eloped*: ran away secretly.

having found from the short acquaintance which I had had with the negroes that they were kind and friendly, I concluded, at their request, to take up my residence with them for a while in their cabin till I should be able to provide a hut for myself. I lived more comfortable than I expected to through the winter, and the next season made a shelter for myself.

The negroes continued on my flats two or three years after this, and then left them for a place that they expected would suit them much better. But as that land became my own in a few years by virtue of a deed from the Chiefs of the Six Nations, I have lived there from that to the present time.

My flats were cleared before I saw them, and it was the opinion of the oldest Indians that were at Genishau at the time that I first went there that all the flats on the Genesee river were improved before any of the Indian tribes ever saw them. I well remember that soon after I went to Little Beard's Town the banks of Fall-Brook were washed off, which left a large number of human bones uncovered. The Indians then said that those were not the bones of Indians, because they had never heard of any of their dead being buried there, but that they were the bones of a race of men who a great many moons before cleared that land and lived on the flats.

The next summer after Sullivan's campaign [1780], our Indians, highly incensed at the whites for the treatment they had received and the sufferings which they had consequently endured, determined to obtain some redress by destroying their frontier settlements. Corn Planter, otherwise called John O'Bail, led the Indians, and an officer by the name of Johnston commanded the British in the expedition. The force was large, and so strongly bent upon revenge and vengeance that seemingly nothing could avert its march nor prevent its depredations. After leaving Genesee they marched directly to some of the headwaters of the Susquehanna River and Schoharie Creek, went down that creek to the Mohawk River, thence up that river to Fort Stanwix, and from thence came home. In their route they burnt a number of places, destroyed all the cattle and other property that fell in their way, killed a number of white people, and brought home a few prisoners.

In that expedition, when they came to Fort Plain on the Mohawk river, Corn Planter and a party of his Indians took old John O'Bail, a white man, and made him a prisoner. Old John O'Bail in his younger days had frequently passed through the Indian settlements that lay between the Hudson and Fort Niagara, and in some of his excursions had become enamored with a squaw, by whom he had a son that was called Corn Planter.

Corn Planter was a chief of considerable eminence, and having been informed of his parentage and of the place of his father's residence, took the old man at this time in order that he might make an introduction leisurely and become acquainted with a man to whom, though a stranger, he was satisfied that he owed his existence.

After he had taken the old man, his father, he led him as a prisoner ten or twelve miles up the river and then stepped before him, faced about, and addressed him in the following terms: —

“My name is John O'Bail, commonly called Corn Planter. I am your son! You are my father! You are now my prisoner, and subject to the customs of Indian warfare: but you shall not be harmed; you need not fear. I am a warrior! Many are the scalps which I have taken! Many prisoners I have tortured to death! I am your son! I am a warrior! I was anxious to see you and to greet you in friendship. I went to your cabin and took you by force! But your life shall be spared. Indians love their friends and their kindred and treat



them with kindness. If now you choose to follow the fortune of your yellow son and to live with our people, I will cherish your old age with plenty of venison, and you shall live easy. But if it is your choice to return to your fields and live with your white children, I will send a party of my trusty young men to conduct you back in safety. I respect you, my father; you have been friendly to Indians, and they are your friends.”

Old John chose to return. Corn Planter, as good as his word, ordered an escort to attend him home, which they did with the greatest care.

Amongst the prisoners that were brought to Genesee, was William Newkirk, a man by the name of Price, and two negroes. Price lived a while with Little Beard and afterwards with Jack Berry, an Indian. When he left Jack Berry he went to Niagara, where he now resides. Newkirk was brought to Beard’s Town and lived with Little Beard and at Fort Niagara about one year, and then enlisted under Butler and went with him on an expedition to the Monongahela.

Soon after the close of the Revolutionary War, my Indian brother, Kau-jises-tau-ge-au (which being interpreted signifies Black Coals) offered me my liberty and told me that if it was my choice I might go to my friends [white society].

My son, Thomas, was anxious that I should go, and offered to go with me and assist me on the journey by taking care of the younger children and providing food as we travelled through the wilderness. But the Chiefs of our tribe, suspecting from his appearance, actions, and a few warlike exploits, that Thomas would be a great warrior or a good counsellor, refused to let him leave them on any account whatever.

To go myself and leave him was more than I felt able to do; for he had been kind to me and was one on whom I placed great dependence. The Chiefs refusing to let him go was one reason for my resolving to stay, but another, more powerful, if possible, was that I had got a large family of Indian children that I must take with me, and that if I should be so fortunate as to find my relatives, they would despise them, if not myself, and treat us as enemies or at least with a degree of cold indifference, which I thought I could not endure.

Accordingly, after I had duly considered the matter, I told my brother that it was my choice to stay and spend the remainder of my days with my Indian friends, and live with my family as I had heretofore done. He appeared well pleased with my resolution and informed me, that as that was my choice, I should have a piece of land that I could call my own where I could live unmolested [unbothered] and have something at my decease to leave for the benefit of my children.

In 1797 the Seneca sold most of their remaining land to the United States for \$100,000. Two of Mary Jemison’s sons, Thomas and John, were among the signers of this agreement, the Treaty of Big Tree. As Mary Jemison had been promised by her brother, she was given a small tract of land in the Gardeau reservation by the Great Council of the Seneca. She lived there until 1831, when the tract was sold and the family moved to Buffalo Creek, New York. Mary Jemison—Dehgewanus—died in 1833 at age 90.

