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The Legacy of Mary Jemison

by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck





Mary Jemison began its first season with Corn Hill Waterfront & Navigation Foundation as a Genesee River/ Erie Canal tour boat in 2005. *Edward P. Curtis, Jr. Photographer.*

Cover: Detail of colored pencil drawing of Mary Jemison by G. Peter Jemison. *Collection of the artist.*

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The Legacy of Mary Jemison

In the spring of 2005 a double-decked wooden boat renamed Mary Jemison moved from the Erie Canal crossing at Genesee Valley Park down the Genesee River toward the Corn Hill Landing Apartments on the west side of the river. Like its namesake, the wooden boat was born on the water, adapted from its original life and brought to the Genesee Country. It now works as an Erie Canal/Genesee River tour boat. Who is Mary Jemison? What makes her story relevant in the 21st century? What is her legacy?'

Mary was only twenty years old when she took her last step on a 600 mile long journey from Ohio to the Genesee Country, settling in what is now Letchworth Park. She had been living with the Senecas about four years; and though for the rest of her life she felt straddled between two cultures, she chose to remain with the Senecas whom she had come to love as family.

In a period where there are few European settlers to see and record the events of the region, Mary Jemison's 18th century recollections offer an historical and cultural window.

Before 1783 there were few nonIndians in New York west of Utica. The Senecas occupied the land from the Mohawk River to Lake Erie with a few towns scattered throughout the region. After peace was struck in 1783, the stories of fertile soil spread throughout New England attracting farmers whose stony, overworked farms could no longer be subdivided for upcoming generations. Land speculators made rapid division of the lands into towns and inside of a decade settlements dotted western New York. These mostly New England emigrants heard stories of Mary Jemison and curiosity about the early Indians' history and the story of "the white woman" led lawyer Daniel W. Barrister to contract James E. Seaver to record her recollections for publication.

Seaver arranged to meet Mary at the home of Jennet Whaley in Castile, Genesee County, New York. He waited while Mary walked the four miles from her home with her friend Thomas Clute.

Her appearance as an old woman of eighty years struck the interviewer, James Seaver, as unusually fit. The 21st century image of Mary usually is the statue of her with a papoose on her back or of the drawing of a frail-looking, bent-over woman. Seaver relates a *strong*, though bent-over, woman. Seaver observed:

*In stature she is very short, and considerably under the middle size, and stands tolerably erect, with her head bent forward, apparently from her having for a long time been accustomed to carrying heavy burdens in a strap placed across her forehead. Her complexion is very white for a woman of her age, and although the wrinkles of fourscore years are deeply indented in her cheeks, yet the crimson of youth is distinctly visible. Her eyes are light blue, a little faded by age, and naturally brilliant and sparkling. Her sight is quite dim, though she is able to perform her necessary labor without the assistance of glasses. Her cheek bones are high, and rather prominent, and her front teeth, in the lower jaw, are sound and good. When she looks up and is engaged in conversation her countenance is very expressive; but from her long residence with the Indians, she has acquired the habit of peeping from under eye-brows as they do with the head inclined downwards. Formerly her hair was of a light chestnut brown- it is now quite grey, a little curled, of middling length and tied in a bunch behind.*²

Over the next three days, she told her story to Seaver who was struck by her facility with English and her lingering Irish accent. Her friend Thomas Clute made her more at ease for she was well aware of her unfamiliarity with the manners of white people from whom she had been separated for over half a century. She somewhat guarded her speech, not telling many stories that might have shed poor light on the family, but which Seaver suspected could be very interesting.

Though she was eighty years old Seaver observed she had the clear memory of a woman of fifty. Except for this exhaustive interview she may not have had the vehicle to transport her memory back through nearly seventy years. At times she paused as she seemingly relived periods of her life. She sighed deeply. Sometimes tears welled from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Sweeter memories brought her to an animated narrative and her passions about various subjects easily excited her.

The eyes of a New Englander perhaps felt some sympathy for the old woman who appeared poorly dressed. But as Seaver related:

*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....*³ *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. The shirt was of cotton and made at the top, as I was informed,*

like a man's without collar or sleeves- was open before and extended down about midway of the hips.- The petticoat and the ends sewed together. This was tied on by a string that was passed over it and around the waist, in such a manner as to let the bottom of the petticoat down half way between the knee and ankle and leave one-fourth of a yard at the top to be turned down over the string- the bottom of the shirt coming a little below, and on the outside of the top of the fold so as to leave the list and two or three inches of the cloth uncovered. The stockings, were of blue broadcloth, tied, or pinned on, which reached from the knees, into the mouth of the moccasins.- Around her toes only, she had some rags, and over these her buckskin moccasins. Her gown was of undressed flannel, colored brown. It was made in old Yankee style, with long sleeves, covered the top of the hips, and was tied before in two places with strings of deer skin. Over all this, she wore an Indian blanket. On her head she wore a piece of old brown woolen cloth made somewhat like a sun bonnet.⁴

By the end of her life Mary had enough property to afford a very comfortable house and well-made clothes. She could probably have afforded to hire help at the house and in the field. She owned several houses in which share croppers lived, working the fertile soil of her flats for a share. She owned cattle and horses and a well-built frame barn 26 by 36 feet. It was larger than the 20 by 28 foot house built of square timber with a shingled roof. A covered stoop extended the house on hot nights. Inside a single stone, stick and mud chimney exhausted two fireplaces from the center of the house, not unlike the model of a longhouse.

Even in her old age she fed her own livestock and fowl, chopped wood, pounded corn and did her own cooking and baking. She chose to sleep on animal skins rather than a bed. She ate her meals from a dish on her lap and sat on the floor or on a bench rather than on a chair or at a table.

Mary spoke of her kidnaping: "Even at this remote period, the recollections of my pleasant home at my father's, of my parents, of my brothers and sister, and of the manner in which I was deprived of them all at once, affects me so powerfully, that I am almost overwhelmed with grief, that is seemingly unsupportable."⁵

She recalled that from the spring of 1752 and for several years after, stories of Indian raids on settlers were numerous. Her parents were greatly distressed to hear of the stories, but her father thought in 1754-55 that the advancing raids would soon end when the Army General George Washington had sent to drive off the French and

Indians arrived. Mary's father's brother was a soldier killed at Fort Necessity near Pittsburgh. Mary's mother took in their motherless, now fatherless, child until the deceased mother's sister arrived to take it home.

The spring of 1755 brought a promising crop season that encouraged Thomas Jemison to make the fatal decision to remain with his family on the farm near today's Gettysburg, Pennsylvania one more season, trusting that the Army would prevail in their rout of the French and Indians. He and his sons prepared the fields for planting and were encouraged by the expanding numbers of cows and sheep.

Mary was returning from a neighbor's house where she had borrowed a horse, and was beginning the one mile trek home when she saw "a sheet widespread approaching towards me [her], in which I [she] was caught and deprived of my senses!"⁶

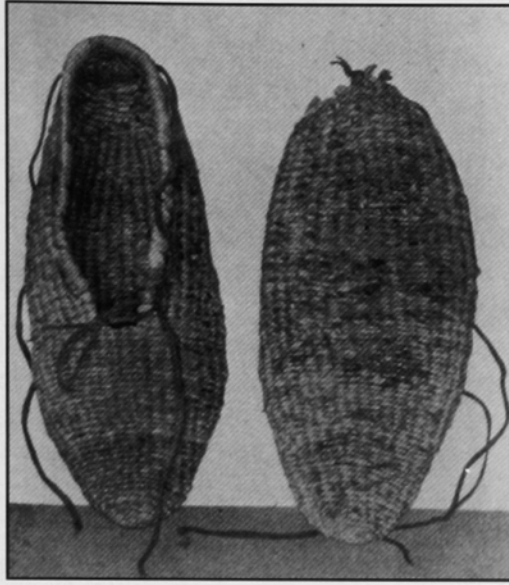
In hindsight she thought this a premonition of her captivity and survival. The family found her, nursed her through the night and she returned early the next morning to find her father planting flax seed while her brothers drove the teams of horses. A neighbor man had just arrived with his sister-in-law and her son and two daughters who lived with him while her husband was fighting for Washington's army.

Mary recalled that her father was shaving an axe handle near the house while her two oldest brothers worked near the barn. Her younger siblings, the neighbor woman and her children were indoors with her mother as she prepared breakfast.

The neighbor man took the horse Mary had brought and left for his house to get a bag of grain. He took his gun hoping to shoot some game on the way. Suddenly gun fire was heard and when the door was opened the man and horse were found shot dead. The Indians took her father prisoner and entering the house, began ransacking it. Her two older brothers working near the barn escaped and traveled to Virginia to live with their grandfather.

The six Indians and four Frenchmen had encountered the neighbor at his own house and followed him back to Mary's home. Whether he was fleeing or hoping to warn the family, he led the raiders to the Jemison house.

The raiders took bread, meat and grain meal and set out into the woods. Not having eaten breakfast, the family was famished and thirsty. One Indian traveling behind the group frequently lashed the children with a whip if they fell behind. If the children cried for water they either had no drink or were compelled to drink urine. When darkness fell they were guarded closely. There was no fire, no shelter, no food or water and little sleep on the hard ground. At dawn they began



Moccasins in the style that would have been worn in Mry Jemison's lifetime. Often they were made of deerskin. These are woven from corn husks. *Office of the City Historian.*

their journey until sunrise when they stopped to eat the food they had taken from the farmhouse. The Indians gave the captives food and all ate except her father who was so distraught he could not eat. The trip resumed and by noon they passed by a fort. They traveled all day entering a swampy forest near dark where they stopped for supper and rest.

Throughout the long trek, Mary's mother spoke encouragingly to them. She urged them to eat. Her mother thought Mary would be spared when she saw an Indian take Mary's shoes and stockings and replace them with moccasins. Another Indian did likewise to the neighbor's son and the two were walked a short distance into the woods where they laid down for the night with one of the Indian captors. Mary discouraged the boy from an escape attempt recalling her mother's advice and caution that they would be found and killed if she tried to escape. Knowing the family would soon be disbanded, her mother told Mary to remember her parents, her own name and her language. She feared for Mary's future and thought it better had she died in infancy for the pain that her mother felt in parting. She cried, "May God bless you my child, and make you comfortable and happy."⁷

The next morning the Indians they had left joined them without the other captives. Mary suspected her parents, two brothers and a sister, the neighbor woman and two of her children were killed.

Mary and the neighbor boy were given breakfast and were soon traveling again with one Indian behind them brushing away evidence of every step they took. That night the travelers built a shelter of twigs and built a fire to warm them up and dry their clothes that became soaked in the rain. Mary appreciated the warmth of the fire on her numb fingers and toes. They again ate supper. Then Mary's suspicions were confirmed when the Indians removed scalps from their bags, alternately scraping them with knives and stretching them over the fire on hoops.

She recognized the scalps by the color of the hair as the Indians combed them to prepare them for market. Mary could do nothing but mourn. The Indians somehow made Mary understand that if they had not been pursued by the neighbors they would not have killed her family. Years later a Mr. Fields who was a neighbor involved in the pursuit, confirmed that explanation, told Mary of her family's fate and that of her other two brothers who escaped capture and moved to Virginia.

After traveling for four days Mary was so tired and cold from rain and snow that she thought she would die. The Indians made another shelter of branches and built a fire that soon restored and warmed her. She rested well that night. The snow storm caused the Indians to delay at the camp for two days. One day six Indians arrived with a young white male prisoner. Though Mary was happy to see him, she knew that as a prisoner he was as powerless as she to escape. The Indians hunted a deer and, roasting it whole over the campfire, shared the meat and bread. After these three nights and two days snowed in, the party of twelve Indians, four Frenchmen, the young man, Mary and the little neighbor boy moved with less haste and with no attempt to cover their tracks. They had obviously entered their homelands.

By afternoon they had arrived at Fort Duquesne (later Fort Pitt near Pittsburgh). Here where the Monongahela River meets the Allegheny River to form the Ohio River, the Indians stopped to paint the faces and hair of their captives before entering the fort. Once inside they were given bread and locked up together.

Quite early the next morning Mary and the two boys were removed from the building. The two boys were turned over to the French who left with them. Their fate was unknown to Mary. Before she had much time to fear for her own fate, two Seneca women came and looked at her closely. Her Shawnee captors gave her to the two Seneca women and they all set out in two canoes on the Ohio River. An Indian in the larger canoe in front, hung the scalps of her friends and family on a pole and carried it over his shoulder as he stood in the stern of the

canoe. They passed a Shawnee town where they saw the still-smouldering, dismembered bodies of white settlers hung from poles. The shocking scene remained blood-curdling to Mary half a century later.

By early evening they arrived at a small Seneca village at the mouth of a river the Senecas called Sheninjee. [probably meaning Indian Cross Creek or Indian Short Creek] seventy-five miles from today's Pittsburgh. The Indian women stopped at their home here and the Shawnee continued on the Ohio River.

The Indian women left Mary alone in the canoe and soon returned with Seneca clothing. They bathed her, and throwing her rags into the river, they dressed her as a Seneca woman. They took her to the center of the wigwam and invited other women to come. They began what to Mary was a noisy, frightening ceremony of grieving for a brother lost in battle. The ceremony moved from that of mourning to joy as they sang and chanted that the lost brother will be replaced by Mary in the traditional Seneca adoption.

Mary was forbidden to speak English, but quickly learned the Seneca language from her new sisters. She spoke her catechism and Bible verses when she was alone so she would not forget it as her mother instructed.

She found the Seneca village of Sheninjee quite pleasant with fertile soil for the corn, large forests for deer and elk and good fishing. In the Fall Fort DuQuesne became Fort Pitt when the French lost it to the British.

The Indians packed up their corn harvest and carried it on horseback and in canoes down the Ohio to the mouth of the Sciota River. There they spent the winter. Hunters could get deer, elk and other game animals while beaver, muskrat and other pelts were marketed for ammunition, clothes, tools, pots and other goods. When spring arrived the Seneca returned to the village they vacated on the Sheninjee River. They planted corn, beans and squash, the staples of Indian fields often referred to as the "three sisters."

That spring the Indians canoed to Fort Pitt to make peace with the British. They made camp across the river from the fort and early the next morning took Mary with them to see the white people. Mary was overcome with homesickness and wanted to be free from the Senecas. The white people asked her name, where she was kidnaped, commented that she seemed too young and frail to endure the life she must have among the Senecas.

The concern of the white people for Mary was so obvious and strong that her sisters feared she could be lost to them in a treaty. They took her home in the canoe. Mary recalled that they never stopped

paddling until they reached home. Her Indian brothers later informed her that white people did indeed cross the river to take her back and were very frustrated at not finding her. Mary recalled:

*Although I had been with the Indians something over a year, and had become considerably habituated to their mode of living, and attached to my sisters, the sight of white people who could speak English inspired me with an unspeakable anxiety to go home with them, and share in the blessings of civilization. My sudden departure and escape from them, seemed like a second captivity, and for a long time I brooded the thoughts of my miserable situation with almost as much sorrow and dejection as I had done those of my first sufferings. Time, the destroyer of every affection, wore away my unpleasant feelings, and I became as contented as before.*⁸

They tended fields as they had the season before and after the harvest traveled down the Ohio again to the hunting ground in the Sciota River. They again wintered there; but the following spring, instead of returning to Sheninjee, they traveled up the Ohio River to Wiishto where two rivers emptied into the Ohio. The Seneca built another town and planted corn.

The first summer in Wiishto a group of Delaware arrived to live with the Senecas. There were five white prisoners with them. One named Priscilla Ramsey married Capt. Little Billy's uncle. After he died she married a white man named Nettles and moved to the Grand River in Upper Canada. Soon Mary's sisters informed her that she must live with the Delaware and take a husband named Sheninjee. Though hesitant to take such a big step, Mary didn't want to disobey or disappoint her sisters and so she married Sheninjee in a Seneca ceremony.

Mary was at first distraught at the idea of marrying an Indian, but Sheninjee won her heart with his mild manner, his care of her when she was sick and his gentleness. She recalled that he was an agreeable husband and a comfortable companion. He became a friend. She said, strange as it may seem, "I loved him."⁹

They were married about two years when she became ill. Sheninjee was away. She was sent to a shed along the river and her sisters tended to her. On her second day in the shed, she delivered a baby girl who lived only two days. She recalled, "Notwithstanding the shortness of the time that I possessed it, it was a great grief to me to lose it."¹⁰

Mary remained ill for two weeks before Sheninjee returned home. He took her back into their home and expected she would die. She remained ill throughout the summer, but by harvest time, she was well enough to travel to the winter hunting ground on the Sciota River. In



Mary Jemison would have ground corn just as this Seneca woman is demonstrating in the early 20th century. *Office of the City Historian.*

her fourth year with the Indians, Mary gave birth to a healthy son in this winter home. She named him Thomas Jemison after her father.

The following spring when Thomas was about four months old they returned to their village at Wiishto. They packed up the furs they had taken over the winter and traveled to Fort Pitt to trade and gather the supplies they needed. She had been with the Indians four years. Her family and friends were now Indians. Home was with the Senecas. The urge to leave them for the white culture was very weak. She had come to believe the work of an Indian woman was not as difficult as for a white woman. Though it seemed their responsibilities were greater, there were many more aspects to a white woman's tasks. Mary did not need to learn spinning, weaving, knitting, embroidery or other arts.¹¹ She did learn functional sewing to make her own clothing. She made no mention of the beautiful and intricate beadwork on so many Seneca clothes.

Mary left Wiishto in a large canoe with their infant son, her husband and two brothers. They canoed to the outlet of Sandusky Lake where they saw three English fur traders who appeared to have been

murdered. Thinking he could be accused of the murders, Sheninjee doubled back to the trading post where they found a party of Shawnee Indians torturing a young white man. Mary pleaded for them to release him and finally the badly injured man ran off. Sheninjee learned these Shawnee were the murderers and they had taken goods from the traders. After a brief rest, Mary and her party traveled forty miles to a Shawnee village called Gaw-sush-shaw-ga on the Sandusky Creek. While there one of her brothers finally agreed to go and to take Mary and her son as well.

Sheninjee agreed to send Mary with her brothers. He would travel alone down the river to trade furs, then hunt with his friends at the winter hunting grounds. He would join Mary the following spring. She and her brothers left, her baby on her back, and arrived at a village abandoned by the Delaware. The brothers searched and found stashes of corn, beans, sugar and honey. They packed a large supply and found two or three horses as well. They traveled to Conowongo Creek where they stopped for more than a week because the horses had wandered off into the woods. When they were found they began their journey again. A heavy, long rain had raised the creek so that they nearly lost their lives trying to cross and were turned back. They attempted again, swimming their horses, and did cross; but Mary recalled, "I but just escaped with my little boy from being drowned." They finally reached Canada, then Genishaw, a large Seneca village not far from the present Geneseo.¹²

Soon after Mary arrived at Genishaw the Senecas were preparing to retake Fort Niagara which the French had lost to the British the month before. Secure in their occupation of Fort Niagara the British sent out a small unit of soldiers to take Fort Schlosser a few miles upriver from Fort Niagara. The soldiers were well outfitted; but perhaps overconfident, for they were ambushed by the French and Indians who drove them off the cliff above the river at "Devil's Hole." Horses, wagons and artillery were destroyed and all but one soldier died. The warriors returned after only a few days with a white prisoner and the first oxen ever brought to the Genesee Flats.

Celebrating their victory and directing their vengeance towards the torture and execution of the prisoners, Mary's sister wanted her to attend with her. Seeing the painful memories of her family's own deaths, her mother intervened, "our business needs attending," she said and the three sisters stayed home.¹³

The winter of 1759 passed and spring turned to summer as Mary's anticipation of Sheninjee's arrival turned to worry. That summer she learned that her husband died in Wiishto soon after she left. Her moth-

er and family tried to console her but she felt a great weight being a young mother and widow.

It was nearly two years later when the King of England offered a reward to people who brought prisoners of the Indians to a fort to free them. A Dutch trader named John Van Sice tried to cash in on the bounty by taking Mary against her will to Fort Niagara. She barely escaped his grasp when he chased her from the corn field she worked. She hid out for three days in an abandoned cabin near Gardeau Flats. When the tribal chiefs learned why she had hidden they ordered that she was not to be redeemed. One old tribal chief told her brother they should turn her in for the reward. Her brother responded that he would sooner kill Mary than let her be taken. He told Mary's sister who, fearing for her life, sent Mary and infant Thomas into the tall grass not far from the house where she could hide until evening when her brother would come to tell her sister if the danger was passed. Her sister told her that when darkness fell, she was to look near the outside of the cabin door. A small cake left there meant she was to be killed. She was to take the cake and go swiftly to a large spring on the south side of Samp's Creek and wait for her sister to reach her.

When darkness fell Mary left Thomas alone in the weeds and crept to the house. Her heart startled when she saw the cake- she was to be killed! She rushed back to Thomas, and placing him on her back, ran to the spring to wait for her sister. She traveled through the night and arrived exhausted. Thomas was nearly three years old and quite heavy. She shared the cake with Thomas and cupped water from the spring in her hand.

That morning the old chief came to her sister's house looking for Mary, and not finding her set off to redeem the prisoners he had at Fort Niagara. Her sister told her brother where to find Mary. He arrived midday, alarming Mary who expected to be killed. After spending the night at the spring they returned home and found all was well. Prisoners everywhere were being freed. Mary's mother redeemed five prisoners at Johnstown on the Mohawk River.

A new life began for Mary that year when she married Hiokatoo, a respected old chief and warrior. She felt safe under his kindness and protection. By him she had four daughters and two sons she named Jane, Nancy, Betsy, Polly, John and Jesse. Jane died at about fifteen years of age, but the other girls lived to have children of their own. It was her sons, whose contact with the white culture and alcohol, who grieved her. She told Seaver, "No people can live more happy than the Indians did in times of peace, before the introduction of spiritous liquors amongst them." ¹⁴

The Senecas lived in peace for about fifteen years before the start of the American Revolution. The chiefs of the Six Nations signed a treaty of neutrality with the rebels and looked forward to peace amidst war; but the next year the British called the chiefs to a meeting and convinced them that the rebels were deserving of punishment for rebelling against the good king. They promised the chiefs great rewards of money and goods if they helped subdue the few outnumbered rebels. Each chief was given a suit of clothes, a brass kettle, a scalping knife, a gun and a tomahawk. A bounty was offered for scalps.



A Seneca woman in the early 1900s picks corn much as Mary Jemison and her daughters would have. Corn, beans and squash were "the three sisters" that sustained the Senecas' diet, especially in the winter when game was scarce.

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The Senecas suffered a severe loss of thirty-six braves in what they expected to be merely an observation of the British triumph over the rebels. Instead the British were sorely beaten.

Both Col. Butler and Joseph Brant often stayed with Mary as they passed to and from Fort Niagara. War was distant from Mary's remote Genesee River village, but in the fall of 1779 they learned that General John Sullivan, under orders from George Washington, was on a punishing campaign to destroy Indian villages. The soldiers burned the houses, killed the cows, horses and hogs and burned acres of corn fields. Every tree in the orchards was cut down.

The Senecas were scouting Sullivan's moves when they ambushed a small group of Sullivan's soldiers. Several of Sullivan's soldiers were killed and Lt. Thomas Boyd and Sgt William Parker were taken captive, tortured and killed. Believing the enemy force too large, the Senecas abandoned the village. Sullivan's army was soon upon the village burning and destroying everything. The Indian women and children were a safe distance away. Even after the army left the Senecas were fearful that they could double back when they did return. Mary knew she had to look out for her children. Carrying the two younger ones on her back, the other three children walked with her. She traveled to Gardeau Flats to the cabin she had hidden in when the Dutch trader sought her. There she was taken in by two runaway slaves who had taken up residence in the cabin. She husked their corn for a share and earned about twenty-five bushels--plenty to feed her family.

That winter was severe and about five feet of snow fell. Many Indians died from the cold. Game was scarce. In the spring deer and many other game animals were found dead in the forest.

Mary and her children were invited to stay with the two men in their cabin as the cold closed in. Her family lived comfortably through the winter and the following summer she built her own cabin with the help of the two men. Later the men moved on. Mary found it curious that by the time she ever laid eyes on the Genesee land, it was already cleared for planting. She later owned all these lands and more. The Senecas told her of a "race of men who a great many moons before, cleared that land and lived on the Flats."¹⁵ Their bones, exposed by the rushing waters of the Fall-Brook near Little Beard's Town, were evidence of a people probably known as the Mound Builders.

Seneca Chief Corn Planter, known as John O'Bail, led the Senecas, with a British officer, down the Susquehanna and Schoharie Creek to Fort Stanwix on the Mohawk River, taking vengeance on the white settlers for the destruction and murder delivered to the Senecas during General John Sullivan's march.

A Woman in Two Worlds

Mary recalled to Seaver that soon after the end of the American Revolution, her brother, Black Coals, came to her and offered her her freedom. She said, "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 traveled 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 counselor, 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 chief's 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." ¹⁶

Mary's brother was pleased to hear her decision to remain with her adoptive family. He said in a few days he would join a Council in Upper Canada. He would speak to the chiefs at Buffalo about giving her land of her own for her use and to pass on to her children. Her brother set out for the meeting, but died at Grand River with Mary not knowing if he had discussed the land. Mary mourned his death. Even as the brother who had promised to kill her rather than free her to the King, for she believed he made that decision with the purest heart.

Mary recalled that she heard not a word until 1797 when Chief Farmers Brother called her to the Council at Big Tree. He told her that her brother had asked for land for her and that she could then choose the tract. She, of course, chose land familiar to her that she had called home for many years. She chose a large tract of land that included Gardeau Flats. Farmers Brother presented the Council with her brother's request of land for her and over strong protests of Red Jacket, Farmers' Brother prevailed. The lands Mary Jemison was awarded came to be known as the Gardeau Tract. The name referred to the hills and valleys.

Red Jacket was so opposed to Mary's land grant that he held her money for two or three years until he was convinced that white people, not Indians, had granted her land.

When the land proved too much labor for her and her daughters, she leased some to sharecroppers which helped her family to live well with less labor.

The Death of Thomas

Mary recalled that her greatest joy with her children was when they were young and safe by the fireside of her cabin. As John and Thomas grew older, Thomas's name calling and persistent badgering about John's bigamy, became more intense. When they became intoxicated their misbehavior was exaggerated. Thomas often threatened Mary's life, once holding a hatchet over her head. In one instance he struck Hiokatoo, showing no respect for him as an aged, great warrior or step-father.

One day in 1811 when Mary was not at home, Thomas stopped by her cabin and found John already there. Thomas was intoxicated and started an argument with John. With no one there to settle them, John dragged Thomas by the hair out onto the stoop and hit him on the head with a tomahawk. The greatest anguish Mary had ever experienced gripped her when she found her murdered son. Neighbors helped her to prepare him an honorable burial and she sent word to Buffalo to inform the chiefs. She painfully relinquished the fate of her son, John to the judgement of the chiefs. John fled to Canada, knowing he would be sought; but returned to his family when he learned the decision of the chiefs was that he was justified in killing Thomas who initiated the struggle. Mary strongly opposed alcohol and believed it to be "a poison that will soon exterminate the Indian tribes of this part of the country."¹⁷

In the fall of that same year, 1811, Hiokatoo died after four years of consumption. At 103, he was the last tie she had to her adoptive family who by then was at the Indian Reservation at Tonawanda. He was buried in his best clothing along with a war club, tomahawk, scalping knife, powder flask, flint, a piece of spunk, a cup and a small cake.

A year after the death of her husband, Mary suffered the loss of a second son, Jesse, by the hand of John. While working with a neighbor to skid logs down a hillside to the Genesee River to float to a sawmill, they became intoxicated despite Mary's warnings to stay sober. A quarrel ensued by the end of the day and John, already upset at being shunned by many of the Indians and jealous of brother Jesse's adoption of white culture and the favor of his mother, vented his rage on his brother by stabbing him eighteen times.

Mary was distraught when she was brought the news the next morning by Thomas' and John's children. John arrived the next morning to explain the tragedy. Mary dispatched George Jemison to carry the murdered Jesse home in his sleigh. Mary walked the three or four miles to the woods where her twenty-eight year-old son lay dead. Her daughter Polly was already there. Frantic with grief, Mary had to be held back from her dead son by her family.

A Victim of Swindlers

In Mary's old age she sometimes became the victim of swindlers. One day she was sent word that a cousin of hers was living in Leicester, and being poor, could use her assistance. Cousin George Jemison introduced himself as a son of Mary's father's brother. Though Mary knew her father to have one brother who had been killed, she supposed he could have had another in Europe, as George claimed. Finding his family in true poverty, she moved him to her farm with the encouragement of a friend. She let him live in one of her houses and farm fourteen acres. She bought him a cow, pig, furniture and supplies, paid a \$72.00 debt (then a large sum of money) provided him with a team and farming tools and loaned him an additional cow for two years.

Mary depended upon friend, Thomas Clute, for advice. While he was in Albany another friend came with George Jemison and convinced her that George's life would be much better if he owned the fourteen acres and an additional twenty-six. Knowing she could not read they assured her the contract they laid before her did not include a lot she referred to as the Steele Place. Instead of transferring forty acres as she believed, the men swindled her for four hundred acres. The trusted friend took a share for using Mary's trust in him to arrange George Jemison's swindle. The friend soon gave up his land, unable to bear the scorn for his trickery; but the supposed George Jemison held his until he sold it much later for a pittance. He was later removed from Mary's land when Chief Young King intervened on behalf of Thomas' son who had gone to George Jemison to retrieve the loaned cow. Jemison clubbed and nearly killed the son, then went to lawyer Jellus Clute to swear out a warrant. The chief got Jemison to agree never again to use the club and the incident was settled. Mary was soon able to remove him from her land.

In June of 1817 her last son John, returned from a meeting to find that a month or so earlier 22 acres of land had fallen into the Genesee River with such great power and volume that this "great slide" ¹⁸

altered the course of the river. John took this as an omen of death for him. He convinced two friends, Doctor and Jack, to drink alcohol with him and to kill him; so great was the grief he felt over the murders of his brothers. With some difficulty they did kill John at the age of fifty-four. Though Mary mourned him as a son, she could not feel bad for him. She related that something in his childhood revealed that he would be a difficult man with "an evil disposition." Friend Ebenezer "Indian" Allen said to Mary that John was bad and would someday do something deserving of death.

Doctor and Jack were shunned by the Indians. They sent a wampum belt asking Mary's forgiveness, but she refused, saying they should leave the area rather than be killed. They discussed their fate, but remained in the area. At the time Seaver spoke to Mary in 1823, Doctor had recently died of consumption at Squawkie Hill in 1819. Jack, however, was abandoned by his family who wanted to go to the Tonawanda Reservation. In despair, and not wanting to leave his home, Jack, who was an expert on herbs and natural medicines, ate a large amount of muskrat root which he knew could be fatal. In ten or twelve hours he died.

Over the next few years Mary deeded over large tracts of her land to trusted friends and kept for herself a lot one mile by two miles, bounded by the Genesee on the east bank and including the Great Slide in the middle of her lot. The men to whom she deeded land were trusted and approved by her son John and daughter Nancy. When Hiokatoo died, Mary was without family in the area. Her favorite grandson, Dr. James Shongo, helped her to move to the Reservation. James was the son of Mary's daughter, Polly and John Shongo. James was born in Mary's cabin at Gardeau Flats and lived his early youth on her land. There on the Reservation she lived among extended family and friends for many more years.¹⁹

The Death of Mary Jemison

Mary's death in 1833 at the age of 91 drew the attention of the newspapers.

The *Rochester Daily Advertiser* predicted that Seaver's memoirs of Mary Jemison would "hereafter be perused with much interest, as illustrative of the character of the 'Red Man of the Forest.'"²⁰ Her son, Thomas, was born when the first white settlers began to settle the Genesee Country. The interaction between the two cultures altered them both and left the settlers curious about the early history of the

Senecas. Even when they were young, Mary noted that her son, Jesse, had adopted the dress and culture of the settlers more than her other two sons.²¹ So mixed were the cultures that an 1850s newspaper reported that young Indians, including several young Jemison men, were playing league baseball on the Tonawanda Indian team.

A Changing World

In October of 1872 Thomas Jemison, son of Mary's oldest son, Thomas, traveled to Mt. Morris with Isaac John E. John, grandson of Tall Chief, to "see and to witness the changes produced on their once famous hunting grounds by civilization and the enterprise and capital of the white man."²² They had great respect for the community's first settler, General William Mills, whom they called "Big Kettle" for his big heart and generosity.

Thomas predicted that within two generations there would be no more Seneca Indians in New York State. "They will all be absorbed by the white race...." He added, "the cross making fine looking men and women." Thomas married a full-blooded Seneca woman who kept to her native dress but their six children- three daughters and three sons- all adopted "the citizens' dress."²³

Isaac John E. John told the *Union & Advertiser* reporter that many of the Senecas on the Reservation had become good farmers and had learned mechanics. They built churches and schools. He said he and his wife were bringing up their children similar to how Thomas had been raised. Some of his children, he said, "are already intermarried with white people."²⁴ Perhaps times had changed since Mary's observation about the effects and changes in Native American culture since contact with the settlers.²⁵

That year 1872, William Pryor Letchworth, owner of Mary's old reserve, a retired industrialist from Buffalo and a benefactor, invited the Mohawks of Canada to join the Senecas in what became known as the Last Council Fire. Following the War of 1812, the Mohawks, who had sided with the British, left for Canada with Joseph Brant. The Senecas remained in New York.

The invitation was not well received at first. Col. W. J. Simcoe Kerr, grandson of Joseph Brant, was the chief of the Canadian Mohawks. He did not wish to open wounds more than fifty years old. He did not consider the Seneca to be his brothers. His sister, however, convinced him and another Mohawk to attend the Council Fire at Letchworth's estate. The meeting was tense as John Shanks, Letchworth's Seneca friend, opened the meeting. Former United States

president Millard Filmore and other nonIndians attended. The tension was broken when Nicholson Parker said that his heart was heavy because the League of the Iroquois was no longer powerful.

Mary's grandson, Thomas, said, "It is painful to think that the race is doomed and that our language and history will soon perish from the thought of men." ²⁶

It was obvious that uniting the Iroquois would help to preserve the culture. One of Letchworth's personal missions was to gather Iroquois artifacts and preserve them. Many of those he collected are now on display at Letchworth State Park Museum.

Solomon O'Bail, grandson of Seneca Chief Cornplanter, offered his hand in peace to Col. Kerr, the Mohawk chief. Kerr said, "My brother, I am glad to take your hand once more held out in the clasp of friendship. The Senecas and Mohawks are now both my people."

O'Bail replied, "I am happy to be in Council with you, my brother, and may the remembrance of this day never fade from our minds and the minds of our descendants." ²⁷

Though most historians set little significance on the Last Council Fire held by the once powerful Iroquois, it served to reunite them for the challenges they would face in the coming generations.

Two years later, Mary's remains were moved from the Mission Burying Ground at the Reservation near Buffalo where they had rested for forty years. The *Union & Advertiser* reported "The stone that had marked her grave had been nearly destroyed by remorseless relic hunters, by whom it had been broken and carried away piece by piece until but a small portion of it remained about the ground." ²⁸

Dr. James Shongo helped to remove her remains to the Gardeau Flats where she had spent so many years of her life and raised her children. A few years earlier John Shanks told William Pryor Letchworth, who now owned the land, about the abandoned Seneca Council House which Letchworth then moved from Canadea to the hill above the home he called Glen Iris. Mary's new grave was near this Council House. The *Union & Advertiser* reported that Mary probably rested in this Council House after traveling six hundred miles from Ohio to the Genesee River where she spent nearly all of her life. Her remains were carried from nearby Castile to the Council House where Rev. W. D. McKinley of Castile read several scriptures and told stories of her life. He ended with a prayer. Many of her old friends from the Genesee River Valley and from the Reservation attended. Her remains were carried from the Council House to the grave by pall bearers George Wheeler, D. W. Bishop, Giles Davis, Benjamin Burlingham, John Peter Kelly and Isaac McNair. ²⁹

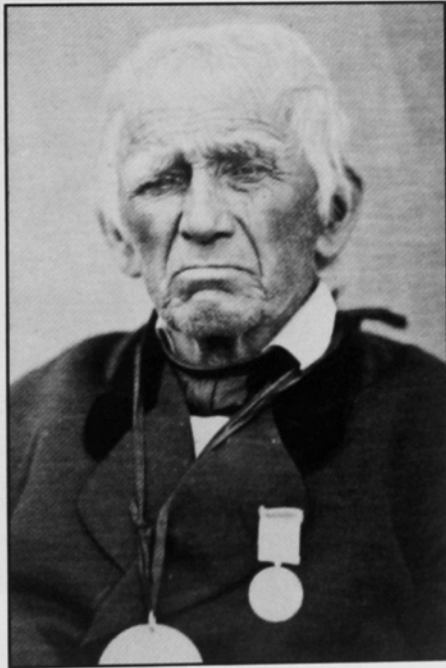
The paper reported, “the murmur of the Genesee may be heard as one stands by her grave as she heard it during nearly seventy years that she lived upon its banks. An iron fence was soon built around the grave site and a statue was erected of her carrying a child on her back as she did when she traveled from Ohio to the Gardeau Flats. The lands were soon to be given from William Pryor Letchworth to the state of New York as a public park.”³ Letchworth had fought several times to prevent the development of waterpower and mills along the river.



The iron bridge that tourists swarmed to see over the Genesee River gorge at today's Letchworth park was built in 1875 to replace a wooden bridge that burned in a suspicious fire. The timbers from the wooden bridge can still be seen in this 1875 photograph. There was talk of constructing a bridge since the 1820s when Mary Jemison was living there. She would have been aware of the difficulties of bringing lumber and goods as well as passengers up and down the steep gorge. Her own sons sometimes helped lumbermen skid logs down the banks to the river below, often to be rafted or floated to Rochester or cut there and shipped as finished lumber. The railroad of course, remained above the gorge and crossed without difficulty. The wooden one was first built in 1852 by the Erie Railroad to complete their trans-New York tracks between the Hudson River and lake Erie. *Office of the City Historian.*

The Legacy of Mary Jemison

In August of 1876 an Erie Railway excursion train left Rochester for a visit to the Portage area about sixty miles south on the Genesee River. The new 235 foot high iron bridge at Portage was the main feature of the excursion, but a tour of Mary Jemison's grave site and the Seneca Council House held great interest to the tourists. The *Union & Advertiser* reported that "At starting the train consisted of five passenger coaches, baggage car and locomotive. So great, however, was the rush along the line to make this trip that at Avon four more coaches and another locomotive had to be added to the train. Even these were not sufficient, as at all the stations along the line large crowds were waiting to step aboard. At LeRoy two more coaches were added, and by the time Batavia was reached there was not a single vacant seat in the long line of cars. At Attica the two locomotives - No. 404, driven by Frank Marsh, and No. 106, William Furman, engineer- were changed for one of the largest and most powerful engines on the line...." ³¹



Thomas Jemison, grandson of Mary Jemison, *Office of the City Historian*.

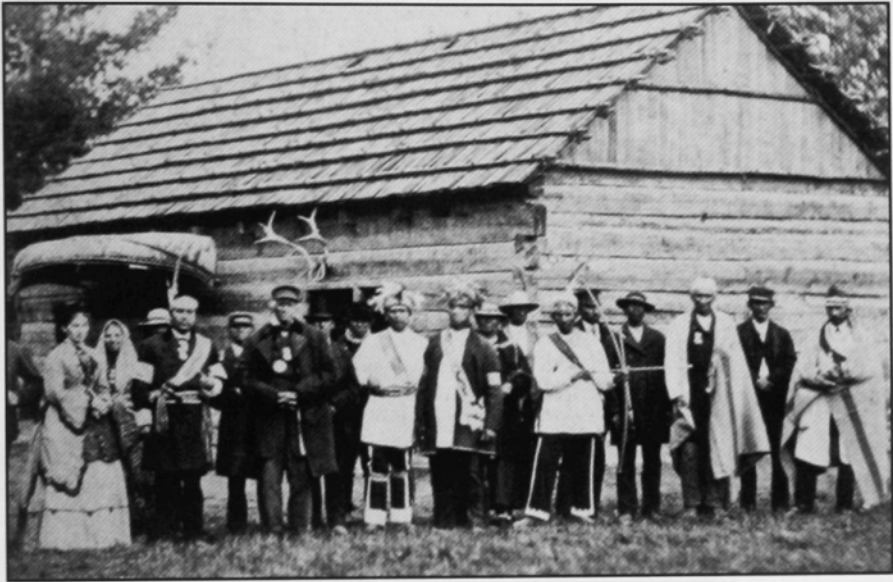
A carriage carried the tourists from the Portage bridge to the hilltop where the Council House and Mary Jemison's grave stood. The tourists marveled that Chief Cornplanter and Red Jacket, Farmers Brother, Tall Chief and other prominent Iroquois leaders once held Council there. The reporter accompanying the tourists remarked that these chiefs were the equals of the Greeks and Romans in their oratorical powers and the challenges they met. He noted, "The white man is now lord of the soil where the fires of the nation are put out forever; but their memories and the few relics that now remain of them, will increase in interest with the lapse of time."³²

Nearby at the grave site, the reporter reflected that Mary chose "to pass the remainder of her days in the midst of those whom her youth and middle age had been spent, she sold her land and purchased a farm on the Buffalo Reservation.... she felt [discontent and weariness] as the white people gathered around and her old Indian friends departed,..."



Mary Jemison's remains were removed to her former Gardeau Reservation by William Letchworth on March 7, 1874. The bronze statue of Mary Jemison over her grave (now Letchworth State Park) near Glen Iris (Letchworth's former home) was sculpted by Henry K. Bush-Brown and dedicated on September 10, 1910. *Office of the City Historian*

In the Council House, the reporter wrote, ““Red Jacket uttered some of his most eloquent harangues against the steady encroachment of the white race, and it is said that it is here [the region] the bones of the distinguished orator and the no less distinguished captive, Mary Jemison, rest side by side, with a multitude of warriors, chiefs and sages.”³³



In 1874, William Letchworth invited Iroquois leaders to what he called The Last Council Fire, held at what is now Letchworth State Park in the Council House he had moved from Canadea. The Last Council Fire had the positive effect of reuniting Iroquois tribes that had not communicated since the end of the War of 1812.

Office of the City Historian

In 1906 Irene and Wyman Jemison, and some of their relatives were among the thirty founding members of the Iroquois League, whose purpose it was to improve the lives, education and employment of the Iroquois. Several tribes were represented in the founding meeting held at School 26 in Rochester. S. P. Moulthrop, principal of the school, facilitated the organizational meeting. His daughter, Mary, a student of both the language and culture of the Iroquois, was present along with George Decker.³⁴

Brian Scriven, Director of Letchworth State Park and Museum, said that Mary's life is meaningful to us today because she chose to remain with the Senecas while so many other white captives returned to their own culture when given the opportunity. Mary reveals that perhaps

Seneca life was not as difficult as many perceived, particularly for women. Her interview with Seaver and the stories told by her descendants help us to better understand the Seneca culture.³⁵

Edward P. Curtis, Jr., founder of the not-for-profit Corn Hill Waterfront & Navigation Foundation, gave Mary Jemison's name to their second tour boat because she was the most famous name associated with the Genesee River. "Much of our early history can be understood through her biography", he said.³⁶

G. Peter Jemison, descendant of Mary Jemison, said Mary's life showed the Seneca perspective of these difficult times. She told of the kindness of her Seneca family and of the discrimination that sometimes existed between the cultures. She told of the negative impact of the introduction of alcohol on the Seneca culture and how her own people took advantage of her to swindle her out of hundreds of acres of land.³⁷

Jemison is an artist and the director of Ganondagan State Historic Site near Victor, New York. This site was once the large Seneca Village of Ganagaro before it was destroyed by Denonville in 1687. A recreated long house, an interpretive center and educational events there attract thousands of people every year. The challenge of the 21st century is to teach people about the Seneca, encourage cross-cultural exchange and to keep alive the oral history tradition, language and music.

Time Line

- 1742-43- Birth of Mary Jemison on board ship from Ireland to America
- 1758- Capture by Shawnees on pioneer farm near today's Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
- 1758- parents, two brothers and a sister are kidnaped and killed along with a neighbor and her daughter
- 1760- marries Sheninjee, a Delaware warrior
- 1761- first born daughter dies at two days old
- 1762 -gives birth to son Thomas
- 1762- Sheninjee, her first husband, dies of illness in Ohio while Mary is in Genesee Country
- 1762/63 -Marries Hiokatoo and eventually bears six more children; four girls and two boys
- 1766- birth of John (to Hiokatoo)
- 1773- birth of Nancy "
- 1774-1777- birth of Betsey

Time Line (Cont'd)

1776-1783- American Revolution

1778 or 1779- birth of Polly

1779- -Sullivan's march to destroy Iroquois villages

1779- Mary takes her children to an abandoned cabin on land that later becomes her own

1782- birth of Jane

1784 or 85- birth of Jesse

1789- Treaty creates Iroquois Reservations and clears title for settlement by Europeans

1789- Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham purchase begins Genesee Country land speculation and settlement

1803- Nathaniel Rochester, William Fitzhugh and Charles Carroll purchase a One Hundred Acre parcel of land from Ebenezer "Indian" Allen's large mill lot on the west side of the Genesee River.

1811- Settlement of the One Hundred Acre Tract begins, forming the nucleus of today's Rochester

1811- Thomas, her first son and only living child to Sheninjee, murdered by son John

1811- death of her second husband, Hiokatoo, honored Seneca warrior at age 103

1812- War of 1812 begins, ending in 1815

1812 - Jesse, murdered by son John

1817- Rochesterville chartered

1817-1825- Erie Canal construction, reaching Rochester in 1823. Rapid development in the Genesee River Valley

1821- Monroe County formed from parts of Ontario and Genesee counties

1824- First edition of the Narrative of the Life of Mrs Mary Jemison by James Seaver

1833- Mary Jemison died at Reservation where much of her family lived

1834- Rochester becomes a city

1850s- Senecas play league baseball for Tonawanda team

1872- Last Council Fire at estate of William Pryor Letchworth

1874- Remains of Mary Jemison removed to Letchworth's estate, now Letchworth State Park

1906- Seneca meet at School 26 in Rochester to form Iroquois League, a Native American advocacy group

Time Line (Cont'd)

1987- Ganondagan State Historic Site begins

2005- Mary Jemison canal/river boat begins cruises for not-for-profit Corn Hill Waterfront & Navigation Foundation.

Endnotes

1. Bought as the *City of Syracuse* from Mid-lakes Navigation by Corn Hill Waterfront & Navigation Foundation in 2005, the renamed *Mary Jemison* was first built in the 1930s as a fishing boat that moved out of the Chesapeake Bay into the Atlantic Ocean to buy fish from the fishermen. It was eventually re-outfitted to ply the the Erie Canal and later the Genesee River.

2. Namias, June, ed., *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*, by James E. Seaver, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, 1995, p.55. Seaver reports chestnut colored hair, but folklore and recollections of Mrs. Asher Wright who knew Mary recalled blonde hair. Perhaps the sun bleached her chestnut hair to a blonde.

3. Ibid. p. 57.

4. Ibid. p. 56.

5. Ibid. P. 63.

6. Ibid. pp 64-65.

7. Ibid. pp. 69.

8. Ibid. pp. 81

9. Ibid. pp. 82.

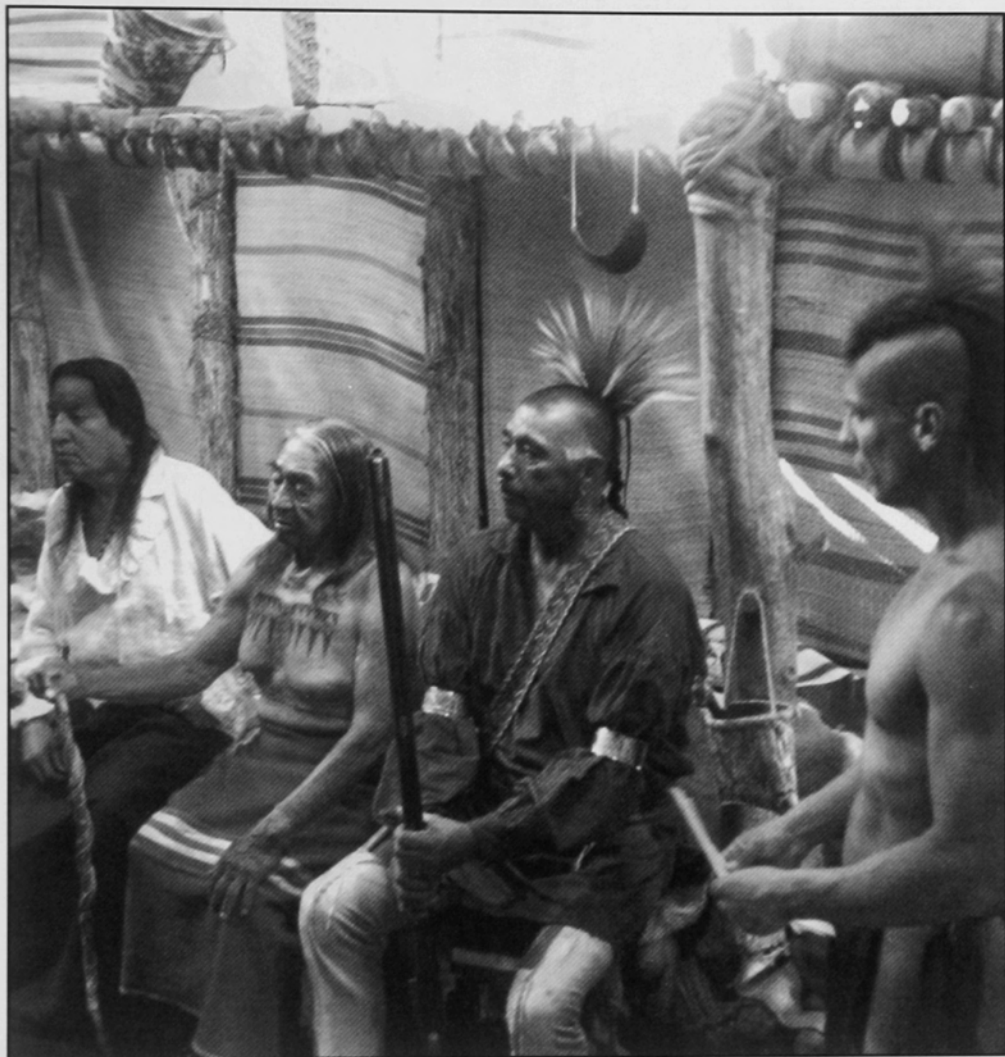
10. Ibid. pp. 82.

11. Ibid. pp. 84.

12. Ibid. pp. 91.

13. Ibid. pp. 91, 92.
14. Ibid. pp. 97.
15. Ibid. pp. 106.
16. pp. 119-120.
17. Ibid. pp. 127
18. Ibid. pp. 15
19. *Union & Advertiser*, March 10, 1874, p.2, col.8.
20. Ibid, October 5, 1833, p. 2, col. 4.
21. Seaver, pp. 141-142.
22. *Union & Advertiser*, October 9, 1872, p. 2, col. 3.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Seaver, pp 84-85. Seaver quotes Mary as saying, "The use of ardent spirits amongst the Indians and the attempts which have been made to civilize and christianize them by the white people, has constantly made them worse and worse; increased their vices, and robbed them of many of their virtues; and will ultimately produce their extermination. I have seen, in a number of instances, the effects of education upon some of our Indians, who were taken when young, from their families, and placed at school before I had had an opportunity to contract many Indian habits, and there kept till they arrived to manhood, but I have never seen one of those but what was an Indian in every respect after he returned. Indians must and will be Indians, in spite of all the means that can be used for their cultivation in the sciences and arts."
26. *Union & Advertiser*, October 9, 1872, 2-3.
27. Ibid.

28. *Union & Advertiser*, March 10, 1874, 2-8.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. *Union & Advertiser*, August 19, 1876, 2-3.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid. Mary Jemison was first buried in The Mission Cemetery on The Buffalo Creek Reservation, but she alone is buried at Letchworth State Park.
34. *Union & Advertiser*, March 23, 1906, p. 6.
35. Conversation with Brian Scriven.
36. Interview with Edward P. Curtis, Jr.
37. Interview with G. Peter Jemison and his comments to editor June Namias.



Above: Actors perform inside the bark long house at Ganondagan State Historic Site at Victor, New York in clothing that would have been worn during Mary Jemison's lifetime. From left to right: Alvin Parker, Warren Sky, Sr., Darwin John, Elmer John, Jr. *Kevin Vickers, photographer.*

Back cover: Colored pencil drawing of Mary Jemison by G. Peter Jemison. *Collection of the artist.*

