White Squaws: Work as a Factor in Choosing Indian Life

Karen L. Hines

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the Indigenous Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-4dn4-xw28

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
WHITE SQUAWS: WORK AS A FACTOR IN CHOOSING INDIAN LIFE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By
Karen L. Hines
2004
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

The requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Karen L. Hines

Approved by the Committee, May 2004

James L. Axtell, Chair

Lelsa D. Meyer

Nwando Achebe
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I. The Squaw’s Work World: A Hard Row to Hoe?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II. The Colonial Woman: Housewife’s Matter ‘Have Never an End’</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III. Work Culture – Keeping Pace</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer wishes to express her appreciation to Professor James Axtell, whose first-semester three-page assignment on Indians stirred my interest in colonial contact and conflict between cultures. His writing deadlines, critical challenges, and love of language have made this a pleasurable learning process. The author is also indebted to Professor Leisa Meyer for her guidance in the author’s first steps in considering gender roles in two cultures. Professor Nwando Achebe’s perspective and careful reading also helped shape this thesis.
ABSTRACT

Indians took some 1,640 men, women and children captive in New England between 1675 and 1763, nearly a quarter of whom were female. A substantial portion of adult women taken captive adopted Indian life; they did not return to colonial communities, but became “white squaws.” Some women may have stayed with the Indians as a passive or negative response to their capture. They may have feared that the stigma of having lived with “savages” would prompt their white communities to shun them. Others may have been overwhelmed by a sense of defeat or helplessness in the wilderness and submitted to captivity. Others might have remained out of fear for their lives if their escape attempt failed, a reluctance to leave behind captive children, and affection for new families, as well as little opportunity to escape.

But colonists, however novice in their wilderness skills, were not a soft, pampered lot. Living on the frontier required a certain strength, both physical and mental, that lends credibility to the idea that becoming a white squaw was an active, positive response to captivity, signifying an acceptance of the new culture and with it a new family, type and manner of work, and role. This thesis explores women’s work in Indian society and compares it with women’s work in colonial society to see whether labor might have weighed heavily in captives’ decisions to live as white squaws. Evaluating women’s work entails looking at their tasks or jobs; the frequency, variation, and routine of work; the rhythm of work, whether it was continuous, cyclical, or occasional; and the amount of leisure compared to work. The thesis also considers the system in which labor was performed: work orientation; sexual division and labor; age considerations; and the level of autonomy.
WHITE SQUAWS: WORK AS A FACTOR IN CHOOSING INDIAN LIFE
INTRODUCTION

Mary Jemison was among hundreds of white colonists captured by Indians during the American colonial period, up to fifteen percent of whom never chose to return to their colonial homes. The length of her life with the Senecas — some seventy years — may have been unusual, but her story sheds light on some reasons the captives chose lives as “white Indians.”

Our labor was not severe; and that of one year was exactly similar, in almost every respect, to that of the others, without that endless variety that is to be observed in the common labor of the white people. Notwithstanding the Indian women have all the fuel and bread to procure, and the cooking to perform, their task is probably not harder than that of white women, who have those articles provided for them; and their cares certainly are not half as numerous, nor as great.¹

Although a few accounts exist of Europeans taken captive by Indians in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it was not until the last quarter of the seventeenth century that capture became a palpable threat in colonial life, particularly in New England. In 1675, New England colonists began to reap the result of forty years of trying to convert or remove Indians from the area. Smoldering friction turned into fiery onslaught that summer, and in just fourteen months King Philip’s War reduced the colonial white male population by nearly ten percent, depleted livestock, and devastated

farms in the more than twenty towns that were attacked. The war also ushered in nearly a
century of steady raids by Indians for booty, including both supplies and captives.²

Indians took some 1,640 men, women and children captive in New England
between 1675 and 1763, nearly a quarter of whom were female. The end of King Philip’s
War stanched the flow of captives from the early settlements in Massachusetts, Rhode
Island, and Connecticut, but raids continued on the northern frontier of Maine and New
Hampshire and in western Massachusetts. Another 275 or so captives from the Mid-
Atlantic region of western Pennsylvania (Jemison’s last white home) and Virginia, lower
New York and the Ohio Valley resurfaced in accord with a truce negotiated by Col.
Henry Bouquet in 1764. Other colonists became captives of Indians in southern colonies,
but no studies have provided a reliable estimate of the numbers.³

Taking captives was an established strategy of intertribal warfare. By extending
the practice to European settlers, the Indians satisfied a range of wartime needs. Holding
prisoners both whittled away at the enemy’s potential troops and demoralized the
remaining colonists. Captives also provided a source of income for their captors, as the
Indians and their frequent French allies could demand a ransom for the English captives.
This was particularly the practice of the Canadian Indians with New England captives.
The Indians also took captives to replenish their population, which had dwindled from the
effects of disease and war. Adoption was more prevalent among captives in the Mid-

² Alden T. Vaughan, Narratives of North American Indian Captivity: A Selective Bibliography (New York:
Garland Publishing, 1983), xvi-xvii; Jill Lepore, The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of
³ Alden T. Vaughan and Edward W. Clark, eds., Puritans Among the Indians: Accounts of Captivity and
Redemption 1676-1724 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1981), 9; June Namias, White Captives:
Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press,
Press, 2001), 193; Vaughan, Narratives, xvi-xvii.
Atlantic, where Indians had less access to a ransom market. These captives replaced a lost work force or lost relatives, and were chosen predominantly from the pool of women and children, considered the best candidates for assimilation into a different society.4

Young children quickly adapted to the new life, mastering the language, forming attachments to adoptive families, and learning the necessary skills to perform their roles in the Indian society. For many who were captured in early childhood, Indian life was the only one they knew; they forgot their previous lives, and resisted or refused “redemption” by the English. Kathryn Derounian-Stodola and James Levernier speculated that habituation or coercion by new authority figures rather than conscious choice spurred the children’s assimilation, especially in the case of girls. Alden Vaughan and Daniel Richter determined that slightly less than a third of the boys ages seven to fifteen lived permanently with Indians, but more than half the girls in the same age group adopted Indian life and spurned attempts to take them back to New England.5

Other than children, Indians most often adopted married women between the ages of twenty and forty-five. Most of the captives were English or Anglo-American Protestants; on the Pennsylvania frontier, some Germans fell captive. They were mothers of young children, though some had both young and adolescent offspring. They were, by and large, of the middling strata, the wives of yeoman farmers and artisans.6

The reasons for women becoming “white squaws,” as they called themselves, are less clear than for children. The women knew another life and presumably had fully formed attachments to their colonial way of life. Relationships to kin and community, religious training, desire or dependence on material goods and comforts, and social customs were ingrained in adults. What made them reject the old life for a new one with their captors? Some women may have stayed with the Indians as a passive or negative response to their capture. They may have feared that the stigma of having lived with “savages” would prompt their white communities to shun them. Puritans, for example, prized their English identity and adherence to strict Christian behavior. Those who strayed from the narrow course of the acceptable faced considerable sanction. But accounts of repeated attempts by colonists over years to reclaim their relatives — efforts captives knew about — reduces the likelihood that fear of being ostracized seriously impeded female captives’ return. More likely, some women may have been overwhelmed by a sense of defeat or helplessness in the wilderness and submitted to captivity. Others might have remained out of fear for their lives if their escape attempt failed, a reluctance to leave behind captive children, and affection for new families, as well as little opportunity to escape.

But colonists, however novice in their wilderness skills, were not a soft, pampered lot. Living on the frontier required a certain strength, both physical and mental, that lends credibility to the idea that becoming a white squaw was an active, positive response to

---

7 When not using “Indians” as a reference to the general populace, Jemison attached gender to the term. Men were “Indians;” women were “squaws.” The terms were explanatory and distinguishing, not derogatory, and for the purposes of this paper, I will use the term as appropriate for the period discussed.
captivity, signifying an acceptance of the new culture and with it a new family, type and manner of work, and role.

Captivity narratives, such as those by Mary Jemison and Mary Rowlandson, have been studied as literature for political, social, and religious implications, as well as for evidence of Indian culture. Work of the captives has been considered, but generally, rather than as the focus for a study of factors determining the choice to “be redeemed” or to remain in the “savage” life. Edmund Morgan discussed “idleness” as having value and signifying position in Indian society, while the English viewed idleness as a sign of laziness. New England Puritan communities encouraged filling all waking time with work of some kind. Jesuits observed that women shouldered the workload and toiled in Indian society, but Jemison and other captives have been much quoted as evidence of the relative ease and pleasantness of Indian life. Studying the conflicting viewpoints may give additional insight to female captives’ choices to stay with or leave the Indians.

This thesis will explore women’s work in Indian society and compare it with women’s work in colonial society to see whether labor might have weighed heavily in captives’ decisions to live as white squaws. Evaluating women’s work will entail looking at their tasks or jobs; the frequency, variation, and routine of work; the rhythm of work, whether it was continuous, cyclical, or occasional; and the amount of leisure compared to work. I will also consider the system in which labor was performed: work orientation -- whether work was communal, individual, or a combination; sexual division and labor -- whether work was divided strictly by gender, shared, or shifted between genders as necessary; age considerations – whether performance expectations changed over life; and the level of autonomy.
In the modern market economy, the term “work” connotes production that generates revenue, whether in the form of wages or payment for a commodity or service. Since the early twentieth century, academics have argued that capitalism has at best blurred and at worst erased the contribution of unpaid labor to the economic and social structure of community. Academics studying women in particular have wrestled with ways to include women’s participation in the American historical narrative. Economist Alice Clark in 1919 examined records spanning four centuries to trace the path to women’s place in the capitalist society of seventeenth-century Britain. She organized her findings on women’s labor into three categories: domestic industry, family industry, and industrialization. In some categories women added to their purses and in others they “invisibly” contributed to the economy. Jeanne Boydston used a controversial method of placing monetary value to women’s “unwaged” labor in her 1990 study to prove that women’s household production was vital to family survival in antebellum America. A decade earlier, Laurel Ulrich uncovered women’s multiple roles in the colonial economy; products of unpaid work in the home sustained not only the family, but provided a means of more efficient labor throughout a community through specialization and barter of goods and services. She also showed colonial women as assistants or partners in their husbands’ business endeavors, as “deputy husbands” who assumed authority in their spouses’ absence, and even as business owners themselves.8

The questions of this thesis revolve around the issue of energy or effort expended by women in their daily lives within their families and communities. I attempt to examine

the routine production and service of women in two cultures, and I am concerned with comparing their work in terms of physical and social relationships rather than economic value. “Work” here means the activities in which women could expect to be engaged within a community. The question of earning power will be addressed because it can be linked with autonomy and work culture, but payment is not essential to the definition of work in this study.

**Considering the narratives**

Captivity narratives, particularly those of women, provide much of the information on squaws’ work. Other first-hand descriptions of Indian life, particularly those found in the *Jesuit Relations* and in documents from the Indian-English wars, also give insight into the division of labor in Indian society.

The narratives of captives and the Jesuits pose a challenge, because most offer European views of Indian life and captivity experience. A few narratives, notably those of white squaw Mary Jemison, white Indian James Smith, and trader James Adair, come closest to relating the Indian perspective. A handful of other narratives, such as those of Mary Rowlandson, Susanna Johnson, and Paul Le Jeune, provide passages of straightforward description that illuminate the Indian work culture. Much of the material, however, requires careful reading and consideration not only of the authors’ intent, but of such things as the amount of time spent in Indian society.
Accounts of Indian life, whether from white Indians, redeemed or escaped captives, or other observers, fall into one of two categories: direct authorship, written by the person with the firsthand experience; or secondhand relation, written “as told to” someone else. The title page, carefully framed to encourage readers to trust the veracity of the coming text, usually announced which category applied.

Mary Rowlandson’s narrative, first published seven years after her 1675 capture, was “Written by her own Hand, for her Private Use: And now made Publick at the earnest Desire of some Friends, for the Benefit of the Afflicted.” The captivity of Elizabeth Hanson, her children and maid was “Taken in Substance from her own Mouth” by Samuel Bownas four years after the experience. The account of “the Remarkable Occurrences in the life and travels of Col. James Smith … during his captivity with the Indians” was written “by himself,” while Massey Herbeson’s narrative was “Given as oath before John Wilkins, esq., of the justices of the peace for the commonwealth of Pennsylvania.”

Writers of both firsthand and secondhand captivity narratives composed the accounts with an agenda in mind. Early narratives rolled off Boston-area presses, and their style and format reflected Puritan mores. Starting with Mary Rowlandson’s, narratives often served as re-entry documents, reminiscent of the conversion narratives delivered orally in Puritan meeting houses. A correct approach and performance was a necessary step in the transition back into white society. Rowlandson, for example,

---

emphasized the elements of her spiritual experience, deep meditation and self-reflection, and proofs of providence. For her, captivity served a valuable instructive purpose that reassured her of God's grace. As the wife of a minister, this aspect was probably especially important in order for her to resume normal colonial life after more than three months among the Indians.

The retention of womanly virtue also appeared in the direct-experience narratives, though not as a major theme in the colonial accounts; sexual purity appeared more prominently in nineteenth-century narratives. Instead, colonial women noted that they had not been harmed or had been treated "far greater than ... expected." Secondhand relations more frequently brought up the issue of sex, as in Archibald Bard's account of his mother's captivity, taken from his father's papers. Mrs. Bard learned from a reluctant white squaw that she would be obliged to marry once she could speak the Delaware language. She decided "never to learn the Indian language, and she adhered to this determination all the time she remained with them, from the day of her captivity to that of her releasement, a space of two years and five months. She was treated during this time by her adopted relations with much kindness; even more than she had reason to expect." Other rhetoric that reinforced beliefs of white society crept onto the pages, some from the pens of captives, some from those who retold their stories. Rowlandson reflected the Puritan struggle with the unknown by referring to Indians as "black creatures" and as "devils." Narratives typically described the Indians as savages, who ate food that "a hog or dog would hardly touch," and lived in rough shelters with furnishing

---

10 Samuel G. Drake, ed., *Indian Captivities or Life in the Wigwam; Being True Narratives of Captives Who Have Been Carried Away by the Indians, from the Frontier Settlements of the United States, From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (Auburn, N.Y.: Derby and Miller, 1852), 145.

that "will not be thought a pleasing residence to one accustomed to civilized life."\textsuperscript{12} In essence, the narratives trumpeted white superiority over Indians. Captives who preferred Indian civilization bewildered most white colonists. When a number of longtime captives resisted separation from Indian families under Bouquet’s treaty, their behavior was attributed to low social status:

The Shawnee were obliged to bind several of their [adult] prisoners and force them along to camp; and some women, who had been delivered up, afterwards found means to escape and run back to the Indian towns. Some, who could not make their escape, clung to their savage acquaintance at parting, and continued many days in bitter lamentations, even refusing sustenance.

For the honor of humanity, we would suppose those persons to have been of the lowest rank, either bred up in ignorance and distressing penury, or who had lived so long with the Indians as to forget their connexion.

Savage life, the observer concluded, “could never be put in competition with the blessings of improved life and the light of religion” by anyone with “the capacity of discerning them.”\textsuperscript{13}

Beyond reinforcing white social beliefs and paving the way for re-entry to white society, the narratives served another important function. They were big business in the colonial publishing world. The heyday of the captivity narrative came later, but the genre showed its promise in the heavy sales and multiple printings of Rowlandson’s book and Puritan minister John Williams’ story.\textsuperscript{14}

The interplay of various purposes and interests of the authors produced particular formats among captivity narratives. Rowlandson set the standard for narrative structure,


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

and others echoed her format. With few exceptions, narratives opened with a description of the horrors of capture, then proceeded to the harshness and difficulties of captivity, and finally ended with escape or redemption. A number describe a sudden attack “with sun rising,” the random killing of members of the household, including infants or young children, and the terrifying confusion of fearing all alternatives – death or being taken captive. Next came the ordeal of travel into the wilderness, to Indian or French villages. Narratives typically framed the “removes” as arduous treks over rough terrain with little sustenance. Captives invariably noted the discomfort of sleeping on the ground, being cold, and how their clothes or shoes proved inadequate for the forest terrain. Most noted separation of captives into smaller groups, and how some died or were killed along the way.

Captives who survived the ordeal of the attack and the trek into the wilderness found themselves at the doorway of a new life. If they made it to the villages, they would be given a whole new family and be adopted into a new community. First, though, they faced an initiation process, a set of rituals of acceptance into Indian life. These rituals, such as running the gauntlet, dunking in streams, and selection by village women to join their families, marked the beginning of an assimilation period that varied in length from months to years. Captives’ reactions to the initiations ranged from fear and apprehension to relief and surprise. Susanna Johnson expected a “severe beating, … but we were agreeably disappointed, when we found that each Indian only gave us a tap on the shoulder.”\textsuperscript{15} After this point, the narratives follow somewhat different paths in tone, according to the gender of the captive.

\footnote{Johnson, \textit{Narrative}, 60-61.}
The narratives of men tend to read more like action-adventure stories, emphasizing the captives' resistance to capture or assimilation, their attempts at escape and other heroic action. They reveal little about Indian village life, with the exception of narratives by long-term captives, generally those taken in childhood who spent several years as white Indians. The men who spent long periods with Indians described not only masculine feats but the skills they learned and the rhythms of village life for both genders. Women's narratives reveal more about lifestyle – the village, gender expectations, work, and relationships – though the information usually supplemented the narratives' primary purpose as a tool to facilitate re-entry into the white fold. The vast majority of narratives represent returning captives, and the overriding motivation for their return appeared to be reuniting with family. The women rejoined husbands and children in the colonies. Yet the narratives of these do show how the captives lived among Indians, the work they personally did, and the work they saw others doing. Had they not had closer ties to family in the colonies, would they have found life as a squaw satisfying?
CHAPTER I
THE SQUAW’S WORLD: A HARD ROW TO HOE?\textsuperscript{16}

Squaw’s work can be viewed from two basic perspectives -- it was harder than that of female colonists, or it was easier. Most of the captives and Jesuits who lived with Indians initially pronounced that women did all the work, and grueling work it was. Joseph Jouvency’s 1612 relation summarized what most of his fellow Jesuits would write regarding squaw’s work over the next 140 years:

The care of household affairs, and whatever work there may be in the family, are placed upon the women. They build and repair the wigwams, carry water and wood, and prepare the food; their duties and position are those of slaves, laborers and beasts of burden. The pursuits of hunting and war belong to the men.\textsuperscript{17}

Pierre Biard lamented the Abenaki squaws’ lot in stronger terms four years later:

“These poor women are real pack mules, enduring all hardships.” His lengthy list of women’s duties probably was intended to show inequity and subservience in Indian society, but it provides valuable detail of the labor required to maintain a village.

These poor creatures endure all the misfortunes and hardships of life; they prepare and erect the houses, or cabins, furnishing them with fire, wood and water; prepare the food, preserve the meat and other provisions, that is, dry them in the smoke to preserve them; go to bring the game from the place where it has been killed; sew and repair the canoes, mend and stretch the skins, curry them, and

\textsuperscript{16} This portion of the thesis will focus on Indian work. I will look at colonists’ work in detail in the next chapter, and then discuss differences between the work culture and job satisfaction that could have been factors in women’s decisions to choose squaw life over colonist life.

\textsuperscript{17} Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., \textit{The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents} (New York: Pageant Book Co., 1959), 1: 257 (hereafter \textit{Jesuit Relations}).
make clothes and shoes of them for the whole family; they go fishing and do the rowing; in short, undertake all the work except that alone of the grand chase, besides having the care and weakening nourishment of their children.¹⁸

Biard covered only part of the squaw's work. In spring and summer, women also took charge of village crop production, the success of which could determine whether the Indians fared well or endured hunger in succeeding seasons. Jesuit descriptions of Indian work patterns filtered back to Europe over the years, but with rare exception, the reports continued to list the same duties and division of labor among Indians from Canada to the Mississippi Valley. Men hunted, traded and warred; women did the rest.

Though sometimes the litany of duties indicated a disparity of workload, narratives and relations held up the squaws' pack loads as evidence of their hard work. Paul Le Jeune, who tended to be less judgmental in his letters than other French observers, described squaws hauling loads through deep snow, aided by bark sleds.¹⁹ James Smith, a Pennsylvanian who spent five of his young-adult years with a Caughnawaga Mohawk family, recalled the work during the Indians' nomadic seasons. After a hunting expedition, the group (men as well as women) carried pelts, meat, and necessities forty to fifty miles back to their winter base camp.

[A]s we had no horses, we had all our baggage and several hundred weight of beaver skins, and some deer and bear skins - all to pack on our backs. The method we took to accomplish this was by making short day's journies. In the morning we would move on with as much as we were able to carry, about five miles, and encamp; and then run back for more. We commonly made three such trips in a day.²⁰

²⁰ Loudon, Selection, 1: 210.
John McCullough, who lived with Indians from age eight to sixteen, also reported that Delaware squaws carried the load in Indian life, "raising corn, cutting firewood and carrying it home on their backs, and I have known the men when they had killed a deer five or six miles off to carry the skin home on their backs & send their wives for the carcass."21 The male captives painted a picture of a difficult life, which female captives reinforced.

Regina Leninger, a German girl of ten when captured by the Muskingum in 1742 along the western branch of the Susquehanna, described her position as "slave for life" to a squaw. As a child she would "drag together the wood by which they were warmed." Mary Fowler, nearly sixteen when captured in 1746 in Massachusetts and taken to Canada, told of "having been compelled to three years' hard labor in planting and hoeing corn, chopping and carrying wood," and other chores before her redemption. The narrative of the Gilbert family's captivity includes a report from Elizabeth Peart of "the labour and drudgery in a [Seneca] family falling to the share of the women."22

Yet the weight of the load seemed to depend on the captive's perspective, and on one's reading of the narratives. Elizabeth Hanson spent five months with Abenakis after her capture in 1725. With her initial remove to the wilderness and adoption behind her, she discovered the nomadic nature of her Indian family. "We were never in one place but very often moved from one place to another, carrying their wigwams with them, which they could do without much difficulty."23 The first portion of her sentence carries the

21 Ibid., 348.
23 Vaughan, Puritans Among the Indians, 236.
familiar tone of drudgery, but the final clause reveals a different view of the degree of hard work involved.

Smith’s descriptions also chip away at the image of squaws’ monumental burden. He described preparations for the winter move away from the river inland to hunt. “We buried our canoes, …and every one had a pack to carry: the squaws also packed up their [birch bark] tents, which they carried in large rolls, that extended up above their heads; and though a great bulk, yet not heavy.”24 Even the Jesuits occasionally conceded that the squaw’s lot was not all bad, as when Le Jeune commented in 1633 on the division of labor between male and female Hurons.

It is true that the Savages are very patient, but the order which they maintain in their occupations aids them in preserving peace in their households. The women know what they are to do, and the men also; and one never meddles with the work of the other.

Men make the frames of their canoes, and the women sew the bark with willow withes or similar small wood. The men shape the wood of the raquettes, and the women do the sewing on them. Men go hunting, and kill the animals; and the women go after them, skin them, and clean the hides.25

In fact, several of the captive women noted that their work among the Indians was less than taxing. While Elizabeth Hanson’s master was away hunting, her jobs were “to get in wood, gather nuts, etc. I was very diligent, cutting the wood, and putting it in order, not having very far to carry it.” Susanna Johnson wrote about periods when “idleness was among my calamities,” and she was relieved by the opportunity to make shirts for her Indian brother. Jemison regarded the simplicity of tasks and predictable routine of squaw life as less stressful than she imagined white women’s work.26

---

25 Jesuit Relations, 6: 133.
26 Vaughan, Puritans Among the Indians, 236; Johnson, Narrative, 66-69; Seaver, Mary Jemison, 46-47.
What accounts for these different views of squaw work? The primary agenda of the author certainly would skew the narratives' portrayal of Indian life. Rowlandson could not lay claim to divining God's providence in her struggle had she not suffered deprivation and despair. The Jesuits could hardly carry on a mission to save "savages" if the Indians lived well. Male captives such as John Williams could not return to colonial life without reciting cruelties and hardships borne and overcome. Nor would it be likely that a bookseller could successfully hawk a story that lacked the drama of sharp contrasts between the whites and "the other."

The length of captivity or other association with Indians also influenced perceptions about the relative workload of squaws and Indians. In the wake of the initial shock and trauma of capture and the remove to Indian territory, virtually all work would overwhelm the whites. Fatigue, inappropriate clothing, injuries, language barriers, and most of all fear permanently impressed memories of hardship upon the captives' minds. The captives' work on the trail was to survive; they recounted few chores performed during that time. Even Mary Jemison, who spurned redemption several times as an adult, recalled the pain, confusion, and cruelty of her first days of captivity. As they settled into village life, however, they noted their work and that of others around them. At first, most captives -- men and women, child and adult -- helped with simple tasks, such as gathering firewood, fetching water, and grinding cornmeal. As they adjusted physically to their new lives and improved their communication skills, they received more instruction in work methods.

Susanna Johnson's period of ennui was compounded by her clumsiness at squaw's work, which left her little to do in her short captivity among the Abenakis. "I
was a novice at making canoes, bunk, and tumplines, which was the only occupation of
the squaws,” she wrote. Still weak after recently giving birth, Johnson needed frequent
breaks, “which gave my companions a poor opinion of me” and prompted her Indian
sister to reproach her as “no good squaw.” A Jesuit taken captive in 1647 drew the
assignment of cutting wood to keep the cabin fire going when the Indians judged him
unfit for hunting. As he gained strength, he was expected to carry loads of corn; still
unfit, he could not handle the usual squaw work and was berated as “a misshapen fellow,
who knew nothing but to eat.” Sixteen-year-old Rebecca Gilbert “was not able to pursue
a course of equal labour with the other women” and so helped with the cooking, where
she proved her mettle by devising an oven to bake bread.\footnote{Johnson, Narrative, 66, 70; Jesuit Relations, 31: 81-83; Loudon, Selection, 2: 136.}

Captives such as Johnson and Hanson spent too little time among Indians to see a
full range of squaw work. Captured in August, neither woman participated in the
agricultural cycle, when the Indians shifted from nomadic life to settle in one place
during the growing season. Nor did they observe the range of artisan work or come to
know the pace of squaw work when the men were absent. Assumptions that squaws
performed the bulk of the work in Indian society may well have formed simply through
ignorance of men’s work. Few of the female captives – Jemison being an exception –
experienced the treks out to help carry back the village’s supply of meat after the hunt.
The narratives of young male captives contradict the dominant European depiction of the
division of labor between Indians and squaws -- they described the rigors and dangers
that hunters and warriors faced. But such narratives are few. Jesuits described women’s
work in detail, but did not elaborate on the physical demands of the hunt or war. Perhaps
they did not experience men's work firsthand, and so assumed Indian jobs were "sport," as hunting was to European nobles.

The authors' European viewpoint set the narratives' tone. The French and English both considered field labor as men's work, and lower class men's work at that. In his 1701 relation, Jacques Gravier noted an unusual situation in the Illinois territory, where squaws did not tend the crops -- "the men here do what peasants do in France: they till and hoe the soil; they sow and harvest." While squaws were not performing "peasant work" in that instance, it is likely that the Jesuits, like the English, considered fieldwork especially demeaning for women other than those in the lowest class. The English colonists deep tilled the soil using plow animals, fenced their fields, and applied manure to fertilize their crops, all heavy labor that they assumed required the strength of men. Though Indians did not use the same methods, and squaws relied on short hoes as their only tools in the field, the English nevertheless were shocked to see women in the field. Mary Kinnan, taken captive in 1791, noted cultural differences not related to work, including the "humiliating condition" of the Indian women. "Here the female sex, instead of polishing and improving the rough manners of the men, are equally ferocious, cruel and obdurate." She bemoaned the squaws' lack of the "benevolent disposition and warm sensibility to the sufferings of others" that marks "civilized climes."28

Given the subjectivity of the narratives, it seems that the best way to evaluate squaw work is to examine it in a manner that will allow comparison with female

---

colonists' work. The following chapter will present types of chores and methods of performing them in six work categories that exist in both societies: agriculture, housework, artisan work, child rearing, community duties, and trade.

**A Squaw’s Work World**

Indian survival depended on the work of both men and women; each provided essential sustenance for the village. The squaws’ domain included agriculture, and the production of the all-important crop, corn. It is often assumed, since so many references mark fieldwork as exclusively a squaw job, that men took no part in the growing process. However, James Axtell’s research and observations in *The Jesuit Relations* indicate that in many tribes, the Indians did assist with the initial preparation for planting by clearing the ground, “girdling the trees, extracting rocks and burning the underbrush.” Once the men withdrew, children and old men helped the women in the fields, but the squaws directed the work.29

In the summer, the squaws, accompanied by their children, planted, tended and harvested corn, “but had no master to oversee of drive us, so that we could work as leisurely as we pleased,” according to Mary Jemison. The women gathered at the first prepared field and began planting, one row per person, moving from field to field planting in the same manner until all the seed was gone. After the corn sprouted, the workers used their short-handled hoes to chop away weeds. At the next stage, they hilled the corn, and completed the planting of the “three sisters” by adding beans and squash to

---

the corn hills. For the remainder of the growing season, the squaws tended their crops as needed, though the work was light. The squaws also put in smaller crops of pumpkins, watermelons and sunflowers, which reduced weed growth. While squaws farmed, the male Indians built up a stock of fish to be dried and added to the winter larder.\(^{30}\)

Unless completely disabled, everyone in the village worked. Men too old or too weak to hunt put in time in the fields. Even the sick could hold their own. Elizabeth Peart, too ill to hoe or perform other duties, spent her recuperation sitting in a small hut beside the cornfield, acting as a human scarecrow.\(^{31}\)

Huron women were known to plant enough corn for two or three seasons “as a hedge against drought and as a surplus for trade.” Kahnawake squaws, among whom Eunice Williams resided for more than eighty years, “brought in corn” yearly, a job that entailed many distinct tasks stretching over several months. After harvesting the corn, they braided husks together to form corn shucks, then dried the shucks on large wooden frames. Next came shelling the dried ears and storing the kernels in large casks made of elm bark, a chore usually reserved for winter. The Maliseet Indians of northeast Maine and southeast Canada employed a different method for drying their corn. When the corn was “in the milk,” they boiled the ears in large kettles until the kernels were hard, then stripped them from the cob with clamshells, and dried them in the sun on bark. Once processed, the corn could be stored for years, its sweetness renewed when boiled again.\(^{32}\)

---


\(^{31}\) Loudon, *Selection*, 2: 123.

\(^{32}\) Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 47; Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive*, 159-60; VanDerBeets, *Held Captive*, 103.
Sometimes the harvest and other food that had been smoked or dried was stashed in sacks and strung up between trees for safekeeping until needed. At other times, the squaws used a version of the root cellar, burying provisions in holes lined with bark.\textsuperscript{33}

In northern climes, women harvested another product annually. They tapped the sweet sap from maple trees and boiled it down to sugar. Sebastien Rasles rated the Abenakis' product "a fairly good sugar," with the first batch always tasting best.\textsuperscript{34} James Smith relied on the journal he kept throughout his captivity to recount the details of the Wyandot and Ottawa method of manufacturing sugar. Each February, after making perhaps a hundred elm-bark vessels that would hold about two gallons each, the squaws selected their maple trees.

In the sugar-tree they cut a notch, slooping down, and at the end of the notch, stuck in a tomahawk; in the place where they stuck the tomahawk, they drove a long chip, in order to carry the water out from the tree, and under this they (set) their vessel, to receive it. As sugar trees were plenty and large here, they seldom or never notched a tree that was not two or three feet over. They also made bark vessels for carrying the water, that would hold about four gallons each. They had two brass kettles, that held about 15 gallons each, and other smaller kettles in which they boiled the water. But as they could not at all times boil away the water as fast as it was collected, they made vessels of bark, that would hold about one hundred gallons each, for retaining the water; and though the sugar-trees did not run every day, they had always a sufficient quantity of water to keep them boiling during the whole sugar season.\textsuperscript{35}

At the end of the process, the squaws had produced some "two hundred weight of sugar" to be packed out for their own use or for trade. Colonists learned from the Indians, and European settlers adopted the practice of making maple sugar in lieu of purchasing expensive, imported cones of cane sugar. European women gathered the sweet sap in

\textsuperscript{33} Jesuit Relations, 1: 107-9; VanDerBeets, Held Captive, 103.
\textsuperscript{34} Jesuit Relations, 67: 137.
\textsuperscript{35} Loudon, Selection, 175-76.
wooden buckets and kept the fire burning for three days as it boiled in metal kettles. Instead of bags, the white women molded the sugar for storage.

Raising corn and the other two “sisters” in the summer and harvesting sugar in the winter marked the extent of the squaws’ agricultural pursuits for the most part. Indians rarely kept livestock until white encroachment restricted their land use. James Adair reported that Cherokees occasionally raised hogs in pens during crop season, then turned them loose to forage on hickory nuts, chestnuts, and acorns after harvest. After the Revolution, when she permanently moved to her house on the Genesee River, Jemison bought a cow; the Kahnawakes, in a departure from traditional Iroquois behavior, raised pigs and poultry.36

As one would expect in white homes, squaws managed the housework in Indian villages. Calling the squaws “homemakers” would be literally correct, since they were primarily responsible for both setting up and transporting shelters during their nomadic winter season and any other time the Indians moved. They cut young, flexible trees to serve as supports for wigwams, and covered both wigwams and longhouses (which were constructed by Iroquois men) with bark, skins or woven mats. Holes in the roof allowed smoke from the central fire to escape. They erected shelters quickly, according to captives, and though they slept on a dirt floor, stayed dry and relatively warm thanks to animal skins and blankets, the only furnishings in the homes. Breaking camp meant rolling up tents and other supplies, a task also accomplished briskly. Though all Indians strove for fitness and strength, proper packing and adjustment were the key to transporting burdens. Jemison “learned to carry loads on my back, in a strap [tumpline]

36 Loudon, Selection, 2: 292; Demos, Unredeemed Captive, 160.
placed across my forehead, soon after my captivity," a technique she continued to use into her eighties. Squaws also loaded their tents and implements onto narrow pliable bark sleds, which they pulled across snow.37

Wherever they camped, squaws gathered firewood and kept the fires going. While they bore primary responsibility for cutting firewood, numerous narratives documented children, old men, captives, and sometimes Indians taking on the chore. Fire heated the shelters as well as cooked the food. With rare exception, such as Rebecca Gilbert's improvised bread oven, squaw cooking was a simple affair. Open-fire cooking limited technique to cooking on spits, on coals, in ashes or in pits. Indians roasted meat when the hunt was successful and ate cornmeal mush -- referred to variously as sagamité or samp - or hominy, while the corn held out. Since kettles and metal implements were scarce, squaws sometimes cooked food in pits filled with water, adding stones hot from the fire to make it boil.

Fresh and smoked fish supplemented the game that hunters killed. Dried peas sustained Mary Rowlandson during part of her captivity, and the Indians supplemented their diet as necessary with roots, acorns, berries, tender bark, and other vegetation foraged from the forest. In dire times they pounded the ends of bones to get at the marrow and cooked up soup in bark or metal vessels. In good times after the sugar ran, squaws mixed it with bear fat, into which the Indians dipped roasted meat as a treat.

Cleanup was more simple than cooking. They counted a few wooden bowls among their goods, often using bark slabs for plates. Knives and a few carved wooden spoons made up the tableware. Some meals were served in communal bowls. Susanna

37 Jesuit Relations, 3: 77, 7: 35; Seaver, Mary Jemison, 142; Loudon, Selection, 1: 195-96.
Johnson remembered dipping up "hasty pudding" while awkwardly sitting in circle around her Abenaki family's fire.\textsuperscript{38}

Limited "housekeeping" left squaws ample time to ply their skills as artisans. According to Jemison, production of clothing was another relatively simple process. Since "spinning, weaving, sewing, stocking knitting and the like" were "never generally practised in the Indian tribes," animal skins provided most of the material for garments. A knife and an awl sufficed as seamstress tools. Tunics or dresses, leggings, and moccasins fashioned from prepared skins fastened together with deerskin ties. Father Biard described Indians wearing "clothes trimmed with leather lace, which the women dress and curry on the side which is not hairy. They often curry both sides of elk skin, like our buff skin, they variegate it very prettily with paint put on in a lace-like pattern, and make gowns of it; from the same leather they make their shoes and strings." Father Le Jeune also marveled at the pattern and construction of leather moccasins, so "ingeniously" contrived that "a child that could sew a little could make the shoes at the first attempt."\textsuperscript{39}

Captives made good use of their needlework skills while among the Indians. Rowlandson knitted stockings and sewed shirts for her Indian family and others, including Metacom, also known as King Philip. Johnson and others wielded their needles for pay or goods in trade, but other squaws apparently did not adopt the white needlework methods.\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{40} Rowlandson, \textit{True History}, 8, 9, 12, 22, 24; Johnson, \textit{Narrative}, 69.
The little spinning that did occur produced strands of bison yarn used to string beads for decorative apparel and wampum. The awkwardness and stationary nature of spinning wheels and looms thwarted European-style weaving in Indian culture. Weaving to squaws meant crafting baskets, mats, blankets, and pouches. Cherokee squaws split and dyed swamp cane, then wove tight, colorful baskets. The Choctaws wove turkey feather blankets by twisting "the inner end of the feathers very fast into a strong double thread of hemp, or the inner bark of the mulberry tree, of the size and strength of coarse twine." They also wove pouches with raised work inside and out, trader James Adair noted.41

Indian women used other methods and materials, including animal skins, to make pouches that hung around the neck — the Indian version of a pocketbook, according to the Jesuits -- and also vessels to hold food.

This pocket, or pouch, is generally seamless, and is made by the Huron women as artistically as a piece of needlework; the Algonquins often make it of a whole skin, -- either an otter's, a fox's, a young bear's, a beaver's, or some other animal's -- so neatly stripped off that you would call it perfectly whole; for they remove neither the teeth, ears, claws, nor tail, but make an opening under the neck, through which they draw out the animal's body entire, and through which the Savages insert the hand into this pocket when it is well dried and cured.42

James Smith watched squaws shape deerskins into tight pouches, then blow them up like balloons so they would stiffen into four- to five-gallon containers to hold bear fat.43

Whatever work they undertook, in the fields, the forest, or the home, squaws also tended their children. Infants rode swaddled in furs on cradleboards attached to their

41 Vaughan, Puritans Among the Indians, 22; Loudon, Selection, 2: 338, 340;
42 Jesuit Relations, 44: 295.
43 Loudon, Selection, 1: 177.
mother's back, rocking with the motion as the squaw went about her chores. As they grew, older children and teenaged girls took charge of younger children, but the mothers continued to protect and guide their youngsters, both male and female. Captive John D. Hunter's adoptive mother gradually schooled him in Indian ways, training him to bear pain without fear and to fight back. The squaw attacked the boy, hitting him, and gradually provoking and accepting blows in return. She taught him valuable warrior lessons. Other captives recalled times when squaws gave them quick instruction about watching rituals and shielded them against abuse.\textsuperscript{44}

Their protective role carried into other areas of the community. Women fed and nursed sick and disabled neighbors. They held the power of deciding who would be adopted as relatives, and who would be spurned. They led mourning rituals and alone welcomed the adopted captives into Indian life. While a number of feasts were reserved for males only, squaws participated in rituals and dances that preceded war and held leadership roles in the village, even speaking before council.\textsuperscript{45}

Squaws also entered the business world in some cases. Jemison helped her first husband with his fur trade. Several captives, including Rowlandson and Johnson, plied their needlework into trade among Indians, and occasionally surplus corn was used for trade, particularly at British forts. Jesuits commented on a trade they deplored -- prostitution of squaws by their men -- but the women appear to have entered few other business enterprises through the eighteenth century.

\textsuperscript{44} Demos, \textit{Unredeemed Captive}, 158-59; Namias, \textit{White Captives}, 75, 71.
Overall, squaw work appears to have been steady but unhurried and relatively uncomplicated, incorporating ample autonomy and the opportunity for cooperative effort. The squaws’ environment and lifestyle required conditioning and stamina, but the long lives of Mary Jemison, Eunice Williams, and Frances Slocum suggest that whites could thrive as squaws. One wonders if their work as colonists – with its differences in technology, concepts of time, and social structure -- would have produced equally satisfying years.
CHAPTER II
THE COLONIAL WOMAN: HOUSEWIFE’S MATTERS ‘HAVE NEVER AN END’

White colonial life, like Indian society, depended on a system of shared responsibility marked by divisions of labor according to sex. As the foundation of colonial life, the household depended on the largely reciprocal relationship of marriage, with spouses bound to an accepted set of duties. Of the seven responsibilities of husbands and wives spelled out in a 1712 book by the Reverend Benjamin Wadsworth, all but the last were reciprocal. Married couples were obligated to cohabit, to love one another, to be faithful to one another, to help each other, to practice patience and honor one another, but finally, the husband was cautioned to “govern gently” and the wife to “obey cheerfully.” A colonial wife, then, was expected to submit to her spouse’s judgment and authority, serve agreeably, shun idleness, and perform her “housewifely” skills, as well as bear and care for his children.46

The boundaries of men and women’s work were more distinct in seaports and larger towns than in rural areas. Legislative, court, and other government buildings, as well as informal places of business such as coffeehouses, marked a male domain in port cities, while women’s presence was more apparent in shops, churches, and the home. The

lines blurred more in rural and frontier communities, where lower population and rougher conditions necessitated less formal work roles. Men and women adhered in principle to traditional roles, but rural women took on work that in more populous, developed communities only men would do. Housewives in New England may have shouldered more physical burdens than their counterparts in the southern colonies, where servants and slaves were more numerous.\(^4\)\(^7\)

In general, a husband bore responsibility for growing crops, plying a trade, or otherwise fulfilling the role of breadwinner; his work zone lay outside the household, in the fields or shop. The housewife’s domain spread beyond the dwelling itself to the space surrounding it. The “yard” might contain herb and kitchen gardens, animals and their shelters, and the spaces used to process the goods of her domain.

While we have no written records of the Indian origin of work divisions, the English gendering of work roles in the American colonies can be traced to traditions established and encouraged more than a century before the first white women were taken captive by Indians in the New World. Men and women were well schooled in their respective roles of “husbandrye” and “huswifry” long before they pulled up their English roots to settle in the American colonies. Guidelines for appropriate behavior and performance of chores were detailed in the mid-sixteenth century. Sir Anthony Fitzherbert’s instructions covered the duties year-round of men and women in his *Boke of Husbandrye*, including a step-by-step schedule for the “wyfe,” who rose before the rest of

---

the family to accomplish initial tidying and animal and child care before serving
breakfast to her brood and servants. 48

Contrary to the romantic notion of a simpler life in previous centuries, the
complexity of work in the sixteenth century spawned detailed guides to accomplishing
chores necessary for family survival. The work-division model of sixteenth-century
English publications organized chores in chunks of time around meals. After the first
round of work at cock’s crow and breakfast, the woman would start another round of
duties, including time-sensitive food preparation or the first steps of an all-day chore. By
noon, she would serve the day’s main meal, then turn back to multi-step processes.
Between major chores like candle-making, brewing, food preparation or child care, she
would pick up needlework, spinning or other “by” work that could be laid aside when
more pressing duty called. In the evening, she would corral and feed the cattle and other
animals before putting the family’s supper on the table. Her work would continue after
dark until she locked up the house and yard and retired for the night. The guides even
prescribed a particular bedtime: “In winter time nine, and in summer at ten.” Summer’s
additional daylight shortened the wife’s sleep; she was to rise at four. In winter, she could
sleep in until five o’clock, accumulating a full eight hours of rest. 49

The English prescription for division of labor between husbands and housewives
appears to have been the norm for other Europeans who traveled to the American
colonies. French observations of Indian women’s work rings similar to the English

49 Thomas Tusser, Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie (1580; online reprint, Cambridge:
guides. Their comments did not suggest that the continuous nature of squaw activity seemed unusual or inappropriate; rather, they looked askance at the Indian men's apparent periods of leisure. The housewife's ceaseless cycle of work during waking hours was both lamented and lauded in pre-colonial books and pamphlets:

Now listen good huswiues, what dooings are here, 
set foorth for a daie, as it should for a yere. ... 
The meaning is this, for a daie what ye see, 
that monthlie and yeerlie, continued must bee. 
And hereby to gather, (as prooue I intend:) 
that huswuelie matters, haue neuer an end. 
...Though husbandrie seemeth, to bring in the gaines, 
Yet huswiferie labours, seeme equall in paines. 
Some respit to husbands, the weather may send, 
But huswiues affairaes, haue neuer an end.50

‘Yard work’ for white women

European missionaries, traders, and captives left the impression that only Indians would send their women to toil the fields, but other sources indicate that female colonists were no strangers to hard agricultural labor. Fitzherbert's book of husbandry of housewifery expanded women's duty beyond “yard work” to the fields when their husbands needed help, particularly during the harvest. “It is a wiues occupacion to winow al maner of cornes [grain], to make malte wash and wring, to make hey, to shere corne, and in time of need to helpe her husbande to fyll the mucke wayne or donge carte, dryve the plough, to lode hey, corne & such other.” The practice of shifting from house to field work followed European women to the colonies, accounts from various regions show.51

William Bradford lavished praise on the first Pilgrim women for going “willingly into the fields” to set corn, carrying their infants with them as they worked. On the

50 Ibid., 66-67.
frontier especially, women did their share of stump clearing, plowing and harvesting. Judith Giton, a Huguenot, escaped from France to South Carolina around 1685 and married a weaver who secured some land for a farm. Scrabbling with her husband to make their stake, Giton "grubbed the land, felled trees, and operated the whipsaw," deprived for six months of bread for lack of supplies and time, she wrote her brother. German settlers of both sexes worked the fields, as did Scots-Irish. As in the old countries, some farm work required extra hands; poor or isolated farmers drafted family members instead of hiring help. Some jobs, such as haymaking, were family affairs, with women and children joining the men to bring in the harvest.\footnote{52}

Landowners recruiting women colonists took care to minimize the perceived potential for the less savory field labor. John Hammond in 1656 wrote that Maryland women "are not (as reported) put into the ground to worke, but occupie" comfortable domestic positions. Under ideal conditions in the colonies, farming remained a male task, and women’s agricultural work was confined to the gardens, orchards and animal care.\footnote{53}

Early surveyors and colony organizers marveled at the possibility of growing a wide variety of grains, vegetables, and fruits in America. Thomas Budd proclaimed Pennsylvania and New Jersey highly suitable for fruit orchards common in England, in addition to the region’s native fruits – "Strawberries, Cramberries, Huckleberries, Blackberries, Medlers [related to the crabapple], Grapes, Plums, Hickery-Nuts, Walnuts, Mulberries, Chestnuts, Hasselnuts, &c." Kitchen gardens under women’s care might be


\footnote{53} Holliday, \textit{Women’s Life}, 145; Berkin, \textit{Voices}, 93, 95.
planted in beans, peas, parsnips, turnips, carrots, potatoes (sweet and white), onions, cabbage, asparagus, cauliflower, cucumbers, pumpkins, squash, watermelon, and greens or “sallet.” Eliza Smith’s 1739 cookbook confirmed the English taste for variety in what the garden might yield, and explained how, as “Men began to pass from a Vegetable to an Animal Diet… then Seasonings grew necessary, both to render it more palatable and savoury.” Accustomed to Old England tastes, colonial women carefully tended herbs in addition to vegetable gardens.

The herb garden may have rated higher status than the kitchen garden, since herbs served double purpose in colonial life. Like the Indians, European women counted on plants for their healing properties; herbs were the basis of colonial medicine, used to aid digestion and health. Smith offered more than three hundred concoctions of “medicines and salves” in her cookbook; the section comprised nearly forty percent of the total recipes.54

What they did not grow, the women gathered from the “wilderness.” White women and children, like their Indian counterparts, foraged for greens, herbs, roots, nuts and fruits. For colonial widow Magdelen Wear and other struggling housewives, a woman’s skill at scouring the woods for food may have been crucial to her family’s subsistence on the Maine frontier.55

55 Hechtlinger, Seasonal Hearth, 28; Ulrich, Good Wives, 31-32.
In the cool of fall, work for colonial women shifted into high gear. They pitched in to harvest the “men’s crops” as well as their own, and commenced the busiest processing time of the year. As Ruth Belknap, a minister’s wife, wrote in answer to the Rev. Edward Taylor’s exalted view of a housewife’s work, “New toils arise from Autumn’s store/ Corn must be husk’d, and pork be kill’d,/ The house with all confusion fill’d.” Fruit spared from the applesauce or apple butter pots was sliced, strung on linen thread, and hung on kitchen and attic rafters. Women stashed root vegetables in the cellar or other cool space reserved for food and drink that wouldn’t immediately spoil. Pickling preserved fennel, purple cabbage, green walnuts, parsley, mushrooms, asparagus, nasturtium buds and radishes, as well as oysters and fish. Eliza Smith turned out no fewer than fifty pickling recipes for housewives to use.56

If it was not dried or pickled, it was probably salted. Meat especially was salted “to preserve that Part which was not immediately spent, from Stinking and Corruption.” Colonists ate little fresh meat, and relied heavily on salt to cure the livestock slaughtered in fall for winter meals. Men usually butchered large stock, such as oxen, cattle and swine, but women often managed the slaughter of smaller pigs. Slaughter took place in the early morning so that meat would be drained and hard, ready for salting or pickling later the same day.57

Much of this harvest and preserving was foreign to Indian women. They dried the three sisters – corn, beans, and squash – for winter use, but pickling and salting were not in the Indian household repertoire. Indian agriculture, with rare exception until the later

---

57 Earle, Home Life, 152-54; Ulrich, Good Wives, 22.
eighteenth century, included neither extensive garden crops nor livestock to be tended, harvested, or stored. Game and fish were consumed fresh, or sometimes dried, but not cured in large portions for later cooking.

Livestock not only fell under the white woman’s domain; it sometimes was housed under her roof. In colder climates and in areas where wild animals posed a particular threat, stock joined the family indoors. The widow Wear may have sheltered poultry, a pig, or a calf in the lean-to attached to the house, and chicks may have enjoyed residence near the warmth of the fire. The close proximity would save steps for the housewife, but she would still have to venture out to milk the cows. Dairy production was yet another charge of women. Besides milk to drink, the dairy provided the cream, butter, and cheese so common in colonial diets.58

Women, both colonial and Indian, of necessity mastered the art of frugality. Indians boiled and pounded bones to extract the last morsel of marrow for sustenance; colonists were less thrifty with food, but still wasted no byproduct they could recycle into other household goods. Any fat that rose to top of a simmering pot or dripped from roasting meat was skimmed or collected to make candles and soap. Every scrap of thread or cloth found new utility as other clothing, patches for repairs or quilts, small items like pockets, and eventually as twisted rag wicks for betty-lamps or candles. Even ashes were put to good use as an essential ingredient for making soap.

Ironically, while colonial frugality signaled maximum use of available resources, it also increased the work required of the settlers to secure their relative comfort. Indians burned “fire-sticks” of cedar; they neither wasted food nor needed to allot potential

58 Ulrich, Good Wives, 32.
sustenance to lighting. Their did their washing in streams, and had little use for soap or its tricky, time-consuming manufacture.

Indian women also enjoyed relatively leisurely housekeeping compared to European women. Without year-round houses to maintain, squaws were unfettered with the drudgery of chinking between boards or logs, sweeping and scouring, white-washing walls and boiling laundry, and the complicated cooking inside a fireplace that were routine parts of colonial women’s lives. 59

The upkeep needed in the home varied from town to frontier settings; nevertheless, colonists strove to maintain European standards of deportment and environment. Small frontier houses typically consisted of one or two low-ceiling rooms on the ground floor with one or two chambers above, and contained little furniture -- a bedstead and a straw pallet on the floor, a bench and a few rough stools, a table that could be shoved against a wall when not in use and perhaps a chest. Village dwellers might establish their main rooms more formally as the “hall” and “parlor,” with storage chambers above. Their furnishings could be more elaborate, including a cupboard and a bed with a bolster, pillows, blanket and coverlet. City residents had greater access to and temptation to acquire luxury items such as mirrors, chairs, additional cabinets, drop-leaf tables and more linens. The housewife’s cleaning duties multiplied with the addition of space and furnishings, though perhaps in the city she would be able to purchase amenities like candles and soap from time to time. 60

60 Ulrich, Good Wives, 18-32.
The colonial household's demand for tallow products kindled hope for entrepreneurs in the larger cities such as Boston and Philadelphia. In the mid-eighteenth century, Ben Franklin's father, Josiah, chose chandlery for his profession, banking on Boston housewives' increasing desire for higher quality, harder, and less smoky candles than they could make at home. He combined his candle making with soap production, figuring he could produce two products requiring the same essential ingredient, tallow. In a more rural setting, Franklin's venture likely would have failed. Village and frontier housewives lacked the cash to buy items like candles, which took modest resources and simple skill to make. The pennies saved in home production outweighed the time rural women spent making their own candles. If tallow was scarce, colonial women made do burning betty-lamps, small pots with wicks dipped into unrefined grease. Dried lengths of rush dipped in tallow also substituted well for candles; they did not last as long as candles, but burned brighter, according to essayist William Cobbett.  

Though more difficult to produce, women could cook adequate batches of soap for home use. Finding the right balance of lye for good soap proved a mystery to most housewives. They obtained lye from fireplace ashes in a tedious several-day process of heaping ashes atop straw in a barrel with holes drilled in the bottom, dampening the ashes and waiting for the lye to leach. Three or four days later, they poured a gallon of boiling water over the soggy ashes every few hours, catching the drippings in a bucket placed under barrel. They mixed the lye water with waste fat in a large kettle and boiled it until the soap "came," or thickened like molasses.

Most housewives wound up with soft soap the consistency of a jelly, which they stored by the barrel. Professional soap makers learned to adjust the lye concentration and achieved uniform batches of more desirable hard soap. Six barrels of ashes and twenty-four pounds of tallow went into each barrel of soap.62

Despite the fact that laundering was a monthly household chore, soap was in high demand. In justifying his attempt to break into the business of "pott and pearl ash works," John Rhea estimated in 1772 that half of Philadelphia’s four thousand families made their own soft soap. The other half would purchase fifty pounds — or 1,600 boxes at 30 pence each — of hard soap per household annually.63

Both candles and soap profited from the addition of bayberry or candleberry tallow. Housewives and tradesmen alike used the waxy berries to stiffen the tallow products and improve their scent. The bushes grew primarily in wet coastal regions, and when boiled the ripened berries yielded a distinctive greenish tallow. A girl among the early settlers of Plymouth gathered twelve quarts of bayberries from which her mother skimmed enough tallow to fill an earthenware pot; the woman would save the tallow until she had enough for candle-making, the girl reported in a letter to a friend in England.64

Both of these enterprises, soap and candle making, drew on the housewife’s skill at fire tending. Colonial women tried to keep a fire continuously lit, or at least to save sufficient embers to rekindle it. "Losing" one’s fire necessitated igniting a flame from a

62 Earle, Home Life, 254-55; Huang, Franklin’s Father, 25. To test for lye concentration, Huang explains, tradesmen dropped an egg into the lye bucket. If the egg sank, the lye was still weak; if it floated half above the surface, the lye was too strong. When just a fingernail depth of the egg broke the liquid's surface, the lye concentration was perfect. The soap maker added ashes or water to adjust the lye level.
63 John Rhea, John Rhea Desires to Return His Thanks to All Those Persons, Who Have So Cheerfully Countenanced His Proposed Plan of a Pott and Pearl Ash Works, (Philadelphia: 1772).
flint, a feat difficult to master, or traveling to the nearest neighbor to “borrow” some coals, a precarious task in itself. The colonial household relied on the kitchen fire for cooking and food processing, heat, household production of goods, and fuel for housewifery duties performed in the yard, such as laundry. Fireplaces could span as much as eight to ten feet across the kitchen, and allow a woman enough room to stand inside the fireplace while cooking over multiple fires.65

Indian women built single fires in their dwellings, which vented not through a chimney but an opening at the apex of the home. In lodges or longhouses, each family had a fire. The squaws, like the colonists, carefully maintained their fires, but their cooking methods and differences in household production reduced their need to stoke fires to high heat as frequently as colonial women did. Indians did not have to spend as much time gathering fuel or cooking.

Nor did Indian women acquire the array of iron, copper or brass pots, kettles, skillets, griddles, Dutch ovens, stands, spits, and utensils that colonial cooks with sufficient funds often did. At weights up to forty pounds, kettles could hardly be considered portable as the Indians’ cooking vessels were. The colonists’ utensils, on the other hand, compared better with Indian implements. Settlers often owned but a few rough wooden trenchers, spoons and mugs made of wood or boiled “jack” leather. More established colonists acquired pewter ware.66

More complicated cooking techniques and dishes followed colonists’ possession of more varied cooking tools. Housewives roasted, stewed, ground, and fried meat; made broth, soups and ragoos; fashioned savory and sweet pies; boiled, steamed and baked

65 Earle, Home Life, 47-8; Hechtlinger, Seasonal Hearth, 21-28; Holliday, Women’s Life, 108.
66 Ibid.
puddings; baked bread; and concocted a number of variations on Indian corn mush (samp, sappawn, johnny cake, Indian slapjack, bannock, Indian pudding). They created sauces, jellies and pickled foods, and frequently including produce and herbs from their gardens in their dishes. Cooking duty placed the women in harm’s way on a daily basis; their long, cloth skirts could easily ignite if hems brushed embers as the cooks moved from station to station in the fireplace.\textsuperscript{67}

When they came to the New World, colonists brought with them an Old World taste for hard beverages, which the women sated by regularly preparing beer, cider, and wine. Whites complained in captivity narratives of having only water, which they distrusted, to slake their thirst. In their own homes, the women might follow instructions of a “cyder-maker” to brew barrels of alcoholic libation on a regular basis, which families quaffed at all meals unless they drank milk or perhaps tea. Some housewives mixed up weekly batches of “small beer,” but made cider and various wines only seasonally. Beverage making required cooking time, tending, and sealing to ensure proper fermentation.\textsuperscript{68}

Processing and preparing food and its by-products took up much of the colonial woman’s time. Between those primary chores she sandwiched her other major duty, textile production. From her fingers flowed the family linens – sheets, blankets, coverlets, curtains, tablecloths, and clothes. She and her daughters had a hand in nearly every stage of textile production, from helping set the seed in the flax field to stitching apparel. Only weaving might be performed by someone else, since looms were not household fixtures


and men dominated the trade until the late eighteenth century. Bringing mature flax from the field to the spinning wheel could take several weeks, as the plant required numerous stages of drying, soaking, cleaning, and refining before it could be spun into linen thread for the loom. Transforming dirty fleece into fine wool yarn, while not as lengthy a process, was also demanding. One girl noted in a June diary entry “the sheep have all been sheared and now it is necessary that Mother and I work on the fleece so that we might have some material for our heavy clothing” the following winter. It could take months for the ewe’s coat to become a human’s.69

Touted as a low-skill job, spinning was rated among the “by” work of housewives. A mother might step to her wheel at odd moments throughout the day, her ability to watch her children unimpeded by the mechanical movements of spinning. She could spin at night when the light was too dim for other work; through the course of a day, she might travel up to twenty miles in the forward and backward tread of wheel work. Spinning, though so easy that virtually all children counted it among their regular chores, was slow work. It took four good spinsters working steadily, or ten “by” workers, to keep a weaver employed at the loom.70

In contrast, Indian women spun no weft or warp, nor strained their eyes to ensure they met the twenty-two-stitch-per-inch sewing standard of colonial women. Their apparel, tanned skins and fur from various game, was shaped simply, seams generally tied rather than tightly stitched. They traded with whites for wool blankets – and an

---

70 Clark, Working Life, 9, 95; Earle, Home Life, 228-29.
occasional coat — to supplement their animal-skin bedding. Neither they nor their children knitted stockings, mittens or suspenders, as did white women and their offspring.\footnote{Heather Huyck (lecture presented to Introduction to Public History class, College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., April 10, 2003); Earle, \textit{Home Life}, 259; Hechtlinger, \textit{Seasonal Hearth}, 52-53.}

The housewife applied her talent with the needle to decorative as well as functional projects. Quilts, pockets, seat cushions, linens, clothes and wall hangings were enhanced by embroidery and embellished with beads and lace. Girls acquired steady hands and fancy techniques stitching samplers that featured the alphabet, phrases, and pastoral scenes. High skill in textile production drew praise from colonial officials, who were ever mindful of cloth shortages. North Carolina's surveyor general extolled early eighteenth-century white women as “the most Industrious Sex in that place, and by their good Housewifry, make a good deal of Cloath of their own cotton, Wool and Flax; some of them keeping their families (though large) very decently apparel’d, both with linens and Woolens, so that they have no occasion to run into the Merchant’s debt, or lay their money out on stores for cloathing.” Some twenty years earlier, Thomas Budd advocated a public system of technical schools in Pennsylvania and New Jersey that would “teach and instruct Boys and Girls in all the most useful Arts and Sciences.” Girls would learn “Spinning of Flax and Wool, and Knitting of Gloves and Stockings, Sewing, and making of all sorts of useful Needle-Work, and the making of Straw-Work, as Hats Baskets, \&c.”\footnote{Ulrich, \textit{Homespun}, 143-173; John Lawson, \textit{History of North Carolina} (London: T. Warner, 1714; reprint, Charlotte, N.C.: Observer Printing House, 1903), 47; Budd, \textit{Good Order}, 43-44.}

Children began acquiring the rudimentary skills for trades or housewifery under the tutelage of their parents, particularly their mothers. In New England, Puritans believed in embarking on the quest for salvation early. Clergy and childcare manuals
urged imparting to the young bits of education “while you lay them in your bosoms, and dandle them on your knees.” Children were taught their ABCs as toddlers, and it was not unusual for them to be reading aloud from the Bible long before reaching age five. Preparation for their “calling” as adults was inserted seamlessly into their routine of catechisms and reading. Girls began training for their calling earlier than boys “because there was little likelihood of their ever following any career but that of a housewife, whether as a daughter, wife or mother.” A letter from Samuel Sewall documented the purchase of cloth and other supplies so that his daughters could “begin to goe to schoole” to learn the art of sewing; they were five and seven years old. The emphasis on literacy remained largely a New England characteristic, but early mentoring in housewifery skills was common throughout the colonies.\textsuperscript{73}

In this preparation of the young for adult life, Indian and colonial women’s duties were similar. They both nurtured their infants, and carried them along during respective agricultural work. They charged older siblings or household members with watching toddlers and youngsters, though mothers monitored the situation as closely as possible. Among differences between the experience of Indian and European mothers, a higher colonist birth rate stands out. Colonial women delivered babies one after another, while Indian women spaced out their births. Pregnant and nursing mothers abstained from intercourse, Adriaen Van der Donck observed while in the Dutch colony that became New York. Fertility gave women such power that they threatened the social balance during menstruation and pregnancy. They were isolated during menstrual periods and their activities were restricted during pregnancy. Indian men also avoided sex during

hunting and war. The birthrate and infant and child mortality were high among colonial households – for example, half of Samuel and Hannah Sewall’s fourteen children died before their second birthday; an eighth was stillborn. Maternal mortality among colonial women likewise was high due to complications of childbearing. Fewer pregnancies may have extended the lives of Indian women and their children, as the longer period between deliveries allowed the women’s bodies to recover full strength.74

Women of both cultures attended to the sick, administering herbal cures, first aid, and religious ritual through the course of household illness. Sometimes when their patients failed to improve, they sought a higher level of medical care in the form of medicine men or doctors, depending on the culture. Indian and European women attended other women in labor as needed; colonial women relied on midwives when possible, who were assisted by several other female neighbors or relatives during the “lying in.” White and Indian women alike assisted neighbors in need, providing food, comfort, or religious sustenance as appropriate. They also pooled resources or energy on some work – Indians planting corn in female teams, white housewives gathering to spin or quilt.

Colonial women maintained a different presence than Indian women did in their communities. White housewives wielded less recognized community authority. Hindered by less control over the fruits of their labor and accumulated property, they were excluded from much of the public decision-making process. Women could speak their minds in church meetings, but with the exception of Quakers, could not hold positions of authority. Community government lay outside their realm. Colonial women did move in

public circles, assuming authority as “deputy husbands” for household and business decisions in their spouses’ absence, assisting their husbands in business and conducting some business affairs on their own. They bartered or sold their household skills and products — spinning, sewing, eggs, seeds and the like — and some entered business on their own. Mary Katherine Goddard ran her brother’s printing business and edited *The Maryland Gazette* for a decade. An advertisement to auction hundreds of yards of fabric, ribbons, thread, edging, beads, handkerchiefs and other notions indicates that Henrietta Maria Caine operated a Boston millinery and dress shop. Other women in colonial cities secured licenses to sell “cyder” and “hard drink” as tavern keepers.75

Housewives’ tenuous inheritance rights presented them both the opportunity and necessity of earning their own way. Proximity to high population concentrations increased women’s access to the market system; village and city dwellers had better chances to enter trades or professions than more rural housewives or Indian women.

Overall, colonial women’s work lives appear to have required more time and attention than that of Indian women. Aspects of women’s responsibilities — such as the general household duties of cooking, keeping “house,” and child and nursing care — bore distinct similarities in both cultures. But white colonial women juggled more numerous and more complex tasks on a daily basis. Did a woman bear a heavier load in Indian or colonial life? A further comparison of work culture — seasonal pace, communal and individual work settings, autonomy — should provide the additional factors necessary for a white captive to decide which life to lead.

For both Indian and colonial women, some work was continual and some followed the seasons. Their mutual dependence on agricultural for subsistence set the schedule for certain tasks to be performed at certain times. Both Indians and colonists prepared ground and planted and tended crops in spring and summer. Squaws produced the tribe’s primary food while housewives supplemented the family diet. Despite the importance of the Indian women’s endeavors, their agricultural duties were less complicated than colonial women’s were.

Aside from moving camp, farming demanded the most physical effort of Indian women, but group labor and the planting style reduced their workload. By planting corn, beans, and squash in hills rather than plowed rows, Indian women minimized soil preparation and tending of crops. They farmed less land, producing three crops in one field, and subsequently avoided extra weeding. Their heavy labor also lasted only a short time; Delaware squaws in the Mid-Atlantic region said field work employed them a mere six weeks annually. And the work did not take up all the women’s time. Trader James Adair described games during the southern growing season in which Indian men and women competed against each other daily.76

---

76 Axtell, Indian Peoples, 103-104; Axtell, Invasion, 154; Loudon, Selection, 2: 270-271.
Colonial women’s kitchen gardens were smaller than Indian women’s fields, but housewives grew a greater variety of vegetables and herbs over an extended period. The crops they tended necessitated varying planting times from spring through the growing season. Garden plots were laid out in rows and reflected the English taste for diversity, commonly containing more than five times the variety of vegetables grown in Indian women’s fields. Herb gardens required careful tending and harvesting to supply year-round the seasonings for table use and ingredients for medicinal poultices, pills, and potions. Agricultural work assumed a continual rather than seasonal element with animal husbandry. Colonial women shouldered responsibility for daily care for livestock, as well as such chores as regular milking and processing of milk if cows were kept. During the hot summer months of July and August, colonial women got a reprieve from churning butter, but replaced the chore with cheese making, which required daily attention.\textsuperscript{77}

Women’s work at harvest differed as well. After the harvest, Indian women processed their crops in stages, sometimes taking several months to dry and prepare food – primarily corn -- for storage. The harvest entailed far more work for colonial women. Fruit from the orchards had to be picked, cleaned, and dried. Flax had to be pulled and arduously processed. Sheep were shorn in warm months to ensure time to transform the fleece into yarn. Animals were slaughtered in autumn to provide meat through the winter. Besides meat, “the killing time” yielded fat that was used to make both for candles and soap. The end of the growing season, then, resulted in a flurry of activity for colonial

women, while their Indian counterparts marked completion of their heaviest work cycle.78

After September, Indian women shifted to a slower pace. The Delawares in the Mid-Atlantic colonies had “little else to do than to prepare the daily victuals, and get firewood” for the five to six months between harvesting corn and tapping maple trees for sugar. They mended baskets and tools, and made canoes and lines, but the tempo was slow and captive women noted the idleness of Indian women’s lives for two seasons of the year. When Indian women accompanied men on winter hunting trips, they retained their housekeeping responsibilities, transporting wigwams and supplies. They prepared the fires and food, and processed the men’s kill. But with the exception of sporadic carrying of loads, the women were at relative ease during this period, occupied only with light housekeeping.79

The homes of colonial housewives were stationary and they lived there year-round. They avoided the periodic packing and transport common to Indians, but their permanent homes carried additional burdens of housework. With the sparse furnishings in frontier dwellings, straightening and “setting right” the house would take minimal effort, though keeping the rooms clear of garbage, animal leavings, and dirt could still be a formidable undertaking. Textile production begun in summer continued through fall so that families would have warm clothes ready for the cold winter months. Knitting and garment repair filled any gaps in the housewife’s winter routine, along with the ever-

79 Axtell, Indian Peoples, 136; Johnson, Narrative, 66-69; Hanson in Vaughan, Puritans Among the Indians, 236; Seaver, Mary Jemison, 40-43.
present spinning. Food preparation remained a constant duty conducted on a grander scale than in Indian villages.⁸⁰

Besides much of the housekeeping, women of both cultures attended to children and the sick without regard to season. Both employed a sort of “apprenticeship” system, teaching life skills to males and females in their earliest years. As the children grew older, women concentrated on training daughters in womanly work and behavior while men tutored boys in their roles. Colonial women typically handled their children’s early, informal education, but ceded decisions on education to husbands and advanced teaching to other men. Girls in cities or on plantations might learn decorative needlework at the hands of a female teacher, but masters taught music, languages, drawing, dancing, and other lessons to the elite. In New England, boys’ education was in the hands of men once they advanced beyond dame school. Indian women retained authority to make decisions on children’s education, which surprised some traders whose Indian wives overruled their wishes to send offspring to colonial schools.⁸¹

The difference in the women’s authority in the two societies in part was a product of the work culture. Indians farmed, feasted, hunted, and warred in groups. Indians lived in communities, not merely in close proximity to one another, but with and among extended family or clan systems, tracing lineage through one parent. Many of the Eastern Woodland tribes followed descent through the mother’s family, with children belonging

to the clan of their mother rather than their father. Among the Iroquois nations, the matrilineal system extended to link clan members across nations: A Mohawk member of one clan recognized as a relative a member of the corresponding clan in the Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and, after the eighteenth century, the Tuscarora nations. Cherokees had seven clans with names ranging from Wolf and Deer to Paint and Wild Potato. Most Southeastern tribes, such as the Catawba, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Natchez and Yamasee, all adhered to matrilineal organization. Some northern hunting tribes, including the Micmac and Ottawa, were patriarchal, but nevertheless honored clan ties and lived in close community. The structure of a clan or kin system was an essential component of Indian life, creating a communal system of work.\textsuperscript{82}

English colonists followed a different tradition of community organization. The patriarchal, nuclear family had generally replaced the strong extended-kin system years before colonization. In the extended-kin system, decision-making power was diffused among a number of family members from multiple generations. The smaller family unit concentrated power and influence under the primary provider and protector, the husband. Not only did the nuclear family concentrate authority, it served to isolate its members from other families. Men and women still had contact with others outside their nuclear unit through their work – men handled the public, legal aspects of the family, and shared tools and supplies with other men, while women attended the sick and exchanged household products and services. But a single family comprised of parents and their

children served as the household's primary work force, removed in daily work from other households in the surrounding community.⁸³

Housekeeping dominated the colonial woman's life, and in large part, she worked alone. She sometimes could hand off tasks to her children or perhaps a servant, but in those instances the English woman primarily delegated to or directed others rather than worked with them on housework. Consider the labor of cooking. A woman would cook inside or in front of a fireplace, moving between several fires. An older child might be asked to turn a spit using a pulley system that positioned her away from the immediate work zone, but more likely the girl would be charged with keeping watch over younger siblings. If the housewife had a servant, she would likely assign the hired worker tasks she as employer did not want to do, or those that took less skill than the housewife had. A servant could wash clothing outside while the housewife attended to cooking or other chores. On plantations, a servant's labor could relieve the housewife of field duty. New England housewives did trade products from their households, and assisted each other in some work such as cloth making. Occasionally women combined their work with social time, gathering to quilt or spin in the company of other women. Still, their daily work lives were marked with the isolation inherent, at least on the frontier, in the nuclear family system.⁸⁴

The Indian clan system encouraged group activity among women. In matrilineal tribes, particularly the Iroquois nations, Indians' relationship with their mothers' kin was more significant than their relationships with spouses. Clans shared dwellings – Iroquois

---

⁸³ Berkin, First Generations, 9-11; Eldridge, Women and Freedom, 46.
⁸⁴ Clark, Working Life, 157, 196; Earle, Home Life, 52; Hechtlinger, Seasonal Hearth, 78; Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, 86-87; Berkin, First Generations, 10-11; 99-102; Ulrich, Homespun, 37.
longhouses protected twenty to forty people, each family with its space and fire; Cherokee lived in clusters of clan dwellings. Female relatives who lived together also worked together. They shared duties of housekeeping, kept company and helped one another in chores, and most important, farmed together. Missionary John Heckwelder reported that Delawares marshaled “female parties” to tackle tasks such as tilling, gathering firewood, and grinding corn. Trader James Adair and Rhode Island’s Roger Williams, author of an English-Narragansett dictionary, noted entire villages rallying to plant or harvest, with the women directing the work. But proximity to female relatives was not the only factor contributing to their communal work setting. Men’s work of hunting and fighting took them away from their homes for long periods, leaving Indian women alone (except for the unfit young and elderly males) to farm, forage, and manage the village.85

The clan system balanced Indian life along gender lines, with both men and women commanding power derived from the clan system’s tradition of creation stories. Indians attributed the giving of life, as symbolized through corn cultivation, to an ancient woman; life-taking powers rested with men. Cherokees considered the relationship akin to the balance of winter and summer. Men did not dominate and women were not subservient; mutual respect for defined roles maintained their culture. They regarded women’s link to crops as so sacred that only women were capable of bringing the corn to harvest.86

---
85 Perdue, Cherokee Women, 4, 42-43, 63; Eldridge, Women and Freedom, 10-11, 45; Axtell, Indian Peoples, 122-23; 132-33, 135.
86 Eldridge, Women and Freedom, 14; Perdue, Cherokee Women, 13-17.
Women’s vital connection to the life-sustaining earth gave them authority over land and a measure of autonomy in their work. In essence, women owned the fields and controlled the products of their labor. They decided when it was time to move a village and break new ground for fields. The tools needed for their work belonged to them (men likewise owned the tools they used) and the women determined their own work pace during the growing season. Women’s sacred tie to agricultural not only determined their work, but also bestowed upon them the right and duty to distribute the food they had grown. Senior women in Iroquois longhouses shared the food equitably after it was harvested and processed. The same women were known to thwart war by refusing to give their men supplies of cornmeal needed to sustain them on their raids. In agricultural tribes, because male hunters only supplemented the food supply, women took custody of the meat to prepare and portion it out. 

In the patriarchal colonies, men generally controlled most of the property. As the dominant providers with responsibility for agricultural and trade, European men owned or controlled the land, the tools of trade, and the house. Colonial women owned the “movables” they brought into home upon marriage, such as furniture and linens and perhaps a spinning wheel. Furnishings and implements – such as cookware and spinning wheels – acquired during the marriage usually counted as marriage property, and thus fell under control of the husband’s estate. Through their housewife role, colonial women assumed responsibility of the home, including much maintenance, but the control of ownership usually eluded them. Colonial men on the frontier struggled to produce goods for market while housewives strove to reduce expenses through self-sufficiency. The

87 Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, 73; Berkin, First Generations, 62; Seaver, Mary Jemison, 47; Eldridge, Women and Freedom, 11, 51; Perdue, Cherokee Women, 135-36; Axtell, Indian Peoples, 154.
women's animal husbandry and household production was important to family subsistence, but like Indian men, their work supplemented that of the primary breadwinners.\textsuperscript{88}

Unlike Indian culture, colonial work roles contributed to an imbalance between men and women. Matrilineal agricultural tribes depended on women to produce the majority of the food, while men supplemented the food supply and provided protection for women, children, the elderly, and the infirm. The work of both genders was essential and valued, and allowed for an ebb and flow of work intensity as well as shared responsibility (among the Iroquois) for tribal decisions. The patriarchal colonial culture depended on men to supply the majority of food, through farming or business, as well as to provide protection for the nuclear family. Shouldering a disproportionate amount of responsibility for family survival (compared to the Indian system) put colonial men in the position of greater authority. The housewife's support role in the family meant that her work was perceived in the colonial system as less valuable than a man's, which in turn limited her work autonomy.\textsuperscript{89}

With less valuable work to offer, colonial women commanded fewer rights to property, family support, and community support than did Indian women. Married women and daughters under their father's roof could be assured of relative support and security, but by the time Indians were taking white women captive, a single or widowed woman without the protection of a man faced a life of uncertainty. By the 1680s, the inheritance system throughout the English colonies favored the patriarchal passing of


\textsuperscript{89} Axtell, \textit{Indian Peoples}, 143-44.
land from father to son in an attempt to sustain the nuclear family, and by 1720 even household goods were entrusted to sons over daughters. Early in English colonization, widows had often retained ownership of their spouse’s land or at least substantial rights to make decisions about it. Daughters sometimes inherited land from their fathers, particularly in New England. But the fear that new husbands would obtain land left in widows’ or daughters’ hands – to the detriment of the dead men’s children, especially the sons -- encouraged a reduction of women’s inheritance rights. The system of “thirds,” in which a widow received lifetime rights to one-third the estate, became the standard and the courts frequently named men to oversee the widow’s use of property.90

The habit of father favoring sons in inheritance locked women into dependent relationships. When Samuel Moody died, he left his 12-year-old son his Massachusetts estate, along with responsibility for running the estate and supporting the surviving family. The will stipulated that four overseers would help the boy manage the property. Moody’s widow Mary was given use of the estate until her son came of age, but she was required to follow the overseers’ instructions. If she chose to remarry, she would receive the same marriage portion allotted her daughters. In essence, the will turned the widow into one of her son’s dependents, a step above a hired domestic.91

To avoid becoming domestics for others without position or autonomy, widows needed to secure the role of head of household. Several widows on the Pennsylvania frontier attempted to assert their legal status as “feme sole” (or “woman alone”) during

---

the last half of the eighteenth century, petitioning the courts to maintain their
independence and support their families. They appealed for the right to operate
businesses, to be paid for their labor that had improved their children’s estate, and for
relief as a soldier’s widow. More often in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “feme
covert” (“female covered”) prevailed, and a woman participated in business by assisting
her husband, serving as deputy husband in his absence, or operating a business under
license with a male partner. Laurel Ulrich, Carol Berkin, and others have questioned
whether adding the support role of spouse’s assistant or deputy husband rated as an
opportunity or as an additional burden for the colonial woman. The housewife increased
the burden of her workload without controlling its profits. Since colonists hired help and
sought the reduced physical workload of the elite, it seems unlikely that a woman would
choose additional work if another alternative existed.92

Colonial women could not always count on male protection, even under the terms
of dependence. Many widows, particularly those on the frontier, floundered under the
burden of sustaining a farm and raising young children. Seeking widow or poor relief
made them vulnerable to community authority, which, like the nuclear family, was
paternal. New England towns, for example, strictly monitored their populations and
had the power to accept or reject residents. When towns strained under the economy or
people perceived potential for disruption of the political, religious, or social order,
support for the struggling dissipated. Single or widowed women easily fit the standard for
a threat to the community. They could be sent to poor houses, their children placed under

92 Matthaei, Economic History, 27; Eldridge, 147-53, 167-79; Carol Berkin, “What an Alarming Crisis Is
This: Early American Women and Their Histories,” in Michael V. Kennedy and William G. Shade, eds,
The World Turned Upside-Down: The State of Eighteenth-Century American Studies at the Beginning of
the Twenty-First Century (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 2001), 255-59.
indenture, or they could be expelled from towns as transients. The definition of transient extended beyond newcomers passing through or seeking to establish residence in a town. Upon the death of her husband, Providence, Rhode Island, officials sent 69-year-old Abigail Carr back to Newport, her “legal settlement” (or town of origin) where she’d first married her husband of forty years. The Carrs had made their home in Providence for thirty years.93

Indian widows risked little of the insecurity that threatened colonial widows. Though not all Indian groups were matrilineal, those that followed the matrilineal clan system ensured the widow a position in the tribe. First, the widow continued to live in her home and to share common ownership of the land with other women. Following the tradition of tool ownership, she kept all her possessions; friends and her husband’s relatives divided up his belongings. An Ottawa widow observed two years of mourning, during which time she avoided all pleasure: She ceased regular personal grooming, wore tattered clothes, and refrained from seeking out friends. However, she could receive friends or speak with them in passing, and during her mourning period “those about her show[ed] … much consideration for her modesty and … [took] special pains not to give in the least thing any occasion for grief.” The tribe sent food to her directly or through her parents, and in other ways provided support for the widow. At the end of her mourning period, a widow received counsel from her mother’s kin, or in the case of the Ottawa from her mother-in-law, about remarriage. It was not unusual for a widow to marry a brother of her deceased husband. Generally, an Indian widow’s loss was her husband, not her ability to survive.94

---

93 Ricketson, “To Be Young,” 115-16; Eldridge, Women and Freedom, 269-73.
94 Perdue, Cherokee Women, 140; Axtell, Indian Peoples, 210-12.
Ultimately, the ability to survive may have been the crucial factor white female captives considered when they were given the option to return to colonial life or to stay with their Indian captors. A modern American might assume that the chief obstacle to choosing Indian life would have been accepting the “negative” aspects of being a white squaw -- relinquishing the material comforts of “civilized” colonial life. But if we consider that colonial women faced first and foremost the issue of basic survival -- food, shelter and clothing -- the merits of Indian and colonial work take on a different status.

Narratives reported the warmth and dryness of Indian shelters, however simple and sparsely furnished they were. Indians shared food, and though captives’ accounts complained of hunger and strange types of food during the initial journey following capture, they expressed little dissatisfaction with nourishment once they were established in village life. Clothing fashioned from animal skins proved superior to colonial garb for life in the forest. The basic needs for survival were met in Indian life. And after the initial trauma of capture when they began to adjust to Indian life, captives admitted the relative leisure Indian women’s work afforded. Susanna Johnson referred to her own and fellow captive women’s “idleness.” Mary Rowlandson had ample time to sew shirts and knit for Narragansett and Wampanoag Indians. Mary Jemison regarded her Indian work life as less complicated and less stressful than colonial housewifery. By comparison of the types of chores and the work culture, women’s work was not more difficult in Indian culture, and in fact, was less demanding in terms of time spent working and the ability set one’s own pace.95

95 Axtell, Indian Peoples, 119; Johnson, Narrative, 54-55, 66-69; Rowlandson, True History, 1, 8, 9, 12, 19, 22, 24; Seaver, 46-47; Gherman, “From Parlor to Tepee,” 58.
From the perspective of survival or subsistence, which was the reality of frontier housewives most vulnerable to capture, one must also consider the drawbacks or barriers to survival in colonial culture. Though fear of rejection could easily be presumed a barrier from the modern view, colonial reality disputes that. Colonial relatives sought captives’ redemption for long periods. It seems more logical, however, that captive women realized some of the hardships they could face if they returned to colonial life. Young women taken captive reasonably could have expected to return to a life without the protection of men; narratives suggest that many husbands and fathers died in the Indian raids or in the initial removes of captivity. Male relatives could have died during the women’s lengthy captivity. The returning women, single or widowed, would face difficulty in surviving at a level comparable to the security of their Indian life.96

Young New England women widowed in King Philip’s war made poor prospects as future wives. Their husbands had had less time to build up an estate, and so the widows would have little in the way of property to enhance their appeal as mates in remarriage. If they had young children, they would have a difficult time making a go of widowhood, even if they were able to secure an inheritance. Captives taken during the war who were widowed would be even more vulnerable to hardship, their absence making all the more difficult reclamation of property left unattended or the business of attracting a match. Single or widowed captives returning from an extended life with Indians easily could fall victim to colonial transient restrictions. Those women who did

return to husbands or fathers would be aware of the tenuous nature of their protected status compared to the security of the clan system.\textsuperscript{97}

Finally, those who attempted to return with independent status would encounter the barrier of the low value of their work in colonial culture. Unmarried women's work, which scholar Julie Mattheai broadly considered "homemaking work for other families," earned low wages or few goods through barter, making it difficult for a woman to live on her own. Women rarely were able to support themselves in a separate household with their spinning, sewing, cooking, or other domestic production. Instead, they supplemented the family economy or eked out a domestic existence dependent upon relatives or employers.\textsuperscript{98}

When weighed, these dim prospects for survival could have tipped the scale for white women making the choice to rejoin colonial culture or to remain with Indian families. The issue of work type and work culture, and the related connection to work value, could have been compelling enough for female captives to give up European ways and become white squaws.

A life working as an Indian woman allowed autonomy in one's major work, which was also seasonal in nature. Of one's continual work, housekeeping was less demanding, and nursing and childcare were roughly equivalent to colonial life, though since an Indian woman delivered fewer children with more space between offspring through prolonged breast-feeding and sexual abstinence, childcare was less demanding. Artisan work, too, had a seasonal nature and was less persistent. An Indian woman could expect more companionship and group work, which resulted in less isolation and less

\textsuperscript{97} Ricketson, "To Be Young," 115-18; Eldridge, \textit{Women and Freedom}, 269-76.
individual strain or responsibility than in colonial life. The Indian perception of a woman’s contribution gave higher value to her work. Property and inheritance rules of the extended-family system further ensured a woman’s ability to support herself.

That work could have been a deciding factor for white women’s choice of Indian life appears plausible, but it is a theory that cannot be proved. With few exceptions, white squaws in colonial times disappeared into the forest. In adopting Indian life, they gave up the European ways of telling their stories, and without documents, the reasoning behind their decisions remains historic conjecture. The stories that do exist -- of Mary Jemison, Eunice Williams and Frances Slocum -- point to family ties as the primary reason women became Indians; the bonds between the women and their spouses and children were too strong for them to break. These accounts were produced by white writers whose perceptions likely were colored by their own culture, one that valued family connection in a way it did not value women’s work. Without more sources from the women, it is necessary to concede that work was probably a lesser factor in the decision to become a white Indian ... but a plausible factor nevertheless, especially for single or widowed white captives. In their quest for survival, they could choose the Indian squaw work that Jemison described as “without that endless variety that is to be observed in the common labor of the white people” or the colonial woman’s lot of “huswiuelie matters, [that] haue neuer an end.”

---

99 Seaver, Mary Jemison, 46-47; Tusser, Good Husbandrie, 66.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources


Caine, Henrietta Maria. Catalogue of Goods to Be Sold by Publick Vendue on Wednesday the Eighteenth Day of September 1754, Mrs. Henrietta Maria Caine, at the Sign of the Fann in Marlborough-Street, Boston. Boston: 1754.


*Secondary sources*


Coleman, Emma Lewis. New England Captives Carried to Canada Between 1677 and 1760 During the French and Indian Wars. Portland, Me.: The Southworth Press, 1925.


VITA

Karen L. Hines was born in Norfolk, Virginia on June 24, 1955 and grew up in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She graduated from First Colonial High School in June 1973. She received her B.S. from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1977 with a degree in Mass Communications and worked in journalism and hospital and university communications for twenty-four years before entering the College of William and Mary. She is currently pursuing her doctorate at the College of William and Mary.