

Native American Women
Representations in American History

By

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Abstract

The lives and actions on non-Euro-American individuals have historically been omitted from the American narrative. My research exposes how historians have, over the past few decades, begun to study Native American women in ways that honor their diversity and participation in American History. I challenge historians that discredit native oral traditions, a method that has been used to suppress native histories, through an analysis of an Oneida tradition. Finally, I created a website to educate schools and teachers of the steps they must take to rectify the disservice textbooks and curriculum have committed against minority students. The inclusion of minority participation throughout American History education is crucial to build pride and confidence in minority students.

Keywords: American History, Native Americans, women, education, minority

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Appendix	2
Table of Contents	3
Special Thanks	4
Women of the Canadian Fur Trade: A Native American Historiography.....	5
Polly Cooper: Oral Traditions in American History	26
Multicultural Education: Empowering Culturally Impoverished Students	42
Bibliography	44

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Women of the Canadian Fur Trade: A Native American Historiography

When asked to give examples of prominent Native American women in history, many respond with the typical answers of Pocahontas and Sacagawea. As a social studies education graduate student I am concerned for the fate of native women if these are their only known historical figures. Both Pocahontas and Sacagawea are portrayed as willingly assisting in the western expansion of European society into the North American continent; their histories uphold the Euro-centric view of manifest destiny. Even worse, these two women are only mentioned in small subtexts in most high school history textbooks, and native peoples in general are described as passive bystanders in the master narrative of American history. Despite the lack of inclusion in grade school textbooks, scholars of Native American studies have in the past thirty years increased the amount of work on this subject. The rising field of Native American women's history has been influenced by the work of Red Power and the American Indian Movement in the 1960s, which supported the concept of active Native Americans, who participated with personal motives, separate from European interpretations, in the changing socio-political climate of North America.

This paper will focus on the history of the fur trade in the Hudson Bay region of mid-western Canada from the formation of the Hudson Bay Company in 1670 until the end of company fur trading in the mid to late nineteenth century.¹ More specifically this area, also referred at times as Rupert's Land, includes the tributaries of the Hudson Bay and the surround lands bordered by the Great Lakes in the south and the Rocky Mountains to the west. Also for the purpose of this paper I will use the term Native Americans when

¹ Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), xiii.

referring in general to native peoples within the modern borders of the U.S. and Canada, the term Native Canadians to represent in general the native peoples within the modern borders of Canada, and when possible I will use the most specific nation and tribe names. I seek to demonstrate the exclusion of Native American women in the larger Canadian fur trade history and then to show the process in which their narratives have begun to be included in recent years with the introduction and increased support for ethnography and feminist studies. Prior to these movements, fur trade historians focused purely on the economic interactions between European and Native men. Dr. Jacqueline Peterson, a historian of American Indian studies, explains that this phenomenon in earlier fur trade studies is due to the lack of white women involved in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Canadian fur trade. Peterson believes that if a population of white women existed in Canada during the early years of the fur trade, more emphasis would have been given to social and domestic aspects. Prominent Canadian fur trade historian, Sylvia Van Kirk furthers Peterson's argument claiming that European men ignored native histories because, "Indians who effectively thwarted removal often relied on anonymity as a protective device," and those who were visible adapted to white culture as a means to survive in a growing European-Canadian society.² Earlier historians have misunderstood this kind of accommodation to European culture as desired assimilation by an inferior people, and thus their history was unnecessary. This bias led scholars on the subject to depend heavily on European primary sources creating a predominantly androcentric

² Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 7.

account of the period, prior to the incorporation of native accounts.³ The recent inclusion of native female perspectives reveal new insights into the domestic and social interactions within the Canadian fur trade, providing alternatives to analyze against the master narrative to form a more diverse, complete history. For the purpose of this historiography, first I will analyze three books from the early 1980s to create a foundation to then contrast current scholarly work on the subject to show the change in this field of study over a more than twenty year span.

In her book, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (1980), distinguished scholar Dr. Jennifer S. H. Brown, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada for her work in the social sciences, sets the stage by first presenting the arrogant, Euro-centric view held by the Europeans involved in the Canadian fur trade, which has prevailed in histories of the topic. In the Hudson Bay Company's charter, produced by King Charles II of England, it gives the company a monopoly over all trade in the region surrounding the Hudson Bay and its tributaries, "that are not actually possessed by or granted to any of our Subjects or possessed by Subjects of any other Christian Prince or State."⁴ Throughout her book, Brown compares the two major British fur trading companies, the Hudson Bay Company, as mentioned before, and the North West Company, to show the variation of interactions that traders had and the influence each company held in creating the fur trade society. In order to analyze the companies, the author focuses on their origins, characteristics, and how they developed social and domestic relations in the

³ Jacqueline Peterson, review "Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870 by Sylvia Van Kirk; *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* by Jennifer S. H. Brown," *Minnesota History*, 48: 8 (Winter, 1983), 343.

⁴ Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), xi.

Hudson Bay region through the use of letters, journals, wills, and many secondary sources. Brown argues that these documents reveal the uniqueness of the fur trade culture in that the traders were often European men, married to Native American women, who fathered the first generations of Euro-Native Canadians, who were loosely managed by their less knowledgeable European superiors, and who lived in relative isolation allowing the creation of a separate fur trading society. She clarifies:

Traders brought with them European instructions, models, and experience that affected their behavior in the fur trade country, and they encountered Indians whose expectations and ways of life demanded their consideration and accommodation. But within those constraints, individuals could make decisions, innovate, and experiment to a degree; and in learning from their successes and failures, they built up new social patterns adapted to their distinctive situations.⁵

American Historian, Richard White, later upheld Brown's argument in his 1991 book, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815*, in which he supported her thesis that a middle ground existed between Native American and Euro-American societies.⁶ Despite Brown's attempt to provide a balanced perspective of the Canadian fur trade, the author admits her book predominantly studies the higher ranked officers of the fur trade since they were the first to create familial bonds with the Native Americans and these relationships formed models for the rest of the company men to follow. Thus, although her limited span of sources, Brown defends these elite documents because they demonstrate the general trends in fur trade familial connections. The author employs her sources to disclose the differences between the traders from both companies. Brown claims that because the Hudson Bay Company men lived in permanent posts they

⁵ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, xix-xx.

⁶ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

remained more tied to European domestic expectations of their families compared to the North Westers (North West Company men) who adapted more to Natives cultures in their travels deep into the Canadian West. Through her book, Brown gives a needed look into the domestic aspects of the fur trade, including the problems these mixed raced families encountered, predominantly with the support of primary documents left by fur trade officers.

In the same year, Sylvia Van Kirk Ph.D., a professor of Canadian and Women's Studies, released her book, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (1980), which, like Brown's book, focuses on the domestic side of the Canadian fur trade, but Van Kirk delves deeper into the roles of the female participants. The author writes that geographic and economic history of the fur trade have been widely studied and recorded but few have reported the social history. Similarly to Brown, Van Kirk claims that cultural understanding of the fur trade can provide a unique look at two diverse societies, which created a middle ground or mixed culture through the process of contact and trade. Throughout the book Van Kirk remains culturally conscious of the peoples she is studying. She prompts readers and historians to remember the classifications of "Indian" and "white" are far from simple.⁷ European voyagers came in contact with many different native tribes with diverse cultures while traveling across the Canadian wilderness. Likewise the Hudson Bay Company and North West Company were composed of different European populations, British and French respectively, both with varying customs towards women.

While Brown's book centered more on the lives of the métis, or "mixed-blood," children produced from Native-European relations, Van Kirk chooses to study the

⁷ Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*, 3.

marriages between European fur traders and native, métis, and eventually European women and the roles they played in the Rupert's Land fur trade.⁸ Her inspiration for the book came from a remark by James Douglas concerning his friend, Chief Trader James Hargrave's marriage to a European woman in 1840. He wrote:

There is a strange revolution in the manners of the country; Indian wives were at one time the vogue, the half-bread [métis] supplanted these, and now we have the lovely tender exotic torn from its parent bed to pine and languish in the desert.⁹

Van Kirk acknowledges that historians have accounted the trend of marriage between European fur-traders and Native Canadian women, but she strives in this book to demonstrate why the pattern of desired partners transformed over time from Native Canadian wives to métis and later white European-Canadian women. Despite the biased reports of widespread native promiscuity, Van Kirk stresses that relationships between Native Canadians and Europeans were not the casual sexual encounters but "marital unions".¹⁰ This is remarkable because in most other areas of European/Indigenous contact intermarriage was disapproved or to the very least frowned upon, but in the fur-trade intermarriage became essential to trading society. The fur-traders depended on the Native Canadians for fur and their geographic knowledge of the land thus the native populations could enforce their traditional beliefs as leverage for good trade relations. Native Canadian wives participated in the fur trade by acting as liaisons, interpreters, and creating large familial trading networks. Van Kirk argues that the social interactions between the European traders (mostly French) and their native wives are more indicative of Native

⁸ Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*, 1.

⁹ G. P. deT. Glazebrook, ed., *The Hargrave Correspondence 1821-1843* (Toronto: Champlain Society, XXIV), 310-311, as cited in Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*, 1.

¹⁰ Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*, 4.

Canadian gender roles with equally important male and female occupations. Van Kirk theorizes that these intermarriages continued as long as the fur traders were mutually dependent on the Native Canadians. As the traders became more experienced in the geography and skills needed to collect furs, and a new population of European settlers replaced the prior native consumers, intermarriage became less accepted. The author uses descriptions and documents concerning fur trade marriage ceremonies, or marriage *à la façon du pays*, which included a combination of Native Canadian and European customs, to demonstrate the gradual shift towards a more European dominant society.¹¹ Based on her studies, Van Kirk asserts that although European primary sources from the period describe that the Native Canadian women would hold a higher position in society if she married a fur-trader rather than a fellow native, but in actuality native women lost much of the independence they would have enjoyed by marrying within her culture. Van Kirk supports this argument with examples of documented European disregard for rights and goods left to native wives and métis children by their fur trader husbands in their wills. She also references the desire among fur traders, especially those belonging to the Hudson Bay Colony, to have their métis daughters educated in the ways of European culture, which was typically much more repressive towards women. Van Kirk ends her book by placing the blame for the eventual denigration of native women in Canadian society with the settlement of Canada by Europeans and the introduction of white women into the interior of Rupert's Land.

Both Brown and Van Kirk's works demonstrate that in 1980 historical research in the study of the Canadian fur trade was much broader and included more aspects of gender

¹¹ Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*, 4.

roles within the cultures involved. However, historian James K. Smith chose three years later, in 1983, to print his book, *Wilderness of Fortune: The Story of Western Canada*, without regard to these new insights. Smith writes a moving narrative describing the rugged European fur traders, but gives little to no mention of woman and maintains a racist portrayal of Native Americans. Despite the book's readability and the multitude of visual sources included within the narrative, a modern scholar of history would have limited issue noticing the clear Euro-centric, and male-biased tone Smith employs in his writing.

In the third chapter titled, "West of the Mountains," in which the author describes the motives for exploring past the Rocky Mountains and the fur trading opportunities on the northern shores of the Pacific, he summarizes, "The history of the fur trade in north America is the story of a slow movement from one overtrapped region to the next untouched one westward."¹² This generalization gives no consideration of the Native Canadian populations living in the supposed "untouched" areas of Canada. In fact the only mention of female gender roles in the entire book is presented in the first chapter, "The First Immigrants," when Smith attempts to describe pre-European contact Native Canadian societies. In his description of the, "Plains Cree, Blackfoot, Assiniboine, Blood, Peigan, Sacree, Gros Ventre, and the Sioux," residing in the plains of northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, Smith gives a robust explanation of male genders role, "The great male occupation, of boys and men alike, was practicing the twin skills of the hunt: tracking and archery... The successful hunter had a well-fed, well-clothed family."¹³ He adds that the females in these tribes gathered food, cooked and prepared meals, including

¹² James K. Smith, *Wilderness of Fortune: The Story of Western Canada* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1983), 49.

¹³ James K. Smith, *Wilderness of Fortune: The Story of Western Canada*, 3-4.

pemmican, or dried, pounded meat mixed with berries, for long hunting and trapping trips, and constructed clothing from skins and furs. However, Smith fails to realize that in order to have a, “well-fed, well-clothed family,” the, “successful hunter,” would have needed a female to cook the game caught and sew the clothing.¹⁴ Rather than give credit to both the males and females in these tribes, Smith appoints the gender role of the male provider as the key to a successful family. Even more disappointing, the author lists no sources for this entire first chapter in the subpar, three-page notes section at the end of his book. Beyond Smith’s unsubstantial description of Native Canadian gender roles; the author fails to include native women into his narrative when possible. Returning to the third chapter “West of the Mountains,” Smith details the usefulness of the native “canoemen” hired by the company fur traders to navigate the rivers leading west and for their light weight, long lasting supplies of pemmican, “Without him [canoemen], there would have been no fortunes in furs.”¹⁵ In summation, throughout his book, Smith neglects to acknowledge the contributions, such as pemmican, Native Canadian women gave in the fur trade.

The following year, in 1984, Van Kirk wrote an article, “The Role of Native Women in the Fur Trade Society of Western Canada, 1670-1830,” which seems to be a response to Smith’s limited portrayal of native women’s involvement. Based on her earlier work, *Many Tender Ties*, Van Kirk offers a short (four-page), but direct description of the roles native and métis women played in the fur trade with a chronological rationale for the eventual downfall for native women in Canadian society. She opens her article by grandly stating the two hundred year period of relative peace between Native Canadians and European fur traders was formed by their mutual dependence on one another, which was further

¹⁴ James K. Smith, *Wilderness of Fortune: The Story of Western Canada*, 4.

¹⁵ James K. Smith, *Wilderness of Fortune: The Story of Western Canada*, 32.

reinforced by the proliferation of intermarriage between European men and native women. Like her previous book, the author uses journal accounts of the *à la façon du pays* marriage ceremonies as well as other domestic concerns as her key sources.

Unlike Smith, Van Kirk presents both Native Canadian and European motives for interaction and intermarriage. She explains that the western Canadian tribes would have offered their women for marriage with the fur traders as a sign of alliance between the two groups. She adds that native women especially would have favored trade with the Europeans for stronger, more durable tools and materials, such as cloth and metal kettles, pots, knives and needles, which would have greatly improved the efficiency of the work generally taken on by the women. Likewise, Van Kirk states the European traders would have desired Native Canadian wives for their small game hunting skills, food preparation and preservation, ability for shoe making, canoe building, as well as their expertise in canoe steering and paddling. Having a native wife opened many opportunities for European fur traders.¹⁶ One of the most influential modes of assistance a native wife could give her fur trading husband was a supply of pemmican, which would enable him to journey on the necessary fur trapping hunts into northern Canada where the furs were thickest, but this kind of arctic environment offered limited food supply. Even when the pemmican was not enough to last the family through winter, native wives kept their families alive when their European husbands could not. Van Kirk details:

“In 1815, for example, the young Nor’Wester George Nelson would probably have starved to death when provisions ran out at his small outpost north of Lake Superior

¹⁶ Sylvia Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women in the Fur Trade Society,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 7:3, Women on the Western Frontier (1984), 10.

had it not been for the resourcefulness of his Ojibwa wife who during the month of February brought in fifty-eight rabbits and thirty-four partridges.”¹⁷

By explaining the mutual advantages of Native Canadian-European relationships, Van Kirk gives a voice to native women showing that they actively participated by first accepting the marriage proposal of the fur traders and secondly by aiding their trade with the production of clothes and food, as well as their canoe expertise for excursions north.

Sociologist, Dr. Karen Anderson, offers a new perspective, using micro studies of specific tribes to uncover the roles of native women in the Canadian fur trade in her 1985 article, “Commodity Exchange and Subordination: Montagnis-Naskapi and Huron Women, 1600-1650.” Anderson gives a fresh interpretation of written documents from the period by studying the subject through the lens of gender studies. Anderson focuses her article on the transformation of Native Canadian gender roles after French contact through the fur trade, centered on the outcome of two tribes: the Montagnis-Naskapi and the Huron. The author first presents the need for historical analysis of gender roles due to the prevalence of the conservative belief that women are and will inevitably be subordinate to men. Prior to European contact, both Montagnis-Naskapi and Huron women possessed different gender roles from their male counterparts, but both roles shared equal importance and influence in their societies, disproving the myth of natural male dominance. Despite this, only the Huron were able to remain egalitarian post-French contact, while the Montagnis-Naskapi traditional gender roles were replaced with Euro-Christian social expectations. Anderson argues that European contact alone could not have entirely caused this transformation because the Huron also interacted with French fur traders and

¹⁷ Sylvia Van Kirk, “The Role of Native Women in the Fur Trade Society,” 10.

missionaries.¹⁸ Rather, the Montagnis-Naskapi had several preexisting conditions including, decreases in fur bearing animal populations in the region, limited traditional government, need for protection from Iroquois, and the opportunity for better trade alliances with the French, which allowed the Montagnis-Naskapi men to embrace the French customs without consequence from the women, at the time of French missionary work in the 1630s. Anderson's thesis is further supported by the Huron counter-example, who despite the same actions by the French were able to maintain their native gender roles because their society featured tight matrilineal kinship networks, existing agricultural food production, and complex governing system.¹⁹

The author also alludes to the changing terminology used to represent Native American societies in the introduction segment of her article. Anderson references Friedrich Engel, Mon Etienne, and Eleanor Leacock's works to history of gender studies concerning the causes of female subordination. In her description of Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1972), Anderson uses the phrase "primitive societies."²⁰ In contrast, Anderson's explanation of Etienne and Leacock's *Women and Colonization* (1980) contains the more respectful, yet Marxist, adjective "precapitalist" rather than "primitive", which denotes the unwarranted characteristics of simple and undeveloped to Native American societies.²¹ Through her use of specific language and analysis of Native Canadian gender roles prior and post-French contact, Anderson shows the variety of roles native women played in the Canadian fur trade.

¹⁸ Karen Anderson, "Commodity Exchange and Subordination: Montagnis-Naskapi and Huron Women, 1600-1650," *Signs*, 11:1 (Autumn, 1985), 48-50.

¹⁹ Anderson, "Commodity Exchange and Subordination," 60-61.

²⁰ Anderson, "Commodity Exchange and Subordination," 48.

²¹ Anderson, "Commodity Exchange and Subordination," 48-49.

In 1991, Dr. Jo-Anne Fiske, a professor of women's studies at the University of Lethbridge, in Alberta, Canada, continued the trend toward micro studies in her article, "Colonization and the Decline of Women's Status: The Tsimshian Case." In the piece, Fiske addresses the inadequate historical research of the Tsimshian, "a fishing-hunting people of the Northwest coast of British Columbia," focusing on the roles of the Tsimshian women during their involvement in the Canadian fur trade.²² Although the Tsimshian were located farther west, making their contact date with Europeans later than the other Native Canadian tribes discussed in this paper, Fiske's study of the women of the Tsimshian tribe and the effects of encroaching European society follow the same pattern as other examples used. The author argues that a complex system of social hierarchy existed in Tsimshian society prior to European contact. Fiske believes that the fur trade, along with the missionary work that followed, destroyed the Tsimshian hierarchy, specifically causing the decreased social status for their women. To support her argument, the author attempts to piece together the experiences of the Tsimshian women from the research of anthropologist Franz Boas, Viola E. Garfield, and Albert P. Niblack, along with primary sources. Fiske does admit that each secondary source has its flaws; Boas only studied traditional Tsimshian society, Garfield's work is contradictory, and Niblack combines his data of the Tsimshian with that of other neighboring tribes, but when compared against each other, a more complete history is revealed.

Fiske first describes the traditional Tsimshian socio-political structure with lineage heads and tribal chiefs (usually men) at the top, but she explains that these positions did not hold direct authority and relied on the agreement of tribe/clan members, including

²² Jo-Anne Fiske, "Colonization and the Decline of Women's Status: The Tsimshian Case," *Feminist Studies*, 17:3 (Autumn, 1991), 509.

women, for support. The missionary, William Duncan, chronicled in his 1858, *First Report Respecting the Indians*, that the Tsimshian women were often considered the highest authority due to the matrilineal compilation of their clans.²³ These women also enjoyed personal economic autonomy from their husbands through their production of food, utensils, clothing, and the highly prized Chilkat blankets, all of which were traded by the women. Like Anderson, Fiske maintains that because they produced goods valued by the men in their society, the women held some extent of control over the actions of the men. Unfortunately for the Tsimshian women, their equivalent social status to their male counterparts began to shift after 1825 with the dramatic decrease in sea otter populations pushing the west coast fur trade further inland. Tsimshian women traded the goods they produced, like dried fish and other provisions, while the men traded the furs and skins they collected. The thrust inland increased the trade for Tsimshian men with fur traders, while the introduction of European domestic tools devalued those made by the native women. The populations of fur-bearing animals along the coast were depleting by the mid nineteenth century while native demand for European goods increased, giving the Christian missionaries leverage against the Tsimshian, forcing three-hundred of the members to relocate to Metlakatla, a Christian village set up as a model of European culture. Once moving to Metlakatla, the Tsimshian women lost all personal economic, social, and political independence. Through her article, Fiske brings the previous work of several anthropologists and historians, which separately give limited evidence of the transition female Tsimshian gender roles underwent as consequence to the fur trade,

²³ Fiske, "Colonization and the Decline of Women's Status," 512-514.

together to shed new light on the complexity of the Tsimshian traditional society and the fate of the women post-European contact.

Contrary to Fiske's study of the Tsimshian, historian and anthropologist, Dr. Bruce M. White wrote about the benefits afforded to Ojibwa women due to the Canadian fur trade in his 1999 article, "The Woman Who Married a Beaver: Trade Patterns and Gender Roles in the Ojibwa Fur Trade." The Ojibwa occupied the lands around Lake Superior and thus encountered European fur traders at least a century prior to the Tsimshian; one possible reason for their varied experiences and outcomes. White offers a conscious ethnographic analysis of prior historical research, comparing the observations of outsiders with the oral history traditions of the Ojibwa. This ethnographic technique is termed "upstreaming" as first described by anthropologist William Fenton, which includes contemporary accounts from perspectives not documented in earlier historical works.²⁴ White argues the need for this style of ethnographic study:

To insist too strictly on the primacy of early French or British documents is to suggest that native people of more recent times have nothing useful to say about their own past. It can also lead to ignoring, as the earlier documents often do, the role of native women, simply because they are not mentioned in documents written by European men, who recorded only interactions with native men.²⁵

White believes that ethnographers must add contemporary accounts to the historical literature so to discontinue the failings of the earlier European chroniclers.

White begins his article with an Ojibwa story about a woman who married and parented children with a beaver. The beaver husband and children would leave with a

²⁴ Bruce M. White, "The Woman Who Married a Beaver: Trade Patterns and Gender Roles in the Ojibwa Fur Trade," *Ethnohistory*, 46:1 (Winter, 1999), 116-117.

²⁵ White, "The Woman Who Married a Beaver," 117.

white man and return with European trade goods. White argues that this story provides evidence from Ojibwa oral history that women openly participated in the fur trade. He supports this thesis through his research on the three main patterns of trade between the Ojibwa and the Europeans: gift giving, repayment of credit, and direct trade. White upholds that Ojibwa men were typically involved in the trade of furs, but he states these furs would have predominately be given as gifts at the beginning of the trading season in fall and then used to repay debts at the end of the season in spring. This leaves the direct trade of other desired native goods, specifically food provisions, for the Ojibwa women to handle, as they were the producers of prepared food and domestic tools in their culture. Several traders from the period, including Michel Curot and Alexander Henry, documented their exchanges with Ojibwa women for rice during times of food shortages, commenting on the usefulness of this trade not only to feed crew in the area but also for provisions during trade missions west. Also, women were prominent participants of direct trade interactions. European traders were required to win the favor of Ojibwa women in order to trade in their villages. By intermarrying with native women, Europeans would gain more trade opportunities, while the wives became their link between the two societies. These women now had the prospect to become, “spies, interpreters, guides, or diplomatic emissaries,” as an outcome of their marriage with European traders.²⁶ Through his ethnographic interpretation of historical documents, White exposes the opportunities granted to Ojibwa women by the fur trade due to the increase in demand for their food production and influence they gain by intermarrying with European traders.

²⁶ White, “The Woman Who Married a Beaver,” 128.

The following year, in 2000, historian, Dr. Susan Sleeper-Smith released an article, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade,” which like Bruce White’s earlier work, focused on the benefits the fur trade provided native women. In the piece, Sleeper-Smith contends that by participating in the fur trade Native American women increased their social status while they retained their indigenous cultural beliefs and relative independence from their French husbands through the practice of Catholicism. Sleeper-Smith differs from the previously mentioned historians of the fur trade in that she argues that by the mid-eighteenth century the native women of the western Great Lakes who converted to Catholicism used their newly adopted religion to elevate their social status and gain independence within the fur trade society. The author argues that Catholicism was more flexible on the frontier where missionaries often relied on the support of native women when village leaders turned them away. This is contrary to the findings of both Anderson and Fiske, who described how the influence of Catholic missionaries decreased the economic and political status of the Montagnis-Naskapi and Tsimshian women. Sleeper-Smith states that Catholic kinship networks based on intermarriage with French fur traders and the induction of godparents simply modified the existing native kinship networks to include Europeans. The author contends that through marriage with French traders, Native women could increase trade networks outside their tribe and clan, become mediators, religious leaders, and even autonomous fur traders.²⁷

In the article, Sleeper-Smith focuses on four native women, Marie Rouensa, Marie Madeleine Réaume L’archevêque Chevalier, Magdelaine Marcot La Framboise, and Thérèse Marcot Lasaliere Schindler, who used Catholicism to increase their social standing.

²⁷ Susan Sleeper-Smith, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade,” *Ethnohistory*, 47:2 (Spring, 2000), 424-426.

Rouensa, a Kaskaskia of the land south of Lake Michigan, was arranged to marry a French fur trader in the late seventeenth century, but she refused. At the time, French marriage alliances were very appealing to Great Lakes Native Americans for greater access to trade products, making Rouensa's rejection controversial within her village. To defend her decision, Rouensa portrayed herself like a celibate Catholic saint, and when they did eventually marry, she could command her husband to act according to Christian social standards.²⁸ Réaume, an Illini métis woman born in the early eighteenth century, used Catholic kin networks to replace the disappearing Native kinship system, to increase trading opportunities after her husband died. By aligning herself with other tribes and métis families, across the Great Lakes region and south along the Mississippi River, through marriage and god parenting, Réaume promoted her own social status and created a large base of support against the encroaching British.²⁹ The other two women, Térèse and Magdelaine, were sisters born into the métis, Catholic kinship network in the late eighteenth century, but raised in their mother's Odawa village. Both married prominent fur traders and gained experience in the European perspective of trade. In the early nineteenth century, after the death of her husband, Magdelaine manipulated her social standing within her Odawa community, the Catholic kin networks of her family, and the European traders she met through her late husband, to become an independent trader herself. A few years later, Térèse followed her sister into the independent trade business after her husband suffered a stroke. Without the Catholic kin networks, which tied the sisters to both Native American and European cultures, Sleeper-Smith argues neither could have achieved such

²⁸ Sleeper-Smith, "Women, Kin, and Catholicism," 426-428.

²⁹ Sleeper-Smith, "Women, Kin, and Catholicism," 432-437.

high ranking in the fur trade.³⁰ The author employs the narratives of these four individuals to show that Native women were actively managing their own social statuses by bridging the cultural divide in the Great Lakes fur trade.

Sleeper-Smith followed up her article with her 2001 book, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounters in the Western Great Lakes*, which synthesizes the topics presented in “Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade.” In the book, Sleeper-Smith claims that Native Americans responded to the threats of European fur traders and missionaries in similar fashion to the ways they responded to other native people prior to European contact. Although she agrees with Richard White’s general thesis of the “middle ground,” the author challenges his argument that native tribes have become immobilized by Euro-American society in the nineteenth century.³¹ In contrary, Sleeper-Smith argues that Native Americans have and continue to adapt and resist foreign cultures, much the women mentioned in her earlier article. The author again employs examples of Native wives of European fur traders that modeled of the processes of acculturation and opposition in their ability to mediate between multiple societies. Adverse to most histories of the fur trade, Sleeper-Smith argues that native culture, specifically kinship networks, “transformed the impersonal exchange process characteristic of capitalism into a socially accountable process,” which continued through the introduction of Catholic kin networks.³² Using the same native and métis female examples from her previous article, Sleeper-Smith adds further investigation of native resistance and the ability of Native American tribes to adapt to changing environmental factors. She reveals

³⁰ Sleeper-Smith, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism,” 438-440.

³¹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815*.

³² Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounters in the Western Great Lakes*, University of Massachusetts Press (Amherst, MA: 2001), 4.

the large extent to which Native Americans influenced the style of exchange in the fur trade compared to other historians who focused primarily on European influence. By doing so, Sleeper-Smith demonstrates that Native Americans had relative control over the fur trade.

Through the examination of over twenty years of research and publications on the Canadian fur trade, several trends become apparent. Within their theses, the following historians have sought to fix prior historical inaccuracies and cultural misunderstandings, place blame for the eventual downfall of Native societies, and/or argued whether the fur trade harmed or benefited Native women. The historians have made these claims through the use of macro studies of general Native American interactions or micro studies of specific tribes and individuals. In the early 1980s Brown and Van Kirk sought to first add native women to the androcentric, Euro-American perspective of the fur trade still promoted by historians like Smith. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the study of native women within the fur trade shifted from macro studies like Brown, Van Kirk, and Smith's to micro research of specific tribes, villages, and individuals. This enabled historians like Anderson to show that not all native groups interacted the same way with Europeans causing varying outcomes for native women. By the 1990s, with the increase in micro studies of Native Americans, the emphasis of fixing prior inaccuracies turned more towards revising the narratives of native women compared to simply adding these stories like the historians did a decade earlier. Prior works like Van Kirk, Anderson, and Fiske's, which focused on the negative consequences for native women, often blamed existing native cultural factors, European society, missionaries, and white women, for decreasing the social status of native women, alluding that they were passive bystanders to their eventual demise. The three most contemporary publications by Bruce White and Sleeper-Smith demonstrate the

recent shift in fur trade research that highlights the opportunities native women created themselves by actively participating in and connecting native, métis, and European societies within the fur trade. The comparative disagreement among historians concerning the role and status of native women within the fur trade, especially in a small time frame of twenty years, further proves the need for more research in the subject and increased inclusion of native female narratives into the master narrative of American history.

Polly Cooper: Oral Traditions in American History

As described in the previous section, historians have only recently, in the past thirty years, begun to study Native American women's history. Despite the recent rise in scholarship, textbooks and curriculum feature few updates and continue to endorse the self-promoting, androcentric view that the hard work of white men alone has created the success of the United States. This idea has been developed due to historical discrimination against access to education that hindered certain populations from creating primary sources and de facto social discrimination that caused discouraged white men from writing about the day-to-day business of females and minorities. For instance, the heroes of the Valley Forge encampment during the winter of 1777-1778 are often reported as George Washington and Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, but few sources on the subject cite an Oneida oral tradition that states a Haudenosaunee woman also contributed to preservation of the Continental Army during the encampment. The Oneida Nation, located in Oneida, New York, published a description of the oral tradition on their website:

According to Oneida oral tradition, Polly Cooper was a member of the relief mission organized by Chief Shenendoah, who sent a party of Oneidas with hundreds of bushels of white corn to help feed Gen. George Washington's starving troops in the cruel winter of 1777-78.

The relief party walked hundreds of miles from Central New York to Valley Forge through the bitter cold. The corn they brought was white corn and quite different from the yellow version that can be prepared simply. White corn, the variety grown by the Oneida people, requires extended preparation before it can be eaten.

But the American soldiers were desperate for food when Polly Cooper and her fellow Oneidas arrived, and they tried to eat the corn uncooked. The Oneidas stopped the soldiers, knowing that if they ate the raw corn it would swell in their stomachs and kill them.

Polly Cooper taught the soldiers how to cook the white corn, taking them through the preparation process and the lengthy cooking time. She

stayed on after the other Oneidas departed for their homeland and continued to help the troops.³³

The oral tradition describes Cooper as not only courageous for joining the relief party, but also diligent and humble. A prominent Oneida leader, Chief William Honyost Rockwell, learned the story from those with living memory of the event, “When I was a boy, I used to hear my people talk about Polly Cooper’s bravery, about how she cooked and carried water to the soldiers. Whenever she had a chance between hours of cooking duty, Polly would roll up her sleeves and take two pails of water, one container in each hand.”³⁴ The Oneida tradition continues, “After the war, the Colonial Army tried to pay Polly Cooper for her valiant service, but she refused any recompense, stating that it was her duty to help her friends in their time of need.”³⁵ Chief Rockwell explained that Polly volunteered because she thought, “the war was about freedom in thought, to develop principles for the good of all living and the coming generations.”³⁶

Although Cooper declined payment from the Continental Army, the Oneida oral tradition recounts that she did accept a gift for her service:

So the wives of the officers invited Polly Cooper to take a walk downtown with them. As they were looking in the store windows, Polly saw a black shawl on display that she thought was the best article. When the women returned to their homes, they told their husbands what Polly saw that she liked so well. Congress appropriated money for the purpose of the shawl and it was given to Polly Cooper for her services as a cook for the officers of the Continental Army.³⁷

³³ “Polly Cooper: Oneida Heroine,” *Oneida Indian Nation*, last modified March 5, 2014, <http://www.oneidaindiannation.com/history/noteworthyoneidas/39567117.html>

³⁴ William Rockwell, “The Unpublished Rockwell Papers,” as cited in, “Chief Rockwell’s Polly Cooper,” *Shako:wi Cultural Center* (1996), paragraph 10.

³⁵ “Polly Cooper: Oneida Heroine.”

³⁶ Rockwell, “The Unpublished Rockwell Papers,” paragraph 10.

³⁷ Rockwell, “The Unpublished Rockwell Papers,” paragraph 9.

The shawl, which is over two hundred years old, remains in nearly perfect condition thanks to the care of Cooper's descendants who have inherited the family heirloom.³⁸ The garment appears to be made of deep brown, fine horsehair and measures 62 inches square.³⁹ Although the shawl is privately owned, it has periodically been loaned for display at Shako:wi, the Oneida Nation Cultural Center.



Louello Derrick of Syracuse, a great-great niece of Oneida Polly Cooper displays the family heirloom. *Oneida Daily Dispatch* (1994)

Despite the oral tradition, recorded memories, and shawl, non-native sources

refer to the story of Polly Cooper as myth and folklore, which explains, unfortunately, why her heroism is not documented in scholarly works. Although anthropologists have created a separate field of study for non-written histories, or oral traditions, which defines the field and provides methodology, historians persisted discrediting these sources. In order to create a comprehensive American narrative that includes the history of oral societies, historians must learn how to appropriately source and analyze oral traditions. The story of Polly Cooper reveals an ideal example that women and American Indians participated in the shaping of American history and is worthy of further reference by history educators.

³⁸ Guy C. Hulbert, "Oneidas Will Display their Gift from Martha Washington," *Oneida Daily Dispatch* (Oneida, NY), Feb. 22, 1994.

³⁹ Hulbert, "Oneidas Will Display their Gift."

Dr. Peter N. Stearns, provost and professor at George Mason University, acknowledged that people study history to develop their cultural and national identity.⁴⁰ History can inform a person of the basic beliefs and values of their society and a perspective through which to view and comprehend the world. Stearns warned that, “Merely defining the group in the present pales against the possibility of forming an identity based on a rich past.”⁴¹ Modern representations of American Indians in popular culture are often so stereotyped that they no longer have any connection to actual cultural beliefs and customs. These twisted portrayals discredit American Indian cultural histories and hide the abuse and discrimination that the United States government has committed against native peoples. Even the United Nations recognized that identity is integral to the success of societies. According to the *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, “States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.”⁴² In order to protect the identity of minority groups, “States should, where appropriate, take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities existing within their territory.”⁴³ These documents support the argument that American Indian history must

⁴⁰ Peter N. Stearns, “Why Study History,” *American Historical Association* (1998), [http://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](http://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/archives/why-study-history-(1998))

⁴¹ Stearns, “Why Study History.”

⁴² “Article 1: Section 1,” in *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, as cited in “Minority Rights: International Standards and Guidance for Implementation,” *United Nations: Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner* (United Nations, 2010), 46, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/MinorityRights_en.pdf.

⁴³ “Article 4: section 4,” in *Declaration on the Rights of Persons*, 47.

become easily accessible and taught in context with American history for native peoples to retain their cultural identities.

Despite the disapproval of some historians, oral traditions are the main source of historical information for oral societies without writing systems. Renowned anthropologist and historian, Jan Vansina, defines oral traditions as, “verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation.”⁴⁴ This definition can be specified into two parts that Vansina titles, “process” and “product.”⁴⁵ He explains that the “process” describes the method or, “transmission of such messages by word of mouth over time,” and that the “product” is the current message or messages.⁴⁶ Vansina clarifies that oral traditions can then be classified as either “news” or “interpretation,” which is largely based on the time period for which the story is set.⁴⁷ The story of Polly Cooper’s participation at Valley Forge would fit the later category because there is no longer anyone alive with living memory of the event. Interpretation oral traditions can take the form of personal memories and reminiscences passed along from one generation to the next, which Vansina describes as, “essential to a notion of personality and identity... they are the images of oneself one cares to transmit to others.”⁴⁸

To incorporate oral traditions appropriately, historians must consider the differences between oral messages and written documents. Written primary source documents offer the reader a snapshot of a single perspective of an event or subject. In comparison, oral traditions are collective memories of every participant that has retold

⁴⁴ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 27.

⁴⁵ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 3.

⁴⁶ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 3.

⁴⁷ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 3-12.

⁴⁸ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 7-8.

that history. When oral traditions are recorded as written documents and audio or visual files, they are termed oral histories because that recording has stopped the transmission of the message within that society.⁴⁹ Oral tradition can thus be described as living history because the story collects new experiences and interpretations with every recitation.

Due to the inherent differences that separate oral traditions from other historical sources offer unique advantages for historians. The Native Americans of North America and many other oral societies traditionally perceive time as cyclical and continuous, in comparison to the western understanding of linear time. Oral traditions model this concept of Native American culture because the messages that are transmitted are never made permanent. The continuous effect of oral traditions causes their messages to carry more meaning than a written document. The thoughts and knowledge from every generation that has participated in the oral tradition have been imprinted into the message. Historians must first view oral traditions within the context of the culture from which it originates before analyzing or comparing them to other sources.

Despite the benefit of broad cultural knowledge, the oral transmission of these traditional histories can also cause issues. Tamarack Song, although a controversial figure, asks a valid question of oral traditions, “what if there is no one to tell the stories?”⁵⁰ The process by which oral traditions are recited and learned is very intricate and requires devotion to the study. As western, Euro-American culture presses in on traditional societies, less and less students are learning to preserve the oral traditions. Nearly a century ago, the Navajo Chief Old Man Buffalo Grass foretold, “I sit as on a mountaintop and

⁴⁹ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 12-13.

⁵⁰ Tamarack Song, forward to *The Native American Oral Tradition: Voices of the Spirit and Soul*, by Lois J. Einhorn (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), xii.

look into the future. I see my people and your people living together. In time to come my people will have forgotten their early way of life unless they learn it from white men's books. So you must write down what I tell you; and you must have it made into a book that coming generations may know this truth."⁵¹ The existence of oral traditions is at risk if conscious efforts are not applied to the preservation and promotion of the culture and people they belong to.

Before discussing the Polly Cooper story, it is necessary to first point out some characteristics specific to Haudenosaunee oral traditions and culture. Termed the Iroquois by the French, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, located in New York, consists of six nations: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora.⁵² In Haudenosaunee culture wampum strings and belts are used to transmit messages. Wampum beads are made from quahog clam and whelk shells found along the Atlantic coast.⁵³ The shells can be formed into beads of differing shades, including purple and white, which represent different meanings.⁵⁴ The beads are strung together in specific patterns to convey information and, "when a string of wampum is held in a person's hand, they are said to be speaking truthfully."⁵⁵ Oral cultures may use objects, like wampum, to assist the performer to remember the individual parts and sequences of the story.

⁵¹ Old Man Buffalo Grass, "The Dine: Origin Myths of the Navajo Indians," by Aileen O'Bryan, *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 163 (1956), as cited in Lois J. Einhorn, *The Native American Oral Tradition: Voices of the Spirit and Soul* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 9.

⁵² "The League of Nations," *Haudenosaunee Confederacy*, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/leagueofnations.html>.

⁵³ "Wampum," *Iroquois Indian Museum*, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.iroquoismuseum.org/ve11.html>.

⁵⁴ "Wampum," *Iroquois Indian Museum*.

⁵⁵ "Wampum," *Onondaga Nation: People of the Hills*, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/>.

Now that a definition and explanation of oral tradition has been outlined, let us turn to the background of Polly Cooper's story. In the early years of the American Revolutionary War the nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy divided based on their neutrality or alliances to the American colonists or the British colonial power. The Oneidas supported the American cause due to the leadership of the Connecticut born Congregational preacher, Samuel Kirkland, and their disdain for the British appointed Indian Superintendents, Sir William Johnson and his son-in-law Guy Johnson.⁵⁶ The Oneidas valiantly assisted the rebel forces at Fort Schuyler during the bloody attack on Oriskany and the Saratoga campaign.⁵⁷ In April of 1778, while assisting General Marquis de La Fayette recruit Oneida warriors, Louis de Tousard took notice of their food supplies the Continental Army desperately needed, "We are at present in plenty of Corn, which we receive from the Indians themselves, who made a prohibition to receive any money for it and every day they Carry Corn much more than we want for fitting our horses."⁵⁸ On April 25th, a group of forty-seven Indian men and Polly Cooper left with Tousard carrying bushels of corn to assist Washington at Valley Forge.⁵⁹

During the early winter of 1777, Washington and the Continental Army retreated to Valley Forge after the British captured Philadelphia. The winter encampment that year is considered one of the harshest during the war due to shortages of proper clothing, shelter, and food rations. Prior to settling in Valley Forge, Washington pled to the Continental Congress:

⁵⁶ Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin, *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 56-75.

⁵⁷ Glatthaar and Martin, *Forgotten Allies*, 163-172.

⁵⁸ Louis de Tousard, *Tousard to Marinus Willett, 7 Apr. 1778*, Myers Collection, *New York Public Library*, as cited in Glatthaar and Martin, *Forgotten Allies*, 198-199.

⁵⁹ Glatthaar and Martin, *Forgotten Allies*, 203-205.

“Sir: The condition of the Army for want of Cloaths and Blankets, and the little prospect we have of obtaining relief according to the information I have received from the Board of War, occasion me to trouble you at this time...Our distresses still continue and are becoming greater. I would therefore humbly submit it to the consideration of Congress, whether it may not be expedient for them to address the Several Legislative and executive Powers of the states, on this subject, as early as possible, and in the most urgent Terms.”⁶⁰

Within the first few weeks at Valley Forge the conditions worsened and it was not uncommon for the men to have several days consecutively without flour or meat.⁶¹ By February the following year, disease spread violently through the poorly equipped troops causing Washington to skeptically commission, “if possible to keep the Camp well supplied with rice for the use of the sick; if rice cannot be had, Indian meal is to be provided in it's place.”⁶² Through the end of winter, Washington was required to continually ask for more rations to feed his recovering army, “Sir: You are to delay no time in providing a quantity of Indian Meal, as a number of Men are expected to join the Army soon who will have to undergo Inoculation for the Small pox.”⁶³ By the arrival of the Oneida relief party and their supply of corn on May 15th, the Continental Army was in desperate need of their aid.⁶⁴

White corn, called “Indian corn” by the colonists, was a staple crop of the American Northeast and was rationed to troops during the French and Indian War as well as the

⁶⁰ George Washington, *George Washington to Continental Congress, November 11, 1777*, letter, as cited in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, From Library of Congress, *George Washington Papers 1741-1799*.

⁶¹ Johann de Kalb to the Comte de Broglie, December 25, 1777, as cited in Joseph Lee Boyle, *Writings from the Valley Forge encampment of the Continental Army, December 19, 1777-June 19, 1778*, (Heritage Books, 2000).

⁶² George Washington, *George Washington General Orders*, February 22, 1778, letter, as cited in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, From Library of Congress, *George Washington Papers 1741-1799*.

⁶³ George Washington, *George Washington to Jeremiah Wadsworth, March 26, 1778*, letter, as cited in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, From Library of Congress, *George Washington Papers 1741-1799*.

⁶⁴ Glatthaar and Martin, *Forgotten Allies*, 206.

American Revolutionary War. From the beginning of the war Washington ordered, "The following is the Ration of Provisions allowed by the Continental Congress unto each Soldier... One half pint of Rice, or one pint of Indian meal pr. Man, pr. Week."⁶⁵ It is worthy to note that the official rations call for corn meal, not shelled corn. In fact, Washington only commissions "Indian Corn," instead of meal, for the service horses, "The Quarter Master General will, in future, deliver the following Rations of Provender for the horses employed in the service--viz: For Light Horse, 16 lbs. of Hay, and 10 Quarts of Oats, or 6 1/2 Q'ts. of Indian Corn, or other Grain in lieu thereof."⁶⁶ Shelled white corn requires washing with lye to, "soften the outer shell somewhat and allows the two black eyes found on each kernel of corn to be washed off after cooking," otherwise the corn can be difficult to digest.⁶⁷ Considering the Continental Army rationed the processed, ready to cook "Indian meal," they likely would not be equipped with the skills needed to prepare the bushels of corn brought by the Oneida relief mission, providing a need for someone with that knowledge, like Polly Cooper.

Haudenosaunee agriculture may have aided Washington beyond feeding his troops and horses. A copy of French artist Jean-Antoine Houdon's statue of Washington stands just outside of his restored headquarters building at the Valley Forge National Historic State Park. The aptly named, *George Washington*, is a bronze life-sized version of "the Father of our Country," which depicts his passion for agriculture with the addition of a plowshare

⁶⁵ George Washington, *George Washington General Orders*, August 8, 1775, letter, as cited in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, From Library of Congress, *George Washington Papers 1741-1799*.

⁶⁶ George Washington, *George Washington General Orders*, February 4, 1777, letter, as cited in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, From Library of Congress, *George Washington Papers 1741-1799*.

⁶⁷ Loren Greene, "Traditional Indian Corn Soup," *Tuscarora and Six Nations Websites*, accessed March 29, 2014, http://tuscaroras.com/pages/history/cornsoup_recipe.html.

placed at his left side.⁶⁸ Outside of his political and military duties, Washington enjoyed cultivating his fields at Mount Vernon. In 1788, Washington wrote a letter to his nieces husband and patriot veteran, Brigadier General Alexander Spotswood, concerning their shared interest in agriculture. Washington details that his farming trials led him to conclude that “Indian Corn” grows more abundantly, an increase of 1210 plants per acre, when single stalks are separated by six feet rather than planted in couples.⁶⁹ Beyond this trial, Washington also found that his crops yielded the most produce when he planted other crops like potatoes, carrots, and turnips, between the rows of corn spaced ten feet apart. He exclaims, “from this husbandry, and statement then of what I conceive to be facts, any given number of acres will yield as much Corn in the *new* as they will in the *old* way, and will, moreover, with *little* or *no* extra labour produce four times as many Potatoes or Carrots.”⁷⁰

Although Washington gives no credit to his “new” farming technique, this pattern compares to the Three Sisters tradition of the Haudenosaunee people. According to their creation narrative Otsi:tsia, Mature Flowers, fell from Sky World to the water filled Earth below where dirt collected by the beaver was placed on Great Turtle’s shell to form land.⁷¹ At the time of her fall Sky Woman was pregnant and upon arriving to the earth she gave birth to her daughter, Ohshe:wa, Budding Flowers.⁷² The daughter grew quickly, became pregnant, and gave birth to two twin boys. The first was born from her womb, but the second burst through her armpit causing her death. Although Budding Flower had died,

⁶⁸ “George Washington,” statue and park display, *Valley Forge National Historic Park*.

⁶⁹ George Washington, *George Washington to Alexander Spotswood, February 13, 1788*, letter, as cited in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, From Library of Congress, *George Washington Papers 1741-1799*.

⁷⁰ George Washington, *George Washington to Alexander Spotswood*.

⁷¹ Brain Rice, *The Rotinonshonni: A Traditional Iroquoian History Through the Eyes of Teharonhia:wako and Sawiskera* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 38-42.

⁷² Rice, *The Rotinonshonni*, 43.

corn, beans, and squash grew from her body.⁷³ From this point on the Haudenosaunee planted the three plants together intermixed. The Three Sisters planting method is not only tradition, but also offers several physical, biological advantages. The Oneida Indian Nation boasts that each plant benefits the others: the beans grow up the sturdy stalk of the corn, the squash leaves cover the ground around the plants trapping water and blocking light to impede weed growth, and, “The bacterial colonies on the bean roots capture nitrogen from the air, some of which is released into the soil to satisfy the high nitrogen needs of the corn.”⁷⁴ The advantages of the Three Sister cultivation can explain Washington’s increase in produce after he began to intermix different crops with his corn.

Washington may have learned of the Haudenosaunee planting pattern from the seemingly endless supplies of “Indian Corn” that he requested to be commissioned during the war, or, he saw the Oneida planting technique first hand. In a letter to Francois Jean, Comte de Chastellux, a French officer of the Revolutionary War, in October of 1783, Washington divulged that he anxiously awaited the removal of British forces in New York and recently toured the area to investigate water passages to Lake Ontario. During this trip he reported traveling from Fort Schuyler to Oneida Lake by crossing Wood Creek, near the Oneida homelands.⁷⁵ It is clear that Washington appeared in Newburgh, New York on March 15th of the same year to suppress a possible mutiny among the troops there.⁷⁶

Therefore, Washington must have toured upstate New York during the immediate post-war

⁷³ “The Three Sisters,” *Oneida Cultural Symbols*, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://www.oneidanation.org/culture/page.aspx?id=1310>.

⁷⁴ “The Three Sisters and the Genius of the Indians,” *Oneida Indian Nation* (2009), <http://www.oneidaindiannation.com/culture/threesisters/agriculture/26871269.html>, paragraphs 2-3.

⁷⁵ George Washington, *George Washington to Francois Jean, Comte de Chastellux, October 12, 1783*, letter, as cited in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, From Library of Congress, *George Washington Papers 1741-1799*.

⁷⁶ Mary Stockwell, “Newburgh, New York (1783),” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://www.mountvernon.org/educational-resources/encyclopedia/newburgh-address>.

period and would have met with the Oneidas while traveling in their homelands, giving Washington an opportunity to view their crop fields.

Although few non-native sources have incorporated the Polly Cooper oral tradition the Oneida people continue to celebrate her history. According to Chief Rockwell, the story, “expresses the unswerving friendship and timely aid offered by the Oneidas in the most perilous hour of the United States.”⁷⁷ In Haudenosaunee culture alliances are cemented by the giving of gifts.⁷⁸ The agreement between the Oneida and the United States was then formalized by the gifts of corn and the shawl. Rockwell also believed that the story served, “as a parable for the traditional matriarchal wisdom of his people.”⁷⁹ In Haudenosaunee societies women help political power because they possessed specific knowledge and characteristics due to their separate gender roles from men. As tensions built between the colonists and the British prior to the outbreak of war, the Haudenosaunee first attempted neutrality because they viewed the struggle as a “father-son matter.”⁸⁰ Rockwell argues that Polly understood that the war was not fought for access to food, so the soldiers should not die of starvation.⁸¹ She treated all the men despite their rank or alliance as her children to care for.

To share their culture and the oral tradition of Polly Cooper, the Oneida Nation commissioned a statue to be made by bronze sculptor, Edward Hlavka, in 2004.⁸² The final project was then gifted to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian where it is featured on the proudly named “Oneida floor” on the fourth story of the

⁷⁷ “Chief Rockwell’s Polly Cooper,” Shako:wi Cultural Center, 1996, paragraph 2.

⁷⁸ “Chief Rockwell’s Polly Cooper,” Shako:wi Cultural Center, 1996, paragraph 3.

⁷⁹ “Chief Rockwell’s Polly Cooper,” Shako:wi Cultural Center, 1996, paragraph 6.

⁸⁰ Glatthaar and Martin, *Forgotten Allies*, 85.

⁸¹ “Chief Rockwell’s Polly Cooper,” Shako:wi Cultural Center, 1996, paragraph 10.

⁸² “Commissions,” *Edward Hlavka Enterprises*, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://www.hlavka.com/commissions.html>

museum. The statue is a beautiful representation of the oral tradition and Oneida culture. Visitors to the museum cannot miss the nearly twenty-foot tall, 2,200-pound monument.⁸³ The Oneidas commissioned the statue to tell the Cooper oral tradition and, “Symbols of importance in [Oneida] culture to be allotted a presentation point... telling our story as we have told it for generations.”⁸⁴

To feature the oral tradition, life-size figures of Washington, Polly Cooper, and Chief Shenedoah are placed at the front of the statue. Chief Shenedoah aided the Oneidas in their decision to ally with the colonists and is seen on the statue holding a pipe that was given to him by the New York State government before his death.⁸⁵ The pipe is a symbol of the



Oneidas cooperation with New York State.

To Shenedoah’s right, front and center of the statue, is Polly Cooper wearing the shawl given to her from Washington, holding a bushel of white corn in one arm while motioning a welcoming sign with the other hand. The corn and shawl symbolize the formal alliance between the Oneidas and the colonists as described on the previous page.

Just behind and to the right of Cooper,

Allies in War, Partners in Peace by Edward Hlavka, 2004

⁸³ “Allies in War, Partners in Peace: Smithsonian Statue Details,” *Oneida Indian Nation*, last modified May 24, 2011, <http://www.oneidaindiannation.com/about/Allies-in-War-Partners-in-Peace.html>.

⁸⁴ Keller George, as cited in, “Sculpture Celebrates Friendships Forges in the Past, Cemented in the Present and Promised for the Future,” printed publication, *Oneida Indian Nation*, 1.

⁸⁵ “Sculpture Celebrates Friendships Forges in the Past, Cemented in the Present and Promised for the Future,” printed publication, *Oneida Indian Nation*, 1.

George Washington is portrayed in his colonial garb and holds a wampum belt in his right hand. The belt he holds is called the “Two Row Wampum” and represents an agreement the Haudenosaunee made with European colonists. The one row of dark beads represents the Haudenosaunee and the other the Euro-Americans. The separate lines flow like rivers and describe, “Each group has its own laws, beliefs, and way of life. The belt teaches that each should travel side by side but without interfering in the lives of the other. In this way, the two groups can continue to co-exist in mutual respect and harmony.”⁸⁶ Although almost hidden from view, Shenedoah and Washington cross arms, possibly



representing their friendship, behind the tree located at the center of the statue. *Allies in War, Partners in Peace* by Edward Hlavka, 2004

Other Oneida cultural symbols can also be seen represented in the art piece. The three tribal clans of the Oneidas, wolf, bear, and turtle, can be found around the feet of the three figures. At the base of the statue, six squares bound together form the Oneida belt, in which each square stands for one of the six Haudenosaunee nations.⁸⁷ The Three Sister, corn, beans, and squash, can be found growing next to Cooper’s right foot. The white pine

⁸⁶ “Wampum,” *Iroquois Indian Museum*.

⁸⁷ “Sculpture Celebrates Friendships,” 2.

tree that towers over the rest of the inhabitants of the statue is a symbol of the Haudenosaunee, and represents the Peacemaker who is believed to have buried the weapons of the rival nations under the roots of the tree in order to bring them to peace.⁸⁸ Located on the rear, a little girl stands holding a doll without a face. The girl symbolizes the future generations and her dolls represents an oral tradition in which the hawk snatches the dolls face because she has become too vain of her beauty.⁸⁹ Each symbol on the statue represents a specific Oneida belief or tradition, but when viewed together they form a comprehensive image of Oneida culture.

Oral traditions, like the story of Polly Cooper and the Oneida relief mission to Valley Forge, reveal cultural knowledge and provide examples of non-conventional heroes. Historians should widen their range of sources to enhance their scholarship and promote a universal American History. The interpretation of oral traditions should only be done in consideration of the culture of origin and under the guidance of the people who keep that history. Through these efforts, American Indian histories can be shared and a new, culturally correct identity can be revitalized.

⁸⁸ "Sculpture Celebrates Friendships," 2.

⁸⁹ "Sculpture Celebrates Friendships," 2.

Multicultural Education: Empowering Culturally Impoverished Students

In my experience tutoring and teaching in low socio-economic areas I have found that students exhibit a particular exclusion from American History. I believe this phenomenon is due in part to the predominance of white, Euro-American perspective in American society and education, which promulgates the concept that people who do not currently hold positions of power and wealth deserve their belittled status. Recent curriculum change has attempted to fill the gaps as to represent minority history, but there exists still a disconnect to the impoverished, minority youth of today. I can admit that I too have prescribed to this blatant discrimination in my own classroom, explaining to students that what is acceptable in their home life may not be acceptable in school and that they should separate those two cultures. If we, as teachers, want students to adopt the belief that education is valuable we must conclude that the home culture of our students is also valuable.

In order to engage the minds of cultural minority students, schools must embrace these their cultures to build self-pride and confidence. First, teachers must realize they are the most influential factor in creating the attitude that poor while minority culture is worthless and wrong, instilling in our students a belief that they too are outsiders to "American" society for belonging to their home culture. To move forward, educators must acknowledge their past errors and make a conscious effort to rectify these judgments. Secondly, students should be encouraged to share their experiences outside of school to create connections with what they are learning. In addition, curriculum must be overhauled to equally incorporate the modern mixture of cultures. The context of American history is constantly changing as the ethnic background of America becomes more

diversified. This does not mean the addition of sidebars or a new chapter in textbooks, but the creation of a new lens to view the subject as a whole. The curriculum must include opportunities for all students to take pride in their person culture and history. Finally, the divide that separates school culture from the outside community must be broken down in order to establish a cohesive center of learning.

To learn more about empowering culturally impoverished students please visit my website <https://sites.google.com/a/u.brockport.edu/empowering-culturally-impoverished-students/>.

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