

Jemison, Mary ('Deh-he-wä-mis')

by Turlough O'Riordan

Jemison, Mary ('Deh-he-wä-mis') (1743?–1833), American frontierswoman, was born aboard the ship *William and Mary*, when her parents, Thomas Jemison and his wife Jane (née Erwin), (both of protestant Scotch-Irish heritage) were emigrating to colonial Pennsylvania, departing from Belfast or Larne. They settled in Franklin Township, Adams County. On 5 April 1758, aged fifteen, Jemison was captured during a skirmish in the French and Indian War (1754–63), by a raiding party made up of Shawnee and French forces. Her parents, two brothers and a sister all died in the raid. Three subsequent attempts to ransom her back to British Colonial hands failed; Jemison either resisted or avoided them, choosing to live as a Seneca among the Iroquois nations.

She was adopted by two Seneca sisters, who named her 'Deh-he-wä-mis' meaning 'pretty girl or handsome girl, or a pleasant good thing' (Seaver, 59), and married Sheninjee, a Delaware warrior, in 1760. He died within three years of their marriage, which produced a daughter (who died soon after birth) and a son, Tommy, named after Jemison's father. Jemison's second marriage to Hiokatoo (c.1763), a husband of her own choosing, lasted over five decades until his death in 1811. They had four daughters and two sons. Knowledge of Jemison's life comes principally from James E. Seaver's, *Narrative of the life of Mrs Mary Jemison* (1824). This account is one of the very few sources depicting the impact of the colonial expansion and ensuing conflagrations on Native Americans, their declining autonomy and the eventual assembly of Seneca peoples into reservations.

Moving to Genishau, a substantial Seneca town on the Genesee river, New York, Jemison's account of her life captures the great happiness she found in native American society, even when parsed through the voice of her evangelising (for both Christianity and colonial culture) interlocutor, Seaver. Providing accounts of turn of the century Seneca life rich in detail, observing the arrival of alcohol, and futile attempts to convert the Seneca to Christianity, Jemison's account demonstrates the innate happiness and civility manifest in the last vestiges of Native American society, itself highly tolerant of other customs and religions. In July 1811, John, her eldest son by Hiokatoo, murdered her first son Tommy; in July 1812 John also murdered his younger brother, Jesse. In June 1817 John was himself murdered in a drunken altercation. A grandson, Jacob Jemison, attended Dartmouth College (1816–18).

During the American Revolution the Senecas sided with the British, their traditional allies. The Seneca relinquished much of their land, after being abandoned by their allies, and again Jemison's account is an invaluable source of events from the Native American perspective. Jemison was granted 17,927 acres of land along the Genesee River, near Castile, New York, by the Treaty of Big Tree (1797), indicative

of her astute negotiating skills. The New York state legislature passed (April 1817) a statute naturalising Mary Jemison, affording her the ability to convey land, thus affirming her title to this land.

She lived on her land on the Gardeau Flats until forced to cede it to white settlers in the early 1820s. She then followed other Seneca to the Buffalo Creek Reservation, where she died in 1833. Later reinterred in Letchworth State Park, her remains were moved a second time to an unmarked location in Letchworth Gorge.

At least twenty-eight editions of Seaver's *Life of Mary Jemison: Deh-he-wä-mis* followed its initial publication in 1824. Based on Seaver's interviews with her in November 1823, the book became an instant bestseller. Delivered in the first person, ethnographically insightful in reconstructing Iroquois culture, Seaver presents a captivity narrative that occasionally betrays the spirited individualism of its subject. Seaver, unable to accept Jemison's confidence, independence and strength, presents her as a passive victim, refusing to acknowledge her deliberate alignment with Native American custom and culture. Jemison's life with the Seneca subverts Anglo-American narrative traditions, due to her refusal to return to colonial society, remaining proudly independent until her death. Adopting Iroquois matrilineal practice, allowing her to retain her Irish surname through two marriages, Jemison's narrative provides a fascinating account of her life in North America. A bronze sculpture of her stands in Castile, at the Letchworth State Park, New York.

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James E. Seaver, *Life of Mary Jemison: Deh-he-wä-mis* (4th ed., 1856); *ANB* (1998); Susan Walsh, "'With them was my home": Native American autobiography and *A narrative life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*', *American Literature*, vol. 64, no. 1, Mar. 1992, 49–70; Hilary E. Wyss, 'Captivity and conversion: William Apess, Mary Jemison, and narratives of racial identity', *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 3 and 4, 1999, 63–82