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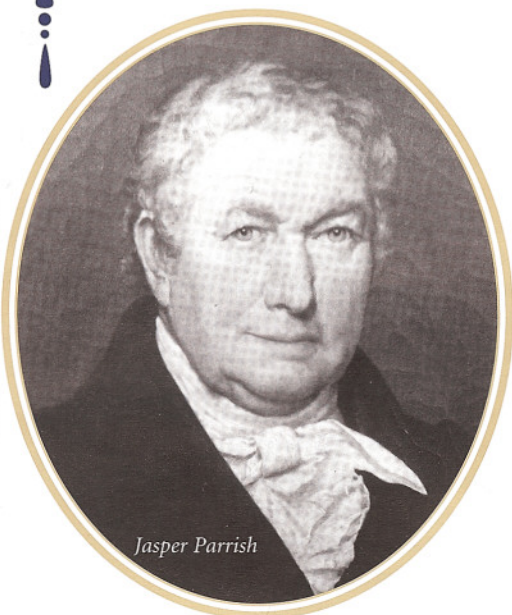
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The Widow's Son

BY KARIM M. TIRO

ONTARIO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Jasper Parrish

Jasper Parrish was a Euro-American boy who was captured by the Mohawks and lived with them for five years before being freed. But when he grew up to be a government interpreter and Indian agent, he came back to visit his "other mother"—and the culture he'd left behind.

In June 1817, an Upper Canada widow named Hester Hill sought the assistance of someone who could write to prepare a letter to her son, Jasper, in Canandaigua, New York. The writer told Jasper that Hester was "very anxious to hear from you, and she hopes that you are well, and always [has you] in her mind." Hester implored him to write and "send her...any thing you please...to remember you." She said that she was still "living...upon the same spot

of the Place where she allways did," and instructed Jasper to convey her regards to his family and friends. A second letter, dated 1818, suggests that they were in contact; she even asked him "if you would be pleased to send me a little Tea or any other neseries.... for Tea they ask a good price in our Country."

These letters stand out after almost two centuries because Hester Hill was a Mohawk woman named Genwondeshon, and her son was Jasper Parrish,

a fifty-year-old white man and the U.S. subagent to the Six Nations Indians. Jasper had been taken captive by Indians at the age of eleven during the American Revolution. More than thirty years had passed since his five-year residence in Hester's family, but she still had "feelings for [him] in her mind." Jasper and Hester visited each other's homes, a strong indication of the bond they shared decades after Jasper had returned to white society.

Life as a Captive

The Iroquois took captives to replenish their numbers, and sometimes to replace specific individuals who had died.

Captives who were adopted became full members of their respective clans and nations; those who were not adopted were sometimes tortured or ransomed. Europeans were simultaneously outraged and fascinated by this aspect of Native culture, although they rarely compared it to their own taking of captives for use as slaves.

On July 5, 1778, Jasper had been herding horses six miles from his home near the headwaters of the Delaware River when a party of Munsee Delawares seized him, his father, and a neighbor. Jasper's father was taken to Fort Niagara, where he was released in a prisoner exchange two years later. The neighbor was transferred to the Tuscaroras, among whom he remained for life. But Jasper was retained by the Delawares, among whom he reported generally kind treatment. He was allowed to move around freely and was even "permitted to ride one of their horses." Nevertheless, he suffered from illness, cold, and hunger due to the change in diet, as well as occasional threats when the Indians fell under the influence of alcohol.

In 1779, Jasper's Delaware community joined thousands of other wartime refugees at British Fort Niagara. Conditions were terrible, claiming the life of his adoptive mother. This

may have played a role in his master's decision to sell Jasper to a Mohawk chief named Karonghyontye, also known as Captain David Hill.

Despite the fact that his new father greeted him in English ("This is your home, you must stay here"), Jasper was dismayed by his transfer. As he indicated in the narrative he related to a family member, he had become "attached...to his Delaware master." He also hesitated at the prospect of learning a new and very different language and "having to make new acquaintances and friends."

Jasper (now renamed Seneatdowa, or Big Throat) eventually adjusted to his new environment and stated that "the change of masters... proved to be very fortunate and happy." David's wife, Hester (Genwondeshon), was a conscientious mother, ensuring that Jasper's "wants were attended to and many acts of kindness were shown him." Historian Charles Johnston noted that many thought David was "the handsomest and most agreeable Indian they had ever seen."

As a well-connected Mohawk warrior, David Hill had superior access to food and supplies at Fort Niagara. Jasper reported that he "resided in Capt. Hill's family five years and upwards, during all of which time they furnished him with the necessary Indian clothing and an abundance of comfortable food. He passed all that time in traveling with the Indians and in hunting,

Grand River Mohawk Village Dec 21st 1818
Dear Son

I take this liberty and chance of writing to you by the bearer of the Onida. I thought that I will forward this to you - only for to acquaint you that I am well as yet at present time and all my children are well. But as I would wish to come down to you when you are, may be one of my son would take me down, but ^{not} very sure I would be very glad if I could come down to see you - And if you would be pleased to send me a little Tea or any other necessary you please by some chance of time for Tea they ask good price in our Country - And I wish that our Great Spirit would preserve you and your family, my great respects to you & your family. I hope that I may see you before my day be out. I am your most Obedient Servant
Capt Parrish Hester Hill

ONTARIO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

fishing and working, but they never compelled him to do any hard work, or anything beyond his ability or endurance."

In May 1781, the Mohawks resettled eight miles away in Lewiston, which they dubbed "Loyal Confederate Valley." A British commander described the Mohawks there as "very comfortably settled, and their fields well planted with Indian corn." Jasper recalled his education in Native diplomacy at Hill's side, "traveling among other...nations of Indians, [and] invariably receiving from his adopted father's family and other Indians among whom he sojourned, the greatest kindness..." He was unaware, however, of the extent to which these experiences at Hill's side would shape his future.

More than thirty years after Jasper Parrish lived with the Mohawk, Hester Hill, his adoptive Indian mother, still maintained contact with him.



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA DAVIS

Irish-born surveyor
Guy Johnson drew
this map of Iroquois
country in 1771.

The Seneca Red Jacket observed that the Seneca chiefs had been good to Parrish and Jones, "so much so that they have fattened them up until their bellies hang over their knees—very fat men indeed."

Two Families, Two Worlds

That future began with his return to white society as a result of the Six Nations' September 1784 treaty with the U.S., which included a mandate for the Iroquois to return all white prisoners. Jasper eventually found his Parrish family in Goshen, Orange County, but his re-entry to white culture was not smooth. Because his English was rusty, he could only make himself understood "with difficulty." Moreover, there was considerable residual hostility toward all Indians, especially the Mohawks. Jasper probably faced probing questions about his wartime activities.

The conclusion of the Revolutionary War set off a mad scramble for Indian lands. As a result, land speculators and governments competed for the services of those who could facilitate transactions with Natives. Jasper's proficiency in Native languages became extremely valuable. In 1790, Timothy Pickering, Washington's ambassador to the Six Nations, sought out Jasper to serve as an interpreter in his diplomatic

initiatives. Parrish was also the interpreter at the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua, which actually resulted in the return of some Iroquois lands.

However, Parrish went on to participate in many other private and state land transactions that had the opposite effect. Parrish personally acquired Seneca lands from both speculators and the Senecas themselves, as both groups hoped to secure his loyalty. At a treaty at Genesee in 1798, the Senecas gave Parrish a square mile at the site of the village of Black Rock. The Seneca speaker, Farmer's Brother, referred to the grant as the fulfillment of a promise made to Parrish in the event of his return. Speaking of Parrish and another captive, Horatio Jones, Farmer's Brother said that the Iroquois "adopted them into our families, and made them our children... We still feel our hearts beat with affection for them." The Senecas provided both Parrish and Jones land "for them and their children to sit down upon," but they sold it. Other questionable transactions involving both men diminished

the Senecas' ardor for them. In 1827, the Seneca Red Jacket observed that the Seneca chiefs had been good to Parrish and Jones, "so much so that they have fattened them up until their bellies hang over their knees—very fat men indeed."

How did Parrish justify treating the Iroquois people so callously? His narrative states that "he was very anxious to civilize the Indians by inculcating among them habits of industry and instructing them how to cultivate their lands and endeavoring to impress them with the use of property and the value of time." Euro-Americans agreed that the best way to promote this was to strip the Indians of their land. In addition to this "philanthropic" justification, land companies offered Parrish considerable amounts of cash, as well as entry into their society. One of Parrish's daughters married a son of western New York land baron Nathaniel Gorham.

Ties Stronger Than Blood

While Parrish built a lucrative career at Canandaigua, his adoptive mother Hester's people found New York inhospitable. Rather than return to the Mohawk Valley, in 1785 Hester and David Hill followed Joseph Brant, the Mohawk leader and British military officer, to the Mohawk Village on the Grand River in Upper Canada, about a day's travel west of Niagara. The Grand River Valley, of which the Mohawk Village

was the *de facto* capital, attracted nearly 2,000 Iroquois and provided a fertile location for the Indian migrants.

By the time of Hester's 1817 letter to Parrish, however, the heyday of the Mohawk Village had passed. Joseph Brant had moved away before his death in 1807, and the political center of gravity at Grand River had shifted to the Onondaga Village. A British traveler described the Mohawk Village in 1817 as "built of logs, rudely put together, and exhibiting externally a great appearance of neglect, and want of comfort: some few are in a better condition: the house belonging to Brandt's family resembles that of a petty English farmer; Dr. Aaron's was neat and clean." Dr. Aaron was Hester's biological son, and her daughter had married a Brant; thus Hester's home was likely one of those that the traveler deemed in "better condition." He also recorded that Aaron "told me the village had been injured much during the war [of 1812], which had put a stop to its improvements, and dispersed the inhabitants over the country." The eruption of a volcano in southeast Asia in 1815 brought the disastrous 1816 "year without a summer" to North America, producing killing frosts that also contributed to the deterioration of the village's economy.

But Hester's request for "a little Tea" reflected more than



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

In the background of Benjamin West's painting of Guy Johnson is Mohawk Chief Karonghyontye, also known as Captain David Hill, Jasper Parrish's adoptive father.

local economic woes. By defining tea as a necessity, she was expressing her Mohawk identity. At Fort Niagara, tea was among the goods some Mohawks demanded from the British, and archaeological evidence suggests the Mohawks' tradition of formal tea-drinking was alive and well into the 1820s. The practice reflected the Mohawks' position as the Iroquois Confederacy's "Eastern Door," the people responsible for greeting the English. That role required mastery of the social rituals of those with whom they had contact.

Jasper and Hester's relationship crossed national and cultural boundaries, and demonstrated the artificial nature of both. Former Buffalo

mayor Orlando Allen said that Hester "...sometimes visited [Parrish] at his home in Canandaigua, and seemed to look upon him with as much pride and affection as though he had been of her own blood. When she became too old to visit him, he occasionally visited her at her home."

For historians, however, their relationship also illuminates the politics of Iroquois dispossession, as well as the emotional intensity of the Iroquois practice of adopting captives, one of the ways the Iroquois sought to assuage grief and its deranging power. Ironically and unfortunately for Hester, still alive in 1836, she would confront the demon of grief again, when she learned of Jasper's death in the summer of that year. ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

The two letters at the heart of this essay were found at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie and the Ontario County Historical Society in Canandaigua (where Parrish was a prominent early settler). The 1817 letter is from Vassar's Jasper Parrish Papers, part of the Lucy Maynard Salmon Collection of Historical Materials donated by a Parrish descendant who graduated from the college in 1940. Both collections illuminate Parrish's career as an interpreter and agent for government and private interests. Parrish's narrative about his experience as a captive appeared in the *Publications* of the Buffalo Historical Society in 1903. Other repositories with substantial Parrish holdings include SUNY Oswego and the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.