

United States History

Colonial Life and "Mourning Wars"

Little, Ann M., *Abraham in Arms: War and Gender in Colonial New England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

In both Algonquian and Iroquois cultures, war captives were most often brought into Indian villages to be adopted into new families. Highly ritualized torture and eventual execution awaited some adult male captives, but for the most part, captives were put through a series of ceremonies and ordeals designed to bring them into the fold of their new Indian families. When Joseph Bartlett arrived at the Iroquois village that ultimately adopted him, they confined him for a while. He reports that "I believe they held a counsel whether to burn me or not. But God, who hath the hearts of all in his hands, spared my life." God did not spare him some ritual torture however, as "the Indians that took me ... permitted a squaw to cut off one of my little fingers, and another to strike me severely with a pole." Soon after they "bound up my little finger with plantain leaves, and gave me some roasted pomkin to eat." Next came the introduction of the captives to the whole village: "Here there came together a great company that filled the wigwam, which was nearly forty feet in length, where they sung and danced a greater part of the night, as many at a time as could stand from one end of the wigwam to the other. In this manner they danced around their fire." Dancing too was a means by which captives were brought into their new community, as dancing and singing were important skills in Native villages. Bartlett reports, "they often invited me to dance; but I refused them from time to time. However, they pulled me up, and I went around once with them."

Captives were not just thrown into Indian villages and expected to make their own way; they were given to specific families and sometimes assigned the identities of dead or captured family members with the expectation that they would fulfill the missing person's function in the family. "One of them took me by the hand, and, after a lengthy speech, gave me to an old squaw, who took me into another wigwam... An English woman, who belonged to one of the French nuns, came in, and told me I need not fear, for I was given to this squaw in lieu of one of her sons, whom the English had slain; and that I was to be master of the wigwam" ... The taking of war captives seems to have been especially central to Iroquois warfare in the post-contact period. Daniel Richter has argued that the taking of captives was not just the result but rather the purpose of what he calls "mourning wars."