

This article was originally published in Reliving History Magazine.

The Girl Who Fell from the Sky

They struck just before dawn on February 29, 1704. Coming quickly, they climbed over the snowdrifts that had formed around the edges of the fort. Local legend said the watchman leaning against a house failed to see them coming. Failed to hear their footfalls in the night. He was listening, it is said, to the sounds of a mother's lullaby. His cry to arms came too late. Two hours before daybreak, a small army of natives along with their French allies attacked the wilderness village of Deerfield, Massachusetts, changing the lives of its citizens forever.

In a bloody raid forty-four, residents of Deerfield were left dead and another hundred and nine taken captive. Among the captives was a young girl named Eunice Williams. At the age of seven, Eunice became a captive of the Kahnawake Mohawk people. Taken from her family, Eunice was thrust into a world about which she knew nothing. But Eunice's story is different than most captivity stories of her time. Eunice was never redeemed.

To redeem is to rescue, to save the abducted person from their captors. The people of Deerfield made multiple attempts to redeem Eunice Williams, but as she assimilated to life with the Mohawk, it became clear that she didn't want or need to be saved. Eunice—a child of Puritans—found freedom in a world radically different from her own.

The Raid

Colonial New England was not a place made of tangible borders. There was not a line drawn in the dirt to mark where native territory stopped, and the European settlements began. It was fluid—settlers and natives mixing on a regular basis. But the settlement of Deerfield marked a boundary. For colonists, it was the edge of civilization. For Natives, it marked a crossroads, a place they had made their home for centuries. Deerfield was often filled with native people who came to trade or simply to visit. Most visits were peaceful, but when conflict did erupt, it could turn violent and deadly in an instant.

The raid on Deerfield was a combination raid—Mohawk, Abenaki, and the French—part of Queen Anne’s War. The Kahnawake Mohawk’s participation in the raid was one of strictly cultural purposes—a mourning war. They came to obtain captives to replace their deceased relatives. Mourning wars tended to be a strictly Iroquoian practice, of which the Mohawk were part. These “wars” provided restoration and spiritual healing for the community as well as the individual who had been lost. Often, it was the women of the tribes who demanded these raids. They could even demand full out wars to obtain captives who, Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney, leading historians on the Deerfield raid, say, if deemed worthy, “...could ease [the woman’s] pain by either replacing the deceased through adoption or by suffering ritual execution.” According to Kahnawake legend, there were at least two women with the raiding party at Deerfield. It was rare that women went along on these raids, but not unheard of. After all, it was the women in the community who could demand the raid. According to the same legend, one of the women who accompanied the Kahnawake came with the intention of obtaining a captive to replace a young daughter who had died. The woman would eventually become Eunice Williams’s adoptive mother.

The citizens of Deerfield awoke on that early February morning to what Reverend John Williams, Eunice’s father, called, “A flood upon us.” The raiders were everywhere. They broke open doors and windows of homes, slaughtering many of the occupants and taking others captive.

The Williams home was one of the first to be attacked. “They came to my house in the beginning,” recalled Reverend Williams, “...and by their violent endeavors to break open doors and windows with axes and hatchets, awakened me from my sleep...” He tried to shoot, but his pistol misfired, and he was taken captive. “I was seized by three Indians who disarmed me and bound me...and so I stood near the space of an hour.” As he stood, shivering in the winter cold, he watched the raiders destroy his family. His two youngest children were murdered, as well as the family’s Black servants and the children’s nursemaid.

Eunice was also a witness to this terrible carnage. She was only seven in 1704, but even still, she understood what was happening around her. She heard the cries of her neighbors as their homes went up in flames. She saw the bodies of her siblings lying bloody in the snow. She knew her father and the rest of her family had been taken prisoner. But in all of this, could the memory that stayed with Eunice for years to come have been the memory of the Mohawk woman who comforted her? Perhaps it was here, amid the destruction of her biological family—her life, as she knew it—that Eunice felt her first connection with the Kahnawake people, a connection that would keep her with them for the rest of her life.

The Journey

An hour after sunrise, Eunice, her father, mother, four brothers, and older sister, along with some of their neighbors, were marched out of the village by their captors to start a grueling trek into the Canadian wilderness. “My youngest daughter,” recalled Reverend Williams, “...was carried all the journey and looked after a with a great deal of tenderness.” Indeed, Eunice’s captors carried her nearly all the way to Canada on their backs. They showed her such great care that the juxtaposition of it against the treatment of others in the party was striking. Eunice’s mother, still weak from the birth of her son (one of the children killed in Deerfield), fell behind on the first day and was, “slain in the woods near Greenfield.” Others were burned at the stake, starved, or tomahawked. But not Eunice. Eunice was loved and cared for. Eunice was treasured.

Eunice was separated from her remaining family in the middle of the journey. While her father was taken to Montreal and soon ransomed by the Governor-General of Canada, Eunice was taken to a fort near Caughnawaga. In the following months, Eunice’s four brothers and sister slowly worked their way to freedom. “My youngest child was redeemed by a gentlewoman in the city as the Indians passed by,” Reverend Williams wrote of his four-year-old son, Warham, and “the governor redeemed my eldest daughter [Esther]...the governor gave orders to certain offices to get the rest of my children out of the hands of the Indians...” Within a year all of

Reverend Williams children had been redeemed. All, that is, except for Eunice. While her family was being rescued, Eunice was assimilating.

The Captive Who Was Never Redeemed

Could it be possible to be born in the wrong place? To the wrong people? Eunice was the child of a Puritan minister—a product of the first Great Migration. Her upbringing had been strict and harsh—cold in so many ways. As a child—and a female child at that—she wasn't permitted her own agency. She was the property of her father, and when she married, she would be the property of her husband. Her sphere in the Puritan world was small and always would be.

Soon after her arrival Eunice was adopted by a Kahnawake family. The Mohawks of Kahnawake had converted to Catholicism years before Eunice arrived and so she was baptized into the faith and given the name Margarite. Her full assimilation was gradual. But eventually she forgot how to speak English, forgot the tenants of Puritanism, and felt freer in the dress of Mohawk children. Deep in the Canadian wilderness, Eunice felt herself pulled into a life completely unlike the one she had known—the one full of piety and rules and restrictions.

Reverend Williams made several attempts to redeem his daughter, saying at first she was “Very desirous to be redeemed out of the hands of the Mohawks...” but as time went on and she was absorbed further and further in the Kahnawake community, and soon there was nothing left of the Puritan Eunice to be redeemed. The Mohawks, her father said, “would sooner part with their hearts as my child.”

At age sixteen Eunice married a man eight years her senior and bore him three children. Most historians seem to agree that this marked her full assimilation into the Mohawk tribe. Though by this time she only spoke Mohawk and French and had been living at Kahnawake for more than eight years. Her father had tried to redeem her and she would not go with him. Others had come and still she would not go. The Mohawk's were her home.

What was it that kept Eunice with the Kahnawake Mohawks? They murdered her family, destroyed her home. Why did she stay? This question is maybe best answered by looking at the role of women in the Kahnawake community versus women in the Puritan community.

The Kahnawake Mohawks were part of the Iroquois Five Nations and therefore shared many of the same beliefs as the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Oneida people. The Iroquois believed that women played an important role in society. Women were life givers—creators of all that was new. In the Seneca legend *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, woman is credited with creating earth on the back of a sea turtle. “Here on the sea turtles back, she planted bits of roots and plants she had brought from the sky world. And she walked across the turtles back, planting and creating the Earth that we know...” She became known as the Sky Mother and bore a daughter. The daughter had twin boys who fought with one another to see who would be first out of their mother’s womb; one son chose, instead, to be born out of his mother’s armpit and in the process, killed her. The two boys buried their mother in the earth. As a result, she became the Corn Mother “...source of corn, beans, and squash, Three Sisters of the Iroquois. From her heart grew sacred tobacco, used to send messages and thanks to the Sky World.” In this story, woman is the creator. The Sky Mother creates the Earth while the Corn Mother creates all things which nourish the human body. The Iroquois, therefore, left the agricultural work to the women of the tribe.

The custom of allotting agricultural work to women was criticized by many Europeans, often called a “cruel injustice.” But Iroquois men too engaged in equally arduous tasks. They spent their time hunting and war-making, or doing other tasks deemed just as labor-intensive as fieldwork; and, since all the women’s agricultural work was done communally, the task also served as a social-outing. In Puritan society, as in all European societies, it was the men who did the laborious work in the fields. Women were not seen as life-givers, but rather viewed as subordinate to men. “[Men] justified this arrangement by emphasizing woman’s descent from Eve and her innate irrationality, both of which made her more vulnerable to error and corruption,” says historian Martha Saxton.

Cotton Mather encouraged women to show their “...shinning piety...” While Lucy Hutchinson, in a biography about her husband, called herself “his very faithful mirror, reflecting truly, though but dimly,

his own glories upon him.” Puritan women spent their days looking out for the good of their husbands, the good of their families. They were glorified for their subordination and piety, not their ability to give life and sustain a community.

Where Eunice came from, all authority and property were traditionally passed down through the male line leaving all women dependent on their male family members. In Iroquois tradition, the family line was measured in reference to the woman. Marriage was based on matters of respect and mutual feelings rather than marriage contracts laid out by fathers. According to the missionary Joseph Francois Lafitau “in general, children [were] regarded as belonging more to the mother than the father.” Being thrust into this society Eunice would have noticed these drastic differences even as a child. She would have noticed the freedom she was allotted, the work that the women did to keep the village fed and thriving. She probably would have understood, even at her young age, that if she stayed with the Mohawk, she would get to live a life that was less constricting. A life where she could marry someone she loved. And a life where she wasn’t looked upon as a second-class citizen.

Eunice was not the only child from Deerfield taken to Kahnawake. Joseph Kellogg, along with his brother and two sisters, was also there, as well as countless other children. Their Puritan upbringing taught them to fear Catholicism. Yet, many of the abducted children converted. Joseph and all of his siblings converted. Eunice converted. Later in his life, Joseph Kellogg would return to Deerfield and plead that he was forced by the Jesuit priests of Kahnawake to convert. “They said Calvin and Luther were wicked [and] that Luther himself said he had eaten salt with the Devil.” “Then,” Joseph said, “they used all their art to make us in love with their religion.” This account comes from a captive who was redeemed out of the hands of the natives and taken back to Deerfield. Not only that, Joseph Kellogg is a male. Why did Eunice convert to Catholicism? Or Joseph’s sister, Joanna, who also married into Kahnawake society and never returned to Deerfield. Could Eunice and Joanna have seen Catholicism as an escape from the spiritual excellence that Cotton Mather saw linked only with woman’s subordination? “But if thou hast a husband that will do so,” wrote Mather in reference to women being beaten by their spouses, “bear it patiently; and know thou shalt have—Rewards—hereafter for it, as well as *Praises* here...” Catholicism for captives like Eunice and Joanna could have

been seen as solace from what might befall them if they remained Puritan and returned to their Puritan community.

In the Kahnawake Mohawk society, white female captives who chose to stay did not have to submit to the will of men. They did not have to have a man determine for them how heavily or lightly the yoke of marriage would rest upon them. Their salvation did not come from submission.

The Woman Who Fell from the Sky

In many ways, the life of Eunice Williams can be compared to the Seneca legend. She suffered great loss in the beginning—forced into a world in which she knew nothing. But she found friends among the Kahnawake, and soon she had planted her roots there. She married there, had children, and died there. She returned to Deerfield only three times later in life. By then, her children had grown, and she came at the pleas of her brother, Stephen. She had forgotten how to speak English, and their only communication came through an interpreter. The Eunice Williams that her brother had known was gone, and an Indian woman stood in her place. There was not a trace of her Puritan self left within her.

At the time of her death, Eunice Williams was eighty-nine years old. She had been a “captive” for over eighty years. In her captivity, she found redemption from a world that would have forced her into submission; a world that would have neglected to acknowledge the life-giving purpose of the woman; a world that was interested only in her piety rather than her faith or her being. For Eunice, captivity did not mean restriction, it meant freedom.