The Whitmoyer Saga

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The Whitmoyers on the Frontier

The story of the "Whitmoyer Massacre" on Easter Sunday morning 1780 and the subsequent Indian captivity of five of the children is one of the most dramatic and moving stories from the Pennsylvania frontier. The histories of Columbia County include several stories from the Revolutionary War era about local Indian raids and the carrying away of captives. Among these stories none is more remarkable, for both horror and adventure, than that of the Whitmoyers.

The "massacre" itself was brief and stark, but the intriguing tale continues for years after 1780 in the later history of the surviving Whitmoyer children. Scattered in various locations and raised for some years in Indian villages, the five children experienced frontier life in the most down-to-earth ways. Through the chances of wartime some ended up on each side of the new border between the United States and Canada, and their families later fought on opposite sides in the War of 1812. Three of them left behind stories of their ordeals, tales which found their way into print and rank among the prime "captivity narratives" in American historical literature.

When the area in the Forks of the Susquehanna was opened to settlement in 1769, one of the pioneer settlers was George Whitmoyer, of Lancaster County. He was probably descended from Peter Witmer, one of three brothers from the Swiss canton of Zurich who came to Philadelphia in 1733. In about 1772 George brought his family to the headwaters of Chillisquaque Creek in what is now Madison Township. They settled in the valley along Mud Creek in modern Jerseytown, built a cabin and made a life in the wilderness. By 1780 Peter and his wife (née Sheets) had nine children: Sarah (Sally) 17, Philip (the oldest son, probably 15), Catharine 14, Ann 12, Mary 11, Peter 8, George 6, John 4, and an infant.

Only a few other families were neighbors: the Eves near Millville, the Bilhimes and Wellivers nearer to the Whitmoyers. Native Americans hunted in the region and passed nearby on the Nescopeck trail from the West Branch at Muncy to the North Branch at Nescopeck. When word reached these settlers of the July 4, 1778 Wyoming Massacre (near modern Wilkes-Barre), the Eves, Welliver and Bilhime families all fled from their homes to safety at downriver forts. The Whitmoyers, however, resolved to stay put — a decision which proved to be a disastrous mistake.

The Easter Morning Massacre

Early on Easter morning in 1780, the family were still in bed except the two girls Catharine and Ann, who had started out before daybreak to gather syrup at the Sugar Bush [grove of maples toward Millville]. Oldest son Philip had just arisen and was at the cabin hearth trying to start a fire. Suddenly the door burst open, a terrifying yell sounded, and several Indians crowded in. The father, awaking and immediately realizing the danger, reached for his rifle, but a shot from the doorway killed him instantly. Before Philip could rise from the hearth, a tomahawk cleaved his skull, and in a moment another killed his mother as she reached for her infant. All three of the slain were scalped and the cabin was ransacked. The six remaining children were hustled outside, Sarah cradling the baby who had fallen from her mother’s arms.

The children were set onto various Indians’ horses, Sarah holding the infant. By this time the cabin was afire, and the Indians, fearing that the rising smoke would alert the American rangers in the area, made ready quickly to ride off with the children, leaving the dead and the burning cabin behind. When the baby began to wail, the Indian riding behind Sally suddenly snatched it from her arms and bashed its head against a tree. Sally and Mary both screamed and struggled to get

down and run to the baby, but Sally's captor struck her and stuck a knife in Mary's side, bringing a rush of blood to her nightgown.

Such was the scene shortly after when the two remaining children, Catharine and Ann, alerted by the screams or the rising smoke, returned from the Sugar Bush to find their dead parents and siblings and their home ablaze. The spring close by was red and gory where the raiders had washed off the scalps they collected. By one account, the two girls set off to walk the eighteen miles to Northumberland, the nearest settlement with a detachment of soldiers. (A different account has the girls hiding terrified at the Sugar Bush until found by soldiers three days later.) The next day, in any case, a small body of soldiers came from Northumberland and found the dead bodies partially burned, all the buildings destroyed, the cattle slaughtered, everything of value plundered. The militia commander decided that he could not spare scouts and cavalry to pursue the Indians, so the captive children were given up for lost. The soldiers buried the dead and returned sorrowfully to their fort. [The foundation of the home was reportedly still visible near Jerseytown as late as 1883, when Jerseytown resident Samuel Brugler related the massacre story he had heard as a boy.]

The Indians, meanwhile, with their horrified child captives traveled hard westward and then north, moving two days without stopping to gather food. The raiders were from three different groups of Native Americans: Oneidas, Mohawks and Delawares; all three groups favored the British side in the white men's war because they feared — rightly, as it turned out — that the Americans if victorious would settle on their hunting lands. On the second night the party split up: Mohawks took Sarah, Oneidas took Peter and George, and Delawares kept Mary and John. Peter and George were apparently "redeemed" shortly afterward and went to live with their mother's family in upstate New York. The three other captives, however, had longer stays with their captors.

Sarah and the Seneca Chief

Seventeen-year-old Sarah (called Sally) was taken to a Mohawk village in the Genesee country known as Little Beard's Town (on the Genesee River near upstate Wellsville, New York). There she was adopted by a Mohawk family, with whom she wandered often up and down the Genesee valley. While life was full of hardships, she was treated with kindliness by her new family. As a handsome young woman, she was designated by the Mohawk council for marriage into one of their clans; she drew the particular attention of one young chief, who asked her family for her hand. Sally put him off, but she knew that she could not delay a decision indefinitely; she heard that the war was soon to end, and she hoped desperately that she might be freed in a general release of captives.

About this time word came of a "pigeon roost" in the lower Genesee valley; passenger pigeons, then plentiful, were nesting by the millions in a certain forest area. Indians gathered from a wide region of western New York to take advantage of this fortunate food source: they cut down the trees, gathered the fat young birds, and smoked them over open fires for a winter food supply.

While at this pigeon hunt for several days, Sally heard about a white captive of the Senecas, their chief interpreter with the British and so valuable to them that they had made him a chief. This was Horatio Jones, captured by Indians when just sixteen and already then a militiaman in a troop of Pennsylvania rangers. Sally sought him out and told him her dilemma of running out of excuses to put off her suitor; he listened gravely, then told her that he would think about her problem and talk again the next day. When they met again, he told her a way she could be saved from an Indian marriage — if she "married" and moved in with him instead! Since he was fully accepted among the Indians, and was of a different clan, he was sure he could persuade the council to give her to him rather than the ardent chief who had asked earlier. It happened that Jones had previously taken an Indian wife, who had recently died, so he would be expected to take another wife soon in any case.

Sally agreed to his proposal, and her clan went along. Her Mohawk suitor was left aside, and Sally moved into Horatio's cabin. Very soon after, their captivity came to an end. By the Treaty of Stanwix, all war prisoners were to be released. Sally and Horatio, however, made their marriage official in the white culture by being wed by the noted "missionary to the Indians," Rev. Samuel Kirkland, at Schenectady in December 1784.

Captain Horatio Jones, as he was later called, was like Sarah a teenage Indian captive from the Pennsylvania frontier. He was the son of a blacksmith who moved from Downingtown to the valley of the Juniata River. There young Horatio had a minimal education but grew extremely proficient in woodcraft and strenuous physical activity.

After their wedding, Sally Whitmoyer Jones made a short visit to her old home in Pennsylvania, but then returned and settled with Horatio, who took up a life as trader and interpreter between Indians and Americans. They lived for a while in the Indian village at Seneca Falls, then nearby at the site of Geneva. Here their first child, "Billy," was born in December, 1786. Sally was the only white woman in a wide region and her son was reputed to be the first white child born in New York west of Utica.

Soon after, they moved westward to the Genesee valley, where Horatio continued his trading and also his role as chief and counselor to the Senecas. He was appointed by the U.S. government as the official interpreter for the Senecas; this post required him to be away from home much of the time. Sally made as comfortable a life for the family as was possible in the wild. She bore three more sons: George (June, 1788), Hiram (December, 1789) and James (March, 1791).

Tragically, her fourth son was barely a year old when Sally weakened and died. Her husband was away at the time, so Sally had only her Indian women friends with her in her last days. The nearby villages gathered and provided a grand funeral in their tradition. Hiram, only three years old at the time, retained vivid memories of the rites, with his mother borne on the shoulders of Indian warriors to a shallow grave on a grassy knoll (the exact site is no longer known). Later, Horatio built a large new residence on a nearby hill, where he spent the rest of his life. Two of Sally's sons were involved in an adventure with their Canadian uncle John and came to a tragically youthful death, a story told below.

Mary Among the Delawares

After the "Massacre" at the Whitmoyer cabin, the Delaware Indians with Mary (age 11) and John (age 4) rode to far western Pennsylvania to their village along the Allegheny River. There Mary was adopted by an older Delaware woman and remained seven years; John was adopted into a different family in the same village. Mary learned the language and many of the skills of her adoptive mother; in particular, the woman was a noted healer and herb-woman, and Mary learned the secrets of finding medicinal plants and preparing all sorts of salves and potions. She learned, also, to grow and prepare "Indian" foods and to locate many kinds of edibles in the forest, as well as to hunt small game, process skins to make soft leather, and generally to live in the wilderness as a Native American.

Although living with different families, Mary and John were able to see and comfort one another frequently. After four years, however, John was sold away one morning to a British officer; Mary, unaware at the time of John's departure, was heart-broken when she was told. She had a burning desire to find her little brother, but was helpless to leave the village. Three years later, however, after two tough years of scarce food, Mary's Delaware group decided to journey to Detroit; they had heard that British soldiers there would provide food for them. Mary was eager to go, for she had somehow formed the idea that John had been taken to Detroit.

The clan journeyed by canoe down the Allegheny and the Ohio River to the Muskingum, north up that river to its western headwaters, and then by foot to Detroit. There the Delawares exchanged Mary to the British for desperately-needed food

supplies. While Mary, now a young woman of eighteen, was sad to leave her adoptive mother, she was delighted at the chance she saw to search among the British at Fort Detroit for her brother, John. In exchange for the food provided to the clan, they "sold" captive Mary to the British; a British officer at the Fort arranged for Mary to become an indentured servant for one year to a French-Canadian settler family at their log home north of Detroit.

Mary entered this year of servitude gladly, for after twelve months she would be free to search for her siblings. She relearned white people's ways of life, along with the French language, and proved useful to the settlers with her knowledge of "Indian" medicine.

Near the end of Mary's year of service, a German Lutheran pastor came to the cabin one day looking for her. He had been asked to help locate the Whitmoyer children by their uncle, Jacob Sheets, their mother's brother. Sheets was a Loyalist from upstate New York who, at the end of the Revolutionary War, like thousands of other Loyalists had been declared a traitor by the United States and had his property confiscated, and so he moved to Canada. The British awarded land grants to these Loyalists, and Sheets claimed a tract along the St. Lawrence River at the Long Sault Rapids, some five hundred miles east of Detroit.

Although her year's service was not quite up, Mary's master let her leave with Pastor Schmidt for the long journey eastward. The two traveled in a huge canoe with "voyageurs" carrying furs to Montreal; down the Detroit River, the whole length of Lake Erie, a portage around Niagara Falls, and then down the length of Lake Ontario they went. Although Mary didn't know it at the time, they passed close by the site on the shore of Lake Ontario where her brother John would later homestead. Mary hoped to hear news of John at Fort Niagara, but the canoe went right past and didn't stop there.

When they finally arrived at the Long Sault, she was welcomed by her uncle Sheets; gradually she learned the German language and became one of his family. At the time she arrived, food was extremely scarce because of a severe summer drought and a subsequent harsh winter, the period known later as the Hungry Year. Mary was able to teach the pioneers how to find edible roots and other food in the forest, and saved many from starvation. She quickly became known also as a "doctor," and though she had no knowledge of Western medicine she is remembered as the "first woman doctor" of that region.

She married settler Henry Hoople, who had lived near the Sheets family in upstate New York and migrated with other Loyalists to Canada. Henry and Mary lived for some time with his brother John Hoople in his cabin beside Hoople's Creek, but finally they built their own home in the woods nearby, a comfortable farmhouse which still stands near Osnabruck, Ontario. Henry and Mary had twelve children, eleven of whom lived to adulthood and had families of their own.

During the War of 1812 a crucial battle happened at the site of John Hoople's cabin along the Creek and involved both families. American troops under General Wilkinson had crossed into Canada and were descending the St. Lawrence to attack Montreal; John and Henry and some of Henry's older sons were in the Loyalist militia which mustered to fight the invaders. On November 10th, an American cavalry troop came downriver in advance of the army to try to seize supplies at the town of Cornwall. John's wife took her younger children and the family's cows back in the woods to Mary and Henry's cabin; the militia meanwhile, some 1,300 strong, set up an ambush just across Hoople's Creek from John's home. A sharp gunbattle ensued, with the Americans setting up two small cannon in John's front yard to fire across the creek — where John himself, his sons and his brother Henry were among the Canadians under fire! Fortunately, none of the Hooples were wounded, and the Americans soon were forced to retreat after a defeat the next day.

Years later, one of Mary's nine sons, William, became a prosperous merchant in New York City; on a business trip to Toronto in 1851, he happened to hear of a man at Niagara named John Whitmore, who had once been an Indian captive.

Sure enough, he learned upon investigation that this was indeed his uncle, still alive and living at the other end of Lake Ontario from the Long Sault. William went to Niagara-on-the-Lake, visited his uncle, and arranged for Uncle John to take a steamer down the lake to visit his sister Mary. News of the visit caused something of a sensation in the Loyalist community along the St. Lawrence. The two elderly people, brother and sister, met again after a separation that had lasted seventy years!

Little John's Story

This younger brother of Mary, John, was ransomed from the Delawares in 1784 and subsequently adopted by a Canadian officer, Captain Daniel Servos of Butler's Rangers; John later married the Captain's daughter Magdalene. As a young adult, John became a homesteader among the pioneer settlers of "Upper Canada"; his farm was on the Canadian shore of Lake Ontario, about three miles from the village of Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario), not far from Niagara Falls. William Kirby's *Annals of Niagara* (1896) relates two fascinating stories about him during the War of 1812. (Kirby was John Whitmore's son-in-law and undoubtedly had heard these stories from John himself.)

During the War of 1812 John was a Loyalist (i.e., loyal Canadian) when the Americans invaded Canada and seized the town of Newark. As narrated above, his sister Sarah, carried off by the Mohawks, later was married to Horatio Jones, interpreter of the Seneca nation. In the War of 1812, two of Sarah's sons were soldiers in the New York militia and were among the troops occupying Newark, Ontario in December, 1813. They knew that their uncle John lived just three miles beyond the town along the lake shore, and their step-mother had asked them to visit this uncle if at all possible. Unknown to the brothers, British troops had marched in and were camped on a farm between their Uncle John's place and the town, preparing to attack. The two young men took a boat after dark, rowed along the lake shore, and managed to land unseen, just a few paces from John's house. Kirby says, "Whitmore met them, and was horrified when he saw who they were. He knew that if discovered they would be seized and shot as spies. He told the young officers that they were within the British lines. They, too, were greatly alarmed, not having foreseen such a possibility." Whitmore led his nephews to the house of a neighbor, the local Anglican priest, who took them to the headquarters of the British commander, Colonel Murray. This worthy officer, having heard the story, rather than arrest the young brothers ordered them to get in their boat and go back to their own camp, and thus they returned to their regiment unharmed. "Sad was their fate, however," notes Kirby. "Ten days after this visit these two young officers were killed and scalped by the Indians on the hill at Lewiston [NY], after the British crossed over and stormed [the American] Fort Niagara, December 19, 1813."

Kirby relates another striking incident which occurred slightly later, just before Newark was burned by the Americans in one of the most senselessly cruel acts of that short, harsh war. John learned that among the Indians accompanying the American invaders was a chief named DeCoignee, who had been a leader of the massacre of John's family in 1780 (the same chief who had been recognized by Sarah at Detroit, and now fighting on the American side). John resolved to revenge his parents' deaths at the first opportunity. One day he heard that the chief was intending to walk up the Lake Road past where John's farm stood; he took his musket and tomahawk and lay in wait in some trees. DeCoignee, as it happened, was delayed and did not appear for some hours, while John patiently waited in his hiding place. Finally, John sat on a log and reflected on what he was doing, and his Christian training made him feel remorse and, writes Kirby, he "prayed God for direction, until he felt that to kill the chief would be a sin. Just as he ceased to pray he heard footsteps in the leaves" and the chief appeared, but did not see him. John let him go past and himself returned to his home unavenged.

John lived to old age, died in October, 1853, and is buried with his wife in the Servos Cemetery near his farm. The remarkable story of his reunion after seventy years with his sister Mary is related above.

The fate of the other Whitmoyer children has not to date come to light. The Whitmoyer / Whitmire surname is still common

in Columbia County, but the relation of any of these families to the pioneer family is uncertain. All Columbia Countians, however, can claim some kinship with the pluck and hardihood of one of our region's earliest pioneer families.

The principal sources for the Whitmoyer stories are:

> For the massacre: a story told by Samuel Brugler of Jerseytown (born 1801) that he learned from a very early resident with whom he lived in boyhood (printed in Catawissa *News-Item* 19 April 1883), along with each of the following.
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> For Sarah: George H. Harris, *Life of Horatio Jones*, and Sarah E. Gunn, *The Captivity of Sarah Whitmore* (both: Buffalo Historical Society *Publications*, No. 6, 1903); Mrs. Gunn was Sarah Whitmore's great-granddaughter.
>
> For Mary: Elizabeth L. Hoople, *The Hooples of Hoople's Creek* (privately printed, 1967) and *Medicine Maid: The Life Story of a Canadian Pioneer* Belleville, Ont.: Mika Publishing, 1977); Mrs. Hoople was Mary Whitmore's great-grandaughter;
>
> For John: William Kirby, *Annals of Niagara*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927) and *A Memoir of the Whitmore Family* (Niagara Historical Society Publications, 1901); Mr. Kirby was John Whitmore's son-in-law.

These various accounts differ in numerous details in describing the events of the massacre day.