

ENG 260

Spring 2021

Dr. Angela Fulk

Class notes—Week of Mar. 8, *Indian Captive*, Chapters 1-8

One reason that I like to use Lois Lenski's *Indian Captive: The Story of Mary Jemison* for this course is that it is a local story. We have been reading the first part of the narrative this week, which takes place in central and western Pennsylvania (Fort Duquesne is located at the present-day site of Pittsburgh), but at the end of Chapter 8, Molly is beginning her journey to Genesee Town, located in Western New York. Mary Jemison lived the later portion of her life in this area. Today, she is buried in Letchworth State Park, where the statue below stands in her honor. The park is a little over an hour's drive from Buffalo.



The "Introduction" and "Forward" to the book stress both the real historical background of the story and the amount of research Lenski did while writing and illustrating it. Late in her life, Mary Jemison dictated her story to a white settler, who wrote it down and had it published, and we have a few recorded details from others who knew her, as well. Notice that the amount of study Lenski carried out of Seneca life in Mary's time was considered remarkable. (Lenski published the book in 1941, during

WWII.) All of her drawings and the details about life among the Seneca are based on surviving artifacts in museums.

The story has been “sanitized” a bit for a young audience. In the book, Molly does not know what became of her parents and siblings after being separated from them. In real life, after she and young Davy were singled out and led away from the group, the other captives were killed. Though Mary was not present at the massacre, she watched the next night on the trail as the Shawnee warriors prepared and dried the scalps next to the campfire. She remembered that her mother’s red hair was clearly visible. Sex is also left out. The real Mary was married to a Seneca about two years after being captured. When she visited Fort Duquesne and encountered some English-speaking whites, the baby she was carrying on her back was her own, not her adopted sister’s.

It is important to remember that the historical backdrop is the French and Indian War—the North American branch of a larger war between France and Great Britain that took place about 20 years before the American Revolution. Mary Jemison and her family were Scots Irish settlers on the Pennsylvania frontier; Mary herself had been born on board ship during the Atlantic crossing. As British colonists, they were considered enemies by the French and their Native American allies.