CHAPTER 4
Recentering Indian Women
in the American Revolution

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In U.S. history textbooks, if Indians generally fare badly, Indian women fare even worse. For the most part, for textbooks surveyed for the periods up to the Civil War, only two Native women even appear to have names: Pocahontas and Sacajawea.¹ Both are known for their alliances with white men. Pocahontas was the daughter of a Native leader, Powhatan. She may or may not have helped to save John Smith, an early English governor in Virginia; she was later a captive herself. She was baptized, married John Rolfe, and returned with him to England, where she died of smallpox. Sacajawea was a Shoshone interpreter and the wife of a French trader. She accompanied Lewis and Clark on their westward journey and helped to make it possible and successful. Other typical points of discussion about Native women include brief surveys of the precolonial social life of Indians, in which gendered divisions of labor figure. Native American women tend not to have a great deal of agency in these textbook accounts. Mostly, they are acted upon or remain in the background of the main narrative, which typically centers on white men. They do not appear to have really any role at all in pivotal moments in American history such as the American Revolution.

Almost uniformly, for a given major event such as the revolution these textbooks contain a section on Indians, which generally means Indian men. Then there is a section on women, which typically means white women. This situation is changing, but only slowly. In part, this orientation in textbooks reflects some limitations in the treatment of indigenous women in the historiography, especially in specific key eras such as the American Revolution. Indigenous women appear largely as marginal figures, in a late chapter or a concluding section, in histories of the American Revolution, even in histories of women in the American Revolution.² Both classic and recent work on the revolution that includes a great deal on women fails to discuss indigenous women.³ There are understandable reasons for this compartmentalization, but it does make it possible to continue to marginalize indigenous women in these histories. At the same time,
most historians of Native Americans and the war, with a few notable exceptions, have had comparatively little to say about women. Work in which Native women have been at the center tends not to focus on the traditional turning points of U.S. history such as the American Revolution.

However, Indian women were vital to the shape of developments in early North American history. It is possible to tell stories about key events in American history in which Native women figure more prominently as actors and agents of history. Scholars are increasingly doing so, but their work has yet to be fully integrated into more general treatments. In part, widening the geography of American history to include what is now the United States is essential to telling these tales. Many points of focus in a standard class in American history might include more on Native American women. Attention might be given to war, for instance; Indian women played prominent roles—as leaders, as captives, and as mediators—in just about every war fought in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North America, as well as many later ones. Other themes, from religion to cultural encounters to politics to economics, might usefully and reasonably highlight the ongoing contributions and experiences of Native women.

To give a few brief examples, we might hear more about the spiritual and economic authority of women such as Kateri Tekakwitha, the seventeenth-century “Mohawk Saint,” or cultural and economic mediators such as Marie Rouensa, a Native woman in New France who converted to Catholicism and lived at the center of a complex network of trade, religion, and community. We might consider the vital role Native women played in systems of labor and captivity, considering how enslaved Native women such as Marfa Paula or Marie-Marguerite-Caroline navigated and at times surmounted complicated, bitter worlds of enslavement and exploitation.

We would benefit from more attention to the actions of political leaders such as Doña María, a cacica (or chief) among the Guale of Spanish Florida in the late sixteenth century, and Nancy Ward, the War Woman of Chota, who addressed U.S. treaty commissioners on behalf of Cherokee women in 1781. We might hear more about the complicated intersections of domesticity, deviance, and religion in the stories of Native women such as Sarah Ahmontan in seventeenth-century New England or Tschanneks in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. In part, we might also be more attentive to the ways in which gender and ideas about gender were critical to cultural encounters and alterations across a range of times and places, not simply at “first contact.”

This chapter provides an account of a critical event in U.S. and Haude-
nosaunee (or Iroquois) history in which Native women are at the center. It offers a case study of another little-known Native woman, called Madam Sacho, who was important in the American Revolution. It concentrates on the period in which U.S. Major General John Sullivan led a campaign of devastation in the Country of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee in 1779. Recentering our revolutionary accounts so that such narratives are at the core is important for a variety of reasons. At a most basic level, it is good to pay attention to people who have been largely forgotten in mainstream historical narratives because it fills a gap; indigenous women have been too often ignored. Certainly, too, such women at the time were far from marginal; following the lead of contemporaries brings the power of such women into finer focus. There is also symbolic importance in the stories of such women.

More than one textbook devotes attention to Sullivan’s campaign. It was a significant event in the war itself, especially in the frontier war between patriots and Native Americans allied to the British. It was also relevant to the breaking up of the long-standing Haudenosaunee Confederacy, as the Oneida and Tuscarora supported the Americans, the Onondaga split, and the Mohawk, Seneca, and Cayuga remained loyal to the British. Here is how the story of the campaign appears in a very recent textbook: “When patriot General John Sullivan’s regular army was badly defeated by Mohawk chief Thayendanegea, known to the Americans as Joseph Brant, and local loyalists, Sullivan took revenge by burning forty Indian villages. It was an act of violence and cruelty that deeply shocked and shamed George Washington.”11 In this characterization, women are absent, as in all of the accounts of this campaign in textbooks. Here, Sullivan is a revenge-driven maverick, while honorable George Washington grieves for the Indians. This depiction bleeds drama and sorrow, yet it also offers comfort. George Washington remains sympathetic, a founding father of whom to be nothing but proud. Alas, as this chapter will show, this depiction is fundamentally incorrect.

Looking more carefully at women helps to correct this sort of flawed account. Taking indigenous women seriously and returning them to the center of these stories, where they rightly belong, reveals critical aspects about both Native American women and their communities, important in itself, but it also recasts our understandings of the founding of the new American nation as well as its leadership. The essay delves deeply into the story of one elderly woman in part to show how historians excavate the tales of people whose true names have been lost. Such work is chal-
lenging, but not impossible. There are considerable gaps and omissions in
terms of sources, to be sure, but the sources on Indian women are not as
limited as many suppose. Using traditional accounts, including letters from
generals and diaries of soldiers, it is possible to discern the importance
of Native American women. This chapter demonstrates, I hope, that it is
possible to highlight the agency of such women in key turning points of
American history, even where a lack of sources makes it difficult. In its
insistent focus on the tale of one obscure Indian woman, it demonstrates
that such women, while heretofore treated as marginal figures, could in
fact be quite important.

Soldiers called her many things: "a very old Squaw," "helpless impotent
wretch," "antediluvian hag." Only one recorded anything like a name:
"Madam Sacho." Her full name has been lost. Yet we would not even
know that much about her had not Major General Sullivan and his men
not stumbled across her in the desolate country of the Six Nations in
September 1779. This land seemed eerily abandoned: "Kittel's left in a
hurry by the hearth, books thrown aside, and tall corn stalks rustling,
ready for harvest, in the field. The Haudenosaunee people imagined
they would be returning to their homes soon. It was not to be. Sullivan
and his men burned houses and fields to the ground. Madam Sacho must
have emerged from the smoke like a ghost herself: startling, uncanny,
and with a tale to tell.

Contemporaries, Iroquois and otherwise, were well aware of the impor-
tance of women to the war. The Haudenosaunee, or people of the
Great League of Peace and Power, had long been united diplomatically,
centered in lands in what is now upstate New York. They were indeed
powerful, though their enemies would not have described them as peace-
ful. They fought hard, especially against Algonquian enemies, in a series
of "mourn ing wars" in the seventeenth century. In part, Iroquois people
were seeking captives, mainly women and children, and their own matrons
had an important role in deciding on war and peace, captivity and death.
Women in these communities had long had the power to select chiefs,
participate in councils, and wage war. They were also central to the
agricultural labor that provided resources, stability, and power. In 1763,
Mohawks explained to an Indian agent that women were "the Truest
 Owners, being the persons who labour on the Lands." As one historian
has it, "an Iroquois town was largely a female world."

The Haudenosaunee people initially followed a policy of neutrality
in the American Revolution. Most of the Iroquois Confederacy, long
allied to the British, had little interest in joining in the patriot cause. However, a series of incidents led to a declaration of loyalty to the British side, by all but the Oneida and the Tuscarora. When this fateful resolution passed the council of warriors, records noted that “the mothers also consent,” indicating the continued political standing of Iroquois matrons. One of the best-known of these women, central to the revolution, is Konwatsitsiaienni, or Molly Brant, recognized in Iroquois communities as the widow of Sir William Johnson, the prerevolutionary British agent to the Indians. Her arguments were critical in persuading Mohawks and others to support the British, since “one word from her goes farther with them than a thousand from any White Man.”

Thanks to the efforts of Konwatsitsiaienni, her brother, and others, Mohawks and others began fighting with the British. There was a series of raids and attacks in 1778, most notably at Wyoming Valley and Cherry Valley.

By 1779, the majority of the Haudenosaunee League, then, was proving deeply vexing to patriot leaders. Generals George Washington and Philip Schuyler therefore determined on a campaign of systematic violence against Native American women and children; Sullivan was no maverick going against orders from on high. Both Washington and Schuyler had served in the Seven Years’ War and participated in fierce fighting against Native Americans. This background shaped their thinking. The lands of the Six Nations did not have tactical significance in the war between the United States and Britain. Instead, it was to be a campaign of terror. As Washington agonized over how to “carry . . . the War into the Indian Country,” he asked for Schuyler’s guidance on numbers of troops and methods required. Schuyler suggested: “Should we be so fortunate as to take a considerable number of the women and children of the Indians I conceive that we should then have the means of preventing them hereafter from acting hostilely against us.”

Washington gave his assent, hoping that their “attacks will distract and terrify the Indians.” He added, “It is also to be hoped in their confusion, they may neglect in some places to remove the old men women and Children and that these will fall into our hands.” Listen carefully to Washington’s dehumanizing language before any finger or tinder has been lifted: “these will fall into our hands,” not “they.” Washington argued that either American troops would be able to defeat Indian warriors, or at the very least they would “distress . . . them as much as possible, by destroying their villages, and this year’s crop.”

So, Washington gave Major General John Sullivan explicit instructions for the 1779 campaign: “The immediate objects are the total destruction

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and devastation of their settlements and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible,” since “hostages are the only kind of security to be depended on.” Washington also directed the destruction of crops and houses: “parties should be detached to lay waste [to] all the settlements around, with instructions to do it in the most effectual manner; that the country may not be merely overrun but destroyed.” He stressed the need to achieve “the total ruin of their settlements,” since “our future security will be in their inability to injure us; the distance to which they are driven and in the terror with which the severity of the chastizement they receive will inspire them.”

Under the command of Major General Sullivan, several regiments marched. Almost all the inhabitants of the Native settlements fled before soldiers arrived, but the corn was ripening in the field. Under orders, troops plundered houses and burned homes, fields, and orchards. They destroyed forty towns and 160,000 bushels of corn. In a typical entry, one lieutenant wrote on August 30 that “Our Brigade Destroyed about 150 Acres of the best corn that Ever I saw (some of the Stalks grew 16 feet high) besides great Quantities of Beans, Potatoes, Pumpkins, Cucumbers, Squashes & Watermelons.”

This destruction particularly affected women, for it was Haudenosaunee women who planted, tended, and harvested these crops and trees. To destroy the fields and orchards so carefully cultivated by these women was to inflict a visceral blow on many of the people of the Six Nations, who were evidently only just emerging from two years of poor harvests.

In the midst of this carefully orchestrated rampage, in early September soldiers stumbled across Madam Sacho. Soldiers’ diaries recount the surprise they felt on finding her, detailing how, through an Oneida interpreter, she conversed with General Sullivan himself. Some soldiers wanted to kill her immediately, but, as one soldier recorded, “the common dictates of humanity, a veneration for old age, and a regard for the female world of any age or denomination induced our General to spare her.”

Sullivan gave her some food and left her in a hut. According to one soldier, Sacho claimed she was of the Tuscarora tribe. Sullivan claimed she was Cayuga. It is difficult to ascertain with certainty. In any case, if she was as old as soldiers thought she was, it means that she had likely lived through the evacuation of the Tuscarora in the Carolinas to the Five Nations League of the Iroquois following their defeat in the Tuscarora War in 1713. She would have been a girl or a young woman when some 2,000 Tuscarora left the Carolinas to make the long trek to the country of what then became the Six Nations. Whether she was Tuscarora or Cayuga,
this evacuation, which reconfigured the Confederacy, would have been part of her experience. Her long life, then, was bookended by two major wartime evacuations.

In any case, Sacho recounted a tale in which there had been a council in her village, during which, as one soldier recorded, “there was a great debate between their warriors their squaws and children. The squaws had a mind to stay at home with their children.” Other soldiers, including Sullivan, reported that the women wanted the men to stay and fight, but the warriors did not think they stood a chance against the American troops—a somewhat self-serving claim by American soldiers. Either way, there seems to have been a debate about whether to stay and fight or to flee, and it is clear that Haudenosaunee matrons were critical to this decision. Indeed, when some leading members of the Iroquois Confederacy later argued for a resumption of neutrality, one of them, Agorondajats (Good Peter), did so by making a speech in the name of the women, asking that the matrons use their influence to persuade the warriors to agree to peace. There were concerns for human life, but there were also fears about leaving their homes and crops open to depredations. One escaped former captive woman, “almost starved,” in fact later told the soldiers that “the Indians have been in great want all last spring—that they subsisted entirely on green corn this summer—that their squaws were fretting prodigiously, and continually teasing their warriors to make peace.”

Sullivan evidently disregarded Washington’s orders to take hostages “of every age and sex.” Sullivan not only left Sacho alone but also provided her with food and shelter. The diarists, and most subsequent historians, emphasized the gift of food Sullivan made her when his own soldiers did not have much to eat. They do so even after recognizing that Sullivan and his men were destroying all of the food the Iroquois had planted, cultivated, and saved. Contemporary and historical accounts assume Sacho’s helplessness and victimization, as well as Sullivan’s personal kindness. Some soldiers condemned their leader’s actions. One soldier, having already complained bitterly of “Hungry bellies and hard Duty,” observed caustically after the second gift of food: “I suppose she will live in splendour.” Other soldiers celebrated the gallantry of their leader: “General Sullivan gave her a considerable supply of flour and meat, for which, with tears in her savage eyes, she expressed a great deal of thanks.” Here the general was a protector of a powerless old woman. Indeed, stressing Sullivan’s personal generosity about food (one soldier claimed that she saw him as “her good angel”) suggests a kind of uneasy recognition of the “uncivility”
of the troops’ actions. The emphasis on the great plenty being destroyed also resonates with this horror. Numerous soldiers stressed the bounty and beauty of the towns and crops they were demolishing. One diarist described Sacho’s town: “It contained nearly fifty houses, in general, very good. . . . We found several very fine corn-fields, which afforded the greatest plenty of corn, beans, &c.” One soldier wrote home: “I really feel guilty as I applied the torch to huts that were Homes of Content until we ravagers came spreading desolation everywhere.”

Sacho was able to exploit the uneasiness that men felt about their need to show gallantry to women and children, even amid the terrible imperatives of war and the need to inflict suffering on an enemy. After all, Sacho’s testimony tantalizes with other questions, ones not addressed in the detailed and well-sourced treatments of this campaign: why was she left, and why did she tell this tale? It seems unlikely that even if she were old and infirm that her clan and kin, maybe even her own children and grandchildren, would have just left a venerable matron behind to be killed by U.S. soldiers. As one historian has observed, these matrons, “the women of the lineage’s eldest living generation,” were “dominant figures morally, economically, and to some degree politically.” Also, why would she reveal this much detail about internal disagreements to what was without a doubt the enemy? Some historians have claimed she was threatened physically, but this point is not clear. It also seems somewhat unlikely. Is it possible that in fact this woman volunteered to take the risk of staying behind, to plant information about the intentions of her people?

The soldiers saw a “poor old creature” reliant on Sullivan’s “humanity.” Most historians have followed suit. But what if we refuse to accept these characterizations? It is possible that she chose to stay, to sacrifice herself to plant and gather information that may have helped her countrymen and -women. After all, she “likewise told us that a great deal many Squaws & Children was over a hill somewhere near Seneca lake . . . in consequence of which . . . a Detachment of 3 or 400 Men” went in pursuit but returned without “seeing anything of them.” Maybe her story of the council also served to emphasize that if women were captured they should be treated with “humanity,” because, after all, they had wanted peace and did not agree with the warriors. Although soldiers emphasized Sacho’s lonely impotence, she was not alone. When soldiers came back a few weeks later, they found the body of a younger woman who had evidently been helping her. She had been shot, “supposed to be done by some of the soldiers.” The murder of this much younger women, a violation of
that “regard for the female world” that even several soldiers denounced as the actions of “some inhuman villain,” indicates the justified fears of the Haudenosaunee, and why they also might have chosen to leave a very old woman who served as a pitiful figure for the American soldiers. An Onondaga chief later contended that when U.S. soldiers attacked his village, “they put to death all the Women and Children, excepting some of the Young Women, whom they carried away for the use of their Soldiers & were afterwards put to death in a more shamefull manner.” One scholar has posited that this younger woman may have been killed resisting rape. In any case, it suggests that she provoked lethal violence in a way the older woman did not.

The haunting trajectory of the murdered younger woman, whose name is lost, reminds us that violence against all kinds of women did occur in this war, even as Americans congratulated themselves that it was only the “merciless Indian Savages” who killed people “of all ages, sexes and conditions.” Putting Indian women at the center of our accounts demonstrates how Anglo-Americans in the American Revolutionary War adopted new forms of systematic violence against indigenous people, specifically women and children, ones they would continue to exploit in the early national era. Such is a theme that could easily be incorporated into the stories we tell about the founding of a new nation. This use of campaigns of terror and hostage taking, engineered by George Washington himself, should be part of how we understand the creation of the United States. Despite much casual violence against Anglo-American women in the Revolutionary War, at no point did they provoke the systematic violence that Indian women did. There is of course a long history of violence against Native peoples. But this decision to use systematic violence against Native women and children was at least one of many critical political moments in shaping the course of relations between Anglo-Americans and Native Americans in the new republic. Yet we also need to recall that Native women resisted this violence in myriad ways. These tales are worth telling.

When the people of the Six Nations fled their homes, they cast aside books, including some volumes of the early eighteenth-century English periodical the Spectator. Was one the volume in which the editors lamented that civil war “fills a Nation with Spleen and Rancour, and extinguishes all the Seeds of Good nature, Compassion and Humanity?” After all, the destruction of the orchards, crops, and homes of the Six Nations resonated long after the autumn of 1779. There was a terrible way in which the evacuation of Haudenosaunee from these lands, seemingly

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leaving behind only an old woman, allowed Americans to imagine a fuller “disappearance” all too easily. Indeed, even a preacher of a celebratory sermon at the conclusion of Sullivan’s campaign declared: “Led by the consideration of our just and complete conquest, of so fertile a part of the western world, I will venture to look a few years into futurity... Methinks I see all these lands inhabited by the independent Citizens of America. I congratulate posterity on this addition of immense wealth and extensive territory to the United States.”

Sacho, an old woman, became a symbol of the weakness of the actually quite-powerful Confederacy of the Six Nations. The image of the disappearing Indian is one that has filled many American narratives. There was power in emphasizing that someone was the last Indian left. The land of the Six Nations was not in fact a ghost land, but, as the Iroquois had little to which to return, many did indeed flee to Fort Niagara. Rehearsing an American takeover of the land, with the easily vanquished Sacho the only Indian left, allowed Anglo-Americans actually to take it over. Yet the people of this great league did not disappear. Modern Iroquois people live on a range of reservations in the United States and Canada, as well as in many other places, and still have treaties with the United States. Even in the face of systematic violence, the Haudenosaunee people have survived. Narratives about both the systematic violence, and the ability to resist it, can and should be part of our accounts of American history.

Soldiers patronizingly dismissed Sacho as “an old squaw.” Too often historians have accepted this kind of characterization. Yet this mother of her people, survivor of two devastating wartime evacuations, still has power, if only we care to see it. Telling her story recasts other, older narratives. The image of George Washington as simply a compassionate father of the nation has already come under pressure since he was also a slaveholder, albeit one with abolitionist tendencies. His treatment of Indian women suggests other roles, as at least some contemporaries recognized. After all, because of the experiences and stories of women, he received other names. In 1790, a Seneca chief informed him: “When your army entered the country of the Six Nations, we called you Town Destroyer and to this day when your name is heard our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling close to the necks of their mothers.” Here were some of the real and painful costs of what participants called “this late unhappy war.” Recentering Indian women in the American Revolution helps us to see their prominence, to resist easy triumphalism, and to witness one nation’s savage core. After all, the
father of a nation also became a town destroyer. Names matter. There are women whose names we will never know. This obliteration continues to darken our histories. Yet even where indigenous women’s names have been lost, their presence should still be felt.

Notes


4. There are scattered references to women in the excellent Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1995). There are fewer


11. This quotation comes from the most recent U.S. history textbook I could find when writing this piece: Berkin et al., Making America, 136. The campaign is discussed, though not named, in Faragher et al., Out of Many, 156. It also receives attention in Goldfield et al., The American Journey, 163; Foner, Give Me Liberty, 228–29; Norton et al., A People and A Nation, 103.


13. Journal of Lt. Rudolphus Van Hovenburgh recorded that the Iroquois had “left the town in Great Haste for they left Kittels on the fire.” Cook, Journals, 279. Lt. Daniel Clapp noted in his diary that “we find houses here with all their furniture in them which is but trifling we find Some Volumes of the Spectator and other Valuable Books.” “Diary and accounts [manuscript] 1779 June 9–Sept. 16” for Lt. Daniel Clapp, VAULT Ayer N.A. 162, Newberry Library, Chicago. Numerous soldiers mentioned the corn (see below).


16. Richter, Ordeal of the Longhouse, 22.


26. Richter, Ordeal of the Longhouse, 239.

27. Journal of Major John Burrowes, in Cook, Journals, 42–51: 45. Mann is the only historian who has (rightly, in my view) identified this as a political council, rather than simply something like a personal squabble. Mann, George Washington’s War, 90–91.


33. Mann also follows this emphasis, to point out the horror of this campaign. But she does not consider why the soldiers would have recorded so much about these issues. “I have taken the space to detail some—but by no means all—of the recorded devastation wrought by Sullivan during his rampage through Iroquoia because I wanted to bring home to the reader the magnitude of the food supplies taken from the mouths of starving civilians between 9 August and 28 September 1779.” Mann, George Washington’s War, 75.

35. As quoted in Mintz, Seeds of Empire, 186.
37. It is possible she was left behind in the confusion. It is also possible she revealed intentions for other reasons: because she was a Tuscarora, and was against the British alliance, or because she was naïve, or senile. I cannot know with certainty, but the context suggests otherwise to me.
42. Calloway, American Revolution in Indian Country, 53.
43. Mann, George Washington's War, 92. Her nakedness points to this interpretation.
45. See Susan Sleeper-Smith's forthcoming work on campaigns in the Ohio Valley in the 1790s.
46. Spectator, July 24, 1711.
47. Israel Evans, A Discourse Delivered at Easton, on the 17th of October 1779, to the Officers and Soldiers of the Western Army. After their Return from an Expedition against the Five Nations of Hostile Indians (Philadelphia: Thomas Bradford, 1779), 22.
50. Fischer, A Well-Executed Failure, 7.

Suggested Readings