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# French and Indian Cruelty? The Fate of the Oswego Prisoners of War, 1756-1758

## **Abstract**

This article examines what happened to approximately 1,200 prisoners of war taken by the French and their Indian allies at the British post Fort Oswego in August 1756. Their experiences illuminated the contrast between traditional methods of warfare in colonial America and the new rules of war being introduced by European armies fighting in the French and Indian War. Although European armies claimed to treat POWs more humanely than Native Americans, their supposedly civilized rules of warfare actually increased the suffering of the Oswego prisoners.

## **Keywords**

Fort Oswego, French and Indian War, Prisoner of War, POW

## **Disciplines**

European History | History | Indigenous Studies | Military History | United States History

## French and Indian Cruelty?

### The Fate of the Oswego Prisoners of War, 1756–1758

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Oswego, the fur-trading post on the southeastern shore of Lake Ontario, played a brief but ignoble role in British fortunes during the Seven Years' War. Established during the 1720s, it was the linchpin of Britain's imperial ambitions to the Great Lakes. When hostilities between France and Britain broke out in the Ohio Country in 1754, the French had already built forts at several key portages and passages between the St. Lawrence River and Lake Superior, extending their fur trade and Indian alliances far into the continent's interior. Oswego, on the other hand, was an isolated and precariously exposed outpost of British power, the tip of a solitary tentacle extending westward from Albany, along the Mohawk River, and stretching all the way to the shore of Lake Ontario. It did good business during its summer trading season, but the Iroquois Confederacy controlled the surrounding country and could at any moment cut off British access to it.

Bearing in mind these factors, it is easy to understand why Oswego figured so prominently in British campaigns at the outset of the war. In 1755, William Shirley, the royal governor of Massachusetts and second in command of British forces in North America, gathered his troops at Oswego for an intended attack on the French at Fort Niagara. When that plan fizzled, Shirley again made Oswego the focal point of his campaign plans in 1756, intending to use it as a base for attacking Fort Frontenac (Kingston, Ontario). If all had gone according to Shirley's plans, Oswego would have been transformed from an ill-protected trading post into a powerful military base and harbor, simultaneously securing Britain's claim to the Great Lakes, cementing the loyalty of the Six Nations, and protecting New York and Pennsylvania from French invasion by way of the west.

It was not to be. By the end of 1756, Shirley was relieved of command and sent back to England to defend himself before the king's ministers.



Figure 1. [Anonymous], *The English Lion Dismember'd, or the Voice of the Public for an enquiry into the loss of Minorca . . .* (London, 1756). Published after the British loss of Minorca (represented by the lion's severed front right paw), this print also noted two locations in North America imperiled by the French: Nova Scotia and Oswego (represented by the lion's rear right and left paws, respectively). © Trustees of the British Museum.

The French had advanced practically to Albany's doorstep by entrenching themselves at Ticonderoga at the southern end of Lake Champlain. Most shocking of all, Oswego, into which the Crown and colonies had poured two years' worth of men and supplies, was a smoldering ruin. Alongside the loss of the Mediterranean island of Minorca to the French, the fall of Oswego in 1756 was a sobering failure of British arms that caused public outcry and political panic at home (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

The fall of Oswego presented another unanticipated problem: the largest single group of British prisoners of war taken in North America to that

1. I would like to thank the anonymous readers for *New York History* for their comments, as well as Stephen Brumwell and Erica Charters for sharing their expertise with me. A Professional Development and Research Grant from Gettysburg College helped fund research at the British National Archives.

For the twin disasters of Oswego and Minorca, see Stephen Brumwell, *Redcoats: The British Soldier and War in the Americas, 1755–1763* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15–21, and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 179–85, respectively.

date. During the seventeenth century, warfare in North America had been fought on a small scale, mostly between colonists and Native Americans. Europeans who took Native Americans as prisoners of war typically sold them into slavery or put them to the sword. Native Americans who took Europeans as prisoners followed their own cultural practices for adopting, enslaving, or executing war captives. Between 1689 and 1748, a series of Anglo-French wars that originated in Europe brought new methods and rules of warfare to North America, but compared to the European theaters of these wars, the scale of operations in America remained small, and seventeenth-century precedents continued to govern how the belligerents treated their prisoners.

The Seven Years' War (1756–1763) brought into sharp relief the difference between European and American methods of dealing with prisoners of war. Army officers who crossed the Atlantic to fight in North America brought with them new ideas and practices influenced by Enlightenment sensibilities that equated humanitarian regard for prisoners of war with a nation's degree of civility. These same officers condemned Native American methods of war as savage, in part because Indians condoned the torture, execution, or permanent adoption of their war captives and did not conduct prisoner exchanges on the European model. This clash between European and Native American military cultures was most famously illustrated in the "massacre" at Fort William Henry in 1757, when French-allied Indians attacked the British garrison after it had agreed to surrender.<sup>2</sup> The fall of Oswego has in many respects been overshadowed by what happened one year later at Fort William Henry, but the fate of its prisoners tells us much about how warfare was changing in North America at this time. In particular, following the Oswego prisoners of war allows us to examine how the supposedly more civilized rules of warfare imported by European armies to North America often compounded rather than alleviated the suffering of prisoners taken there.

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2. For an excellent overview of the changing nature of colonial warfare, see Ian K. Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). For the Fort William Henry Massacre, see Ian K. Steele, *Betrayals: Fort William Henry and the "Massacre"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).



Figure 2. “English Plan of the Forts Ontario and Oswego . . . from Gentleman’s Magazine, 1757,” from E. B. O’Callaghan, ed., *Documentary History of the State of New-York*, 4 volumes (Albany: Weed, Parsons, and Company, 1849–51), 1:482. Fort Ontario and old Fort Oswego are depicted on opposite sides of the passage from the “River Onondago” [Oswego River] into Lake Ontario.



## SURRENDER

During 1755 and 1756, British soldiers and laborers transformed Oswego. Under Shirley's command, engineers built new fortifications for the post's original stone blockhouse (the "old fort") and two new forts on nearby hills: Fort Ontario on the east side of the Oswego River and a new Fort Oswego a few hundred yards southwest of the old one (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> By summer 1756, the garrison at Oswego consisted of 1,100 men, made up primarily of soldiers from the 50th and 51st Regiments, both regular army units recruited in the northern colonies, and supplemented by provincial troops from New Jersey commanded by Colonel Peter Schuyler. There were also several hundred civilian workers at the post, including carpenters and shipbuilders from Massachusetts and bateau men who manned the flat-bottomed boats used for river navigation. Approximately 300 sailors were there as well, sent to crew the naval ships the British intended to launch on Lake Ontario. At the time of the French attack on Oswego, a significant portion of this military and civilian manpower was working elsewhere along the river route between Albany and Oswego, transporting and guarding supplies as they moved west through Iroquois country. French and Indian war parties harassed these convoys, hurting morale and causing desertions. In early August, officers of the 50th and 51st Regiments mustered their troops to watch the execution of two deserters. Stephen Cross, a Massachusetts carpenter working at Oswego, noted these executions in his journal, as well as the death the following day of a soldier who was killed and scalped "within Gun Shot of Fort Ontario."<sup>4</sup> The mood was foreboding at Oswego even before the siege began.

The French army arrived on August 10, led by General Louis Joseph, marquis de Montcalm. Aware that the British were building ships and

3. On the state of Oswego's fortifications at the time of the siege, see "A Journal of the Transactions at Oswego from the 16th of May to the 14 of August 1756. By Patrick Mackellar Eng'r en Second to the Expedition," in *Military Affairs in North America, 1748–1765: Selected Documents from the Cumberland Papers in Windsor Castle*, ed. Stanley Pargellis (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1936), 187–206. Hereinafter cited as Mackellar journal. For good overview of Shirley's designs for Oswego in 1755 and 1756, see Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The Great War for the Empire: The Years of Defeat, 1754–1757* (New York: Knopf, 1946), 147–95, and John A. Schutz, *William Shirley, King's Governor of Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 205–39.

4. See Sarah E. Mulliken, ed., "Journal of Stephen Cross of Newbury Port, Entitled 'Up to Ontario,' The Activities of Newburyport Shipbuilders in Canada in 1756," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 2 parts, 74 (1939): 334–57, and 75 (1940): 14–42, 1:356. Hereinafter cited as Cross journal.

amassing troops at Oswego, Montcalm decided to strike before they could seize the offensive. He had 3,000 men at his disposal—including regulars, Canadian *troupes de la marine* and militiamen, and 300 warriors from Algonquian and Iroquoian nations allied with New France. In contrast, the outnumbered British troops were practically all untested colonists. As for Indian allies, they had none. Although Oswego was an important trading post, the Iroquois exhibited little inclination to assist the British in defending it.<sup>5</sup>

The French knew that Oswego's defenses were poor, but they were nevertheless surprised by how quickly it fell. Louis Antoine de Bougainville, Montcalm's aide-de-camp, heard from scouts that the garrison at Oswego was "badly fed, low in spirit, discouraged, ready to desert at the first chance," and he noted that if the French took Fort Ontario on the east side of the river, they would be ideally situated to fire their guns on the two forts on the west side of the river.<sup>6</sup> The best hope for the British was to get their armed vessels into the water, so that they could prevent French bateaux from landing troops and artillery, but a gale grounded a brigantine in the harbor, and Captain Housman Bradley, the commander of the British fleet, could not get his other armed vessels within firing range of the French, who were protected by their own armed ships and gun batteries on shore.<sup>7</sup>

Montcalm concentrated his forces first on Fort Ontario. When he had his artillery in position to batter the fort's stockade, Colonel James Mercer ordered its garrison to evacuate and join the rest of the British troops on the west side of the river. The abandonment of Fort Ontario gave the French exactly the advantage Bougainville had predicted; they now commanded the high ground necessary to aim their guns at the other British forts. Montcalm began bombarding the old fort at daybreak on August 14. In the meantime, his Canadian troops and Indian warriors forded the

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5. On Montcalm's forces, see E. B. O'Callaghan, ed., *Documentary History of the State of New-York*, 4 volumes (Albany: Weed, Parsons, and Company, 1849–51), 1:490–492. Hereinafter cited as *DHNY*. On the disaffection of the Iroquois with the British, see Francis Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies, and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (New York: Norton, 1988), 289–90.

6. See *DHNY*, 1:487–88, and Edward P. Hamilton, trans. and ed., *Adventure in the Wilderness: The American Journals of Louis Antoine de Bougainville, 1756–1760* (1964; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 7.

7. On the failure of the British naval fleet at Oswego, see W.L. Grant, "The Capture of Oswego by Montcalm in 1756: a Study in Naval Power," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, ser. 3, VIII (1914): 193–214.



river and approached the old fort from the north and south. The troops at the still-incomplete new Fort Oswego had no artillery to defend their position. Mercer planned to have them sally out and engage the Canadians and Indians, but a French cannonball decapitated him before the order could be carried out. Command of the besieged British devolved to Lieutenant Colonel John Littlehales of the 50th, who called a parley to discuss terms of surrender with Montcalm.<sup>8</sup>

When he asked for terms, Littlehales had hoped that Montcalm would extend to the British the “honors of war,” eighteenth-century shorthand for a number of concessions that allowed the vanquished to exit the field of battle with their dignity, property, and personal autonomy intact. These included care for the defeated army’s sick and wounded, parole for their officers and enlisted men, their retention of arms and regimental colors, and protection of their personal belongings from plunder. In the context of North American warfare, it also meant that the victorious army would prevent its allied Indians from taking captives, scalps, and plunder from the garrison. Military custom, however, also dictated that the honors of war were granted in recognition of the martial spirit exhibited by the defeated army. Montcalm did not think the British had proven themselves a worthy enemy at Oswego and so declined Littlehales’s request. Instead, he offered three articles of capitulation: the British would surrender as prisoners of war and be taken to Montreal, where they would be treated humanely according to the custom of war; officers, soldiers, and civilians would be allowed to carry their baggage and clothing with them; and all would remain as prisoners of war until their exchange could be arranged.<sup>9</sup> With the “cries, threats and hideous howlings” of the Canadians and Indians who had surrounded the British echoing in his ears, Littlehales accepted.<sup>10</sup>

Indians did not consider themselves party to such negotiated settlements. The honors of war, after all, were not a part of their military culture, and European commanders did not include their Indian allies in the

8. See Montcalm’s “Journal of the Siege of Chouaguen [Oswego],” in *DHNY*, 1:488–97; for a British perspective on the siege, see Mackellar journal, 207–14.

9. On the honors of war, see Steele, *Betrayals*, 109–10, and Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 153. For the articles of capitulation, see E. B. O’Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York*, 15 volumes (Albany: Weed, Parsons, and Company, 1853–57), 10:474. Hereinafter cited as *NYCD*.

10. *NYCD*, 10:473.

parleys that produced these settlements. Warriors who had traveled far from home expected to return with tangible proof of their success. One year after the fall of Oswego, at Fort William Henry on Lake George, Montcalm extended the honors of war to the surrendering British, but his Indian allies attacked the garrison as it marched out of the fort. The subsequent infamy of the “Fort William Henry Massacre” overshadowed a similar episode that occurred at Oswego.<sup>11</sup>

Details of the Indians’ attack on the Oswego garrison are sketchy, but enough eyewitness accounts exist to piece it together. In his journal, the carpenter Stephen Cross provided the most complete description of the event. According to Cross, Montcalm ordered the British soldiers and civilians back across the river and into Fort Ontario, where “A Guard was Set Round us, for two Reasons, one to Prevent our Stragling off, and another, to Prevent the Indians from Murthering us.” During this evacuation, Cross learned that the Indians had already killed all the sick and wounded, as well some soldiers who had broken into the “traders Houses, and Intoxicated themselves with liquor.” Other soldiers surreptitiously filled their canteens with rum and got drunk inside Fort Ontario, where their “Singing, Dancing, Hollowing, and Cahooting” attracted the notice of Indians who had been plundering the rum stores at the old fort. These Indians “Rushed the Guards Exceedingly hard, to git among us, with their Tomehawks.” The French sentries held their position, but warned the British to keep quiet or face the consequences. Regardless of the danger, “our Drunken Soldiers Continued their Noyes, and the Indians, their Strugles & Yelling, Until the operations of the Liquor, together with the Strong Exercions, began to dispose boath Parties to Sleep.”<sup>12</sup> Cross’s story is corroborated by a report written by Colonel Littlehales two weeks after the capitulation. Littlehales stated that he lost few men during the siege, but “after the Capitulation, some of them having got in Liquor fell into Wrangling with the Indians, and several of them were Kill’d, but the Number as yet is Uncertain.”<sup>13</sup>

It is hard to know exactly how many soldiers and civilians were killed or taken captive by the Indians in the melee that followed Oswego’s surren-

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11. See Steele, *Betrayals*, 109–28, 149–85.

12. Cross journal, 2:16–17.

13. Littlehales to Lord Loudoun, 30 August 1756, LO 1631, Loudoun Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Hereinafter cited as Loudoun Papers.

der. Neither Cross nor Littlehales mention specific numbers. British officer Patrick Mackellar recorded in his journal that the French performed well in guarding the prisoners inside Fort Ontario.<sup>14</sup> French sources make a few oblique references to the violence that followed the capitulation. Montcalm did not directly address the purported massacre at Oswego in his report on the siege, but he admitted that it was necessary to “tolerate a little plunder” by the Canadians and Indians because “this is the custom in the Colonies, on one side and the other.”<sup>15</sup> Another French officer was less guarded, writing that “more than 100 persons who were included in the capitulation” were killed by the Indians afterward, “without our being able to prevent them or having the right of remonstrating with them.”<sup>16</sup> Another French estimate put “those scalped by Indians” after the surrender at “about eighty.”<sup>17</sup> From these reports, it seems possible that up to 100 British soldiers and civilians perished in the aftermath of the battle, most of whom were vulnerable to assault because they were wounded, ill, or intoxicated.<sup>18</sup> It is also apparent from these reports that the French delivered on their promise to guard the prisoners, even at risk of their own lives, and that after the soldiers and Indians had sobered up, the threat of violence declined significantly.

Two other sources mention captives taken by the Indians after the surrender. These reports are significant because they clearly distinguish between prisoners of war, taken by the French according to the articles of capitulation, and captives taken by the Indians, which violated the articles but was nevertheless countenanced by the French. The anonymous British officer who published “A Journal of the Siege of *Oswego*” in London in 1757 accused Montcalm of handing over to the Indians twenty men from the New Jersey Regiment to compensate them for their losses during the battle. These men, he suspected, were tortured to death to gratify the Indians’ “insatiable Revenge,” although he offered no evidence to support this supposition. He also claimed that Montcalm “cunningly” selected these men out of the New Jersey troops because he knew the British Crown

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14. Mackellar journal, 213.

15. NYCD, 10:464.

16. NYCD, 10:456.

17. NYCD, 10:484.

18. For high (100) and low (30) estimates of the massacre at Oswego, see respectively Jennings, *Empire of Fortune*, 295–96, and Steele, *Betrayals*, 79.

would have protested had he taken them out of the 50th or 51st Regiments, which were regular army units: "So the Lot fell on the poor Provincials."<sup>19</sup> Robert Eastburn, an English Indian captive living in Montreal at the time of Oswego's surrender, made a similar claim. According to him, one of the Oswego prisoners told him that the French drafted "15 young *Lads*" out of the civilian prisoners to hand over to the Indians "to fill up the Number they had lost in the Battle." The French concealed this "*barbarous Design*," which is contrary to the *Laws of War*, among all *civilized Nations*," by claiming the boys were being sent off to work as bateau men.<sup>20</sup> In both instances, the fate of the prisoners allegedly handed over to the Indians was unknown. The anonymous officer suspected they were tortured to death; Eastburn suspected that the young boys were adopted into Indian families and would be converted into Anglophobic Catholics by French priests. Both of these suppositions have more to do with longstanding British caricatures of the French and their Indian allies than anything witnessed by either reporter. Both sources also illustrate a distinction that would become increasingly clear as the defeated soldiers and civilians from Oswego made their way into Canada: different cultural protocols determined how the French and their Indian allies treated their prisoners.

## THE OSWEGO PRISONERS IN CANADA

Montcalm's decision to make the Oswego garrison prisoners of war rather than paroling them created a new problem: what to do with them? For the soldiers and officers, European rules of war dictated that they were to be fed, clothed, and housed by the French until they could be exchanged for French prisoners.<sup>21</sup> With virtually no French prisoners of war in North America at this point, that meant shipping them back to Europe. The status of the other prisoners was less clear. Montcalm's responsibility for any Indian captives ended the moment they fell into Indian hands. The status

19. [Anonymous], "A Journal of the Siege of *Oswego*" in [Anonymous], *The Military History of Great Britain, for 1756, 1757* (London: J. Millan, 1757), 41–42. Hereinafter cited as "Journal of the Siege of *Oswego*."

20. Robert Eastburn, *A Faithful Narrative of the many Dangers and Sufferings, as well as wonderful Deliverances of Robert Eastburn, during his Captivity among the Indians* (Philadelphia: William Dunlap, 1758), 31, n.

21. On the evolving protocol among European nations for dealing with prisoners of war, see Erica Charters, *Disease, War, and the Imperial State: The Welfare of the British Armed Forces during the Seven Years' War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 172–90.

of the civilian prisoners of war was less clear. At the time of the surrender, there were about 200 workers at Oswego, as well as sixty to eighty women and girls, some wives and children of officers and soldiers and others part of the civilian work force. Montcalm was not as duty-bound to protect them as he was the soldiers, but neither did he give these civilians over wholesale to the Indians, which would have ended his need to provide for them. As the French evacuated the post, they transported, fed, and housed the civilian prisoners in the same manner as the soldiers.<sup>22</sup> The distinction between soldier and civilian, however, was not erased, and it became important when custody of the prisoners shifted from French into British hands.

The number of Oswego prisoners was unprecedented, but their treatment was not. In addition to the European rules of war regarding prisoners, which emphasized humane treatment and rapid exchange, there had emerged in colonial Canada an intercultural process for taking and redeeming prisoners of war and Indian captives. French civilian and military officers did not compel their Indian allies to surrender captives taken during their cooperative military operations. Rather, French officials and private individuals sometimes purchased colonial captives from Indians, and then put those captives to work as servants until they paid off their ransoms. In other cases, French officials, clergy, and traders served as intermediaries, helping a captive's family or benefactors negotiate his or her purchase and repatriation. During times of war, captives who were no longer bound to Indian or colonial masters would be held by the governor-general of Canada in Quebec until he arranged a prisoner exchange with one of his counterparts in the British colonies. Before the Seven Years' War, most British prisoners in Canada were civilians taken captive during French and Indian raids on frontier towns such as Deerfield, Massachusetts and Saratoga, New York.<sup>23</sup> The Oswego prisoners were different not just

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22. Sources report varying numbers for the prisoners taken at Oswego, depending on who they were counting: regulars, all military personnel (including provincials and sailors), and civilians. See *NYCD*, 10:456, 484; Lt. Colonel John Littlehales, Returns for the 50th and 51st Regiments from Quebec, 24 August 1756, LO 1539, Loudoun Papers; Cross journal, 2:16; Hamilton, *Adventure in the Wilderness*, 26.

23. On the methods and protocols used to redeem prisoners and captives in New France, see John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 77–119, 167–87, and Ian K. Steele, *Setting All the Captives Free: Capture, Adjustment, and Recollection in Allegheny Country* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 263–308.

because of their large number, but because so many of them were soldiers in the regular army.

The most obvious precedent for what would happen to the Oswego prisoners had occurred ten years before, during King George's War (1744–1748). In August 1746, Fort Massachusetts in the Berkshire Mountains surrendered to a French and Indian force. The garrison consisted of twenty-two men, three women, and five children. Their leader, the Reverend John Norton, negotiated articles of capitulation with the French commander that promised “the Salvages should have nothing to do with any of us,” that the children would remain with their parents, and that all would be exchanged as soon as the opportunity arose. The Indians, angered “that they were shut out,” insisted on a share of the captives, and the French officers relented, despite Norton's protests and expectation that they would be tortured and killed. Instead, Norton was surprised to find that the Indians treated their captives well, even carrying the sick and incapacitated on their backs.<sup>24</sup>

The French and Indians marched the Fort Massachusetts prisoners into Canada, where most were eventually delivered to the Quebec prison to await exchange. Here they joined other prisoners taken at sea by French privateers and naval ships, bringing the total number confined inside the prison to 105. Within a few days, this number more than doubled with the arrival of more prisoners taken at sea. By the fall, the Quebec prison had become a pest house, and a “very mortal epidemical Fever” exacted a terrifyingly high toll on its occupants. More than half of the Fort Massachusetts prisoners succumbed, including a child named Captivity who had been born to one of the women during the march into Canada. In July 1747, after nearly a year in confinement, the surviving Fort Massachusetts prisoners were put on board a ship with their compatriots for exchange in Boston. During their time in the Quebec prison, seventy-three British prisoners died.<sup>25</sup>

As the experience of the Fort Massachusetts prisoners indicated, the Oswego prisoners had far more to worry about from confinement in Quebec than captivity among the Indians. Indian captivity involved more

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24. John Norton, *The Redeemed Captive, Being a Narrative of the taking and carrying into Captivity the Reverend Mr. John Norton* (Boston: n.p., 1748), 9–14.

25. Norton, *The Redeemed Captive*, 28–30, 38, 40.



culture shock, but captives who were not young children and survived the march into Canada stood a good chance of eventually finding their way home. The route to freedom could be long and circuitous, but counter-intuitively, it also involved some freedom of movement. Indian captives traveled with their captors and engaged in their daily lives. If sold to the French, they likewise lived and worked within their masters' households and sometimes gained the freedom to work for their own wages.<sup>26</sup> Prisoners held for exchange in Quebec, on the other hand, had to endure confinement in the prison, where inactivity and overcrowding exposed them to potentially fatal illnesses.

Here it is instructive to examine the experiences of Robert Eastburn, the Indian captive who encountered the Oswego prisoners as they passed through Montreal. Eastburn was a blacksmith working at the Great Carrying Place (Rome, New York) when he was taken captive by a French and Indian force in March 1756. When the French commander learned of his occupation, he asked Eastburn if he was interested in settling in Canada, where he could make a good living. Eastburn refused this proposition, and so the officer handed him over to his Indian master without further regard. Eastburn then marched into Canada along with other Indian captives, where he spent several weeks enduring the emotional and physical abuse that Indians typically inflicted on freshly arrived captives, such as forcing them to run the gauntlet and to sing and dance for them. Eastburn's captors eventually handed him over to an Indian family in the mission town of Oswegatchie (Ogdensburg, New York). His new relations fed, clothed, and cared for him, and put him to work chopping wood. Despite this improved treatment, Eastburn did not like living among his adopted kin, and so with their permission, he went to Montreal, where he worked for another blacksmith. When the Oswego prisoners arrived in town, he was unexpectedly reunited with his son, who had come along with his father to work at Oswego the previous spring and was at the fort when it fell. Eastburn wished to proceed to Quebec with his son and the other prisoners of war, but the French forbade it because he did not have permission from his Indian family. Eastburn convinced the French to let

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26. For the experience of Indian captives in Canada at the time of the Oswego prisoners, see Beverly W. Bond, Jr., "The Captivity of Charles Stuart, 1755–1757," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 13 (June 1926): 58–81, and Eastburn, *A Faithful Narrative*.

his son stay with him in Montreal, and both worked there until he was finally released from his Indian captivity and, along with his son, allowed to rejoin the Oswego prisoners in Quebec.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, by the very nature of their condition, the Oswego prisoners did not get to choose between being Indian captives or prisoners of war. In the chaos that immediately followed the surrender, some may have ended up with the Indians, but the vast majority of those who were placed under guard inside Fort Ontario were treated as prisoners of war by Montcalm and his officers. Evacuation to Quebec began the day after the surrender. Among the prisoners, officers went first. Along with their female relations and servants, they boarded bateaux and headed down the St. Lawrence River to Montreal. The enlisted men followed, and then the civilians, who embarked five days after the officers.<sup>28</sup> After taking all the artillery, provisions, and other goods they could from Oswego's stores, the French burned its three forts and returned into Canada. Montcalm did not bother leaving a garrison there. He knew a losing proposition when he saw one.

The conditions for the prisoners along their trek varied according to their status. An anonymous British officer described the landscape from Lake Ontario to Montreal as "the most difficult, romantick, and dangerous that Imagination can form," and he was impressed with the skill that the Canadians and Indians exhibited in navigating their bateaux through rapids and other hazards during his river journey. In Montreal, Indians lined the shore as the officers disembarked. Colonel Littlehales, the highest-ranking officer among the prisoners, "was immediately seized by a number of these Savages, who buffeted, knock'd him down, and would have kill'd him" had not French guards intervened. Despite Littlehales's roughing up, the other officers were treated well, and the anonymous observer conceded, "to do Justice to the *French*, no People take greater Care of sick and wounded Men than they do."<sup>29</sup> Littlehales likewise complimented the French on their care of the prisoners, noting that "Since Our Arrival at this Place we have been Treated with all Imaginable Politeness, and I have no Reason to Doubt of a Continuance."<sup>30</sup>

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27. Eastburn, *Faithful Narrative*, 10–36.

28. For the French evacuation of Oswego, see Hamilton, *Adventure in the Wilderness*, 27–28, and Mackellar journal, 214.

29. "Journal of the Siege of *Oswego*," 43–45.

30. Littlehales to Lord Loudoun, 30 August 1756, LO 1631, Loudoun Papers.

The rank and file prisoners had a less “romantick” trip down the St. Lawrence. Peter Williamson, who served as a private in the 50th Regiment, described the passage from Oswego to Montreal as “very hard and slavish” because the men were made to load and row the vessels that carried them. He arrived at Montreal on August 28 and spent one night confined to the fort there before being loaded onto a ship that carried him to Quebec.<sup>31</sup> An Indian captive who spoke with the enlisted men as they passed through Montreal found them angry over the manner in which their officers had surrendered Oswego, and they “did not scruple to say that it was sold to the Enemy.”<sup>32</sup>

The civilian prisoners appear to have had the most difficult passage of all. In his journal, Stephen Cross noted that the bateaux that carried the civilians were overcrowded, and the prisoners were made to row and carry the vessels over portages. At Oswegatchie, Cross and his fellow carpenters saw “Several of our Men, who had been Picked off [i.e. taken captive], from us in times Passed,” and he noted that they were “Dressed and Painted, after the Indian fashion.” Like the officers and soldiers, the civilians stayed briefly in Montreal before moving on to Quebec, but their security remained a concern. According to Cross, French soldiers tried to sexually assault one of the women in his group, but “She and her Husband Screamed Murder” and drove them away. The sick and wounded among the civilians also seem to have suffered more severely during the trip down river. Cross noted the deaths of two of his fellow carpenters during their journey. He was digging a grave for one of them when he was ordered to board a ship headed for Quebec, where he arrived on September 4.<sup>33</sup>

Some of the Oswego prisoners escaped rather than wait for their exchange. In Montreal, Robert Eastburn assisted a small party of escapees by giving them two pocket compasses and escorting them “clear of the Town, on a *Saturday* Evening, before the *Centries* were set at the *Gates*.” He did not know what became of two of the men who split off from the group, but the remainder made it safely to Fort William Henry (Eastburn

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31. Peter Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty; Exemplified in the Life and various Vicissitudes of Fortune, of Peter Williamson, A Disbanded Soldier* (York: N. Nickson, 1757), 98.

32. Declaration of John Veel, 6 October 1756, LO 1980, Loudoun Papers. Veel gave his testimony at Fort Edward, after escaping from his master in Montreal.

33. Cross journal, 2:17–20.

learned this from another prisoner of war he encountered later).<sup>34</sup> According to a report in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a bateau man named Williams who had been taken captive a few weeks before Oswego's surrender ran away with some prisoners of war when they passed through Montreal. Williams and three others spent two weeks traversing "over Hills and Dales, Bogs and Quagmires," until arriving at Fort Edward, "quite spiritless through Want."<sup>35</sup> The Indian captive John Veel, who like Eastburn was working off his ransom in Montreal when the Oswego prisoners came through town, escaped to Fort Edward in October, but his statement to officers there did not mention whether he had collaborated with any of the Oswego prisoners.<sup>36</sup> In all three of these instances, it is worth noting that none of the escapees reported running away because of abuse they had received from the French or Indians. In fact, the escapees generally admitted that they had been treated well. Their motivation to escape, therefore, may have come from what they expected to happen to them: confinement in Quebec's prison.

The bulk of the Oswego prisoners arrived in Quebec during the first week of September. Officers were allowed to find housing with the city's inhabitants, but soldiers and civilians were confined to the military prison inside the royal redoubt that guarded the upper town, overlooking the St. Lawrence. This was the same building that had housed prisoners during King George's War. It had barred windows and guards, but it was much larger than the prison used in the lower town to hold civilian criminals.<sup>37</sup> Cross described the military prison as a "Grand long Stone Barrack of 3 Stories, divided into Convenient Rooms with Cabbins and Straw Beds, and in the 2 lower Stories fire Places." He and his fellow carpenters were assigned to the unheated upper story, which already contained a "Considerable number" of other prisoners, "both men and Women." Despite the overcrowding, Cross found his conditions tolerable. The prison keeper "Conducted toward us more like A Father than an Enemy," the food was satisfactory, and they were allowed to spend daylight hours in the prison yard. Also, prisoners who fell ill were treated in the hospital and not returned to the prison until they had recovered. The high mortality from

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34. Eastburn, *A Faithful Narrative*, 33–34.

35. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 18 November 1756.

36. Declaration of John Veel, 6 October 1756, LO 1980, Loudoun Papers.

37. For the location and physical dimensions of the military prison, see Colleen Gray, "Captives in Canada, 1744–1763," (M.A. thesis: McGill University, 1993), 18–25.

disease that afflicted the prisoners held during King George's War was not repeated in 1756.<sup>38</sup>

The French guards offered to free some of the prisoners from confinement if they agreed to work on nearby farms during the harvest. According to Peter Williamson, all the usual farm laborers had been drafted into military service, leaving the corn "continually falling into the Stubble for Want of Hands to reap it." When Robert Eastburn saw the Oswego prisoners pass through Montreal, he thought they had been purposefully kept "in a starving Condition, in order to make them Work, which some complied with, but others bravely refused."<sup>39</sup> That does not appear to have been the case in Quebec. Williamson refused the offer to work the harvest, not out of patriotic resistance, but because he was fed better in prison. The men who did go to work the harvest returned after a few days, "being almost starv'd, having nothing in the Country to live on but dry Bread," while those in the prison received meat with their daily rations. Cross likewise refused to work the harvest, but he noted that 22 of the soldiers did take up their captors' offer.<sup>40</sup>

The prisoners ate comparatively well in Quebec because in keeping with European rules of war, their upkeep was charged to the British and would eventually be reimbursed. Regardless of who was paying, they could not eat if there was no food, and by the end of 1756, provisions were growing scarce. Bougainville, who was in Quebec in November, noted that the poor harvest had forced the rationing of bread among the populace: "I went to see this distribution. It presents the image of famine." He also noted that the "English prisoners" witnessed these scenes and "do not fail to draw their conclusions from it."<sup>41</sup> Williamson described the same situation, but more provocatively: the guards and townspeople feared that the Oswego prisoners would rise up and ravage the "entirely Defenceless" civilian population. They thought that "sending us away" would be "the most eligible Way of keeping themselves from Famine."<sup>42</sup> No one in Quebec, from the governor-general on down, wanted to see the Oswego prisoners stick around for any longer than was absolutely necessary.

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38. Cross journal, 2:20–21.

39. Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty*, 98, and Eastburn, *A Faithful Narrative*, 31.

40. Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty*, 98–99, and Cross journal, 2:21.

41. Hamilton, *Adventure in the Wilderness*, 71–72.

42. Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty*, 99.

## ATLANTIC PASSAGES

With no French prisoners of war in Boston or New York City awaiting exchange, the governor-general of New France shipped the Oswego prisoners to Europe. They sailed on cartel ships, unarmed vessels that flew a neutral flag, so long as they were carrying prisoners for exchange and not commercial cargoes.<sup>43</sup> Peter Williamson was one of nearly 500 Oswego prisoners crammed aboard the first cartel ship to leave Quebec. The *La Renommé*, commanded by Captain Dennis Vitree, sailed from Quebec on September 30, a little more than three weeks after the Oswego prisoners' arrival in the city.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike some of the cartel ships that followed it, the *La Renommé* sailed to Britain rather than France. According to a return prepared by Littlehales, who also sailed on the *La Renommé*, 332 officers and enlisted men boarded the ship, divided roughly equally between the 50th and 51st Regiments.<sup>45</sup> Littlehales did not count the other passengers on board, but is likely that more than 150 other prisoners, civilians and sailors, also embarked on the vessel.<sup>46</sup> Nearly 500 passengers was a large number for any ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean in the mid-eighteenth century, but it was not unheard of. Vessels carrying immigrants, soldiers, and slaves often carried as many on board. No doubt, the vessel was crowded, but the soldiers on it would have faced similar conditions on a British transport ship.

After a five-week voyage, the *La Renommé* arrived at Plymouth on

43. On the use of cartel ships to carry prisoners of war and smuggled goods, see Steele, *Setting All the Captives Free*, 305, and Thomas M. Truxes, *Defying Empire: Trading with the Enemy in Colonial New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 89–94, respectively.

44. Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty*, 102. Dennis de Vitre was a French ship captain who later piloted vessels for the British in the St. Lawrence River. See John Cleveland to the Lords of the Admiralty, 24 February 1761, ADM 354/166/156, British National Archives, Kew, England. Hereinafter cited as BNA.

45. John Littlehales, "Copy of the Returns of the 50th/51st Regts. & the Detachment of Royal Artillery Embark'd from Quebec for Old England 30th Sepr. 1756," LO 1539, Loudoun Papers. These returns list the officers and soldiers in aggregate by rank; they do not name the individual passengers. Cross noted in his journal that 300 soldiers were drafted to sail for England on September 29. See Cross journal, 2:21.

46. The *Derby Mercury* reported in its 13 May 1757 edition (several months after its arrival at Plymouth in November 1756) that the *La Renommé* arrived in Plymouth with 242 officers and soldiers on board and 149 other passengers and sailors. If correct, this figure means 90 officers and soldiers died during their passage, making for a startlingly high mortality rate of 27%. If that were the case, it seems strange that Williamson did not mention it in *French and Indian Cruelty*, nor have I found any other references to this shipboard mortality in any other sources that reported on the arrival of the *La Renommé*.



England's southwest coast. British newspapers reported its arrival and the large number of prisoners from Oswego that it carried.<sup>47</sup> Williamson and his comrades, however, were not allowed to leave the ship for another week because the local authorities were unsure what to do with them. Finally, the War Office in London ordered the army commander in Plymouth to supply the men with food and clothing and to find billets for them in the countryside until they could be mustered into service again.<sup>48</sup>

The remaining Oswego prisoners waited their turn for repatriation, but most would end up enduring longer and more difficult passages than those who sailed on the *La Renommé*. Stephen Cross noted in his journal that on October 4, just a few days after the *La Renommé* left Quebec, the prisoners were asked for 160 volunteers to sail on another ship headed for France. About half the number was met by volunteers from among the soldiers, but the balance was made up from civilian prisoners selected by draft. This portion included Cross and all of his fellow carpenters, who were greatly disappointed because they had hoped to be sent directly to Boston. They embarked on the *Outarde*, a war ship of 500 tons. The prisoners were crowded below decks where a platform had been built over the water casks to accommodate them, but it was so cramped that sleeping left them "lying Partly one on the other." During their passage, they were plagued by lice and moldy bread with "Many Worms in it." One of the prisoners, a soldier of the New Jersey Regiment, slowly went mad. During a storm at sea, he cried out "the Ship was Sinking and our friends would never Know our unhappy fate." By the time the ship landed, he had "lost his Reason totally and went raving distracted."<sup>49</sup>

Tensions arose during the voyage between the military and civilian prisoners. Cross noted that about half of the passengers were soldiers from the 50th Regiment, whom "by their Manners and behavior" he suspected were former convicts recruited into the army. After many altercations that some-

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47. See the *Gazetteer and London Advertiser*, 12 November 1756 and the *Leeds Intelligencer*, 16 November 1756.

48. Lord Barrington to J. Cleveland, 16 November 1756, WO 4/52/399, and Barrington to John Calcraft, 13 November 1756, WO 4/52/395, BNA.

49. Cross journal, 21–24. Captain Bradley and other naval officers associated with the failed Oswego fleet also sailed on the *Outarde*. See Frank H. Severance, *An Old Frontier of France: The Niagara Region and Adjacent Lakes under French Control*, 2 volumes (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1917), 2:179.

times “Came to blows,” the soldiers and civilians agreed to divide their space down the middle, each group keeping to its own side of the hold except when it was necessary to pass up the hatch. After a six-week voyage, the *Outarde* landed in France, but Cross’s trials were far from over. The prisoners were confined in Brest for several weeks, and then Cross was part of a contingent that marched eastward to join other British prisoners of war being held in Dinan. By January 1757, many of Cross’s compatriots were falling ill and dying, including his uncle.<sup>50</sup>

Another cartel ship, the *Abenoquis*, sailed from Quebec on November 14, delivering its human cargo to Brest in late December. The Oswego prisoners on this ship were marched inland to the village of Lesneven, where they were still awaiting exchange the following May.<sup>51</sup> After the *Abenoquis* sailed, ice blocked the St. Lawrence until the spring. In July 1757, 300 prisoners of war sailed from Quebec on a cartel ship headed for Plymouth, England. Robert Eastburn and his son, despite their desire to return directly to Philadelphia, were aboard this ship, as were at least two other Indian captives who had been ransomed and confined in the Quebec jail. They arrived in England “ragged, lowly, sick, and in a Manner, starved,” but were not allowed to go ashore because of an outbreak of smallpox among them. The prisoners were transferred to another ship and taken to Portsmouth, where they spent two more weeks in onboard quarantine. Some of them never set foot on English soil: they were transferred to another ship that sailed directly for Boston.<sup>52</sup>

## HOMEcomings

The cartel ships delivered the Oswego prisoners to Europe in piecemeal fashion, and so in like manner they were exchanged. Repatriation did not necessarily mean a homecoming. Most of the prisoners, whether civilian or military, had homes in North America. Arriving on British soil may have restored their freedom, but it did not guarantee their passage home.

50. Cross journal, 2:25–42.

51. “Journal of the Siege of *Oswego*,” 50.

52. Eastburn, *A Faithful Narrative*, 39–40. Two other former Indian captives sailed on this cartel ship. See Bond, “The Captivity of Charles Stuart, 1755–1757,” 79, and Susanna Johnson, *A Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Johnson* (1796) in *North Country Captives: Selected Narratives of Indian Captivity from Vermont and New Hampshire*, ed. Colin G. Calloway (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1992), 75–76.

Soldiers, for the most part, ended up back in service. The government's responsibility for civilians, however, ceased the moment they acquired their freedom, which could leave them ill, penniless, and stranded in a strange land.

Not long after the first shipload of Oswego prisoners arrived in November 1756, the ministry made plans to break the 50th and 51st Regiments and to have their men drafted into other units. The decision was practical, but it was also a symbolic way of washing away the stain on British honor left by the hasty capitulation at Oswego. This process was complicated by the fact that soldiers of the 50th and 51st were at that time in four different places. Those who had not been at Oswego, when it surrendered, were still on active duty in North America.<sup>53</sup> Of those taken prisoner at Oswego, some were still in Quebec, while those placed onboard cartel ships were arriving in either England or France. In January 1757, the 400 officers and men of the 50th and 51st quartered in and around Plymouth were drafted into the 2nd battalion of the 1st Regiment of Foot, also known as the Royals, which was then preparing for deployment to North America.<sup>54</sup> The health of these men on the eve of their return home was not good. When they arrived in Portsmouth to join their new unit, their commanding officer complained to the War Office that they "brought the Small Pox among us," and he sought permission to quarantine them on land rather than loading them on transport ships among his healthy soldiers. He noted in particular the presence of an "Indian Squaw" among the infected Oswego prisoners, who "was Wife to an Indian, a Soldier, turned over among others into the Royals." Her husband had since "died of the Small Pox," but he feared that this woman remained a source of contagion.<sup>55</sup> The fate of this unnamed Indian woman is unclear, but in this fleeting reference to her we can begin to comprehend the suffering and loneliness that many of the Oswego prisoners must have experienced as a result of their Atlantic passage.

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53. These soldiers were eventually drafted into the 62nd Regiment (the Royal Americans) in spring 1757. See "A Return of the Serjeants, Corporals, Drummers, and Private Men and Deserters from the 50th and 51st Regiments turn'd over to the 62nd or Royal American Regiment at Castle William, March 7th, 1757," WO 1/1/165, BNA.

54. Lord Barrington to John Cleveland, 4 February 1757, WO 4/53/167. See also C. T. Atkinson, "A Colonial Draft for the Royals in 1757," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 16 (1937): 215–217, and Brumwell, *Redcoats*, 66–67.

55. General Hopson to War Department, 27 March 1757, WO 1/973/535, BNA.

In August 1757, another wave of Oswego prisoners arrived in southwestern England by way of France. These included more men from the 50th and 51st, as well as soldiers from the New Jersey Regiment and some civilians. Unlike the earlier wave of prisoners drafted into the 1st Regiment, these soldiers appear to have been discharged from their service. The commander at Plymouth encouraged the soldiers to re-enlist, but he found them reluctant to do so and more inclined to “entering on board his Majesty’s Ships and others to Entertain with the Marines.” He asked the War Office to “give them a Free passage Home.” As had been the case with the earlier Oswego prisoners drafted into the 1st Regiment, many of these were in broken health: “I found a hundred Sick of the Small Pox and Dysentrys [dysentery].”<sup>56</sup> It was a cruel irony that while many of the Oswego prisoners had avoided contracting life-threatening illnesses in Quebec, they fell prey to them on cartel ships and in prison camps while awaiting exchange in France.

Civilians who found their way to Britain or France among the Oswego prisoners faced even more daunting prospects in their efforts to return home. The Admiralty Office arranged for their exchange, but its responsibility for them ceased at that point. The War Office felt no compelling need to provide for them because they were not enlisted in the army. For food, clothing, and shelter, they relied on the charity of friends and strangers, and for transportation home the sympathy of captains of naval and merchant vessels. The plight of such prisoners is illustrated in a petition that thirteen Americans submitted to the War Office in September 1757. The petitioners were all former Indian captives from Virginia and Pennsylvania whose fates had been conjoined with those of the Oswego prisoners when they were placed onboard the same cartel ship that carried them from Quebec to France. They had finally arrived in Britain as part of a larger prisoner exchange, but found themselves impoverished and especially in need of clothing. The War Office, on reviewing the petition, forwarded it to the Admiralty, because “none of the Petitioners appear to be Soldiers.”<sup>57</sup> Other civilians who arrived in Britain on the cartel ships, such

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56. John More to War Office, 2 September 1757, WO 1/972/487, BNA.

57. See Petition of 13 Americans to Lord Barrington, 29 September 1757, and War Office to Admiralty, 30 September 1757, ADM 1/4323, BNA.

as Pennsylvania Indian captive Jean Lowry, relied on the generosity of private individuals willing to take mercy on “a poor disconsolate Stranger.”<sup>58</sup>

Petitions sent to the War Office during 1757 illuminate the plights of Oswego prisoners with no discernible means of supporting themselves or getting home. Captain Nathaniel Rusco of the New Jersey Regiment arrived in Plymouth in August 1757 by way of France, but then fell ill with smallpox. When his fellow prisoners were ordered to march to Portsmouth, where they would embark for America, he was left behind to fend for himself. By late October, he had recovered from his illness, but found it necessary to ask the War Office for the money necessary to settle debts he had contracted during his convalescence so that he could rejoin his unit in America.<sup>59</sup> Theophilus Dame was an officer in the 51st Regiment who was still awaiting exchange in France when he wrote to the War Office in August 1757. He described himself as having been imprisoned in Poitiers for more than six months, his misfortune “greatly compounded” by his separation from fellow officers “from whom I might have hoped to have rec[eive]d some assistance.” “Being an American by birth and not having the least knowledge of any Person in England,” he found himself with no one to call on for support, and so asked the War Department to forward his overdue pay, “to inable me to discharge debts that my necessity have obliged me to Contract” among his captors in France.<sup>60</sup> Even someone as high-ranking as James Pitcher, “Commissary of the Musters of His Majesty’s Forces in North America,” felt compelled to ask the War Office for financial assistance. Pitcher explained that he had been taken prisoner at Oswego, where “by the eagerness and unruliness of the Enemys Irregulars and Indians for Plunder,” he had lost all of his baggage and papers, “and saved nothing but what was on his back.” He asked for compensation for his losses and for his passage back to the colonies so that he could resume his official duties.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the humane treatment the Oswego captives claimed to have received from the French, the rules of war that governed their internment

58. Jean Lowry, *A Journal of the Captivity of Jean Lowry, and her Children* (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1760), 17. See also Johnson, *A Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Johnson*, 75–76.

59. See Richard Patridge, agent for the colony of New Jersey, to Robert Wood, Esq., 21 October 1757, WO 1/972/475, BNA.

60. Petition of Theophilus Dame to Lord Barrington, 21 August 1757, WO 1/974/95, BNA.

61. Petition of James Pitcher to Lord Barrington, January 1757, WO 1/974/441, BNA.

and exchange clearly took a mental, physical, and financial toll. The New Jersey soldier who went mad on his cartel ship and the Indian woman who contracted smallpox on hers are just two examples of this cost, which could prove fatal. For British prisoners, the French may have been “civilized” captors when compared to the “savage” Indians, but malnutrition, disease, and exposure to the elements were arbitrary persecutors, regardless of who held the prisoners.<sup>62</sup> By the time Robert Eastburn and his son made it back to their native Philadelphia, they had endured two Atlantic crossings, been refused a landing on British soil, treated as paupers on their arrival in Boston, and forced to return to their family “*sick and weak in Body, and empty handed.*”<sup>63</sup> The senior Eastburn may very well have regretted the day he exchanged his Indian captivity in Montreal for the fate of a prisoner of war in Quebec.

### FRENCH AND INDIAN CRUELTY?

By 1758, most of the Oswego prisoners had been exchanged, but a final accounting for all of them is impossible. As other prisoners of war and Indian captives came into Quebec, they were housed with the remaining Oswego prisoners there and all were jumbled together on cartel ships. Colonel Peter Schuyler, the commander of the New Jersey troops at Oswego, remained a prisoner in Quebec for more than a year, during which time he expended his own funds to assist others in need of clothing and other necessities. In October 1757, he returned to New Jersey on parole but was recalled to Quebec because of a dispute between the French governor-general and British commander-in-chief. He was finally exchanged with many of the other remaining prisoners in Quebec after Fort Frontenac fell to the British in August 1758, two years after the surrender at Oswego.<sup>64</sup>

62. For Europeans' perceptions of savagery in the way Indians conducted warfare and treated captives, see Steele, *Betrayals*, 149–85; Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Random House, 1998), 71–121; and Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 39–71.

63. Eastburn, *A Faithful Narrative*, 42.

64. On Schuyler's generosity toward the other prisoners, see Eastburn, *A Faithful Narrative*, 37–38. For his parole and exchange, see NYCD, 7:344, 10:773, 877–78. See also John David Krugler, “SCHUYLER, PETER (1710–62),” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 3, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed July 6, 2014, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/schuyler\\_peter\\_1710\\_62\\_3E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/schuyler_peter_1710_62_3E.html).





Figure 3. "Mr. Peter Williamson in the Dress of a Delaware Indian, with his Tomohawk, Scalping Knife, &c.," from the *Grand Magazine* (London), June 1759. One of the Oswego prisoners of war carried by cartel ship to Britain, Williamson exhibited himself in Indian dress before paying audiences and wrote a widely circulated narrative of his American misadventures. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

As the other Oswego prisoners slipped back into the anonymity of their military and civilian lives, one among them decided to make a career out of his misfortune. Like many other soldiers of the 50th Regiment, Peter Williamson had been drafted into the 1st Regiment at Plymouth in March 1757, but he was discharged soon afterward because of a wound he had received in his hand. A native of Scotland, Williamson had come to Pennsylvania as a child servant in 1743. Rather than returning to America, he decided to go home to Aberdeen. Along the way, he published a narrative of his American misadventures titled *French and Indian Cruelty; Exemplified in the Life and various Vicissitudes of Fortune, of Peter Williamson, A Disbanded Soldier*, and he gave live performances of his story in taverns and coffee houses while dressed in Indian costume (see Figure 3). In his narrative, Williamson described the fall of Oswego and his time as a prisoner of war, but its centerpiece was an Indian captivity he invented for himself along the Pennsylvania frontier. *French and Indian Cruelty* went through several more editions during the next ten years, and Williamson's performances were advertised and reported in Scotland, England, and Ireland. He eventually settled in Edinburgh, where he opened his own coffee house and continued to cultivate his celebrity as a former soldier, prisoner of war, and Indian captive from America.<sup>65</sup> No doubt, he told and retold the story of the Oswego prisoners many times.

Williamson was also a liar and plagiarist. His captivity story was pure fiction, and he filched his description of Oswego's fall from the pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine*.<sup>66</sup> But he was indeed a former soldier and prisoner of war, and he had returned to Britain on that first cartel ship from Quebec. Of all the lies he told in his narrative, perhaps the most obvious was the one hidden in plain sight in its title: *French and Indian Cruelty*. Despite the many lurid scenes of Indian torture and depravity Williamson included in his fabricated captivity, he never mentioned suffering at the hands of Indians during or after Oswego's surrender. As for the French, he admitted that they had treated him and his fellow prisoners "with a good deal of Humanity."<sup>67</sup>

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65. See Timothy J. Shannon, "King of the Indians: The Hard Fate and Curious Career of Peter Williamson," *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 66 (January 2009): 3–44.

66. For his description of Oswego's fall, Williamson borrowed heavily from the account given in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 27 (February 1757), 73–78.

67. Williamson, *French and Indian Cruelty*, 99.

The contradiction between Williamson's accusations of French and Indian cruelty and his own admission that he had been treated with humanity as a prisoner of war illuminates an important truth about the Oswego prisoners: their misfortunes cannot be ascribed to any particular cultural or national defect in their French or Indian captors. Rather, the Oswego prisoners suffered the casual cruelty that new European rules of war inflicted on them in the name of civilization: confinement in prison, Atlantic voyages that ruined their health, and exchanges that left them impoverished and far from home. Stories told by Oswego prisoners like Williamson and Eastburn helped cement in the British imagination the notion that war in North America was particularly savage because the cunning French used their barbaric Indian allies as proxies to conduct the kind of warfare that civilized nations no longer condoned. Yet, the experience of those same prisoners of war indicates that, more than any other factor, it was their forced exile across the Atlantic that compounded their suffering. If we presume that the most fervent wish among the Oswego prisoners was to return home as quickly as possible, then the rules of warfare imported to North America by European armies during the Seven Years' War made it harder, rather than easier, to achieve that end.