

Bicentennial Moment #5: Mary Jemison (1743-1833), the White Woman of the Genesee

Mary grew up on a farm near Gettysburg, PA. In 1758, a raiding party of French soldiers and Shawnee warriors captured her family; her two brothers escaped, but the rest of the family were killed and scalped. Mary was turned over to a party of Senecas who gave her the name “Deh-he-wa-mis” meaning “Two Falling Voices.” She eventually came to live in the Genesee Valley and settled at Little Beard’s Town in Cuylerville.

As a result of the Treaty of Big Tree in 1797, she was granted nearly 18,000 acres of excellent quality land called the Gardeau Flats where Letchworth State Park is today. She lived there until 1831 when she sold the land and moved to the Buffalo Creek Reservation where she died two years later. In 1874, thanks to William Pryor Letchworth, her remains were returned to her former home and re-interred on the bluff above the Middle Falls in Letchworth Park, where a monument honors the life of the Valley’s

most famous resident. Mary Jemison was interviewed by James Seaver in 1823 for a narrative of her life in captivity and her story continues to provide invaluable insight into Seneca life in the mid-18th to early 19th century.

