Native-American Slavery and Territoriality in the Colonial Upper Great Lakes Region

by

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Studies of slavery in the Great Lakes region have generally focused on African, rather than on Native-American slavery, and compared northern and southern institutions, touching only briefly on the importance of Indian slavery in the development of bound labor around the Great Lakes. Because of the strong interest in African-American history, in North America slavery has been viewed quite literally as a "black-and-white" issue.

This emphasis on African-American slavery obscures the crucial role that Native-American slavery and Native-American/white relations played in the labor systems of the Great Lakes region. Indian slavery, more familiar in South America, has been regarded as an offshoot of captivity in North America. Certainly, the enslavement of native peoples grew out of precontact captivity practices that were exacerbated by the introduction of European chattel slavery in the region. Indeed, demand for slaves and the value that the French placed on captives inspired some native groups, including the Foxes, Sioux, Ojibwas, and Iowas, to make war on their neighbors with the intent of gaining the material and economic benefits resulting from the slave trade. Russell M. Magnaghi has shown the vibrancy and resiliency of Indian slavery within the Great Lakes region, both in terms of the trade in slaves east to the St. Lawrence River Valley via Fort Michilimackinac and in their use as domestics or as laborers in the fur trade. It was only through the abolition of slavery in Upper Canada and the qualified enforcement of the Northwest Ordinance that Indian slavery eventually vanished from the upper Midwest. Yet most studies of Great Lakes slavery focus on French and British concepts of bound labor drawn from plantation slavery in the Atlantic world.

1 Russell M. Magnaghi, "Red Slavery in the Great Lakes Country during the French and British Regimes," The Old Northwest 12 (Summer 1986): 202. "The Indians did not institutionalize slavery nor did they place a monetary value on the captives and trade them." Ibid., 201.
I would argue that while European enslavement of native peoples certainly began as a postcontact phenomenon, the slavery system that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French traders, settlers, and administrators used in the *pays d'en haut* (Upper Country) was heavily influenced by Native-American constructions of captivity and slavery. These Native-American constructions in turn grew out of interactions within a culturally diverse middle ground.

Many scholars assume that the middle ground refers primarily to the geographical region of the *pays d'en haut*. In reality, the middle ground is a conceptual framework describing the process by which people of different cultures and competing groups—who were thrown together through the experience of being refugees of the Iroquois wars as well as by their desire to participate in the fur trade—sought to create common ground through an attempt to view situations through the eyes of the cultural other. Richard White notes that “the central and defining aspect of the middle ground was the willingness of those who created it to justify their own actions in terms of what they perceived to be their partner’s cultural premises.”2 In other words, while people operated from their own interests, they often sought to convince others that their actions were justifiable and culturally recognizable. Moreover, the presence of so many reconstructed and patchwork communities in the region resulted in peoples who were internally diverse yet threatened by a common Iroquois enemy. Algonquian peoples sometimes felt that “diverting the Iroquois threat by betraying other peoples” was a more effective strategy than uniting “against the Five Nations.”3 The middle ground, therefore, created a situation in which it was possible to maintain territorial boundaries and access to trade by taking, selling, and redeeming captives as slaves.

The word “slavery” itself is problematic in the context of the Upper Country. Certainly the French colonists and administrators had already had some contact with the Atlantic slave system when they encountered war captives among the Huron, Iroquois, and Algonquian peoples of the Great Lakes and Northeast. To French observers, captives who had neither been killed, ransomed, nor adopted were equivalent in status to slaves, as their wills were subject to a “master.”

The differences between captive and slave are evident in the “Journey of Dollier and Galinée” (1669-1670), a travel narrative in

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3 Ibid., 14.
which slaves play a prominent role. François Dollier de Casson and René de Bréhant de Galinée, members of the Sulpician order, decided to travel west on a mission of conversion. They were accompanied by René-Robert Cavalier de La Salle, who hoped to find a water route to China and fresh sources of furs. A slave presented to the Nipissings by the Odawas convinced Dollier that he could guide the Sulpicians safely to the Upper Country. The availability of such a guide allowed the expedition to go forward. Using slaves as guides seems to have been a common practice. La Salle noted, "He had been led to expect that by making some present to the village of the Senecas he could readily procure slaves of the tribes to which he intended to go, who might serve him as guides." When the party arrived in the Seneca village, the Senecas informed Galinée that they would give him a slave but "begged us to wait until their people came back from the trade with the Dutch, to which they had taken all their slaves." The narrative does not say whether the Senecas had taken their slaves to trade as trade goods, to use as laborers, or simply to prevent their escape. This passage does reveal, however, the lower status of slaves in Indian society and the uses to which they were often put—as guides for the French and as laborers or chattel in the fur trade. The fact that the Senecas expected their slaves to return indicates that they were used to carry burdens, hunt, and perform other tasks related to the fur trade.

While Galinée and his group waited for the return of one of these slaves, a war party arrived in the village, bringing a prisoner who was to be given to the relations of a recently slain member of the tribe. Because the captive had not gone through the customary ritual torture, Galinée and La Salle decided that "as [the Senecas] had promised us a slave they would give us one, and it mattered little to us whether it was this man or another." It did matter to the Senecas, however. The old woman whose son had been killed, and in whose hands the prisoner’s fate rested, "could not bear to see him live, and all her relations were so much concerned in her grief that they could not delay his execution." Even though Galinée offered presents in exchange for the captive, his interpreters declined even to forward the offer as it would interfere with Seneca customs.

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5 Ibid., 171, 182.
6 Ibid., 184.
Captives, while clearly belonging to a particular member or members of the group, were also subject to the wills of others, like the Seneca prisoner who, in accordance with Iroquoian grief ritual, was killed rather than adopted. Ransom was another alternative.7 These incidents are reported through a European cultural filter. Still, even though the French used the Atlantic understanding of the term “slave,” they did perceive distinctions between those who were captives and those who were clearly enslaved. Galinée refers consistently to slaves, except in the case of the prisoner whose life he attempts to save, referring to him as a slave only in the most generic sense when he says that one slave would be as good as another or when he asks that the prisoner be given to him “as the slave that had been promised.”8 Otherwise, Galinée calls him “prisoner,” “fellow,” “sufferer,” and once even by his name, Toaguenha. Only after the prisoner’s fate was sealed did Galinée use the term slave in reference to the prisoner. Galinée described himself as “filled with grief at not being able to save this poor slave.”9 His linguistic shift underscored the man’s transition from captive to slave by emphasizing the Frenchman’s own limited access to power over him. Galinée used the term “slave” (esclave) not because it was synonymous with captivity, but because he perceived a change in the man’s status that was effected, ironically, not in the Senecas’ actions toward him, but in his interpretation of those actions as metaphorical enslavement.

Eventually, Dollier and Galinée found slaves in a village at the end of Lake Ontario and made “two presents in order to obtain two slaves and a third to get our packs carried to the village.”10 The French also received as presents five thousand wampum beads and two slaves, a

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7 The New England captives carried off to Canada exemplify the role that ransom played in Native-American life. Captivity narratives such as that of Mary Rowlandson (the most famous example), reveal the exchange values for these captives. During King Philip’s War, Narragansett and Nipmuck forces captured Mary Rowlandson and her three children during an early-morning raid on Lancaster, Massachusetts, on February 10, 1676. A captive for eleven weeks, Rowlandson recorded ethnographic details of her new masters’ lives, along with her own strategies for surviving her captivity, punctuated by expressions of gratitude to God. Rowlandson wrote her account of her captivity and redemption during 1677, but it was not published until 1682. See Mary Rowlandson, “A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson,” in Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women’s Narratives, edited by William L. Andrews (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 13-65.


9 Ibid., 185.

10 Ibid., 190.
Shawnee and an Odawa, to serve as guides. After Dollier and Galinée outfitted their new slaves with clothing and goods, the Odawa, enraged at not being allowed to trade his new clothes for brandy, abandoned the expedition. Even though a Shawnee of unclear status offered to serve as a guide, the Iroquois villagers compensated Galinée two hundred wampum for the loss of the Odawa slave. This particular incident indicates inherent exchange values for slaves regardless of the French ability to control their enslaved guides.

The Iroquois wars from the 1640s to 1701 established the cycle of warfare for trade and captives (and eventually slaves) that came to characterize the Upper Country. As the Iroquois lost more people to disease and warfare, they went to war to replace lost kin and to maintain or increase access to the rich fur country around the eastern lakes. Richard White cites an incident where Huron captives fought with the Iroquois against remnant Huron populations at Green Bay. The Iroquois agreed to surrender their Huron captives in exchange for provisions and safe passage, but when the besieged Hurons poisoned the food, the captive Hurons learned of the plot and warned their Iroquois captors. Captivity for the sake of adoption (as part of Iroquois mourning ritual) became therefore a means of retaining territoriality through strength of numbers rather than through the sale of slaves.

White’s formulation of the middle ground is useful for conceptualizing the ways in which both French and native peoples understood and used captivity and slavery to further their own interests. One way of doing this was to make up for the murder of a trader, slave, or voyageur. After two Frenchmen were murdered in the late seventeenth century, Daniel Greysolon Dulhut attempted to find and punish the culprits according to French law, with a trial and possible execution. The custom of the country, however, seems to have called for atonement via the offer of a slave or a “package of beaver [pelts].” Dulhut told the Odawas and Saulteurs (Ojibwas from the Sault Ste. Marie area) who pleaded for the perpetrators’ lives: “You have insinuated into the youth, that to kill the French was not an affair of such great moment as one imagines, since a slave or a package of beaver could make sufficient amends; and till now there has been no more grievous result for those who had committed assassinations.” When the guilty offered a gift of some slaves “to patch up the assassination committed upon the French,” the French replied “that a hundred slaves and a hundred

11 White, Middle Ground, 3.
packages of beaver could not make him traffic in the blood of [the French]."12 Interestingly, this incident reveals that both the French and the native peoples understood the exchange values inherent in beaver and slaves; yet, they placed different cultural constructions on the appropriateness of these transactions. Native Americans perceived that the French desire for goods was the linchpin of relationships: offenses committed against the French could be offset by presents of those commodities the French desired. Moreover, the taking of slaves or captives as replacements was a common native approach to avenging the loss of kin. On other occasions the French seem to have accepted this method of atonement, at least in practice. In this instance, a trial and execution seemed unusual both to the Odawas at Michilimackinac and to the French who conducted the prosecution. This insistence upon French legal traditions seems to have taken the Upper Country by surprise, as both French and native peoples seemed to view the exchange value for captives as slaves in similar terms to the trade in furs or skins.

Although the French reinterpreted and adapted the practice of captivity—a culturally distinct yet recognizable system—as a basis for their own enslavement of Native-American peoples, they also came to understand the importance of slaves in the power politics of the Upper Country. The Fox Wars provide an example of how war and captivity could serve to control access to power via access to the French trade networks, goods, and influence.

Slavery played a central role in the prosecution of the Fox Wars, whose origins stretch back to conflicts resulting from Antoine Laumet dit de La Mothe Cadillac’s offer in 1701 to settle various Algonquian groups at Detroit. The first to arrive were the Huron–Petuns and the Odawas. Because of their proximity to Detroit these tribes had better access to the French colonial governor. By creating Detroit as a center, the French sabotaged the success of their own Upper-Country policy, which previously had balanced many leaders and interests through the presence of French traders in the villages. The establishment of Detroit threatened this stability by privileging the Odawas and Huron–Petuns over other tribes. In 1710 some Foxes decided to share in this bounty by taking Cadillac up on his original offer and settling at Detroit. Believing that they had as much right to hunting territories and trading

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12 Extract from a letter by Daniel Greysolon Dulhut, Michilimackinac, April 12, 1684, Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (hereafter Collections), edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites (Madison: State Historical Society, 1902), 16: 122, 123.
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relationships as the other Algonquian groups, they soon began to assert their authority over the region. This upset the Odawas and Huron–Petuns, who manipulated the French into believing that the Foxes, Mascoutens, and Kickapoos intended to destroy French power and thus needed to be removed from southern Michigan. The subsequent warfare in 1712, which pitted the Illinois, Odawas, Potawatomis, Sauks, Menominees, Osages, and Missouris against the Foxes and their allies, resulted in the deaths or enslavement of more than one thousand Foxes and Mascoutens.13

During the siege of Detroit in 1712, the Foxes attempted to use slaves to bargain for time and for the safety of their women and children. On two separate occasions Pemoussa, a Fox war chief, offered slaves as proxies for French losses as well as for himself. In the first instance, he presented a wampum belt and two slaves to Jacques-Charles Renaud Dubuisson, the French commander at Detroit, saying, “I demand of you father, by this belt, which I lay at your feet, that you have pity on your children, and that you do not refuse them the two days that they ask you, in which there shall be no firing on either side, that our old men may hold a council. . . . These two slaves are to replace, perhaps, a little blood that you may have lost.”14 Dubuisson accepted the slaves, but the deal was contingent on the release of three female prisoners the Foxes had taken. Pemoussa, accompanied by a Fox peace chief, two Mascouten chiefs, and “seven female slaves, who were also painted and covered with wampum,” later addressed Dubuisson.15 In this context, the slaves were not meant as recompense for French losses, but as a symbolic representation of Pemoussa himself. He said, “I bring you my flesh in the seven slaves, whom I put at your feet. But do not believe that I am afraid to die. It is the life of our women, and our children, that I ask of you. . . . Here are six belts, that we give you, which bind us to you like your true slaves. Untie them, we beg you, to show that you give us life.”16 This particular diplomatic use of slavery linked the seven slaves to Pemoussa just as the gift of wampum belts created a relationship symbolic of slavery, rather than slavery itself. Pemoussa used the rhetoric of slavery to describe the unequal relationship between the weaker Foxes and the stronger French and Algonquian allies. This

13 White, Middle Ground, 153-58.
15 Ibid., 281.
16 Ibid., 282.
rhetoric, combined with the giving of presents, underscored the twin conceptions of slaves as both commodities and symbols.

At the end of the siege, Dubuisson wrote that "all our allies are returned to my fort with their slaves, having avoided it before as they thought it was infective. Their amusement was to shoot four or five of them every day. The Hurons did not spare a single one of theirs." 17 Dubuisson’s use of the term “slaves” rather than “prisoners” or “captives” emphasized the totality of the victory in the eyes of the French, and the complete subjugation of the enemy.

A glance at the slaveholdings of French settlers in Detroit after 1712 reveals the fate of some of the Fox prisoners. Of those slaves whose ethnic origin was listed, eleven were identified as “renard(e),” six as “outagamis(e)” (an Ojibwa name for the Foxes), and one as “mascoutain.” 18 Other captives were killed or retained by their captors. It seems certain that the slaves listed in the Detroit records were sold to the French for goods, credit, or livres.

The Foxes’ inability to recover those who had been enslaved became a major sore point in further negotiations with the French and fomented ongoing hostilities between the Foxes and rival tribes. In 1718 the governor general of Canada, Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil, called representatives of the western nations together to resolve differences and protect trade. The Foxes protested that they wished to have “their people who were slaves among the French,” returned to them. As a gesture of goodwill, Vaudreuil agreed to free two of his own Fox “hostages” on the condition that the Foxes return “the people of our allies,” specifically a Huron woman and two Saulteuses. Moreover, Vaudreuil stipulated that the Foxes “must next year bring some slaves to replace among our allies those who have been killed during the war.” 19 He did not specify where the Foxes were to get these slaves—it does not seem likely that he would have advocated a continuation of warfare for captives, unless he was attempting to trick the Foxes into further aggression. Perhaps he meant people who were enslaved in captivity among the Foxes.

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17 Ibid., 284.
18 See Marcel Trudel, Dictionnaire des esclaves et de leurs propriétaires au Canada français (Quebec City: Éditions Hurtubise HMH, 1990). Trudel used parish and notarial records to compile his lists, and he found a total of 126 slaves identified as renard or outagamis throughout New France.
19 Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil to the Council, October 30, 1718, Collections, 16: 378.
Vaudreuil’s use of language is also particularly interesting, referring alternately to slaves and prisoners. He wrote that the people the Foxes held were prisoners, while those whom they were to bring to Montréal were slaves—perhaps indicative of their intended status in French society. Indian slavery thus fulfilled a diplomatic role—a slave could be returned even years after his/her original capture, as a means of making peace and maintaining political influence with captors.

The Foxes, however, were continually frustrated in their attempts to reclaim their people, particularly from the Illinois to whom they had given back all their own prisoners. The Illinois did not reciprocate and tensions mounted. The French attempted to have all slaves on both sides returned, “so as to put an end to this unjust war.”20 Fighting between the Foxes and other western nations continued, in part because of the French inability to resolve the slavery question, a state of affairs that much concerned the post commanders in the Upper Country. At Fort St. Joseph (near Niles, Michigan), Étienne de Villedonné wrote, “Steps must be taken to withdraw The Slaves from the hands of the Illinois If they have any. The regnarts complain that they were deceived by Your Savages in 1716, and that the latter kept some of Their people when they had Agreed mutually to deliver Them up to one another.”21 Charles-Michel Mesaiger, a Jesuit missionary at Fort St. Joseph, reiterated this concern, noting, “[The French] see no prospect of securing the peace that they would like to make universal, Unless you help [the Foxes] to get back those Slaves who are so much regretted, in the event of their Being Alive; or Unless you give them information to enable them to Convict the Renard of falsehood.”22

Continuing, Mesaiger suggested more ominous motives, indicating that the slaves were perhaps at the center of a sinister plot to commit genocide against the Foxes: “All the other tribes will be disposed to take part in the war with more ardor when they see the Renard placed entirely in the Wrong through the Restitution of His Slaves, with which he will Probably not be Content; and they will act Jointly with us to destroy him. Such, Monsieur, are the Contents of the Letters which

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20 Constant le Marchand de Lignery to Pierre Dugué de Boisbriand, August 23, 1724, *Collections*, 16: 445.
should Reach You this winter.”23 The French were thus prepared to use the slavery question diplomatically, to make either peace or war. The Illinois, however, denied having any remaining Fox slaves: “Our Illinois have no Slaves belonging to the Renards, and have Never acted Treacherously toward them. They [merely] defended themselves.”24

The Fox Wars demonstrated the French familiarity with native slavery and captivity systems, as well as their willingness to use this rhetoric of captivity and slavery, not to mention the slaves themselves, in the pursuit of profits and power. Ultimately, slavery in the colonial Great Lakes was a complex institution, drawing on Native-American and Atlantic-world models to create something more than what Ira Berlin has termed a “society with slaves.”25 These models included the more recognizable forms of chattel slavery that I have not discussed here, although they existed alongside Native-American slavery. The presence of a strong captivity tradition in North America allowed the French to exploit existing slave networks and systems, which combined with the Atlantic system to create a new and unique regional institution.

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23 Ibid., 450.