

# Journal of the Mormon Social Science Association



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Decolonizing Memories of Our Grandmothers**

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### An Indian Princess and a Mormon Sacagawea? Decolonizing Memories of Our Grandmothers

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**Abstract.** In two extended Latter-day Saint families, individuals have employed a well-worn settler colonial trope of an Indian princess, as well as a Mormon variation on the legend of Sacagawea, to shape memories about Indigenous women as ancestors. Following larger national trends in the United States and Canada, these Mormons have employed selective memories of Indigenous ancestry as autochthonous legitimization of settler colonial occupation of Indigenous lands. Yet, these case studies stand out in contrast to current literature on racial shifting among self-identified Métis, Abenaki, and Algonquin peoples in Canada and non-federally recognized Cherokee in the United States because members of these Mormon families use stories of Indigenous grandmothers to solidify a white rather than an Indigenous identity. Like racial shifters, however, these families imagine their heritage as more autochthonous than American Indians or First Nations. This paradoxical identity formation is rooted in the peculiar narrative of a sacred text, the Book of Mormon, which represents Israelites (portrayed as white) as the original inhabitants of the Americas, attributes dark skin to a curse for wickedness, and makes legitimate land sovereignty contingent on righteous Christian belief and practice. The scripture imagines a future in which its Indigenous descendants become "white [or pure] and delightful." Two centuries of intermarriage of white settler men to Indigenous women have been among the various social means employed by Latter-day Saints to turn American Indians white. These images of an Indian princess and a Mormon Sacagawea are based upon harmful and inaccurate stereotypes that perpetuate settler colonialism.

The authors, raised in Mormon homes in Idaho, Utah, Iowa, and Washington, regularly heard stories from white-identifying family members that we were the great-great-grandchildren of Indian princesses, one of whom was also portrayed as a Mormon Sacagawea. Remembering these ancestors is a political act. The way in which white settler populations in the United States and Canada

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remember Indigenous women who married white men is especially wrought with questions of power. Recent scholarship has examined the deployment of distant Indigenous ancestors (usually women) in the phenomenon of racial shifting among non-federally recognized but self-identified Cherokee in the United States and self-identified Métis, Abenaki, and Algonquin peoples in Canada and the United States (Sturm 2010; Leroux 2019). The stories in our families share much in common with the genealogical discourse of racial shifters analyzed by anthropologists Circe Sturm and Darryl Leroux, with one notable exception. Latter-day Saint relatives in our extended families employ narratives of Indigenous ancestry in support of white rather than Indigenous identities. These case studies are more consistent with the observations of anthropologist Kim Tallbear (2013, 134), whose analysis of distant Native American ancestry in online genealogical discourse found that descendants “had little trouble reconciling the possibility of Native American ancestry with their whiteness.” This essay examines more closely how stereotypical tropes of an Indian Princess and a Mormon Sacagawea reinforce whiteness in the discourse about Indigenous ancestors in our own extended families.

Mormon expectations of an Indigenous progression toward whiteness exists in consort with a corresponding settler colonial desire to become autochthonous. Nineteenth-century Mormons advocated intermarriage with Native Americans, along with slavery, indenture, adoption, education, and fostering, as social means for making them into a “white and delightful” people. Intermarriage brought together the families of the colonized and the colonizers as each sought to navigate a changing world of race, gender, and class. Legends, entangled with sacred narratives and historical facts, explained purported or actual heritage. Indigenous women, in these narratives, become greater-than-life heroines who rescue their descendants from an imagined life of savagery. The stereotypes of an Indian Princess and a Mormon Sacagawea, while neither accurate in general nor in these specific cases, do important cultural work of subjugating Indigenous ancestry to the whiteness of settler colonialists. Lost in these memories are the actual perspectives and experiences of women such as Susannah Ferguson Youngs and Peninah Shropshire Cotton Wood.

### **White and Delightful**

The Book of Mormon, a sacred narrative set in ancient America and published by the founding prophet of the Latter-day Saint restoration, Joseph Smith, in New York in 1830, set the stage for Mormon expectations that American In-

dians would assimilate both culturally and biologically into whiteness. This scripture portrays the original ancient Americans as white Israelites who eventually split into light-skinned Nephites and dark-skinned Lamanites. These opposing groups had porous boundaries that could be crossed by an ancient curse darkening the skin of the wicked, and a covenantal blessing lightening the skin color of the righteous. The narrative covering a millennium makes Indigenous sovereignty contingent on righteous adherence to Christianity, with wicked white Nephites ultimately suffering destruction at the hands of Lamanites who are presented as the ancestors of American Indians. This sacred text forecast a future in which Christianized Lamanites (an ethnonym Mormons have applied to American Indians and First Nations) would become “a white and delightsome people,” or, after changes made to the text in 1981, “a pure and delightsome people” (Smith 1830; Campbell 1996; Murphy 2003; Mueller 2017).

Native peoples, however, have histories and sacred narratives of their own that settler colonial Saints displace with the account in the Book of Mormon (Hafen 2018; Murphy 2019; Murphy and Baca 2020). Dakota and Latter-day Saint historian Elise Boxer (2019, 4) analyzes the Book of Mormon as a settler colonial narrative. “Indigenous identity, history, sovereignty, and belief systems have not only been dismissed but replaced with a limited, racialized identity grounded in Mormon religious discourse.” Mormon settler colonialism, Boxer notes, works “by creating very distinct notions of Indigeneity.” The application of the ethnonym Lamanite to American Indians “erases the way Indigenous Peoples view their own creation as a people, their connection to the land, and their identity as a people.” Settler Mormons who deploy Indigenous ancestors to assert connections to the founding patriarch Lehi and his Nephite descendants from the Book of Mormon also create a distinct notion of a primordial whiteness that likewise replaces and erases Indigenous world-views, sovereignties, and identities.

Several similarities and differences exist between genealogists’ memories of Indigenous ancestors in New France and the Mormon culture region. Both have a history of careful record-keeping and robust genealogical industries. Descendants typically claim an Indigenous ancestor in New France from 300 to 375 years ago. In the two case studies of our extended families, the Indigenous ancestors are from 194 and 235 years ago, respectively, but the genealogical accounts we analyze began as early as a hundred years after the birth of the ancestor. Surprisingly, marriage registries prior to 1680 in New France

only record thirteen Aboriginal women who legally married French men. Le-roux (2019) acknowledges additional, extra-legal sexual unions that tended to result in offspring raised in Indigenous communities but who were ostracized from French society. This paucity of sanctioned marriages stands in contrast with Mormon experiences.

Latter-day Saint leaders such as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young actively encouraged intermarriage with Native Americans in the nineteenth century (Murphy 2003). In fact, historians have documented more than 100 interracial marriages between nineteenth-century Mormons and Ute, Paiute, Shoshone, and other Indigenous nations of the Great Basin. The two marriages in the case studies are in addition to those documented in the Great Basin because they occurred in New York and Illinois prior to the Mormon migration west. Most of the interracial marriages are the result of Mormons bringing at least 419 American Indian children into their homes as slaves, servants, and orphans. Documentation records marriages of 80 of these individuals raised in Mormon homes. Eighty-one percent of the marriages joined a Native woman with a white man, 11% wed a Native man with a white woman, 5% occurred between two Natives, and 2.5% united a Native woman with a Hispanic man. Thirteen percent were plural marriages, which would have been extralegal by U.S. law but were nonetheless sanctioned by the LDS Church (Kitchen 2002; Bennion 2012; Murphy 2020b). Also outside the Great Basin, members of the Catawba Nation in South Carolina who converted nearly wholesale to Mormonism in the 1880s were already intermarried in significant numbers before conversion and continued the process afterwards (Hicks 1977; Thayne 2016; Thayne 2019).

In the twentieth century Mormons fostered more than 50,000 Indian children, predominantly from Diné (Navajo) peoples, but also from nations across the western United States and Canada. The LDS women's organization, the Relief Society, formalized this initially illegal and informal operation as the Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP) in 1954 and it would continue until the end of the century. Boxer (2015, 135–136) describes the ISPP as “a colonizing enterprise designed to assimilate Indian students via conversion to Mormonism.” In contrast to ecclesiastical authorities in the early Church, ISPP administrators and church leaders discouraged intermarriage in the twentieth century. The practice, though, continued uncensored and unabated, even unintentionally fostered by social and educational programs that brought young American Indians and European settlers together (Harris 1985; Shumway and

Shumway 2002; Shumway and Shumway 2007; Boxer 2015; Garrett 2016; Jacobs 2016; Harris 2018; Metcalf 2019).

Mormon social programs were part of larger settler colonial efforts that used boarding schools, fostering, and adoption to remove Indian children from Indigenous homes and assimilate them into settler society (Simon and Hernandez 2008; Jacobs 2009; DeMeyer 2012; DeMeyer and Cotter-Busbee 2012). Settler colonialism in the United States and Canada is an ongoing process characterized by efforts to permanently settle on colonized land, displacing Indigenous peoples through elimination, absorption, oppressive social structures, re-education, and settler pursuit of their own belonging through false narratives of Indigeneity (Veracini 2010; Hixson 2013; Murphy 2014; Veracini 2015). Latter-day Saint politicians and bureaucrats even harnessed the power of the United States federal government between 1954 and 1962 to terminate, at least in part, more than 100 tribal governments in an effort to turn American Indians “white and delightsome” legally, if not in fact. The immediate effects were devastating to all involved, including tribes in Utah and the predominantly Mormon Catawba targeted by Latter-day Saint politicians. While Congress would later reverse the termination of Southern Paiute bands in 1980 and the Catawba nation in 1993, mixed-blood Utes remain terminated, and some intermarried and displaced Catawba have lost federal recognition and tribal membership (Gottlieb and Wiley 1986; Nielson 1998; Wilkinson 1999; Metcalf 2002; Thayne 2019; Murphy 2020b). The Latter-day Saint restoration has been characterized by an extraordinary multi-century effort of settler colonialists employing various religious, social, and political means, including intermarriage, to turn American Indians white.

The colonial dispossession of American Indians coexists with paradoxical settler desires to become Indigenous. From the founding days of the faith, Mormons have temporarily assumed Indigenous identities in dramatic performances as Indians, Lamanites, and Nephites. Joseph Smith, for example, not only encouraged intermarriage but also displayed his own aspirations to play Indian, assuming the voices of Indigenous dead and using Native artifacts in revelation and translation (Deloria 1998; Murphy 2003; Mackay and Frederick 2016; Murphy and Baca 2016). Brigham Young followed by encouraging settlers to purchase Indian children and even more enthusiastically sanctioning plural marriages between settler men and Indigenous women (Murphy 2003; Bennion 2012). From ecstatic performances during the Church’s earliest mission to Kirtland, Ohio through twenty-first-century pioneer treks, Latter-day

Saints have engaged in energetic play imitating Indigenous peoples and enacting the violence and privilege of their own whiteness in a settler colonial setting. Through military disguises, traveling performances, faux abductions and attacks as part of Pioneer Day parades, legends of Indian princesses leaping from Wasatch precipices, a Sun Dance opera, roadshows, firesides, dance troupes, Boy Scout ceremonies, pageants, monuments, and heritage parks, Mormons embody memories of real and fictional Indians in social play that betrays both the anxieties and audacity of settler colonialism (Hafen 2001; Baca 2008; Farmer 2008; Hudson 2015; Reeve 2015; Smith 2015; Boxer 2019; Coviello 2019; Murphy 2003, 2020b, 2021; Patterson 2020).

While family members in the case studies below deploy Indigenous ancestors in support of white identities, Mormonism does have several prominent examples of individuals assuming a public Indian persona. Scholars in American Indian Studies have represented settlers who use distant, dubious, or fabricated ancestries to profit through the sale of “secret” knowledge and access to “sacred” ceremonies as “white shamans” engaged in a settler form of “cultural imperialism” (Macy and Hart 1996; Hobson 2002). Mormon examples of assumed Indigenous identities include Warner McCary and Lucy Stanton, who toured the United States and Canada in the mid-1840s as the Choctaw performer “Okah Tubbee” and the Indian “Laah Ceil” (Hudson 2015). In the 1970s blond-haired Zula Brinkerhoff donned a beaded feather headdress, gathered her collection of kachina dolls and bows and arrows, assumed the adopted Indian name “Paz-Pa-Hutt-Paudee-Cha-Pa,” and traveled the Mormon culture region giving, as she claimed on the dustjacket of her second book, “3,000 talks in schools, universities, clubs, TV, radio, civic organizations, and various Christian churches” in which she discussed Indigenous and Mormon prophecies (Brinkerhoff 1971, 1973; Murphy 2020b). William Anderson, who operates Prophecy Keepers Internet Radio under the name “Blue Otter” and hosts “original Ghost Dances,” has followed Brinkerhoff’s footsteps into the twenty-first century. Will Blue Otter claims Cherokee and Powhatan heritage from the iconic Indian Princess herself, Pocahontas, and seeks charitable donations for his radio station while marketing enrollment in the Cherokee Nation of Mexico (Anderson 2004–2104; Murphy 2020b). These prominent examples of assumptions of Indigenous rather than white identities caution against overgeneralizing the cases of the Mormon families examined below.

The discourse among genealogists in two predominantly Mormon extended families reveals selective, and inaccurate, memories of Susannah Ferguson Youngs and Peninah Shropshire Cotton Wood as Indian princesses.

Ferguson's story, as retold here, disrupts the whitewashed memories it documents through discussions of Tiononderoge, the Mohawk community in which she was born. Images of an Indian princess and those of Nephites and Lamanites from the Book of Mormon have obscured the complexity of these grandmothers' lives while also providing fodder for white identities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Following the portrait of Ferguson we examine memories of Cotton, portrayed as a Mormon Sacagawea, an image that the *Church News* incorrectly attributes to her polygynous husband Daniel Wood. Our essay places this Mormon variant of the Sacagawea legend into a more accurate historical perspective and then complicates this image by examining the way that stories told by descendants remake her from an Indigenous servant into an enterprising colonizer. This analysis rests upon the industry of genealogists in our families, some of whom are also our mothers and grandmothers. While critical of stereotypes our families have inherited and perpetuated, we hope to enrich the way these Indigenous grandmothers are remembered by acknowledging the complexities in the lives of Susannah Ferguson and Peninah Shropshire Cotton and in the stories told and identities assumed by their descendants.

### **Susannah Ferguson Youngs**

Oral traditions of Indian ancestry in one extended family reached the seventh generation through retellings by a grandmother, Eunice Wayment Harmon (1926–2006). She shared stories she had originally heard from her grandfather, Charles Gransbury (1879–1971). He spoke of an Indian grandmother who was not welcome inside his parents' home. Yet, he remembered fondly his experiences playing outside with her. This grandmother was Rachel Youngs Cole (1818–1896), a daughter of Susannah Ferguson (ca. 1790–Deceased) and John Youngs (1783–1823). Genealogists found Susannah in written records through an inscription on her daughter's death certificate and in census records from 1810 through 1850 indicating residences in Amsterdam and Otego, New York. These census records cannot confirm an American Indian identity because no such category was available in the U.S. Census until 1860. Census takers, who assigned racial identities at that time, classified Susannah as white (the status of her husband) but some of her male relations as colored or black, illustrating the gendered way that nineteenth-century racial identifications occurred (Harmon Bills 2011; Pew 2020). Direct-to-consumer DNA tests in the family of Cheryl Harmon Bills (1946–2019) have found approximately 1% to



2% American Indian ancestry but no similar trace of African ancestry. These results are consistent with what one would expect from Indigenous ancestry about six or seven generations ago (Cowan 2015).

Susannah Ferguson was born about 1790 in the community of Tiononderoge alongside the Mohawk River. She married an eighteen-year-old settler named John Youngs at the tender age of sixteen or thereabouts but would be widowed about twenty years later. Together they had at least three children, one of whom was Rachel Youngs Cole (Harmon Bills 2006). Susannah's granddaughter Lura Cole Gransbury (1850–1935) would move in the 1880s with her husband, John Wesley Gransbury (1848–1915), to homestead in Kansas. There the family encountered Mormon missionaries and several members would join the new faith and relocate in 1897 to Albion, Idaho (Gransbury Olson 1956). The oral traditions passed down in the family have been accented by the diligent documentary investigations of two avid fifth- and sixth-generation genealogists, Eunice Wayment Harmon and Cheryl Harmon Bills, who spent many years investigating the woman they have called “our Indian princess” (Harmon Bills 2011).

For at least a century prior to Susannah's birth, Mohawks called her natal town Tiononderoge while settlers called it the Lower Mohawk Castle or Fort Hunter (after 1712). Identified as a “Praying Castle” in 1694, Tiononderoge was home to an agriculturally based community of Protestant Mohawks politically allied with the British (Sivertsen 2006). In 1793 immigrants applied the name Florida to the township within a renamed Montgomery County (Frothingham 1892). The new names may have contributed to the much debated Cole family narrative identifying Rachel as originating from what is now the state of Florida. In these stories she is called by the name of “Rain on the Face” and identified as a “Seminole princess” who met a “Mohawk Indian” she would follow to New York (Harmon Bills 2012). This interchangeability of Indigenous affiliations in genealogical narratives is quite similar to what Leroux (2019) has found in descendant populations in New France, but unlike the persistent claims of Cherokee heritage found by Sturm (2010).

While these extrapolations of non-Mormon relatives in Florida take Rachel and Susannah far afield from Tiononderoge, other mangled memories may linger in speculations of yet another tribal affiliation in a Latter-day Saint branch of the family. A particularly appealing claim has been the belief that Rachel and her mother Susannah were Onondaga, a speculation that fosters a more direct link to the Book of Mormon. This association may result from the

similarity of the village name Tiononderoge to the nation of Onondaga. The name is spelled as Tionondogue in some sources and it was not uncommon to leave off the prefix, Ti-, in the pronunciation of the name, leading to some confusion with the ethnonym Onondaga. Rachel's birth in Otsego County, an area associated at times with Onondaga, may be another factor in this proposed affiliation (Campbell 1883, 11; Frothingham 1892, 108).

Correspondence between our relatives in October 2001 is informative in the way it frames Indigenous ancestry, violence, gender, and whiteness within a Mormon context. Ruth Olson DiFrancesco (1924–2010, Lura Cole Gransbury's granddaughter), wrote to her nephew, Lewis Olson, who had asked for more details about the family's Indian heritage:

One of my mother's ancestors [John Cole] married an Onandaga [sic] Indian woman [Rachel Youngs Cole]. ... I have been told that the story of the men from her tribe coming to the cabin one day when her husband (who was a Cole) and the oldest son were out on the lake catching fish for the winter, is in a book available at the Genealogical library. Anyway, the story goes that she took the children out the back door into the forest to hide, and the two-year-old kept crying and giving their hiding place away. So, in desperation, she left the baby and took the rest of the children deeper into the forest. When the braves found the baby, they dashed its brains out by swinging it by the heels against a tree (Harmon Bills 2001).

In contrast to these horrific portrayals of violence, Ruth expressed delight at discovering an Onondaga connection in the teachings of Joseph Smith in a letter to her cousin, Eunice Wayment Harmon:

I'm sure you have read the story or heard it about our Indian ancestor who saw members of her tribe swing their two-year-old's head against a tree to kill it. Well, the originator of that tribe, the Onondaga, was a great warrior/prophet over the Nephites from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rockies. He is our ancestor and our link to Lehi and Nephi. When I learned that, I nearly jumped out of my skin!

Ruth provides more context in her correspondence with her nephew, Lewis:

I do have a tremendous story to tell you about our Cole ancestor who married the Onandaga woman. Not actually about them, but about that group of Indians: On the Missouri march [Zion's Camp], a group of the men had gone up on top of a mound in Illinois and found a rock

altar with a complete skeleton laying at the base of it with an arrow still through the ribs. They told Joseph Smith about it and he went up to look at it. He told them it was a Nephite Altar, and that the skeleton was of a Lamanite named Zelph who fought with the Nephites under the direction of the great Warrior Prophet, Onondaga who was the progenitor of the Onondaga tribe in upstate New York. Lewis—I just about came out of my skin. This is so thrilling to me that we have that link to a great Nephite. Joseph also said he was in charge of the troops from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rocky Mountains, so he was obviously a very important man in their culture. I wonder if he served under Moroni who is my hero.

The other very interesting thing to me, is that particular group have never surrendered to the government of the US and belong to the five-tribe nation headed by the Iroquois. They print their own money, publish their own passports, which are recognized throughout the world, and have their own government (Harmon Bills 2001).

One can see tensions underlying the recollection of Indian ancestry in predominantly white settler Mormon families. The claimed Onondaga affiliation appears erroneous in the context of Susannah's ties to the Mohawk community of Tiononderoge. There is an uneasy association with purported savagery of male relations through acts of "braves" who kill a helpless child while our female ancestor is remembered as rescuing the rest of the family. This storytelling repeats a widespread trope, most visible in the Pocahontas narrative, in which "the Indian woman saves white men" (Green 1975, 704). In this common motif Indigenous men are portrayed as savages, with subtext questioning their viability as progenitors (Anderson 2004; Finely 2011). Our grandmother's cousin nearly jumps out of her skin when she realizes that Joseph Smith connected the Onondaga nation to the events of the Book of Mormon via a skeleton disturbed in a grave. She feels connected to her favorite characters within the scripture, all of whom happen to be represented as white men. Lehi, Nephi, and Moroni are all prominent white narrators in the Book of Mormon. Even Zelph is represented as a white Lamanite in accounts of the Zion's March (Cannon 1995; Metcalfe 1998; Murphy and Baca 2016). By imagining Susannah as Onondaga rather than Mohawk, Ruth can link herself more closely to white men in the Book of Mormon. Noticeably absent as ancestors in these narratives are Laman and Lemuel, the progenitors of the scripture's dark-skinned Lamanites. The unnoted violence of looting an Indigenous grave is thus juxtaposed against horrific acts of Indian men represented as heartless

and uncivilized (Murphy and Baca 2016; Murphy 2021). These narratives remember Indigenous women who marry white men as liberators, but in the context of a presumed rejection of their own culture and race.

Folklorist Rayna Green (1975, 704) describes “the Indian woman’s dilemma. To be ‘good,’ she must defy her own people, exile herself from them, become white, and perhaps suffer death.” This whitening of our ancestors means remembering them through a settler colonial lens, one that still operates in twenty-first-century discourse among Mormon genealogists and is aided by the Book of Mormon’s portrayal of ancient America (Murphy 2003). Yet, also buried in that discourse is a countervailing admiration of the resistance to ongoing colonialism by contemporary Iroquois who produce their own passports and govern themselves. Remembering Susannah within an Indigenous cultural context of her own place and time may help decolonize these prejudicial genealogical narratives.

Susannah Ferguson entered a cultural milieu already dramatically transformed by disease, trade, war, and evangelism. The Mohawk nation is the westernmost of the Five Nations (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca) and later Six Nations (Tuscarora) of the Haudenosaunee [Iroquois] Confederacy, whose traditional lands stretched across what we know today as upstate New York and parts of Pennsylvania, Ontario, and Quebec. Susannah’s ancestors lived in matrilineal longhouses, dominated by matrilineages of closely related women who shared a common household. Clan mothers were central to household and community leadership, guiding the marital relations and domestic affairs of their daughters (Snow 1996, 129; Mann 2011). Susannah and Rachel would likely have expected men in their family, as well as their daughters, to defer to their leadership. It is thus not surprising that familial oral traditions recall tension from Rachel’s assertive involvement in the household affairs of her daughter and son-in-law. Household leadership, including land ownership, was a traditional cultural role for Haudenosaunee women.

For several centuries Haudenosaunee councils of clan mothers selected male sachems who acted in legislative and judicial capacities to represent the clans in a confederation of nations. The sachems deliberated in councils and committees on behalf of the clan mothers who exercised the ability to recall these elected representatives (Mann 2011). While eighteenth-century colonists often used the term “king” to describe these sachems, this projection of a patriarchal monarchy onto a matrilineal democratic society distorts more than it informs (Hinderaker 2010). This distortion is perpetuated when gene-

alogists use the term “princess” to describe Indian grandmothers (Green 1975, 1988). Classism and racism intersect as this claim to a royal lineage differentiates one’s own ancestry from undesirable “savages.” If our ancestors have to be Indian they might as well be royalty, the thinking goes. This is an act of internalized racism, but also, perhaps, a strategy for survival employed by descendants in a sometimes hostile white settler society (Anderson 2004).

No known historical records support the idea that Susannah was the daughter of a sachem or participated in a women’s council. The American Revolution and its immediate aftermath devastated the community of Tiononderoge. Most of the young Mohawk warriors left in the summer of 1775 for Canada while remaining Onkwehonwe (original people) tried to protect their lands by remaining neutral. After a bruising battle near the town of Oriske, the Oneida, allied with the rebels, sought revenge on Fort Hunter. Following this attack most remaining Onkwehonwe fled to Canada, forming an alliance with the British whom they perceived as less threatening than land-hungry New Yorkers. The four neutral Mohawk families remaining in the valley were taken prisoner by rebel troops at the end of General John Sullivan’s 1779 campaign that scorched earth from the Finger Lakes to the Genesee Valley. General Philip Schuyler’s protests to General George Washington led to the release of the imprisoned families. Yet, they returned to Tiononderoge to find their homes seized by envious settlers (Campbell 1831; Graymont 1972; Calloway 1995; Taylor 2006). It is likely that Susannah Ferguson’s parents were either among the four imprisoned families rendered homeless or the few (including some Fergusons) who later accepted Schuyler’s congressionally endorsed invitation to return to the Mohawk Valley in the winter of 1783–84 after the war had concluded (Huey and Pulis 1997, 77, 86; Sivertsen 2006, 194). After the war the impoverished and often intermarried families remaining in the Mohawk Valley survived as “domestic servants,” a role described by a traveler in 1784 as “little Indians” and “urchins,” holding candles (Marbois 1996, 304).

After her marriage to John Youngs in ca. 1807, Susannah relocated to the town of Otego in Otsego County, New York. Her relocation(s), sometime between 1810 and 1820, appear(s) to have followed the seasonal movement of other “small groups of Iroquois and Mohicans who would return to Otsego in the warm months to hunt and fish; to sell venison, fish, brooms, medicines, bark or willow baskets, and deerskin moccasins” (Taylor 1995, 39–40). Haudenosaunee use of the Otego area where the town of Wauteghe had been located would continue for “many years after the Revolution” with “straggling friendly

individuals and parties” who would erect homes “on the sites of their former villages, and remain variable time, fishing, making baskets and trinkets, drying apples and looking for mineral landmarks” (Blakely 1907, 14). Haudenosaunee from the Mohawk Valley traveled along well-known trails to access mines in an area known as Dumpling Hill on the south side of the Susquehanna River (Vay 1951, 9). These intermarriage and migration patterns continued long-standing Indigenous traditions in traditional territories even as Susannah and her children employed marital relations as a means of integration into a growing settler community.

Local remembrances in Otego record instances of older, dark-skinned women who were accused of witchcraft and harassed by young white men. The neighbors of an “Ol’ Mrs. Tucker,” described as “swarthy” and living east of the old Indian trail, “claimed she cast her spells upon their cows and horses and made them kick furiously at night, keeping the people awake.” Another story reports a practical joke played on “widow Youngs” who was living west of the same Indian trail at the upper end of the East Branch of Otsdawa Creek (a location matching census records for the widowed Susannah Ferguson Youngs).

All towns have their “odd characters.” There was a stone mason, John de Mott, who was quite a practical joker in the old days. He and a boon companion, each with a demi-john hanging at his saddle, rode up to the widow Youngs’ at the upper end of East Branch. They had been sampling the contents of the demi-johns pretty freely and arrived at the widow’s house in a very boisterous condition. They knocked, kicked the door, and yelled around for some time, but the widow would not come to the door. Finally de Mott had a brilliant idea. He found a large flat stone, climbed to the roof and placed it on top of the chimney. That made the fireplace smoke so that the widow was forced to come out. And it is said that in her wrath she fairly blistered them with her eloquence (Blakely 1907, 145; Vay 1951, 9–11; Vay 1959, 3–40).

In the village of Otego women of darker complexions experienced suspicion and harsh treatment by their settler neighbors in contrast to the power and influence that their grandmothers had wielded in Haudenosaunee communities. This harassment was part of the tragic price paid by Indigenous women who resisted removal from their traditional territories. The actual historical record provides a bleak contrast to the images of a royal lineage of an Indian princess conjured by genealogists.

Latter-day Saint genealogists often read the past through a refracted lens of a sacred record. The Book of Mormon narrative reverses the trauma of geno-

cidal removal policies experienced by Haudenosaunee and Cherokee nations and alternatively ascribes an ancient American holocaust to the unleashing of bloodthirsty Lamanites upon a pre-Columbian nation of white Nephites. In the scripture the fair Nephite nation, succumbing to wickedness, suffered humiliation, defeat, and death at the hands of aggressive and idolatrous ancestors of American Indians who had been cursed with a dark skin for their wickedness. Scriptural prophecies hold out the hope that Lamanite descendants would once again become “white and delightsome” like the founding Lehite and Mulekite families. This primordial narrative provides the fodder for the seemingly paradoxical use of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Indigenous ancestors to support autochthonous white identities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Prejudicial portrayals of Lamanites in scripture make it difficult for settler Mormons to affirm the Indigenous cultures of Susannah Ferguson and Peninah Shropshire Cotton as they must have experienced them.

### **Peninah Shropshire Cotton Wood**

A 1997 article in the *Church News*, titled “Indians to Settlers: ‘We Must Help One Another,’” sought to acknowledge the contributions that Native Americans had made to the Church while the Latter-day Saints were celebrating the sesquicentennial of the arrival of Euro-American pioneers to the Salt Lake Valley. The article begins by acknowledging the welcome in 1846 that Saints had received at Winter Quarters, Nebraska from the Potawatomi and Omaha who recognized a similarity with their own plight of displacement. The author draws a contrast between nomadic, predatory Indians and helpful, agrarian ones. American Indians who reportedly “benefited the pioneers” included the Ponca, who rescued and fed a stranded wagon train from Winter Quarters, and the Utes, who provided safe passage to Mormon immigrants and would later donate gold for both debt relief and adorning the Salt Lake Temple. The article celebrated the role of “Ute” Zenos Hill (1855–1938), “adopted” by rancher George Hill (1810–1864) in the 1850s, who fought “on the side of the Mormons” in the Blackhawk War (1865–1872). The author concludes by highlighting the Cherokee woman “Peninah S. Cotton” (1827–1879) who had married Daniel Wood (1800–1892) and joined him on the trek west. The reporter attributed this statement to Daniel:

Peninah was a God-send to these people, as Sacagawea, the Indian maid, had been to Lewis and Clark’s expedition. She knew the berries

and plants that were good for food and medicine. And she made moccasins, glove and clothing from skins; and from cloth she wove herself. She also had to drive one of the wagons (Boren 1997).

While the effort to acknowledge Mormon debt to American Indians is laudable, the reporter left much unsaid. She could have acknowledged that the contrasting image of nomadic and predatory versus helpful and agrarian Indians was rarely, if ever, accurate (Tate 2006). She neglects the perspective of living Indians, such as the Dakota Latter-day Saint Elise Boxer, who found herself estranged by sesquicentennial reenactments of the trek (Boxer 2018). The reporter might have noted that the overwhelming generosity Mormons experienced at the hands of Indians has yet to be reciprocated in anything approaching equal measure. Despite using “help one another” in the title, the article makes no mention of any assistance Mormons provided Indians. There seems to be an unwritten assumption that bringing the gospel was reciprocity enough. The representation of the relationship between Zenos and George Hill as one of adoption disguises the context of the slave trade, kidnapping, theft, depletion of resources, displacement, and warfare that brought Native children into Mormon homes, including three who came to live with Peninah (Bennion 2012, Murphy 2020b). The reporter overlooks the fact that Blackhawk and many others who fought the Saints were baptized Mormons, fighting against their co-religionists (Peterson 1998; Murphy 2003). Peninah’s roles as a servant in the household of Daniel Wood, later to become a plural wife, are likewise missing from the news story. This whitewashing of Mormon-Indian interactions concludes with a presentation of Peninah as a Mormon parallel to Sacagawea, an appellation that is attributed to her husband.

Her son, Joseph Cotton Wood (1856–1943), recalled that Peninah Shropshire Cotton was born March 12, 1827 in Johnson County, Illinois to Caleb Cotton (1776–1850) and Nancy Meredith (1784–1846). He describes Peninah’s grandmother Nancy Fulkerson as “a full-blooded Indian.” Joseph reports that his mother “was very proud of her race ... the first of her blood to enter plural marriage in this dispensation.” He also believed that she “was the first of the descendants of Lehi to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (Wood 1934b). The view of Peninah as the “first Lamanite to join the Church [and] ... to enter into plural marriage in this dispensation” has been popularized by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers (DUP 1998). Daniel Wood Sr. recalled that he had become “acquainted with Peninah Cotton, and married her” while the Saints were preparing to leave Nauvoo, Illinois in 1846. He de-



scribed her as “a motherless girl, her mother and father being dead” (Wood 1868).

The earliest documents offer no explanation for how Peninah came to reside in the household of Daniel Wood. Some family members have speculated that she may have been the victim of a lingering Illinois slave trade in Indian women and children (Gallay 2002, Ekberg 2007). Later documents claim, “Peninah first came into the Wood home as a hired girl to care for Mary and her children” (Wood 1934b). Regardless of how she joined the household, the various recollections make clear that Peninah’s role was that of a servant and would remain so throughout her life, even after she married Daniel polygynously. Her son recalls that Peninah “married Daniel Wood” on January 21, 1846 in the “Nauvoo Temple four months prior to the dedication.” Mary Snider (1803–1873), Daniel’s first wife, “had been a semi-invalid since the death of her son, in 1845.” Peninah “continued to nurse and care for Mary for many years, until her death in Oct. 1873” and she reportedly “loved and cared for Mary’s children” as though they were her own (Wood 1934b). Other accounts testify that “she tenderly nursed the family and Aunt Mary in very poor health, quiet, and unassuming, but true to her faith.” In 1849, Peninah also began providing the primary care and support of two Timpanogos girls (Lucy and Mary) and a boy (Thomas), likely orphaned during the invasion of the Utah Valley. She cared for them until their deaths during an outbreak of diphtheria and pneumonia in 1860–61. Peninah, herself, died on May 28, 1879 and is buried, along with these adopted children, in the Wood Family Cemetery (Murphy 2020b, Naylor n.d.).

If a researcher only investigates the family history of Peninah using the copy of her son Joseph’s reminiscence currently held in the LDS Church History Library, then it might appear that the Sacagawea attribution came from her husband Daniel Wood. Punctuation and parenthetical demarcations in additional, slightly differing, copies of the same family history, though, suggest that attributing this phrase to Daniel Wood is anachronistic. Joseph Cotton Wood dictated his recollections to his daughter, Kate W. Anderson (1892–1982), on May 18, 1934. At least two other online copies of the same narrative have the quote with the Sacagawea reference in parentheses, suggesting an addition in someone else’s words. These documents claim to have been retyped from earlier versions by Norma Jean M. Wood in 1990 and by Staci Bailey in 2003 (Wood 1934a, 1934c). The copying error eliminating parentheses, though, must have come much earlier in the transfer of documents between family

members because another collection of retyped documents, also available online, suggest that by midcentury Josephine Wood Naylor (1887–1957), daughter of Joseph Wood and granddaughter of Peninah, was writing, “Peninah, the daughter of an Indian, had an excellent knowledge of plants that were useful for food and medicine. Daniel said of her, ‘Peninah was a God-send to these people, as Sacagawea, the Indian maid, had been to Lewis and Clark’s expedition’” (Wood Naylor 1947). The Wood, Naylor, and Walters line of the family not only appear to repeat this error earliest but are also responsible for the documents contributed to the LDS Church History Library. Copying errors eliminating parentheses suggest that the idea that Peninah might be a Mormon Sacagawea emerged within a historical window between 1934 and 1947. What was happening more generally in the American populace with the legend of Sacagawea at this time?

The Shoshone woman who participated in Lewis and Clark’s expedition of 1804 to 1806 was not well-known during Daniel Wood’s lifetime (1800–1892). Two small volumes of the expedition’s journals, edited by the Philadelphia lawyer Nicholas Biddle, first appeared in print eight years after the event (Allen 1814). So few copies ever sold, though, that even the expedition leader William Clark had trouble getting one for himself (Clark and Edmonds 1979, 88). Sacagawea’s name “remained relatively unknown for nearly a century” after the return of the Corps of Discovery (Kessler 1996, 65). Elliot Coues (1893) published the first account of the expedition that would have been accessible to Mormons in Utah a year after Daniel’s death. Thus, it is very unlikely that Daniel ever heard of Sacagawea, let alone likened her to his wife. Sacagawea’s legend and role in the popular American imagination developed in the twentieth century with the publication of the 1902 novel *The Conquest: The True Story of Lewis and Clark* by an Oregon suffragist, Eva Emery Dye (1902), in anticipation of the centennial of the Corps of Discovery. Dye described her creative role in the legend as follows:

I struggled along as best I could with the information I could get, trying to find a heroine. I traced down every old book and scrap of paper, but was still without a real heroine. Finally, I came upon the name of Sacajawea, and I screamed, “I have found my heroine!”

I then hunted up every fact I could find about Sacajawea. Out of a few dry bones I found in the old tales of the trip, I created Sacajawea and made her a living entity. For months I dug and scraped for accurate information about this wonderful Indian maid (Clark and Edmonds 1979, 93).

In a legend that continued to grow well beyond the meager facts of Sacagawea's life, the Shoshone woman of settler imagination became the guide for the expedition, even its principal pilot. She also became an atypical Indian, light-skinned in some accounts. This legendary heroine Sacagawea received credit for helping white men in the wilderness, even saving their lives and adopting their religion (Kessler 1996).

After the popularization of the legend of Sacagawea during the Progressive Era, fewer texts would be published in the 1920s and 1930s. A significant text, though, did appear in 1933. Grace Raymond Hebard's *Sacagawea: A Guide and Interpreter of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* perpetuated the emerging popular image of Sacagawea, emphasized her atypical status, and recounted her role in urging Shoshones to adopt agriculture (Hebard 1933). Hebard would influence many authors writing about Sacagawea in the 1940s and would be the main source informing histories shared in schools and college textbooks (Kessler 1996). By 1934 when Joseph C. Wood was recounting his memories of Peninah to Kate Anderson, public familiarity with Sacagawea had increased significantly. By 1947 when Josephine Wood Naylor was compiling and writing family history, the growing legend of Sacagawea would have been well-known in virtually all Mormon households in the Great Basin.

Joseph's recollections of his mother emphasized the ways that Peninah had used her knowledge of plants and animals to help Mormons along the trail west. Whatever traditional knowledge she may have had or shared with others, Peninah did not play the role of a guide nor was she in the first wagon train west. She stayed in Winter Quarters in 1847 and the Wood family left for the Salt Lake Valley the following year (Wood 1868). Her traditional knowledge is juxtaposed with her labor as a significant part of her son's memory:

She helped milk cows, drove the ox team, was an excellent hand with horse teams, and had a very tender feeling for dumb animals. She knitted the stockings for her family, from wool off her own sheep. She did washing, carding, and spinning the wool into warp, as it was called then, to the loom to make cloth from which their clothes were made. ... She knew how to strike a steel on a flint, or rub two boards together to start a fire, as matches were unknown. She could cover a pine knot in the hot ashes and coals so it would keep a fire for days.

She made moccasins for shoes and homemade brooms to sweep the crude floors. She doctored the sick horses and cows and raised moth-

erless colts many times. She made tallow candles, knew how to braid rope, made heavy thread for men's clothing, and kept house with only a fireplace for heating and cooking. She baked bread in an old iron kettle on the hot coals. She made hominy out of corn and cloth out of hemp, and she cured all kinds of meat. She always took the wild animals that were killed to rend out grease for leather and harness oil.

Her summer times were always busy with planting her own kitchen garden and caring for it, drying all kinds of fruits, making her own molasses, syrups, sour kraut [sic] and pickles, for their supply during the long, hard winters. She knew how to make her own gloves and those for the menfolk as well.

He concludes this litany of Peninah's labor interspersed with accents of traditional knowledge with a definitive statement, "She was a real colonizer." Lest there be any doubt about her status as a colonizer, he notes that she "was never known to quarrel" and "learned her alphabet." She even learned to read and write, writing to "her family in the East" and reading "the Book of Mormon which was her favorite book." Yet, he concedes, "She preferred reading to attending meetings or gatherings" (Wood 1934b).

If only we could find the letters that Peninah wrote to her relatives, we might have her perspective in her own words. One wonders if she was fascinated by the Book of Mormon for its apocalyptic message or because she knew ancestors of the Cherokee were among the Mound Builders. Or, perhaps, she was familiar with the Cherokee tradition of seer stones, called *Ulúñsùtì* (Timberlake 1765; Mann 2003; Murphy and Baca 2016). It was in the museum founded by her grandson Wilford Wood (1893–1968) in Bountiful, Utah where the authors first saw and handled one of Joseph Smith's seer stones (Murphy 2020b). Smith, we later learned, used seer stones for divination, finding lost objects, revelation, and even translating the Book of Mormon (Quinn 1998; Mackay and Frederick 2016).

Left mostly with memories from the Mormon men in Peninah's life, descendants desiring her point of view can but read between the lines. Peninah's lifelong status as a servant to Daniel Wood's family, his other wives, and their children is abundantly evident. Her delay in learning to read and write was probably precipitated more by the lack of time than of effort or ability. Her discomfort in public settings such as church meetings may have been the result of class and racial prejudice. Her son's portrayal of his mother implicitly draws a sharp contrast with the lazy, uncivilized, wandering, quarrelsome Lamanites

of the Book of Mormon. Settler colonialists, Mormon and otherwise, imagined “Indians as lazy, cruel, warlike, deficient, un-Christian, and ignorant” (Cook-Lynn 2011, 49). When Peninah’s descendants contrast her comportment with a common stereotype and then liken her to a legendary Sacagawea, they emphasize her exceptionalism. She is more Nephite than Lamanite, an Indian ancestor that white descendants can be proud of, certainly not one of “those Indians.” These contrasts are employed because Mormon settlers have imbibed images of savage Indians, reinforced as they are in Latter-day Saint scripture. What is missing in these depictions of our grandmothers is the lasting impact of intergenerational trauma that continues to manifest itself in their descendants and is perpetuated by the colonization of memory (Brave Heart and LeBruyn 1998; Evans-Campbell 2008). Colonized memories contribute to a broader settler denial (or selective forgetting) of the removals, servitude, and genocide endured by Indigenous peoples.

Narratives of Indian princesses and a Mormon Sacagawea may bolster white settler identities, but they do so by distorting the actual lived experiences of ancestors. Their perpetuation, even when substantiated by DNA tests and a historical trail, harms Indigenous peoples, not just in the past but in the present. These stories do much of the same cultural work that stories of Indigenous ancestors do for race shifters who assume an Indigenous identity within a white settler community (Sturm 2010; Leroux 2019). Even when race shifting (the assumption of an Indigenous identity by descendants several generations later) does not occur, misrepresentative stories of Indigenous ancestors in settler communities can similarly harm Indigenous peoples (Tallbear 2013). The stereotypes disguise aspects of the women’s actual lives, perpetuate inaccurate caricatures of lazy and uncivilized peoples, create a sense of settler belonging on stolen land, undermine sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous nations, and establish a relationship with dead Indians rather than living Indigenous peoples.

Matrimonial ties, even distant ones, could alternatively generate empathy among descendants for their contemporary Indigenous relations. Consensual interracial unions in their first and second generations often served reciprocal relations between communities, facilitated access to key resources, and helped protect ongoing relationships with the land. By the sixth and seventh generations these more distant kinship connections may no longer serve constructive functions without more of an effort, especially on the part of those descendants of predominantly settler heritage. Given the frequency

with which Mormon marriages between settlers and Indigenous women were marred by kidnapping, slavery, servitude, and indenture, we need to recognize that many of these relationships were likely not consensual.

In the twenty-first century Indigenous communities have been raising the profile of murdered and missing Indigenous women and children, while seeking allies in addressing this pervasive problem (Anderson, et al. 2010). Red dresses, often displayed hanging in the wind, have become a symbol of this movement to honor the missing and murdered and to help protect living Indigenous women (Ault 2019). The wearing of orange has marked the Every Child Matters movement to remember and repatriate Indigenous children lingering in marked and unmarked graves at residential and boarding schools across Canada and the United States (Pawson 2021). Mormons played a tragic role in the removal of at least 419 American Indian children from their homes and families in the nineteenth century, the first documented one of which is Peninah Shropshire Cotton Wood who also fostered three more Timpanogos children. The remains of the Timpanogos children are stranded in the Wood Family Cemetery surrounded by a shopping center in Woods Cross (Bennion 2012; Murphy 2020b; Naylor n.d.). Settler descendants might open more dialogue with Indigenous colleagues by recognizing that some of our so-called “Indian princesses” are the missing Indigenous women and children from prior centuries. We can collaborate and partner with our neighbors and relations, even if separated by seven generations, to achieve the goals identified by living Indigenous communities, perhaps even contributing to the repatriation of past and current generations of murdered and missing women and children (Murphy 2018, 2020a, 2020b).

## Conclusion

Neither Susannah Ferguson nor Peninah Shropshire Cotton was an Indian princess or a Mormon Sacagawea. The tropes of an Indian princess and the legends of Sacagawea and Pocahontas are not accurate descriptions of actual Indigenous lives. These stereotypical categories themselves misrepresent more than they inform. Rather than “encompassing native issues and concerns,” Latter-day Saint genealogists portray female Indigenous ancestors as whitewashed princesses to address “the needs of Euro-American society” (Kessler 1996, 2). These women give settler descendants the perception of a royal lineage while erasing the brutality of the colonial violence actually experienced by Indigenous peoples. Colonization of the Americas by Europeans never was justifiable

on ethical and moral grounds (Cook-Lynn 2011). In order to salve anxieties over the violence perpetrated against Indigenous people, settler colonialists have invented an imaginary past in which ancestors of American Indians are portrayed as savage, wandering, and violent peoples in need of Christianity and “civilization.” They have whitewashed Indigenous women who married white men, remembering them primarily for their contributions to the settler colonial project.

White Latter-day Saint descendants of Indigenous women often imagine their ancestors as atypical. Adorned with images of royalty, these Indigenous women protect white men from their savage relatives and seem to endow their descendants with autochthonous roots in a stolen land. The racial intermarriages behind these stories are an important part of a much larger Mormon effort to turn Indigenous people “white and delightful,” absorbing them into a settler colonial body politic. While race shifting does not characterize the experiences of the extended families outlined here, the question remains open about how frequent that practice may be among a broader sample of Mormon genealogists claiming Indigenous ancestors. The significantly greater prevalence of culturally sanctioned intermarriages in early Mormonism versus New France suggests that there is much yet to be learned about this phenomenon among Latter-day Saint descendants.

The presence of prominent individuals such as Warner McCary, Lucy Stanton, Zula Brinkerhoff, and William Anderson who have adopted an American Indian persona indicates that some race shifting is present in Mormon communities too. Thus it is important to note that DNA and genealogical documents do not, by themselves, make descendants American Indians, legally or culturally (Garrouette 2003, Tallbear 2013). They do not authorize descendants to make a living selling Indian secrets, hosting ceremonies, or broadcasting Indigenous prophecies on internet radio (Macy and Hart 1996, Hobson 2002). Pretending that a genetic or historical link to Indigenous ancestors entitles one to speak for American Indians harms living Indigenous people by competing with or drowning out their actual voices.

In order to better understand Susannah Ferguson Youngs and Peninah Shropshire Cotton Wood in the context of their own time and place, descendants should jettison the stereotypes of an Indian princess and a Mormon Sacagawea, which have clouded perceptions of the past. Recovering the Indigenous histories of these ancestors can help undo the erasure inherent in settler colonial uses of the Book of Mormon. A recognition of the painful ways that

women have gone missing and still are disappearing from Indigenous communities might be an alternative way to connect with living relatives. Engaging with and supporting First Nations in Canada and American Indian nations in the United States in their current efforts to investigate and recover murdered and missing women and children would be a much more constructive way to honor Indigenous grandmothers.

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