

Interracial Marriage In Early America: Motivation
and the Colonial Project



Figure 1 : Henry Bueckner, "The Marriage of Pocahontas." 1855.

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In 1855, Henry Brueckner illustrated the 1614 marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe (Fig. 1). In this painting Indians sit among Whites, Pocahontas is shrouded in English trade cloth, John Rolfe points towards heaven claiming the divine appointment of the ceremony, a priest raises his hand as he waves a cross pattern in the air and all look united and at peace: Indians joined with Whites in fictive kinship and all joined to God above for the glory of trade and mutual survival. This painting serves as an excellent illustration of interracial marriage in early America. The marriage of Rolfe and Pocahontas was one among thousands of interracial marriages found in the annals of American history. The 1700s French census of France's North American subjects shows that over 50% of marriages were interracial.¹ The most typical examples of interracial marriage in this period occurred between Indian women and White men. In light of broader relations between Whites and Native Americans at the time, why did these marriages occur? What was to be gained? The very elements that Brueckner included in his painting, "The Marriage of Pocahontas," illustrate the material, religious and political implications of such unions that gave those involved benefit and motivation to enter into these interracial marriages which were crucial to the creation of the post-contact social world.

When the first Europeans landed on America's East Coast, they did not find a "new world," but created one: this process is often called the "Colonial Project." Indian tribes were well established with their own cultures, practices, trading arrangements, war patterns, etc. White men entered into this situation and had to find ways to make themselves part of this world in order to survive and commandeer wealth. They did this by establishing the fur trade, converting Indians to Christianity in an attempt to "civilize" them, signing treaties and many other means. In all facets of the colonial project social connections with the Indians were vital,

and it followed that interracial marriage could be the cornerstone in the building of post-colonial America, even if only useful for simply attaining food to eat.

The first trouble Europeans faced upon landing was how to acquire food. Traders relied on Indian populations for food as they were traveling. They did not possess the time needed, or the regional knowledge required, for growing food or hunting it – nor did they likely possess the skills necessary for this task. Traders, thus, had to establish good relations with the Indians in order to eat. The fact that this staple necessity was contingent upon social relationships with Indians, makes clear the need for traders to strengthen their connection to Indian tribes: and what better way to integrate themselves into these communities than through marriage?

The foundational social ties of the fur trade were also established through marriage. In the “middle ground” of the fur trade in post-contact North America, the traditional roles of Indian women were expanded and their actions as negotiators, sexual partners, intercultural emissaries, spouses, workers, and members / extenders of intricate kin networks were increasingly important.² As Bruce White explains, “Women, it would appear, have power to cross boundaries, explaining one world to another, in this case through a marriage relationship.”³ In Ojibwe folklore there is a story about a woman who marries a beaver. This story stands as an example of interracial marriage and its benefits. Through this marriage Indians and beaver were linked in a reciprocal trade arrangement where the beaver would give up its skin and bring home European trade goods. The woman was auxiliary to this arrangement, yet without her the bridge between these societies could not have been formed, making her role indispensable and venerable.⁴ Marriage is an institution that facilitates the joining of people groups and the incorporation of strangers into a system of created family obligation. This system proved crucial to facilitating the Europeans’ fur trade.⁵

One has to try to understand the world of early America in order to grasp the true importance of interracial marriage that is unlike the Western tradition. The typical examples of marriage-based alliances in Western society are found by looking at royal families. For example, Lady Louise Mountbatten of England married Crown Prince of Sweden, Gustaf Adolf, and an alliance between their two countries was forged. However, such family alliances within early America were not as important on the macro-political scale as on the scale of village relations. As Richard White explains, “At their most enduring, the connections between groups were not so much diplomatic ties between clear political entities as social bonds between much smaller units.”⁶ Therefore, marriages between Indians and White traders created important political relationships within this village-based socio-political system. When it came to trading, “the relation of the buyer and the seller was not accidental to the transaction; it was critical. If none existed, one had to be established.”⁷ The central importance of interracial marriage in post-contact America can be seen in many historical case studies from the period.

Benjamin G. Armstrong, an Englishman, traded with the Ojibwe and married the daughter of a chief in the 1840s. He reported that trading among the Indians was not possible without first marrying into their clan, thus promising a long-term commitment to the trade arrangement.^{8,9} The French Rémaune brothers used marriage to its full business advantage in the mid-1700s. Both were interpreters in service to the King of France and stationed at Fort St. Joseph, but really participating in illegal trading to turn a profit. Jean Baptiste Rémaune married Simphorose Ouaouagoukoue, an Illinois Indian, to guarantee him and his brother access to, and the protection of, the Illinois people. Simon Rémaune married Thérèse Catin, a White resident of Montreal. Catin provided her husband and brother-in-law with the French trade goods needed for the fur trade. Jean and Simon were very business wise in these marriage arrangements and

presumably successful because of them.¹⁰ Such interracial marriages led to mixed-blood children who continued the cycle of interracial marriage.

Marie Madeleine was the daughter of Jean Baptiste Rémaune and Simphorose Ouaouagoukoue. As Sleeper-Smith describes her, “She was the daughter of a fur trader, married successively to two fur traders, and her five daughters married fur traders.”¹¹ Madeleine’s second husband, Louis Thérèse Chevalier, had fifteen siblings, all of whom married in a manner beneficial to the fur trade.¹² This shows the commonality of such arrangements, as well as the multitude of kin connections gained by Madeleine once she entered into this marriage. Interracial marriage affected the French colonial project as it shaped the social construct of not just the fur trade, but also religion as seen in the case of Aramepinchiewe.

The marriage between the French trader Michel Accault and the daughter of an Illinois chief, Aramepinchiewe, advanced the agenda of both the fur trade and the local Jesuit Mission. Aramepinchiewe was the pride of the Illinois Mission and Father Jacques Gravier. Her father arranged the marriage between her and Accault to confirm a profitable trade arrangement. Gravier recorded the events preceding this union in the “Journal of the Mission of l’Immaculée Conception de Notre Dame in the Illinois country.” When originally presented with the idea of marrying Accault, Aramepinchiewe said, as recorded by Gravier, “that she did not wish to marry; that she had already given all her heart to God, and did not wish to share it.”¹³ Gravier supported her by saying she alone could make the decision to marry or not.¹⁴ There was great turmoil in the village. The chiefs ordered the cancellation of all prayers yet some young girls still attended and many threats and malicious words were uttered. Then Aramepinchiewe had an idea which she related to Gravier and he notated in the following words, “I think that, if I consent to the marriage, he [her father the chief] will listen to you in earnest, and will induce all to do

so.”¹⁵ Aramepinchiewe was correct in this thought, and her new husband and her parents accepted Gravier’s message through what Gravier called Aramepinchiewe’s “conquest.”¹⁶ Aramepinchiewe’s father, the chief then proclaimed his acknowledgment of the Jesuit’s preaching to the whole tribe and the number of believers multiplied substantially. In Gravier’s words, “On leaving this assembly, all the elders called out the summons to prayers throughout the village; and I think that the whole of it – women, girls, children, and even the old men – gathered around the chapel.”¹⁷ Through this union Catholicism, a mechanism of the colonial project, was brought to many in the tribe and the trading alliance was in a quite literal sense consummated.^{18, 19}

The story of Aramepinchiewe shows how interracial marriage empowered women. Gravier gave Aramepinchiewe power when defended her original refusal of Accault. He said that “she alone was mistress to do either the one or the other.”²⁰ Many of Gravier’s contemporary writers were condescending towards the Indian culture particularly because Indian women were masters of their own sexuality. Yet here, for the cause of Catholicism and the advancement of the colonial project, Gravier is saying that an Indian girl is free to choose. Aramepinchiewe, being an Illinois, already had greater freedom than most any European girl, and in this Jesuit tale she cleverly claims even more. She takes a European mechanism of domination, Catholicism, and uses it at first to get out of a marriage she does not desire, and when that does not fully work, then to influence her entire tribe, undoubtedly gaining their respect and a position of social power. Most likely Gravier influenced Aramepinchiewe to marry Accault in the end because he was losing his own influence over the village. He too gained tremendously from this matrimonial appointment in that his pastoral flock grew substantially. However, regardless of the background

influences imposed on Aramepinchiewe, she used the changing post-Colonial social world and interracial marriage to raise herself up in society.

There are many more such micro-histories that show how women attained added power through matrimony. In the 1820s Simon Chaquettes's wife from the Crane clan, was put on the American Fur Company payroll for she was seen as such an asset to their operations.²¹ Women would not even gain Constitutional rights until the 1920s, and here, the American Fur Company presumably voluntarily puts an Indian woman on its pay role. María Rosa Villalpando also gained power through her marriage. She was captured and lived among the Pawnee for a decade before a French trader, Jean Salé dit Leroie, took her as a sexual partner and later as his legitimate wife in Saint Louis. He then left for France in 1792 and María Rose Salé stayed behind in Saint Louis as an acting member of a trade company.²² Both of these women secured positions of power within a male-dominated society as a result of their marriages.

The practice of ascertaining power through marriage was a strategy used by both female and male. Henry Schoolcraft is the ultimate example of a man using interracial marriage for this benefit. Schoolcraft married Jane, a mixed-blood. Jane was the daughter of Oshauguscodaywayqua, a Chipewa, and John Johnston, an Irishman. Her father was an important fur trader, but her mother held an even greater position of power. Oshauguscodaywayqua was the daughter of an Ojibwe chief whom Schoolcraft described as a "northern Powhatan" and by extension claimed for Oshauguscodaywayqua an Indian princess / Pocahontas identity.²³ Schoolcraft married Jane in the 1820s soon after his appointment as a federal Indian Agent in Sault Ste Marie. Through this marriage he gained: improved relations with the Chippewa and their allied tribes, a sizable dowry, the possibility of future land holdings through Chippewa tribe association, children, Jane's language skills and her knowledge of the

Chippewa culture. He never learned the Chippewa language, but as Jane and Oshauguscodaywayqua taught Schoolcraft Chippewa culture and folklore, he recorded and published the stories, gaining much fame and literary celebrity..²⁴ This was all only a by-product of his interracial marriage. Schoolcraft's choice to marry interracially had gained him increased political power, material holdings, literary prestige and children to carry on his line. Marriage to Jane brought Schoolcraft much, but as the "New World" changed, so too did the social place of mixed-bloods and their families.²⁵

Some aspects of the marriage of Schoolcraft and Jane illustrate the shift in America's perception of race. In Schoolcraft's memoirs and letters, there is definite emphasis on his description of Jane's refinement and likeness to a respectable Englishwoman as if these characteristics of hers existed in spite of her mixed-blood. In 1825 Schoolcraft wrote in his journal the following description of Jane's biological background.

"Two very diverse sources of pride of ancestry [Ojibwe and Irish] met in her [Jane's] father's family – that of the noble and free sons of the forest, and that of ancestral origin founded on the notice of British aristocracy. With me, the former was of the highest honor, when I beheld it, as it was in her case, united to manners and education in a marked degree gentle, polished, retiring, and refined. No two such diverse races and states of society, uniting to produce such a result, had ever come to my notice."²⁶

This paragraph extols Jane's Indian ancestry, not as honorable by its own merit, but because of the anomaly it produced: a cultured and respected lady, Jane. Schoolcraft was a politician and a writer. He knew how to use language to his full advantage. In this paragraph he admits that Jane is descended from people "of the forest" but he glorifies these 'savages,' as they were widely perceived, by adding the adjectives "noble and free." He then goes on to claim British aristocracy in her blood, and the next decision he makes is interesting. He could have made an argument that British blood is strong and therefore overcame Jane's Native American roots, or he could have talked of Jane as another Pocahontas, as he spoke of her mother, making

Jane a fixture of beauty and a symbol of civilization's triumph. Either of these formulaic claims would have had good effect on the reader, but the words he chose to write instead are pleasantly shocking. Schoolcraft claims her Indian ancestry as *more* honorable than her British component because Jane had overcome the perceived setbacks of her Indian heritage to become the lady Schoolcraft married. This changes the shameful portion of her blood into a tremendous and respectful accomplishment: into a personal triumph that effectively proves her 'Whiteness.' Through the course of Schoolcraft's and Jane's marriage, it became increasingly important to defend Jane's racial identity.

When Schoolcraft and Jane were married, interracial marriage had been praised by President Jefferson as a wonderful process through which all people groups could unite. The young Schoolcraft couple's experience reflected this opinion as Jane was fawned over as a victory for civilization, a true Indian princess to be admired. By the 1840s, however, societal opinion had changed: Jane was viewed as a mixed blood without a mode of redemption, doomed by the Indian portion of her lineage.²⁷ Schoolcraft's risk of breaking with "the custom of the country" by making Jane his true wife, and not just his sexual partner, backfired. His children were seen as degenerate.²⁸ He was unable to claim their identity as Chippewa and the land over which this granted them entitlement without putting their American citizenship at risk. The world had changed and Schoolcraft could no longer re-arrange it with his pen. Either the social disapproval drove him away or he began to actually see Jane as the world did. In any case, Schoolcraft left her. Still, even after ending his marital union, Schoolcraft reaped additional material gains from the marriage. When kicked out of politics by an opposition party, he regained his position in Indian Affairs by claiming the ethnicity of his children as his asset. The marriage of Schoolcraft and Jane is a clear example of the material, cultural and political benefits

of interracial marriage, but also social risks of such an arrangement, as racial distinctions in America grew increasingly cemented and the degree of racial acceptance that had smoothed relations in early America all but vanished.²⁹

Consider this shift as it applies to María Rosa Villalpando who was discussed above. James Brooks described her transition from traditional Indian life to fur trading in the city as a “successful passage across cultures into security and longevity.”³⁰ María Rosa Villalpando was White, although she would have been viewed as less than White after living and breeding among the Indians. While living among the Pawnee she birthed a son. Years after her marriage to Jean Salé dit Leroie this Indian son came looking for her in Saint Louis and she, Brooks writes, “paid him two hundred pesos ‘hard money’ and sent him packing, requiring that he relinquish any interest in her estate.”³¹ This demonstrates that already in the late 1700s it was detrimental to be associated with mixed-bloods. María Rosa Villalpando was lucky to marry a White man and to hold a position within the fur trade of Saint Louis. Her purity had already been called into question, and having an Indian son could have jeopardized her social standing and security. Marriage had given María Rosa Villalpando back her Whiteness, and in an increasingly race-conscious America this was vital.

Understanding the transformation of the race-issue in America is crucial when interpreting John Tanner’s story. John Tanner, author of the 1830 The Falcon, was captured at age nine and lived among the Ojibwe tribe for many years. The Falcon, a type of literature called a “Captive Narrative,” is of a genre written retrospectively for a White audience and the influence of this dynamic must be addressed. The portion of interest here surrounds Tanner’s marriage. In this story his marriage to the Indian maiden Mis-kwa-bun-o-kwa is presented as

though the marriage was forced upon him, but further investigation indicates that this may not have been the case.

Tanner wrote that his adoptive mother, Net-no-kwa, came to him as said, “My son, you see that I am now become old; am scarce able to make you moccasins, to dress and preserve all your skins, and do all that is needful about your lodge.” The story goes on to report that Net-no-kwa told Tanner that as a grown man and a good hunter, he needed a young wife to take care of his property and living area.³² Tanner wrote that he objected to this idea, for he planned to take a White wife of privilege. In his own words, “I had as yet thought little of marriage among the Indians, still thinking I should return before I became old, to marry to the whites.”³³ This thought seems strange for a man who had lived among the Ojibweg for more than half his life. Perhaps this passage was meant simply to pacify his audience and to quell suspicions that he liked living as a ‘savage.’

Tanner’s contemporary writers exposed weaknesses in Tanner’s tale of forced matrimony. For instance, in the late 1800s Benjamin G. Armstrong recorded his lifetime compilation of stories and knowledge gained from interacting with the Ojibweg. He explained that if a man wished to be married, he would go out into the forest and kill an animal that represented love. If the woman he desired to be his wife accepted him, she would take this animal and prepare the meat. Only then did the couple’s respective parents enter into the process of marriage and give their permission.³⁴ From this information it might be inferred that Tanner’s marriage was of his own making. On the other hand, Armstrong gives information to the opposite effect as well. The Ojibweg were short of men due to disease and warfare and needed more husbands for their daughters. Such marriages, Armstrong wrote, were sought to form trade relationships as well. This being the case, perhaps Tanner was persuaded as he wrote to marry an Ojibwe. However,

that is not likely because Armstrong was referring to White traders being talked into marriage among the Indians.³⁵ Tanner was adopted by the Ojibweg who would have regarded him as Indian, not White, and would therefore have respected his right to choose a wife.

In Tanner's story, Net-no-kwa wakes him up and forces him to go off hunting to prove himself as a man. However, after taking Armstrong's account into consideration, it seems more likely that Tanner took his musket and went off to shoot an animal to profess his interest in Mis-kwa-bun-o-kwa without consulting Net-no-kwa. Tanner and Mis-kwa-bun-o-kwa were married and she took care of his camp and birthed his children. In the next years Tanner married multiple Indian women, and eventually returned to White society, leaving his wives and taking with him all but three of his children. By the end of his tale he is living in White society and working as an interpreter for Schoolcraft. A man who wished to work for Schoolcraft in a racialized society could not simply say, "there was a pretty Ojibwe girl and I married her and it was great." No, Tanner had to weave a story suitable for and acceptable to his White audience. That meant making his socially and materially profitable interracial marriage look like a produce of his unfortunate captivity.³⁶ Regardless of the circumstances under which Tanner became a member of an interracial marriage, it did occur, and that event affected the shape of early America.

Interracial marriage was a key ingredient of the colonial project that benefited institutions, people groups and individuals. It affected basic necessities such as food and lofty ambitions like political power. It eased the new cross-cultural encounters in ways that benefited the fur trade and brought temporary peace, but could not ultimately stop the progression of European dominance over native people groups. It helped to spread the Christian religion as well as explain Indian culture to White men. It both turned women into auxiliary players akin to commodities and placed them in positions of influential and economical power. It helped to meld Indians and

Whites together while consequentially producing offspring who would later be viewed as degenerate. It also filled the simple role that all marriage does by providing two people with a partner to help and support them.

These points can all be seen once more by returning to perhaps the most famous interracial marriage of all, that of Pocahontas and John Rolfe, and Brueckner's artistic representation of the event. In Brueckner's painting all are smiling and healthful looking. The Indians are shown wearing cloth goods that would have been gained through the fur trade, illustrating that trade agreements had been arranged and were working smoothly. The marriage is clearly happening inside a church. The Ten Commandments from the Bible are posted on the wall behind the priest who is leading the ceremony. Both Whites and Indians are brought into the church through Pocahontas' and Rolfe's marriage in a physical sense that points to their likely spiritual conversion. The presence of a child in the front row serves as a representation of the child this marriage would produce, Thomas Rolfe. The simple joy of partnership is represented by the couple holding hands and the serene, happy face Brueckner gives Pocahontas. An open window shows the world outside full of promising sunshine that flows into the room to illuminate the blissful couple as if the whole world were made new through their union. Perhaps the world was made new. Pocahontas and Rolfe would have been one of the first interracial marriages between a White and an Indian in America, starting a long line of marriages which would help shape America into what it is today.³⁷

¹ Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 46.

² Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³ Bruce White, "The Woman Who Married a Beaver: Trade Patterns and Gender Roles in the Ojibwa Fur Trade," *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 46, No 1. (Winter, 1999), 112.

⁴ *Ibid*, 137.

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- ⁵ Ibid, 109-147.
- ⁶ White, *The Middle Ground*, 16.
- ⁷ Ibid,98.
- ⁸ White, “*The Woman Who Married a Beaver*,” 129.
- ⁹ Benjamin G. Armstrong, *Indians of North America Social life and customs* (Press of A. W. Bowron, 1892) Digitized Aug 17, 2006
- ¹⁰ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*, 45.
- ¹¹ Ibid,, 50.
- ¹² Ibid, 48.
- ¹³ Jacques Gravier, “*Letter by Father Jacques Gravier in the form of a Journal of the Mission of I’Immaculée Conception de Notre Dame in the Illinois country*,” (Jesuit Relations, Vol. 64), 195.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 205.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 213.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 209.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, 159-237
- ¹⁹ White, *The Middle Ground*, 72.
- ²⁰ Gravier, “*Letter*,” *Jesuit Relations*, Vol. 64, 195
- ²¹ White, “*The Woman Who Married a Beaver*,” 130.
- ²² James Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Omohundron Institute for Early American Culture, 2002). 66-67.
- ²³ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers: with brief Notices of Passing Events, Facts, and Opinions A.D. 1812 To A.D. 1842*. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co.,1851), 107.
- ²⁴ Ibid, 135.
- ²⁵ Jeremy Mumford, “*Mixed-Race Identity in a nineteenth Century Family: The Schoolcrafts of Sault Ste. Marie, 1824-27*,” (Michigan Historical Review, 25: 1 (Spring 1999)).
- ²⁶ Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers: with brief Notices of Passing Events, Facts, and Opinions A.D. 1812 To A.D. 1842*. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co.,1851), 236
- ²⁷ Ibid, 4.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid, all.
- ³⁰ Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands*, 67.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² John Tanner, “*The Falcon*,” (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 84.
- ³³ Ibid, 84, 85.
- ³⁴ Benjamin G. Armstrong, *Indians of North America Social life and customs*. (Press of A. W. Bowron, 1892) Digitized Aug 17, 2006, 101-102
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Tanner, “*The Falcon*.”
- ³⁷ Camilla Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).