The Indian Captivity Narrative of Charles Johnston

John Long

Sir, In compliance with the wishes of my friends and my own inclination I am about publishing a narrative of my capture and detention by the Indians as a prisoner in the year 1790 in which I have had the assistance of a friend much more competent to such an undertaking than I can pretend to be. Having the pleasure of a slight acquaintance with you and knowing you to be a friend of American Literature in which I cannot but flatter myself this work will hold some thing like a respectable station, I am induced to take the liberty of inclosing you one of my subscription papers for the purpose of obtaining your signature should you think fit to honour me therewith...[1]

With these words Charles Johnston of Botetourt Springs solicited the support of former president James Madison in 1826 for an upcoming publishing venture. Thirty-six years before, Johnston had survived a harrowing encounter with Shawnee Indians along the Ohio River. Now, after years of requests to retell the story, he was planning to publish his account, probably the first book ever written in the Roanoke Valley.

Madison did endorse the book and order a copy. Johnston had his narrative printed, and it was well received by readers hungry for this type of adventurous tale. Johnston's 1827 book is a fascinating memoir. Virtually forgotten today, it is a thrilling story that, as an historical record, gives one of the clearest glimpses of the experiences of Indian captives on the frontier.

This essay will summarize Johnston's experiences and then examine where Johnston's chronicle fits into the uniquely American genre of the Indian captivity narrative. Finally, it will demonstrate why the name Charles Johnston deserves to be remembered as a hero, albeit an unwilling one, of the Virginia frontier.

Charles Johnston was born in 1769 in Prince Edward County. As a young man he was employed as a clerk by a Mr. John May[2] to help settle land claims in Kentucky. His duties necessitated traveling there to solicit depositions. On such a journey in 1790, the two men traveled by way of the Kanawha River to Point Pleasant (now in West Virginia). There they chartered a small boat to venture down the Ohio River. Joining them in the boat were a merchant named Jacob Skyles, a frontiersman named William Flinn, and two sisters by the name of Fleming.

The party had not ventured very far when they saw on the northern shore two stranded white men, imploring them for help.[3] The travelers had been warned not to heed such appeals since the Shawnee Indians would often use white captives as decoys to lure boats ashore for attack. Nevertheless, perceiving no danger, the group agreed to land and render assistance.

As soon as they reached shore, they suddenly found their little boat under attack by heretofore concealed Shawnee. John May and one of the Fleming sisters were killed and scalped; Mr. Skyles was wounded; and the rest were captured unharmed. "No human being, who has not experienced a similar misfortune, is capable of conceiving the horror ... upon finding myself a captive of these ruthless barbarians," recalled Johnston.[4]

Surprisingly, Johnston found himself relatively well treated, mainly because of the laudable character of the Indian into whose custody he was placed. Messhawa, a Shawnee warrior, became Johnston's master and proved to be a "humane, generous, and noble" one. Jacob Skyles was allotted to a much more cruel captor and suffered greatly. Messhawa, wrote Johnston, "had qualities which would have done honour to human nature in a state of the most refined civilization; whilst [Skyles'] keeper possessed such as disgraced even the savage."[5] Johnston also received protection and kindness from another Indian with the unlikely name of Tom Lewis. Thus, his captivity, harrowing though it was, was mild.

Several days into the captivity, a Mingo Indian joined the party, touching off an incident that Johnston recounts in a tongue-in-cheek style, though at the time he found it anything but funny. Previously, this Mingo had killed another Indian warrior and so was obliged by

custom to find a replacement to marry the dead man's wife and raise his children. The Mingo was able to convince Johnston's captors to release him for that purpose. "The prospect, indeed, was not very rapturous, of leading to the altar of Hymen an Indian squaw, already the mother of several children,"[6] lamented the 20-year-old Virginian, suddenly and unwittingly engaged to an Indian woman he had never seen. Fortunately for him, after a few days Messhawa regretted the trade and took him back from the Mingo. Weeks later, Johnston chanced to see the woman he was to marry, "and I could not help chuckling at my escape ... she was old, ugly and disgusting."[7]

By that time, Johnston and his captors had traversed the modern state of Ohio and arrived at the Indian towns on the Upper Sandusky near Lake Erie. There he had the good fortune of meeting a French fur trader by the name of Francois Duchouquet. Johnston, who for weeks had entertained the notion of escape but had found no opportunity, now saw a possible means of release: ransom. He implored Duchouquet to intervene on his behalf, which the trader graciously did. The Indians at first refused, but when it became known that they intended to kill Johnston (since "the scalp of their captive might be transported with greater facility and safety than his person"[8]), Duchouquet redoubled his efforts.[9] Finally, the captors agreed to terms and accepted silver broaches worth about $100 in exchange for their prisoner. "This event, to me the most important of my life, by a singular coincidence occurred on the 28th day of April, in the year 1790, the day on which I attained the age of twenty-one years. It might be truly and literally denominated my second birth,"[10] he recalled in his memoir.

Johnston remained in the employment of Monsieur Duchouquet for several weeks, until the trader made a trip to Detroit, and Johnston parted from his redeemer with tremendous gratitude. Johnston later repaid Duchouquet for the ransom and even petitioned Congress to have his friend reimbursed for the ransom of other captives he had rescued through the years. The two maintained a close friendship for years afterwards.

Others of Johnston's original party were not as lucky. Jacob Skyles, after being separated from Johnston, was horribly treated by his cruel master but was later able to escape and found his way back to civilization after many arduous adventures. Peggy Fleming, whose sister had

been killed in the initial attack, was terribly abused[11] but was eventually rescued by a former acquaintance who claimed to be her brother and negotiated her release. As for William Flinn, he was savagely tortured and eventually suffered death at the stake.

From Detroit, Johnston was able to find transportation to New York City, which was then the national capital. When his story was told in that city, it caught the attention of President George Washington, who requested a meeting with Johnston to discuss affairs on the western frontier. Their interview centered on relations with the Indians and the disposition of British forts that were still on American territory. On this point Johnston could offer little information, but his meeting with Washington would afterwards remain a high point of his life.

Eventually, Johnston returned to Virginia where he seemed to recover quickly from his ordeal. In 1808 he moved to the Lynchburg area and built a brick home, still standing, which he named Sandusky after the Indian town where he was ransomed. In 1820, he moved to Botetourt County (now Roanoke), where he lived until his death in 1833. At the Botetourt Springs, site of today's Hollins University, he opened a hotel and resort where an impressive mineral spring still flows. He also owned a hotel in nearby Salem and operated a gristmill, sawmill, and distillery on the Roanoke River near that town. At his death, he was buried on his resort land; years afterwards, his grave was moved to East Hill Cemetery in Salem as Hollins College expanded.

Three years after his experience, while aboard a ship crossing the Atlantic, Johnston met a French nobleman named Francois La Rochefoucauld, to whom he told the story of his capture. La Rochefoucauld later wrote an account that was woefully mistaken on several details. To correct the record and to satisfy the requests of family and friends, Johnston wrote his own memoir in 1827 with the tortuous title *A Narrative of the Incidents Attending the Capture, Detention, and Ransom of Charles Johnston of Botetourt County, Virginia.*[12] The book was well received and widely read, enough so that it was reprinted in 1905 by Edwin Sparks and again, in pamphlet form, by a descendant in the 1960s. An early reviewer commented that "so

graphically was the story told and so fascinating was the style, that none would ever lay it down without finishing it if once begun."[13]

Nonetheless, the tale of Charles Johnston's harrowing adventure has been largely forgotten, even in the Roanoke Valley where he spent his last years. This may be surprising, but, in fact, the obscurity of his story is not unusual. Johnston's book was a late example of one of America's earliest and most ignored literary forms: the captivity narrative. Not only have most examples of these once widely read books been forgotten, the entire genre is virtually beyond recollection. Yet almost two thousand such narratives were published from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries.[14] Of the four best-selling books of the early 1700s, three were stories of Indian captivity.[15] In a day when indigenous American culture was virtually unknown, these widely read books helped to establish American literature. Yet while captivity narratives (including Johnston's, which is not unknown to the few scholars of the genre) have received a limited amount of scholarly attention, they are, by and large, forgotten by Americans today.

Johnston's *Narrative* came on the tail end of the genre. Although his captivity was in 1790, when such experiences were still relatively common, his book was not published for another thirty-seven years. By then the frontier had shifted far to the west, and the captivity experience attracted less fascination than it once had. Occasional captivity narratives would be written for decades after Johnston's, including some highly popular Wild West accounts, but the genre had passed its zenith.

The captivity narratives were a diverse lot. They ranged from the factual to the lurid and improbable, from the eloquent and polished to the rough and amateurish. Some were clearly exaggerated or entirely fictional. For instance, in one obviously fabricated tale, a pair of captives on the Ohio escape and in two weeks are able to flee to the Pacific, where they find the lost tribes of Israel. Another tells of a captive's great adventure through Texas, where he discovers a miracle drug. It finally becomes clear to the reader that the story is nothing more than an advertisement for a new patent medicine.[16] But other captivity narratives seemed to be more-or-less true accounts of actual experiences.

Where does Johnston's *Narrative* fit into this range? In some ways his tale is typical of the phenomenon, and in others it does not fit the mold. Roy Harvey Pearce, in one of the earliest academic treatments of the subject, identified three phases through which captivity narratives passed. The earliest were religious confessionals, tales of God's grace in extreme circumstances, designed to encourage the faithful and witness to the lost. Later, many narratives served as propaganda, identifying the French allies of the Indians, or later the British, as enemies, feeding the nascent American nationalism of the mid- to late eighteenth century. Finally, in the nineteenth century, captivity narratives took the form of the thriller, the "out-and-out sensational piece" in which the Indians are villainous fiends.[17]

Johnston's *Narrative* fits none of these categories well. His is, by and large, a secular story, with only a few obligatory references to God (his slaves "return thanks to Heaven for my deliverance"[18]). Nor does he address the political situation to any great extent, except for Washington's questions about British forts in Ohio. Writing long after the Puritan era and the days of the French and Indian and Revolutionary wars, Johnston had no reason to write his book along the first two of Pearce's lines.

But neither does his account fit the category of the penny dreadful. Johnston's style is too subdued and factual, and the Indians in his story are not one-dimensional villains. Sometimes grim-faced and ominous, they are also prone to "loud and repeated bursts of merriment."[19] To be sure, some Indians he encounters are cruel, and the brutal treatment of his fellow captives cannot be missed. But still other Indians are humane and accordingly respected, even admired, by the narrator. This is especially true of Messhawa, Johnston's "sentinel and protector,"[20] presented as a noble and beneficent man. Elsewhere, the Indians who kill and eat Flinn and those who abuse Peggy Fleming are described as "savages"[21] and "unfeeling Cherokees,"[22] but on the whole Johnston avoids the sensationalistic stereotypes of other captivity narratives.[23]

More surprisingly, in the description of the Indians' drinking binges, greed for trinkets, antipathy toward encroaching surveyors, and underlying fatalism, one can sense a certain pity on Johnston's part for his captors. Observing a war-dance, for instance, Johnston interprets the motions as "repeat[ing] the injuries which have been

inflicted on them by their enemies the whites; their lands taken from them — their villages burnt — their cornfields laid waste — their fathers and brothers killed — their women and children carried into captivity ... repetitions of their wrongs and sufferings."[24]

If Johnston's *Narrative* is neither religious tract, political treatise, nor sensationalized thriller, what is left? An accurate retelling of the facts seems most likely.

Another paradigm exists with which to compare Johnston's *Narrative*. Richard Vanderbeets analyzed the captivity narrative as ritual, identifying a definite pattern that the genre followed with remarkable consistency. The vast majority of these narratives were structured in three stages: separation, transformation, and return.[25] In the separation phase, the captive is removed from his or her home and society in extremely trying circumstances. He or she is often exposed to similar experiences, such as witnessing brutal scalpings or even cannibalism. In the transformation phase, the captive is exposed to the Native American culture and usually is assimilated into that society to some degree, some even joining the captors' tribe and only returning much later, often under duress.[26] Finally, the return phase completed the journey, with the captive being restored to his former society. This event is often portrayed as a resurrection from the dead — and indeed Johnston describes his ransom as "my second birth."[27]

It is the first and third phases of Vanderbeets' paradigm that Johnston's account most resembles. He is certainly separated from his culture and immersed into an alien one, and of course he returns at the conclusion. But his *Narrative* differs sharply in the second, or transformation, stage. Although Vanderbeets uses Johnston as an example of a quintessential captivity narrative in his analysis, in fact several details diverge from the typical pattern.

For instance, scalping and cannibalism are typically witnessed as part of a captive's story (obviously not performed on the authors or they could never write their accounts later). Such details serve to demarcate the differences between one culture and another. Indeed, Johnston witnesses the scalping of Mr. May and one of the Fleming sisters and experiences the horror of seeing their scalps drying by a fire later. But since Johnston himself didn't witness the cannibalistic fate of Mr. Flinn, he gives only a second-hand account.

Several other common experiences identified by Vanderbeets are, at best, peripheral to Johnston's case. Most captives in the second "transformation" phase go through a process of accommodating themselves to Indian food and clothing. Johnston tells us of developing a taste for bear meat, but on the whole never gets used to his new diet, which lacked bread and salt. In contrast, it is his culinary skill in concocting a "chocolate dumpling" from ingredients captured from another boat that impresses the Indians on his first night of captivity.

Nor is he forced to ritually change his attire to "become" an Indian, as many captivity survivors describe. When one Indian tries to force him to swap his shirt for a "greasy, filthy garment that had not been washed during the whole winter," another Indian, Tom Lewis, prevents the trade, reproaching the first Indian for his unkindness, thus allowing Johnston to remain attired according to his own culture.[28] Rather than Johnston "becoming" an Indian in terms of diet and clothing, the Indians he describes seem more interested in taking on the trappings of white society. For instance, Johnston repeatedly describes his captors' eagerness for alcohol and silver broaches and their use of English greetings and curses.

Nor is Johnston forced to run the gauntlet as part of being initiated into captivity, although he expects to do so and expresses great apprehension over the prospect. In short then, Johnston's experiences share some commonality with other captives', but his account is also markedly different from those usually recorded. There is likely a simple reason for this: Johnston was only in captivity for some five weeks and ransomed almost as soon as he arrived at the Sandusky village. In contrast to other captivity ordeals, which lasted months or years, there was not time for Johnston to experience the usual rituals of captivity. As a result of these differences in his captivity narrative, we may infer from this the accuracy of his account: if he were to embellish or fabricate details of his story, he would probably have included some of these lurid details that were so typical of the genre and expected by the readers. That he did not indicates his intention to create a purely factual history.

If Johnston's *Narrative* is a factually accurate account of his experiences, we might then consider the ethnological value of his book. Dwight L. Smith has analyzed captivity narratives as ethnological

sources, and concluded that they are useful records when used with caution. Information contained in such stories should be taken at face value only when it can be confirmed by other sources; otherwise it should be used as "supplementary rather than primary sources."[29] Smith cites Johnston's *Narrative* as one of the sources he considers accurate and useful.

Thus, students of Native American culture, especially Shawnee, may relish some of Johnston's cultural observations. Such details as the game of "Nosey,"[30] the presence among the Shawnee of escaped slaves, French traders, and whites adopted into the tribe, the practice of replacing deceased husbands with captives, the war-dance Johnston eagerly observes — all have the ring of truth to them, although Johnston admits that he doesn't always understand what he sees.

Charles Johnston and his *Narrative* have languished in the historical shadows for too long. For its seemingly accurate recounting of events, Johnston's even-handed assessment of his captors, the ethnological value of his observations, and the compelling story of his adventure, Johnston's *Narrative* deserves a prominent place in the historical record of the Virginia frontier.

Much of the information from this essay is adapted from the introduction to a forthcoming reprint of Johnston's Narrative, *edited by the author and to be published jointly by the Salem Historical Society, the History Museum and Historical Society of Western Virginia, and Historic Sandusky in Lynchburg.*

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Endnotes

1. Charles Johnston to James Madison, April 4, 1826. Letter in archives of Historic Sandusky, Lynchburg, Va.
2. An early land speculator and developer of Kentucky, the city of Maysville on the Ohio River was named for him.
3. This was approximately at the confluence of the Ohio and Scioto rivers, about where Portsmouth, Ohio, is now located.
4. Charles Johnston, *A Narrative of the Incidents Attending the Capture, Detention, and Ransom of Charles Johnston of Botetourt County, Virginia* (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, reprinted 1905), p. 40. All references in this monograph to Johnston's Narrative are from the 1905 reprint edited by Edwin Erle Sparks.
5. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 72.
6. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 88.
7. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 113.

8. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 97.
9. Duchouquet, having already expressed interest in ransoming Johnston and the Shawnee having, up to then, shown no inclination to kill their captive, one wonders if this threat was merely a bid to raise the ransom price.
10. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 98.
11. Johnston was too genteel to describe her suffering in detail but hints at repeated rape. Her silence about her ordeal "left my mind to its own inferences," he writes (*Narrative*, p. 104).
12. Like many nineteenth century manuscripts, which attempted to tell the entire story on the title page, Johnston adds to his title "Who was made prisoner by the Indians, on the River Ohio, in the year 1790; together with an interesting account of the fate of his companions, five in number, one of whom suffered at the stake; to which are added 'Sketches of Indian Character and Manners with Illustrative Anecdotes.'"
13. William McCauley, *History of Roanoke County, Salem, Roanoke City, and Representative Citizens* (Chicago: Biographical Publishing Company, 1902), p. 315. Quote ascribed to a "Judge Marshall."
14. Gary Ebersole, *Captured by Texts: Puritan to Post-Modern Images of Indian Captivities* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), p. 9.
15. Ibid., p. 9. The other bestseller was *Pilgrim's Progress*.
16. Phillips D. Carleton: "The Indian Captivity," *American Literature*, vol. 15, no. 2 (May 1943), pp. 178–9.
17. Roy Harvey Pearce, "The Significances of the Captivity Narrative," *American Literature*, vol. 19, no. 1 (March 1947), pp. 1–20.
18. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 147.
19. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 71.
20. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 56.
21. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 62.
22. Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 110.
23. Also interesting along the same lines is Johnston's surprising friendship with an escaped slave and fellow captive. "The poor Negro, whom under other circumstances I should have kept at a distance, became my companion and friend," he records, commending the bilingual man for his abilities as a translator. (Johnston, *Narrative*, p. 81).Charles Johnston was hardly an egalitarian; nor should we expect a nineteenth-century slave owner to be. But his open-minded assessment of Indians and blacks is more tolerant than we might expect.
24. Johnston, *Narrative*, pp. 84–5.
25. Richard Vanderbeets, "The Indian Captivity Narrative as Ritual," *American Literature*, vol. 43, no. 4 (Jan. 1972), pp. 548–62.
26. An untold number of such captives never returned to white society. Since they tended not to write their memoirs, they are not treated by Vanderbeets' analysis.
27. Vanderbeets, "The Indian Captivity Narrative as Ritual," pp. 561-2.
28. Johnston, *Narrative*, pp. 39–40. He does lose his coat and outer garments, but this seems more like plunder than any ritual. Later, his trousers are also confiscated when a hidden knife is discovered, but again no ritual is involved.

29. Dwight L. Smith, "Shawnee Captivity Ethnography," *Ethnohistory*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter 1955), pp. 29–41.
30. Johnston's description of this game is probably the only record of its existence: "Only two hands were dealt out, and the object of each player was, by a mode of play which I do not now recollect, to retain a part of the cards in his own possession at the close of the hand, and to get all from his adversary. When this was done, the winner had a right to a number of fillips, at the nose of the loser, equal to the number of cards remaining in the winner's hand. When the operation of the winner was about to begin, the loser would place himself firmly in his seat, assuming a solemn gravity of countenance, and not permitting the slightest change in any muscle of his face. At every fillip the bystanders would burst into a peal of laughter, while the subject of the process was required to abstain completely even from a smile; and the penalty was doubled on him if he violated this rule. It is astonishing to what an excess they were delighted with this childish diversion. After two had played for some time, others would take their places, and the game was often continued hour after hour." Johnston, *Narrative*, pp. 57–8.