

Queen Catharine Montour: “She was a remarkable woman”
A story from Schuyler County’s history for March’s Women’s History Month

The most well-known woman in Schuyler County history is indisputably Queen Catharine Montour. Her name lives in place names across the county and in our history books.

Though we rightfully honor her, significant pieces of Catharine’s story are not accepted with certainty. To add to the confusion, her grandmother, mother and sister Esther are all also notable in history, and their stories and Catharine’s frequently have been mistakenly intertwined.

Since the late 1800s, writers and historians have been searching for irrefutable confirmations of the details of her life. Still, newspaper stories of that time describe Catharine as having been a woman of “peace and good will” and “of rare intelligence for the age in which she lived” and who “ruled with power and dignity.”

Watkins Express editor Frank Severne, in the newspaper’s July 6, 1955, edition, quotes 1800s historian T. Apolian Cheney: “She was a remarkable woman who secured for herself the respect of her people by her fearless and determined character. Imbued with more than ordinary intellectual power, she meted out to all exact justice, and demanded implicit obedience.”

Catharine’s maternal great-grandmother was a Canadian Huron married to a Frenchman with the last name Montour. Her maternal grandmother, Catharine Montour, was raised as a Seneca after being kidnapped at the age of 8 but also spent two years with the French governor of Canada as part of a goodwill plan with the Senecas. Her grandmother married an Oneida chief, and it is believed they lived for a time in She-O-Qua-Gah, today’s Montour Falls. Her mother, known as French Margaret, married a Mohawk, and the family of at least five lived in various places, including in a village in the area of today’s Wellsburg where Catharine met her husband.



This art quilt by Alice Gant of Trumansburg depicts Queen Catharine Montour.

Catharine, whose birthdate is not confirmed, married Telenemut, a Seneca chief from She-O-Qua-Gah, where they eventually made their home and raised at least four children. Telenemut died in an attack in Catawba lands in Virginia in 1760.

With the death of her husband, Catharine became the leader of the village of upwards of 300 people. Some, however, believe Catharine was never a “chief” but was instead a respected elder of the village.

Because of her position, whatever it was, she became known as “Queen Catharine” to the whites, with whom she was able to communicate. She had been taught French and English, and with those language skills she served as an interpreter.

“Her ability to speak French and English made her an important figure in dealing with those two powers who fought for the control of North America,” writes Schuyler County Historian Gary Emerson in his essay “Queen Catharine.”

Outsiders referred to She-O-Qua-Gah as Catharinstown. It was generally located along what we know as Catharine Creek, on the southern edge of Montour Falls. It was noted for its abundant gardens.

Catharine lived in a white, two-story, gambrel-roofed house, covered with vines. But her home, and the village, did not survive destruction by Generals John Sullivan and James Clinton in September 1779.

The military expedition was sent through Iroquois territory as retaliation for support of the British and raids on American settlements. Villages and crops were destroyed as the inhabitants fled north. Catharine and her people made their way along the east side of Seneca Lake. One account says Catharine did not want to leave, but she was forced to by her warriors worried about her safety.

And from this point, Queen Catharine’s story is uncertain.

One report says she was killed by Sullivan’s soldiers. Multiple reports say she moved on and lived in Canada. At least one early white settler claimed Catharine returned to a re-built Catharinstown and that he visited with her in her home and shared meals with her. A specific date of Feb. 20, 1804, is given in records as the date of her death at about the age of 94, but the source of that date is unclear. Many believed Catharine was buried in the area of where She-O-Qua-Gah once was, specifically in the Cook Cemetery behind B.C. Cate Elementary School.

None of this is confirmed, but the mysteries of her final years do not diminish the importance of Queen Catharine Montour in the history of Schuyler County and the young United States of America.