It is no mystery that colonial women experienced a very different life than the women of today’s modern world. When taking a close look at the history of the colonial time period, comparisons can be made and certain conclusions can be drawn to explain how and why society has evolved over time. It is common knowledge that American women have come a long way in respect to civil rights. Although premature, perhaps the colonial women were the first “Americans” to begin to take notice of the issue and the need for women's civil rights. Perhaps this is why some women chose to leave their former colonial lives behind after being captured by Natives and take on a new identity within the tribe.

During colonial times, there were many injustices that did not allow women, specifically married women, to take charge of their daily lives. For example, married women were not legally able to own property, they were not acknowledged in the courts and they were also not allowed to partake in any commerce and business activities (14 Berkin). Married colonial women were subjected to a sub-standard lifestyle of oppression, unable to pursue life and happiness to its fullest, once married, women were without a voice in political and religious platforms, and their success and livelihood became completely dependent on their spouse. This oppression, and the way in which it affected the character of colonial women is the reason that many colonial women chose to stay with or even return to their captors rather than return home.

In Carol Berkin’s “First Generations; Women in Colonial America,” she educates the audience with recorded accounts in history that illustrate what life was like for women during the colonial time period. It is unquestionable that in the years of colonization, married women were not considered equal to their spouses. This is evident as Berkin tells of how the law defined the rights of a married woman, “In its most pristine and extreme interpretation, the law denied married women the right to make judgments regarding their own economic circumstances. It muted their voice in the courts, restricted their accumulation and disbursement of material wealth, and made them less than responsible for their misdeeds or achievements in the public sphere. A woman was a legal incompetent, as children, idiots, and criminals were under English law… stripped of all property; once married, the clothes on her back, her possessions whether valuable, mutable or merely sentimental and even her body became her
husband’s, to direct, to manage, and to use (14).” The law also charged husbands with the task to “protect and provide for wives; wives were required to submit to male authority and assist their husbands by productive labor and frugality” (15). This was intended to create a perfect and “ideal unity of person” with both spouses working together as one, however this ideal model was often forgotten and not always followed (15). In the colonial time period, marrying and starting a family was for most people the normal course their life would take. Most women were very likely to marry and start a family just as they do now, so most women would be subject to this lifestyle. Once married, women lost the right to be in control of their own lives, and their only option was to entrust their livelihood to their husband.

Women were also treated as inferior to men in the church. For the Puritan colonists specifically, Berkin states that “Although the equality of souls remained a theological principle, the power of men to mediate between Christ and women was expressed in the all-male clergy and in the silencing of women within the church” (42). Religion was just another arena in which women were restrained from full participation. Berkin compared married colonial women to being viewed as “children or criminals within the law,” and as “legal incompetents”, thus, it is reasonable to conclude that this male dominant world was full of limitations that left women at a disadvantage. Without alternative options, married women accepted their responsibilities and went about their lives.

Colonization of the eastern states in North America progressed over time with frequent encounters between colonists and the Native Americans. When hostility arose between colonists and Native Americans, attacks were waged and many colonists were killed or taken captive by the Natives (43). Berkin discusses that “Those (colonials) taken captive during the raids over the end of the century and over the first decades of the next were intended for adoption into the tribe or into French Canadian society […] Women were considerably more likely than men to remain with their captors, especially if they were turned over to the French in Canada” (43). Berkin reports that at least one third of the females who were sent to New France opted to stay and not return home, and a minimum of 40 percent adapted to Catholicism and even took French husbands (44). Berkin also speaks of, “Those women who, on ransom and release from their Indian captors, pleaded to return to their Indian families and friends[…]” (44). There is ample evidence that many women did not return home after experiencing life with the Native people.
Life with the Natives must have been a quite liberating experience. Odd as it may sound; experiencing life with the Native Americans seemed to open the door for new opportunities to female colonial captives. This different way of life, at the very least, would have been thought provoking for colonial women, and Berkin proves that for many it provoked action as well. For women who were raised in a world full of limitations to have the glass ceiling of the Puritan society removed, some were able to find a new beginning. Choosing to remain with a Native tribe that waged war and captured colonists right out of their homes was a bold decision probably based on a combination of factors. No doubt that the discrimination Puritan society subjected them to became apparent as they interacted with a different culture and observed their different division of labor and the different gender roles for men and women. According to Berkin, “[…]some women found the gendered division of labor and of rights and duties within the Abnaki world more desirable than those of colonial Haverhill or Deerfield” (44). Berkin also discusses how women were regarded warmly amongst the Native tribes, stating that “[…]woman’s primacy in agriculture appeared to some observers a sign of her primacy in political and social spheres as well” (62). Berkin even quotes an 18th century French commentator as stating, “Nothing, is more real than this superiority of the women. […] all real authority is vested in them” (62). What is known for certain about this transpiration is that there were many differences between the way Natives and colonists conducted their lives, and these differences were great enough to influence some women to abandon their former identities to remain with the Native American tribes. The colonial women who chose to remain with the Natives were victims of oppression in the Puritan colonial society that found respect and happiness in a new place.