

8-Kelly Wisecup-Final (1).mp3

Mary Mahoney [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:18] Hello and welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies Anthology on the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:36] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode, it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Kelly Wisecup. Professor Wisecup contributed a household inventory of Mary Occom to Hidden Literacies. It offers significance for its time and our own. To begin I've asked Kelly to introduce herself.

Kelly Wisecup [00:00:59] My name is Kelly Wisecup. I teach in the English department at Northwestern University. I'm also co-director of the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research at Northwestern, and I live in Chicago, Illinois.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:13] I asked Kelly to describe the text she contributed to Hidden Literacies.

Kelly Wisecup [00:01:18] The text is a page of accounts from the New London, Connecticut, merchant Nathaniel Shaw Jr. and it's a set of accounts from 1765 to 1767. It's really just a page of charges made at this merchant's store. And these are items that were charged to the account of the Mohegan minister and leader Samson Occom, who is probably best known in the 18th century for an execution sermon he gave for a Wampanoag man who'd been condemned to death. And he may be best known today for his autobiography, which is often anthologized in literature anthologies. The really interesting thing about the account is that Samson Occum is in England during the time that the purchases were made, and so the purchases were actually made by his wife, Mary Fowler Occom, who was taking care of the family and attempting to provide for them in Occum's absence.

Mary Mahoney [00:02:16] This was no easy task. In her commentary and in our conversation, Kelly suggests two possible ways of reading the account book. One approach of quote, looking through the account, allows us to get a sense of Mary's life. As Kelly writes, quote, "One thread might highlight the purchases of pork, rice, oats, cheese and sugar with which Fowler Occom fed her children and perhaps other Mohegan people while Sampson was in England.

Mary Mahoney [00:02:46] We can surmise, based on the women's shoes, flannel and inexpensive linen cloth, that Mary purchased items to make clothing for herself and her children. We can see from the tea, coffee and rum she bought that she participates in the circum-Atlantic exchange of commodities made from American plants. And we can see that she purchases technologies of literacy from ink and a, quote, "ink pott" to paper. Finally, in 1765, she pays some of her debt in cash and in June 1766 she receives a credit quote by a pot returned. Kelly explains what that might suggest.

Kelly Wisecup [00:03:25] So one of the really interesting entries in the account is at the bottom of it. And it's just a line that says "a pot returned" returned. So the fact that she's returning this pot suggests any number of things. But one thing it could suggest possibly is

that she's perhaps overextended her credit and so needs to return the pot in order to maintain her relationship with Shaw.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:46] Eleazar Wheelock didn't support Mary's family financially after promising to do so, which was one of several problems she faced, as Kelly describes it.

Kelly Wisecup [00:03:56] Mary sent a letter to Eleazar Wheelock, who's the minister who sends her husband to England and is the man who's supposed to be caring for the family. She sends this letter November 8, 1766. So this is just after the account with Shaw begins and she asks for help with her son, Aaron, who she says is trying to run me in debt by forging orders. So basically, Aaron is contributing to her debt by forging her signature and for requests for things that she doesn't actually need. So she tells me like that, quote, "Being in haste cannot write so much as I would but the bearer here of squid is an honest man and will speak the truth if he can relate the whole." So there's a lot to unpack here.

Kelly Wisecup [00:04:39] And I'll just kind of move through the quotation by a bit. One of the things that's interesting is that writing from any outcome is not something that she turns to immediately, but that's not because she doesn't want to or she can, but because she's in haste. She has a large family at this time. She has responsibilities to the community at Mohegan where she's living. And so writing, a thing that literary historians like myself privilege, is not a thing that is a top priority for her. And so she writes quickly, but she also entrusts the letter to another person, a man she says is honest and will speak the truth. So there's a sense here of the ways that literacy is happening both in the letter and in Mary's conveying to this honest man of her message to Wheelock. So she's making use of a messenger as well as a written writing. And then the really interesting word for me in this quotation is squib, which is a kind of satirical line or piece of writing. And I don't know that I have fully figured this out, but I think it's pretty interesting to think about Mary Occom calling on writing to realize something that's satirical and at least suggests that we shouldn't necessarily read it straightforwardly, but that she's somebody who put humor and coded meanings into her letters. And that makes us think about what we like. Then, as somebody who's in control of narratives, as colonial ministers like to present themselves as being, but as somebody who might be struggling to figure out the meaning of a letter sent from Mary Occom.

Mary Mahoney [00:06:04] This exploration of Mary's communications with Wheeler demonstrates a central point Kelly makes in suggesting we read by, quote, looking at the account book in addition to looking through it. Looking at, Kelly writes in her commentary, suggests, quote, "that we think about Mary as a participant in its creation and use even if she does not write the account itself."

Mary Mahoney [00:06:28] Looking at requires that we account for literacy as encompassing not just the ability to read, write or calculate, but also an understanding of the social power of text and the ability to use textual objects accordingly". This knowledge is what Karen Waler has called, quote, "a functional understanding of literacy", which she describes as an understanding of how print worked and how to access it.

Mary Mahoney [00:06:56] Functional literacy allowed people with a range of relations to reading and writing to participate in print culture. We can see this in Mary's various communication methods. She used writing in literacy in several ways, Kelly notes. From penning a letter to refusing to write in English. Mary wrote letters to Wheelock, as described by Kelly earlier, complaining of a son who forged her signature on charges she could not pay.

Mary Mahoney [00:07:24] Later, she wrote his daughter to ask for assistance in the absence of her father's support. As Kelly writes, quote, these letters show that Mary is aware of the power that deceitful or forged orders can have, and of the ways that writing can affect colonialists accounting, perhaps by convincing them to reverse a refusal to sell goods or by stimulating actions they might take to fulfill their promises to pay debts. Quote, "The pot returned could then signal Mary's correction of a forged order or perhaps a decision to pay off a debt she calculated she could not pay otherwise". Beyond navigating communications with those for whom she needed support, Mary demonstrated literacies with both written and in-person communication.

Mary Mahoney [00:08:15] However, as Kelly demonstrates, Mary accounts, quote, not just for goods and money, but also for feelings. She interacts with accounting as both a numerical and an effective project, one meant to extract both money and gratitude from indigenous people. End quote. We can get a sense of this, in a letter, Samson writes to his wife, asking her to thank English ladies for gifts.

Kelly Wisecup [00:08:39] So there's a letter from Samson to Mary in which Samson says the Christian ladies who sent you a gift are waiting for a letter of thanks from you. Please send one to them. So we get the sense of the ways that accounting for Mary Occom, is keeping track not just of expenses, but also of other people's feelings and the kinds of work that she had to do to manage the expectation of gratitude that the woman who sent her gift had. So we can understand a lot about the understanding that Mary would have had of how accounts worked. One of the ways they worked at this time was to put native people into debt. We can see a sense of the ways that she's working to stay out of debt and working to build relationships that will ensure that her debts are paid. And then we also see her working within this world in which there's an expectation of particular kinds of feelings or particular kinds of acts on the part of native women and working to kind of pursue her own agenda there. She sometimes has people write letters for her, so she accomplishes an act, but she maybe doesn't quite take it herself seriously. Working within this larger world in order to pursue her own ends and provide for her family.

Mary Mahoney [00:09:49] These multiple literacies Mary must use to keep up household accounts and prevent debts demonstrates in part the hidden literacies of this text. As Kelly writes in her commentary, quote, "These native women maintain an understanding of how colonists use accounts, debts, exchange and circulation, often to ends that were detrimental to native communities and individuals. As Mary's account shows, interventions in those ends were often small, quotidian acts that aim to circulate alternate interpretations of and uses for accounts. Such literacies are hidden not so much because of obscure archives or uncatalogued text, Mary's account with Shaws cataloged as part of Samson Occom's archive at Dartmouth and digitized as part of the Occum Circle Project, but because they involve forms of use and literacy that require new readerly practices to see them. For Kelly this suggests the importance of reading in new ways.

Kelly Wisecup [00:10:51] One of the things I was thinking about around this account is that it really complicates what anybody thinks of when they think about what native literature is. So a lot of times when I talk to folks and tell them who I am and what my job is, I often get questions about what native literature is. And the thing that people imagine is that it is a novel. Maybe it's an autobiography. It's usually they are imagining written in the 20th and 21st centuries and this piece doesn't fit into any of those categories. It's not a novel. It's not a narrative account. Doesn't even have sentences, really complete sentences. So it really pushes against those expectations for what native literature is and I

think also complicates popular expectations for Native American people. And so I think it really pushes us to read differently, no matter who we are and to I think it trains us to read texts that we encounter in different ways at the level of a sentence and at the level of the book. So I think one of the things that can come out of that is a different reading of the past and of the present, which might be outside of our expectations for what literature looks like about who writes it and about how circulates.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:07] Ultimately, this kind of reading could have implications for researchers working today.

Kelly Wisecup [00:12:12] I mean, I think that it makes us think today about people who maybe are on the margins of historical records. And it tells us that what we think we know about an important person or an important, important moment isn't the whole story and that it's worth looking at materials like accounts, which don't seem like very interesting documents to read, because they will tell us something about the people who remained for various reasons, in some cases because they wanted to be in another case, because they were forced to be on the margins of the historical record, but that we can learn something about their lives and the ways that they navigated larger historical forces that were perhaps more familiar with.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:54] To explore more of Kelly's research, check out her 2013 book, *Medical Encounters: Knowledge and Identity in Early American Literatures*. She is currently completing a book entitled *Assembled Relations* Compilation Collection and *Native American Writing* on early Native American Literatures and their relations to colonial collections and archives.

Mary Mahoney [00:13:17] *Hidden Literacies* is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hillary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to *Hidden Literacies* for more information on *Hidden Literacies* and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit www.hiddenliteracies.org