Ethnohistorical evidence indicates that females had a variety of important functions in Native northeastern societies, and that they were important social actors who had power in the public sphere of these societies. I propose a model for female status which I believe applies to all of these northeastern societies. There are three basic parts to my model of female status. The first part of the model, and a primary factor in determining female status in all of these societies, is the life cycle. In each of these societies older females who were past middle age were the only females mentioned in the ethnohistorical literature who had individual power in the public sphere. The second part of the model, and in my opinion, the second primary factor that determines female status (or public power) is resource control. Each of the older, individual females that are recorded in the ethnohistorical literature had control over resources — trade goods, agricultural products and goods, or special knowledge of herbs and medicines. Thus I am using the term "resources" in a broad sense. The last part of the model are the structural factors that work to reinforce and maintain female status in the society. The structural factors include: matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence, male absence; rules of succession, domestic living arrangements and the presence of a female deity. Thus this model relates the individual female, resource control and the infrastructure of a society together to understand how, why and under what particular circumstances individual females were able to wield public power.

The Wabanaki

The ethnohistorical record on the Wabanaki discusses individual females who were known as "grand-dames" or Nokomums. These females were past middle age and had a variety of privileges that younger females did not have. They also had more mobility, freedom from restraint and were able to serve in a variety of important positions in Wabanakia, in-
cluding functioning as political leaders or speakers in council and serving as shamans (Chamberlain 1902:85–86; Morrison 1983:126–127). The ethnohistorical record illustrates that a number of Wabanaki females inherited formal leadership positions. Angel Queen, a female sagamore-shaman was an older woman who is reported to have travelled to Wabanaki villages at least twice each year. She was a powerful shaman who distributed food as she travelled among the villages. This individual Wabanaki female was an older woman who had control over both food resources and was reported to have strong magical power and thus had power as a shaman as well (Morrison 1983:129).

There are also several other individual females who are recorded in the ethnohistorical literature who clearly had individual public power. The Queen of Quacke was a female leader who inherited her leadership position from her father (Levett 1893:104–105). Another female who inherited a leadership position was Jacataqua of Swan Island who inherited the position of sagamore from her mother. Both of these females illustrate that one of the structural features present in Wabanakia that worked to reinforce and maintain female status were rules of succession that allowed individual females to inherit formal leadership positions (Morrison 1983:130; Griffiths 1976).

The elder Penobscot shaman Molly Molasses was respected and feared as a very powerful shaman. Both her age and her knowledge of herbs and medicines enabled her to obtain a position of public power and influence (Eckstorm 1980:21). Another older female religious leader who had great power in Micmac society was recorded by Christian missionary Le Clercq. This female religious leader was recorded in the ethnohistorical literature as having the power to cure the sick and protect people from enemies. Thus by having earned the reputation of being a powerful shaman, this woman was able to achieve a position of power in the public sphere of Wabanaki society (Le Clercq 1910:229–230; Axtell 1981:193–194).

Thus even though agriculture was only practiced in the southern section of Wabanakia, females were able to obtain positions of power in the society by becoming shamans and inheriting leadership positions. The females that were recorded in the ethnohistorical literature were older, a fact which enabled them to function as shamans, council speakers and political leaders because they were also able to control resources in their society. The structural organization of Wabankia aided these females by having rules of succession for political office that allowed females to inherit positions of leadership. These females were aided by this rule, but none of them would have achieved a position of power in the public sphere of the society without also being an elder who had control over resources.
Female Delaware are recorded in the ethnohistorical literature as serving in a number of important roles in Delaware society. Older females and a group of young men were able to force the Esopus war captains to seek peace with the Dutch in 1664 (Grumet 1980:52). Older females were also important as shamans and traders in Delaware society.

Here again individual females were able to attain positions of power in Delaware society only because they were older and had control over important resources like agricultural or trade goods or shamanic curing powers. Clearly, elder female shamans who had the power to communicate with the dead, locate lost persons and foretell future events had individual power in the religious sphere of Delaware society. The economic importance of coastal Algonquian females as recorded by Mourt (1841), Heckewelder (1817), Juet (1909) and a trader at Albany also cannot be overlooked.

Female status in Delaware society was reinforced and maintained by a number of important structural factors including agriculture, matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence and the ritual cycle. Corn was the major staple of the Delaware diet and since females worked the garden and controlled the distribution of the agricultural products, this worked to reinforce female status in the society. Female status was also supported and reinforced by the 12 matrilineal lineages that were present in Delaware society. These lineages regulated marriage, ceremonial obligations, feasts and the inheritance of special ritual property (Goddard 1978:225).

Individual females were very important as shamans in Delaware society and the Delaware ritual cycle also worked to maintain and reinforce female status. The two important types of ceremonies were family feasts and vision rituals. A major ceremony was held at both corn planting and harvesting time and females played an important role in the ceremony (Goddard 1978:231-232). The matrilineal lineages conducted annual ceremonies which also gave support to female status and reinforced the position of high status for females in Delaware society.

Females in Shawnee society served in a variety of functions and influenced war chiefs, supervised village affairs, directed the planting, cooking and accompaniment of the feasts. In all parts of Shawnee society where females served as important social actors in the public sphere the key elements of my model are all present.

Agriculture was important in Shawnee society and it clearly worked to reinforce and maintain female status. The two distinct women’s committees that directed the Brad Dance feasts were the Naynahowaychki and the
Mayyawwatethechki. The life cycle (or age) was the key factor in the selection of females for the Mayyawwatethechki committee. The ritual cycle itself reinforced female status in Shawnee society since the Bread dance was a ceremony conducted for crop fertility. The females were the ones who called for the ceremony and the women also distributed the meat the feast itself (Galloway 1934:190ff).

Older women also decided the fate of Shawnee war captives and an individual elder female could serve as a ritual war leader if she had a vision that gave her specific instructions (Trowbridge 1939:26). Thus here again an individual elder female could obtain a position of power in the public sphere of society if she also had received a vision which therefore gave her supernatural power. Female status in Shawnee society was also reinforced by their religious system which featured an important deity called "our Grandmother" (Voegelin and Voegelin 1944; Alford 1979).

The Montagnais

Montagnais females were considered to have equal status to males in the society and personal autonomy for both sexes was reinforced by a number of structural factors present in the social structure of Montagnais society.

In Montagnais bands, each member of the group was dependent upon each other and "Obedience was owed not to any individual, but to the practical and moral order of the group" (Leacock 1981:191–193). In Montagnais society leadership in any particular situation was allowed to fall upon the shoulders of the individual who was most knowledgeable. The principal of personal autonomy for both sexes was present in Montagnais society and it was supported by a number of structural features of Montagnais social organization. There was no rigid sexual division of labour and decisions were made by the household group. Polygyny was allowed for both sexes and divorce was easy for either marriage partner. Both men and women were involved in running the household and males were also very involved with the raising of the children. The reciprocal exchange of goods and services in Montagnais society also worked to reinforce and maintain sexual equality in the society. Both women and men held their own feasts and the women as well as the males were involved in the torture of war captives. Thus the entire social structure of Montagnais society reinforced and maintained sexual equality and personal autonomy.

In Montagnais society, older females could obtain positions of influence in the society by controlling resources. Older females in the society functioned as both shamans and village supervisors. Older females who had a good knowledge of herbs and medicines functioned as healers and thus obtained a position of personal influence in the society. Female village su-
Supervisors decided the course of the bands and thus functioned as household leaders. Although there was a tendency for matrilocal residence in Montagnais society, postnuptial residence was quite flexible. The flexibility of Montagnais society is also illustrated by the fact that no formal kinship groups or clans were present.

The personal autonomy and sexual equality that was present in Montagnais society is illustrated by the ethnohistorical evidence. Information found in the *Jesuit Relations* supports the structural features of Montagnais society that I have discussed. Women in the accounts are discussed as co-equals of males and are said to have great influence over their husbands. The accounts also describe the very flexible division of labour in Montagnais society, female control over their own products, the right to divorce and polygamy for both sexes. This independence and personal autonomy of Montagnais females was deplored by the European missionaries and is discussed at some length in the literature (Thwaites 1906:2:77; Leacock 1980:27; Burgess 1944:4–7).

Thus females in Montagnais society were equals to males and the sexual equality present in the society was reinforced and maintained by the key factors of the social structure that I have mentioned and by an economy that was based on the reciprocal exchange of goods and services between the sexes. Individual Montagnais females who were older could become powerful shamans in the society and thus wield individual influence in the society. These females were able to become shamans because of their age and special supernatural power. Older females in Montagnais society also served as village supervisors who organized the camp and distributed the supplies (Thwaites 1906:6:61, 14:183; Rogers and Leacock 1981:182).

Thus, female status in Montagnais society operated on two different levels. At the individual level a particular female could become a shaman or village supervisor. Female status in the society as a whole was maintained by the flexible social organization and a variety of structural factors that allowed Montagnais females to be considered co-equals with males. All of this changed once contact with the Europeans and in particular the missionaries began, and female status at both the individual and collective level began to decline.

Before great changes began to be imposed on Montagnais society due to European contact, females did indeed function in important positions as, individually and collectively, females were considered to be co-equals with males. On the individual level the only females in Montagnais society who achieved positions of power in the society were older females who also controlled resources. On a societal level, females were considered to be equal to males and the structural features of Montagnais social organization as well as the reciprocal exchange of goods and services present in the
Montagnais band economy both helped to maintain and reinforce collective female status in Montagnais society. Thus the model I have proposed focuses on both individual and collective female status within Montagnais society. Both of these aspects of female status must be understood in order to achieve a more accurate historical picture of how females functioned within Montagnais society.

The Iroquois

Females had higher status in Iroquoian society than in any of the other groups that I have discussed. In order to understand why females had such high status in Iroquois society, the structural factors which were present in Iroquois society that served to maintain and reinforce female status must be understood.

In Iroquois society, as in all of the other groups that I have discussed, female status operated on two levels, the individual and the collective. In Iroquois society, all the individual females who achieved a position of power in the public sphere of the society were elders who had control over resources. Individual females functioned as shamans, ritual warfare leaders and traders in Iroquoian society. Thus in Iroquoian society older females who had control over resources were able to wield personal power in the public sphere of the society (Thwaites 1896:44:37). The key structural factors that were present in Iroquois society included matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence, male absence, the domestic living arrangements and female power to elect and terminate male political leaders. The Iroquoian economy, which was based on agricultural production that was done by the females also helped to maintain and reinforce collective female status because the females controlled the production and distribution of the agricultural goods (Brown 1970; Kent and Deardorff 1960:465; Rothenberg 1980:80).

From the household and the domestic living arrangements of the longhouse to the matrilineal clan system, collective female status was maintained and reinforced by a variety of structural factors present in Iroquois society. These structural features functioned to create strong groups of politically powerful females (the matrons) while they served to isolate the males in the society (Brown 1970; Randle 1951; Fenton 1986:36–38).

The Iroquois leaders were males but they were elected and could be put out of office by the female matrons who not only controlled the agricultural goods but they also held all the titles, rights and property. When a female died property was inherited by her children. The females were also in charge of the longhouse and distributed the food to the Iroquois families (Morgan 1965:65; Rothenberg 1980:69).
Another structural feature that was present in Iroquois society that helped to maintain and increase female status was male absence. The Iroquois females actually gained in status due to contact with the Europeans during the fur trade period because males were away from the village on either hunting or warfare expeditions. Thus the Iroquois are the only society that I have discussed in which the females actually gained in status for a period of time after contact with the Europeans (Rothenberg 1981:67; Leacock 1983; Trigger 1978).

Since Iroquois females controlled the land, agricultural tools and the means of production, they were able to become more involved in political decision making (collectively). They also had great influence over Iroquois war parties since they controlled the provisions that supplied these expeditions. The surplus agricultural products were exchanged intertribally and this allowed females to become more involved in decision making on the collective level (Parker 1912:234–236; Rothenberg 1981:69).

Iroquois matrons had a variety of powers including influencing war parties, speaking in council, conferring titles and electing officials, removing officials, serving as ambassadors and determining issues of war and peace in times of crisis (Fenton 1986:36–38).

Thus the model that I have used to examine female status operates on both the individual and collective level in Iroquoian society. Although individual females were able to achieve positions of power in all of the societies that I have discussed by being older females who controlled resources; none of the females in the other societies I have mentioned held such collective power in their society as did females in Iroquois society. Iroquois society had a more complex web of structural factors that worked to provide females with a higher collective status than was found anywhere else in native North America.

Collective Female Status

The Montagnais

Of the five northeastern groups that I have discussed in this paper, females had the lowest collective status in Montagnais society. By using the term "collective female status" I am referring to situations where groups of females were important and wielded power.

Montagnais society was based on personal autonomy for both sexes and leadership was flexible and fell to a particular individual that was best suited to lead in a specific situation. Although females did obtain positions of personal power by functioning as shamans and village supervisors, Montagnais society did not have the structural features like matrilineal descent,
matrilocal residence, clans, etc. that allow for the formation of powerful groups of females.

The ethnohistorical record only illustrates that individual females were important as shamans and village supervisors. The infrastructure of Montagnais society that was based on flexible postnuptial residence and division of labour, and personal autonomy for both sexes was not one that would allow for the formation of group alliances. Thus the ethnohistorical record that stressed the importance of individual Montagnais females as opposed to groups of females must be viewed within the context of the structural factors that were present in Montagnais society.

The Wabanaki

Females in Wabanaki society had only slightly more collective status and power than females in Montagnais society. The only area in Wabanaki society in which females played an important collective role was in the ritual torture of war captives. This was done by females in Wabanaki society and they participated as a group in the Scalp Dance which honored specific warriors who had taken scalps or captives. Thus collective female importance in the torture or war captives was reinforced by the ritual cycle in Wabanaki society (Morrison 1982:13).

Wabanaki society did not have any of the structural features which contribute to the formation of powerful collective groups of females. Thus it is not surprising that the vast majority of the ethnohistorical record focused on important individual Wabanaki females and not on the power that groups of females in Wabanaki society had.

The Shawnee

Females functioned as important collective groups in several areas in Shawnee society. Agriculture was practiced by the Shawnee and it was a very important part of Shawnee subsistence. One of the areas in which Shawnee females were important as a collective group was in the Bread Dance feast which was a ceremony conducted for crop fertility. The females called the ceremony, distributed the meat at the feast and two women's committees directed the feast (Callender 1978; Trowbridge 1939:12, 13).

Shawnee females also decided the fate of Shawnee war captives. Four older females were the heads of the female society that decided the fate of Shawnee war captives. (Trowbridge 1939:13, 26). Although collective female status was supported to a degree by the importance of agriculture in the Shawnee subsistence economy and the ritual cycle, Shawnee society did not have the key structural factors that allow for the formation of female alliance groups that can wield a great deal of collective power.
The Delaware

Females had a high degree of collective status in Delaware society because the structural factors that allow for the formation of collective groups of allied females were present. The most important features in Delaware society that supported collective female status were matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence and the importance of agriculture.

The ethnohistorical record describes a variety of areas in which females were important as collective groups. A group of females helped to force the Esopus war captains to seek peace with the Dutch. This can be understood since females controlled the production and distribution of the agricultural goods that supplied the war parties (Grumet 1980:52).

The ethnohistorical record also shows that females were important as traders in a number of coastal Algonquian groups. Females were also able to regulate marriages, ceremonial obligations, feasts and the inheritance of special ritual property in Delaware society because of the presence of the matrilineal lineages.

The Iroquois

Females had a higher level of collective status in Iroquoian society than in any of the other northeastern groups that I have discussed. Iroquois society had a number of structural features that maintained collective female status including matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence, matrilineal clans, agriculture, male absence and the power of the matrons to elect and terminate male political leaders (Goldenweiser 1912:468). All of these structural features allowed females to have tremendous collective power in Iroquois society including: the control over Iroquois war parties, trade goods, agricultural goods, titles, rights, property and the household (Brown 1970; Morgan 1965:65–66).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ethnohistorical evidence discussed in this paper clearly illustrates that females functioned in a wide variety of roles as social actors in both the domestic sphere and the public sphere of these native societies. Females in these Northeastern groups served as political leaders, shamans, ritual warfare leaders, village supervisors, council speakers and traders. I think that through the use of ethnohistory and by using a variety of primary source materials a much more accurate picture of how females functioned historically in native North American can be obtained. Before an accurate picture of how these native societies functioned historically can be constructed, however, the roles of females in these societies must be discovered. The traditional notion that females were important only in
the domestic sphere of a particular society is falsified by the evidence from the ethnohistorical literature. Thus by documenting the variety of roles that females had in native North America, the first step in achieving a more accurate picture of how these Native societies functioned historically is achieved.

I have proposed a model of female status that focuses on both individual and collective female status. The two key components of this model of female status are the life cycle (age) and resource control. In all of these Northeastern groups, individual females who achieved positions of power in the public sphere of society were elders who also controlled important resources (agricultural, trade, or supernatural power). Thus this is a constant found among all of these Northeastern groups that I have discussed.

The other component of my model of female status are the structural factors that were present in these particular societies that functioned to maintain and reinforce collective female status. The collective level of female status was the highest in Iroquoian society because of the number of structural factors that worked together to maintain female status. Thus the strength of collective female status varied between these Northeastern groups depending upon the particular structural features that were present in each of these societies.

I also believe that that “male supremacist complex” that has been proposed by Divale and Harris (1977) has been exaggerated. Although the Micmac, Maliseet-Passamaquoddy and Montagnais all had a subsistence pattern that was supported mostly by hunting, and no agriculture was practiced in these groups, individual females still achieved positions of power in the public sphere of these societies. Thus even among nonagricultural native groups, individual females were important in the public sphere of society and did not function historically only in the domestic sphere of these societies.

I think that gaining a better understanding of the variety of roles that females had in native North America is only a first step in the more important process of constructing a more accurate historical picture of how both sexes functioned within these native groups. By understanding the roles of both sexes within these societies a more accurate historical picture can be composed.

Research of female status is a good laboratory that can allow the anthropologist to study the process of historical change in native societies. By doing comparative research that focuses on how female status changed as a result of contact with the world system, a better understanding of how the social structure of native societies was changed by the world system can be achieved.

It is also true as Katerine Weist (1982:46) has pointed out that the
treatment of Indian women was a major factor for the designation of the term “savage”. By using ethnohistorical methods to study primary source accounts, a more accurate picture of the role of females in native society can be achieved. Alfred Miller once stated that “nothing so strikingly distinguishes civilized from savage life as the treatment of women. It is in every particular in favor of the former” (1968:70). This viewpoint is not upheld by the ethnohistorical evidence that I have presented in this paper that shows that female status declined as a result of contact with civilization.

In short, I believe that there is still much more work that needs to be done in this area. The cross-cultural study of female status is merely the first step that is required in order to achieve a more accurate historical picture of how these Northeastern societies functioned. Before a more accurate historical picture of these native societies can be achieved the roles of females in these groups must be described. As Valerie Mathers stated “the historical surface has been barely scratched on the subject of Indian women” (1975:137). This is also true for much of native North America. I hope that in at least a small way, the material that I have presented on female status in these particular groups from the Northeast has helped to illustrate how females functioned in these groups.

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