In this class we will read examples of personal narrative or "life-writing" from anglophone America from the mid 1600s until the early 1800s. The term "autobiography" was not coined until 1808, and so does not appear in the titles of any of the texts we will read, but the genre of individuals' written testimonies of their own lives had important social functions and literary conventions in America during this period.

The individuals whose life narratives we will read all tell of profound social and spiritual transformations. Some write of religious awakenings or conversions, while others (notably the writers of captivity narratives) recount how they were forced to adapt suddenly to new families, new languages, and new identities.

Autobiography may appear to be a simple and popular literary genre, and memoirs (as they are more often called today) frequently appear on the lists of non-fiction best-sellers in the U.S. However, several recent controversies have questioned the accuracy or authenticity of these memoirs, and once again blurred the distinctions between novel and autobiography.

We will begin by studying the rhetorical conventions of the conversion narratives that were sometimes delivered as a condition of membership in church congregations in seventeenth-century New England. These texts appear to follow a formula. How does this affect readers' assessments of the authenticity of the narrators' spiritual transformations?

In the second half of the course we will read a number of captivity narratives and consider how these writers tried to convey the American Indian cultures into which they had been adopted. We will also look at narratives by American Indians who used the techniques of the spiritual autobiography and the captivity narrative to appeal for full membership in American communities of individuals.

Books on order at the University Bookstore:
James Seaver, A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison
John Tanner, The Falcon
William Apess, A Son of the Forest
Gordon Sayre, ed., American Captivity Narratives

e-texts from EADA: Early Americas Digital Archive linked from blackboard
Elizabeth Ashbridge
Anne Bradstreet
Jonathan Edwards
John Woolman

pdf texts downloadable from the blackboard site
François-Benjamin Dumont de Montigny
John Dane (I also used a link to an on-line version from HistoryMatters.org)
J. A. U. Gronniosaw
Venture Smith

Attendance
- Class meetings will be devoted to discussions, lectures, student presentations, small group assignments, and other activities. Attendance is therefore mandatory and fundamental to your success in the class.
- You are permitted to miss three classes for whatever reason, but your grade will be reduced for each absence beyond three. I will distribute an attendance list at the beginning of each class period. Please sign to confirm your attendance, although keep in mind that leaving class early will also constitute an absence. If you need to leave early, please discuss it with me ahead of time.
- If you have to miss class, it is your responsibility to obtain notes and materials. Small group discussion questions and handouts will be posted on blackboard, but lecture notes may not be. Your best source is often a classmate’s notes.
- If your absence is due to excusable circumstances, you may meet with me during office hours to review missed materials. Excusable circumstances include: death in the family, serious illness, ill children, observance of a religious holiday, and other university-recognized conflicts, such as athletic competitions. Be prepared to provide documentation.

Writing assignments:
- Critical paper on the conversion narrative, 4-5 pages, due on April 18th
- Critical paper on captivity and transculturation, 4-5 pages, due on May 25th
- Research or Creative Project (choose one of 3 options below) due May 4th
- In addition, the final exam will include a substantial critical essay, questions for which will be distributed by June 1st

Grading:
tests and written assignments will be graded by points, with a total of 100.
20 points each of the two critical papers
15 points research/creative project
15 points midterm
20 points final exam
10 points attendance and participation

Final grades will likely be determined on a scale where 90-100 constitutes an A, 80-89 a B, and 70-79 a C. However, characteristics of each class group and the strength of students’ performances can differ, and the curve may bend accordingly.

Academic Honesty:
All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course. The use of sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly documented. Please consult Rules for Writers for a definition of plagiarism and information on documentation, and refer to the Student Conduct Code on the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards website.
Research or Creative Project (due May 4th):

- 1st option: write or revise a Wikipedia article on a little-known American autobiographer. You can write an entry for an individual who does not have one, or make substantial revisions to an entry that is brief or inadequate. The individual may be one whose work is on the syllabus, or one of many others who are not. I can distribute a list of additional autobiographers. For example, there is no article on Devereux Jarratt, the one on Elizabeth Ashbridge is a short stub, and the one on Gronniosaw could use some work. For this option you will need to create your own Wikipedia account and consult guides for how to write good articles.
- 2nd option: write your own brief spiritual autobiography, following, at least in part, the pattern that you find in the course readings.
- 3rd option: collect or study a narrative by an relative or ancestor. You will notice that Anne Bradstreet and others addressed their narratives to their children and grandchildren. Often with no expectation of publishing their text, they simply wished to leave a testimony of their lives for their descendants to read.

Schedule of readings

**March 28th**: Introduction to course; poems by Ann Bradstreet, Phyllis Wheatley, and/or James Revel (paper handouts)

**March 30th**: John Dane [pdf or link from blackboard] 
Ann Bradstreet “To My Dear and Loving Children” [on-line EADA]

**April 1st**: Jonathan Edwards, “Personal Narrative” [on-line EADA] 
Joanna Brooks, American Lazarus pp 21-41 [pdf]

**April 4th**: Guest lecture by Ali Young: confessions recorded by Thomas Shepard

**April 6th**: John Woolman chapters 1-5 [on-line EADA] 
Also: connections between spiritual autobiography and addiction

**April 8th**: Elizabeth Ashbridge [on-line EADA]

**April 11th**: Olaudah Equiano in American Captivity Narratives pp 225-257

**April 13th**: John Marrant in American Captivity Narratives pp 203-224


**April 18th**: Venture Smith [pdf]

**April 20th**: William Apess, The Experiences of Five Christian Indians of the Pequot Tribe
April 22nd  William Apess, A Son of the Forest, chapters 1-9 (50 pages)
April 25th  Mary Rowlandson in American Captivity Narratives pp 127-176
April 27th  Hans Staden in American Captivity Narratives pp 18-58
April 29th  Isaac Jogues in American Captivity Narratives pp 91-121
May 2nd    Mid-term Exam
May 4th    Intro to French Louisiana and to picaresque autobiography; excerpts from William Moralely (paper handout)
May 6th    Dumont de Montigny, The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont, chap. 2
May 9th    Dumont de Montigny, The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont chap. 3
May 11th   Dumont de Montigny, The Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont chap 4 & 5
May 16th   James Smith, remainder
May 18th   James Seaver, A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison Author’s Preface and Introduction, chapters 1-6
May 20th   James Seaver, A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison, chapters 7-16
May 23rd   John Tanner chapters 1-5 (1-68)
May 25th   John Tanner chapters 6-8 (pp 69-131)
May 27th   John Tanner, chapters 9-11 (pp. 132-198)
May 30th   no class, Memorial Day Holiday
June 1st   John Tanner, The Falcon chapters 12-15 (pp199-280)
June 3rd   Geronimo, in American Captivity Narratives pp410-443

Final Exam 10:15 Wednesday, June 8th
Topics for first essay due April 18th

This first critical paper should be at least 4-5 pages long, double spaced. Please number your pages and provide a works cited list and references for all quotations. You may hand it in in class or send it to me electronically before class meeting on Monday, April 18th. Choose one of these topics:

1) Several scholars who have studied conversion narratives and spiritual autobiographies in American history have identified key ingredients that define the genre. For example, I shared with you this list, derived from Virginia Brereton’s *From Sin to Salvation* (Indiana UP, 1991), p6:

1-early life, before conversion, narrator ignores the question of salvation
2-becomes acutely aware of sinfulness, possibility of damnation
3- surrenders to God’s will, conversion moment, sinfulness is lifted
4-confidence in new self, description of changed behaviors
5-account of pendulum periods of low spiritual energy followed by renewed dedication

This list defines the structure of the conversion narrative. However, there are also certain settings and events that are commonly used in a formulaic fashion in these narratives. Some examples we have seen are thunderstorms, shipwrecks or storms at sea, and scenes where the subject is alone outdoors. Study two or three of the writers we have read so far to show how they used one of these common scenes to enhance the drama and power of their narratives.

2) We have recently read Henry Louis Gates’s article "James Gronniosaw and the Trope of the Talking Book," from William L. Andrews, ed. *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice Hall, 1993). Do you accept his claim that the instances of the trope in Equiano, Gronniosaw, Cuguano and Marrant are evidence that the later authors read the earlier ones and copied it? Or do you find that they may have a separate, prior source (such as the story of Atahualpa cited by Cuguano)? Or do you believe that each experienced the talking book and wrote of it independently, without knowledge of the others? What are the
consequences of this decision for how we read these authors and place them in African-American literary history?