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New England's *Other* Witch-hunt: The Hartford Witch-hunt of the 1660s and Changing Patterns in Witchcraft Prosecution

Although many teachers focus on the Salem witch-hunt of 1692, the history of witchcraft in New England provides other important perspectives from which to examine this perennially interesting topic. Salem, as the most expansive and punitive single episode of witch-hunting in colonial New England, assuredly merits, and gets, significant attention. In the past decade, more than thirty scholarly works, a dozen educational video projects, at least nine major internet websites, and over a hundred primary and secondary supplementary curriculum resources have been produced, all focusing on the Salem witch-hunt. As useful as much of this material is, concentrating exclusively on the events at Salem masks critical features of the cultural and historic importance of witchcraft as a continuous presence in New England's history. Witches, many students are surprised to learn, were an active force in New England from the early seventeenth century until well into the nineteenth century.

Had the Salem witch-hunt never happened, colonial New England would still have a long and complicated history of witchcraft allegations, trials, and executions. New England Puritans accused at least one hundred people of witchcraft in the half-century before Salem. Fourteen of those people, and perhaps as many as sixteen, answered those charges with their lives. Fear of witches and belief in their magical powers was not an isolated episode in the colonial experience; it was deeply woven into early New England's culture.

Considering witchcraft as a presence during the decades before Salem enables teachers and students to analyze aspects of witchcraft history that are lost or obscured when the study is limited to Salem alone. Questions about the cultural force of witchcraft beliefs, the impact of witchcraft on community stability, the consistency of magistrates' attitudes toward witchcraft suspects, and the relationship between witchcraft and other colonial crises are perhaps best observed in the long view. Some questions, in fact, cannot be answered without looking carefully from the longer perspective.

Consider, for example, the question of whether there were patterns in witchcraft prosecution. Historians have noted that

Salem represented an anomaly in New England witchcraft prosecution. At Salem, magistrates dispensed with their customary skepticism regarding witchcraft charges, becoming aggressive witch-hunters. This change in magisterial perspective was an essential ingredient in the deaths of the nineteen Salem victims. But was magisterial prosecution that unprecedented? Examination of the pattern of witchcraft executions in early New England suggests something different. There were two periods of intense danger for accused witches in seventeenth-century New England. The first occurred between 1647, when New England hanged its first witch, and the 1663 execution of Mary Barnes, who was the last person to die in the Hartford witch-hunt. During this period, Puritan elites prosecuted witches zealously. Thirty-four people were tried for witchcraft and nearly half of them were convicted and hanged. Connecticut assumed a leadership role in witch killing, executing each of the first seven witch suspects it brought to trial and eleven of the fifteen witches hanged in New England in this first wave of executions (1). Magistrates and ministers were as active in convicting witches during this period as they were in 1692.

From 1663 until 1688, however, a surprising turnabout occurred. New England enjoyed a twenty-five year period without a single witchcraft execution. Connecticut, which had been New England's most aggressive witch-hunter, became the most tolerant—it never executed another person for witchcraft. Massachusetts ended this period of forbearance in 1688 with the execution of the confessed witch, Mary Glover, which set the stage for the events of 1692. The period that historians characterize as typifying all New England witchcraft prosecution prior to Salem actually represented a period of calm between two very intense storms. What accounts for this unusual pattern? The answer lies in an analysis of New England's other witch-hunt, the understudied but pivotally important Hartford witch-hunt of the 1660's.

"Goody Ayres torments me, she pricks me with pins, she will kill me."

In March 1662, eight-year-old Elizabeth Kelly of Hartford died in agony. Days before, she had been stricken with excruciating stomach pains. Kelly was certain that Goody Ayres, a local woman known for spreading stories of encounters with the devil, was the source of her torment, and begged her father repeatedly to call the magistrates to apprehend Ayres. When Kelly died, saying with her last breath, "Goody Ayres chokes me!" the magistrates were sent for, and the killings of the Hartford witch-hunt began (2).

To determine the cause of Kelly's death, the magistrates turned to physician Bray Rossiter, who conducted an autopsy. His finding that Kelly had died not of natural, but of preternatural causes, unleashed a torrent of witchcraft accusations. Hartford began a year of panic that produced eight trials in as many months. New witchcraft victims screamed their presence; one young woman, "or rather . . . the Devil making use of her lips," according to Hartford Reverend John Whiting, spoke in a "very awful and amazing" Dutch accent accompanied by "extremely violent bodily motions," as she accused her neighbor, the aged Rebecca Greensmith, of being a witch (3). In an official flurry of activity, witnesses were deposed, suspects interrogated, trials set.

The aggressive prosecutorial attitude of ministers and magistrates was essential to the outcome of these cases. Although learned elites are frequently presented as resisting popular pressure to convict witches through official skepticism and scrupulous insistence on direct evidence of the devil's involvement in inflicting harm, this certainly was not the case in the early days of Hartford's witch-hunt. Hartford's venerable Reverend Samuel Stone, accompanied by the youthful Reverend Joseph Haynes of Wethersfield and Reverend Samuel Hooker of Farmington, formed a prosecutorial tribunal. They gathered evidence, recorded notes, and forcefully interrogated witnesses. Rebecca Greensmith crumbled under the ministerial assault. When Joseph Haynes had begun to present evidence against her, Greensmith felt as if "she could have torn him in peeces" (4). But as his battering interrogation persisted, she broke down. She said she felt "as if her flesh had been pulled from her bones . . . and so could not deny any longer" (5). Similarly, When Goody Ayres heard the depositions against her read she exclaimed, "This will take away my life" (6). Two of the suspected witches were subjected to trial by water—bound hand and foot and thrown into a pond to see whether they would float. The logic behind

this ordeal was that since witches had rejected their baptisms by covenanting with the devil, the water would reject them, and they would float. If the water accepted the bound suspects by letting them sink, then the suspects were innocent. Although the ministers and magistrates did not accept the test as a proof of guilt, it was used to provide support to the other evidence against the accused.

Within the year, Rebecca Greensmith and her husband Nathaniel went to the gallows as witches, as did Mary Sanford and Mary Barnes of Farmington. Goody Ayres, in expectation of a similar fate, fled the colony with her husband, leaving behind everything, including an eight-year-old son. Three more potential victims, James Wakeley of Wethersfield and Katherine Palmer and her husband Henry, are also believed to have fled Hartford to escape execution. In an act of coerced political diplomacy, yet another accused witch, Judith Varlet, sister-in-law of New Netherlands's governor Peter Stuyvesant, was allowed to leave the colony for New Amsterdam only after a heated protest by Stuyvesant against the Connecticut court's "pretend accusation of witchery" (7). Only two suspects, Andrew Sanford, husband of the hanged witch Mary Sanford, and Hartford's Elizabeth Seager, had been acquitted and Elizabeth Seager already faced a second trial on new charges of witchcraft. Hartford seemed poised to continue its deadly assault on Satan's servants through 1663 and into 1664.

The summer of 1663, however, produced a turning point in the Hartford witch-hunt and in the prosecution of witchcraft in New England, because Governor John Winthrop Jr., who had traveled to England in 1661 to obtain a royal charter from Charles II, returned to Connecticut. Son of the Governor of Massachusetts, founder of three towns, industrial entrepreneur, member of England's scientific Royal Society, and the most sought-after physician in all New England, Winthrop was in many ways New England's quintessential adjudicator of witchcraft cases. As Connecticut's governor, he served as chief magistrate in capital cases. As a physician, he was an authority on determining the causes of the physical maladies that often provided the foundation for witchcraft accusations. As a dedicated alchemist whose abilities had been recognized by the Royal Society, Winthrop had first-hand knowledge of natural magical practices—like astrology, number magic, and the Hebrew magic of Kabbalah—associated with alchemy, a mystical form of chemical experimentation. Many people today think of alchemy only as a vain and greedy quest to turn lead into gold, but Winthrop and his contemporaries viewed it as a progressive science that promised to produce benefits in medicine,



A community tests a woman by dunking her in a river. Women who floated were believed to be witches while those who sank proved their innocence. *Witches apprehended, examined and executed, for notable villanies by them committed both by land and water: With a strange and most true trial how to know whether a woman be a witch or not.* (London: Printed by William Stansby for Edward Marchant, 1613.)

mining, metallurgy, industrial processing, and textile dyeing and manufacturing.

Winthrop, like almost all of his contemporaries, believed in the reality of witchcraft. Like many of his learned peers, however, he was highly skeptical of witchcraft allegations. He knew first hand the difficulties involved in practicing effective natural magic and believed that people were too quick to attribute misfortunes that occurred naturally to witchcraft. Two of the major influences on his alchemical studies, the English natural philosophers John Dee and Robert Fludd, had both been falsely accused of practicing witchcraft as a result of their studies.

From the time Winthrop became involved in adjudicating witchcraft cases in Connecticut in 1655—first as a medical consultant and then as Connecticut's governor—he intervened to see that accused witches were not executed, as they had been in every previous case tried in that colony. His journey to England for the charter had removed his powerful moderating influence from witchcraft trials, however, and Connecticut reinstituted its prior punitive practices shortly after his 1661 departure for England. Upon his return—in the middle of the Hartford witch hunt—Winthrop acted forcefully to protect the accused and end the crisis atmosphere. In the process, he established legal precedents, which along with growing elite concern over witchcraft prosecution, helped end executions in New England for a generation.

Elizabeth Seager, awaiting her second trial, was the first to benefit from the governor's return. In all likelihood, Winthrop engineered a compromise with her accusers that once again found her not guilty of witchcraft, but the lesser charge of adultery. Seager, however, a strong-willed and sharp-tongued woman, was indicted a third time in the spring of 1665 for continuing to practice witchcraft. This time, accusers seemed determined to get a conviction, and so, Winthrop allowed them to get one. He remained away from her trial, although as governor he could have presided over it. Once the expected guilty verdict was delivered, however, Winthrop refused to enforce it. Calling together a special meeting of the governor and magistrates, he declared that Seager's conviction seemed "obscure and ambiguous" to him and deferred sentencing until a future date (8). He then did nothing for nearly a year, waiting until judicial reforms authorized in the new Connecticut charter went into effect. These reforms gave the governor new powers including the right to "impose, alter, change, or anul any penalty, and to punish, release, or pardon any offender" (9). A week after Winthrop became empowered to summon special courts of assistants to handle unique situations or special needs, the colony's first Special Court of Assistants overturned the jury's conviction of Elizabeth Seager and set her "free from further suffering and imprisonment" (10). For the first time in Connecticut's history, a convicted witch did not hang.

Other colony magistrates soon adopted the new policy of judicial skepticism. They refused to indict William Graves of



Witnesses testified that Katherine Harrison appeared with a large black dog. (Howard Pyle, "A Wolf Had Not Been Seen at Salem for Thirty Years," *Harper's Magazine*, December 1909.)

Stamford in February of 1667 on charges of bewitching his daughter to death. A few months later, they rejected another witchcraft accusation, this time reprimanding the accuser for "greatly sinning" in bringing such charges (11). Many members of the polity proved less eager than the magistrates to accept this new moderate policy toward suspects. Despite Winthrop's authority, his medical and scientific credentials, and a growing tide of elite skepticism, some New Englanders proved most reluctant to cede full power to determine questions of witchcraft to their leaders. Nowhere was this lay resistance more apparent than in the case of Katherine Harrison, the pivotal case in the transformation of colonial witchcraft prosecution. Harrison was an outspoken Wethersfield medical practitioner, astrologer, and widow who had risen from low status to become a person of substantial means. In May of 1668, Harrison's neighbors began collecting depositions charging her with witchcraft. The evidence against her took a number of forms. She was accused of magically causing the death, on separate occasions, of three people, two of them children. Other witnesses claimed to have seen her spectral apparition. Harrison and her black dog appeared by moonlight in the house of one witness. She appeared first as a calf's head and then as herself in a hay cart before another witness. A third person saw a dog-like thing with Harrison's head walking to and fro in the witness's bedchamber. Additionally, Harrison was charged with using astrology to foretell the future, a practice even the magistrates had to admit was diabolical, since only God knew the future, and one could not foretell future events without aid from the devil.

When Harrison was formally indicted in May of 1669, at least thirty witnesses testified against her. Apparent resistance to the testimony by Winthrop and the magistrates resulted in the jury's being unable to reach a verdict. Harrison was ordered imprisoned until the next court in October, at which time the jury would be reconvened to render a decision. Long before October, however, someone, probably the governor, ordered her release. Harrison was allowed to return to Wethersfield, which produced howls of protest from a frightened community. Thirty-eight Wethersfield residents, including two ministers and the local physician, signed

a petition protesting Harrison's release and demanding her immediate incarceration. They also demanded that Harrison's prosecution be taken away from Winthrop and the magistrates and handled by the colony's foremost lawyer.

When the jury reconvened on 12 October, they found Harrison guilty of witchcraft. But again, as in the earlier case of Elizabeth Seager, Winthrop's court challenged the verdict. Before passing sentence, the magistrates sought clarification on a number of issues central not just to the Harrison case, but all witchcraft cases: the evidentiary standards necessary for conviction; the acceptability of spectral evidence; and the distinction between acceptable and diabolical practice. To provide answers, the court turned to a triumvirate of ministers headed by Gershom Bulkeley. A friend of the governor, Bulkeley was, like Winthrop, both a physician and an alchemist. He shared Winthrop's interest in natural magic and his deep skepticism toward charges of witchcraft.

The opinion Bulkeley wrote in response to the magistrates' queries changed the evidentiary standards for witchcraft conviction in Connecticut. First, it made conviction contingent on two witnesses testifying that they observed the exact same act of witchcraft simultaneously. Almost always, people encountered witches as witches when they were alone. (One witness saw Harrison with a dog, another as a calf on a haycart, a third as a dog-like thing.) Previously, the cumulative impact of these separate reports by individuals had been sufficient to prove guilt. Henceforward, unless two people saw a witch's specter in the same shape at the same time, the accused would go free.

Second, the magistrates worried about whether the devil could assume the form of an innocent person and thus provide false evidence that would lead to a false conviction. Bulkeley and the ministers argued that God would not allow the devil to appear in the guise of an innocent person before multiple witnesses, though it left open the question of his ability to do so before a single person. This reinforcement of the need for multiple witnesses strongly undermined the former standards for conviction.

The magistrates also asked the ministers to render a decision on whether the fortune telling attributed to Katherine Harrison demonstrated her familiarity with the devil. Bulkeley's ambiguous answer to this question essentially said that in theory Harrison was guilty, but in practice, she probably was not. Information of future events was indeed diabolical, Bulkeley wrote, unless it was derived from "human skill in Arts," reason, divine revelation, or information from man (12). Which of those alternate sources of foreknowledge Harrison had used was not explicitly stated, but Harrison was not found to be in league with Satan. In May of 1670, a special court of assistants freed her and ordered her to leave the colony, which she had previously intended to do. Harrison moved to New York, and subsequently seems to have returned to Wethersfield. So ended the last witchcraft trial to take place in Connecticut for twenty-two years.

The Katherine Harrison case closed the anguished story of the Hartford witch-hunt even as it opened the door to establishment of a new pattern of ministerial and magisterial skepticism regarding witchcraft cases throughout New England. Connecticut had no witch trials for a generation, though it endured a minor witch panic during the Salem crisis. It never again executed a witch.

Massachusetts' magistrates, though not bound in any way by Connecticut's legal procedures, shared the new skepticism expressed in Connecticut. It acquitted all people brought to trial over the next eighteen years but one, and that person, Elizabeth Morse of Newbury, Massachusetts, was subsequently released.

Examining witchcraft in New England only from the perspective of the Salem trials limits both the scope of analysis and the range of questions that can be answered about this generative topic. Longer-term analysis provides new insight into the historical nature and patterns of colonial witchcraft prosecution. Analyzing the pattern of executions in seventeenth-century New England reveals that prosecution can be divided into three periods: an early period (1647-1663) of great danger for accused witches accompanied by rigorous prosecution by elites; a middle period (1663-1687) of increasing skepticism regarding witchcraft accusation and elite reluctance to prosecute; and a final period of prosecution (1688-1692) at Boston and Salem in which magistrates again became active in the persecution of the accused. This perspective demonstrates the importance of the Hartford witch hunt as a pivotal moment in the transition of witchcraft prosecution from aggressive magisterial assault on the accused to protective magisterial intercession on behalf of the convicted.

Some scholars have seen this skepticism and reluctance to convict as the standard elite approach to witchcraft cases until Salem. The Hartford witch-hunt shows this not to be true. During the early years of witchcraft prosecution (1647-1663), New England's leaders proved all too eager to send witch suspects to the gallows. Only in the 1660s, after a governor and minister who themselves were magic practitioners took a stand against witchcraft convictions, did the generation of skepticism begin. ■

Endnotes

1. The data for Connecticut is based on New Haven and Connecticut colonies, which merged in 1663.
2. "The Testimony of John Kelly and Bethia his wife concerning the sickness and death of their daughter Elizabeth, aged 8 years, May 13, 1662" reprinted in *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History 1638-1692* David D. Hall, ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991) 152-154.
3. John Whiting to Increase Mather, 4 December 1682 in *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections* 4th ser. Vol. III, 466-469.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. R. G. Tomlinson, *Witchcraft Trials of Connecticut: The First Comprehensive, Documented History of Witchcraft Trials in Colonial Connecticut* (Hartford, CT: Bond Press, 1978), 31.
7. Peter Stuyvesant to the Hartford Magistrates, 13 October 1662. Robert C. Winthrop Collection, Connecticut State Library.
8. Connecticut Court of Assistant Records, 8 July 1665. Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT.
9. William K. Holdsworth, "Law and Society in Colonial Connecticut, 1636-1672" (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 1974) 438,440,446,451.
10. Connecticut Court of Assistants Records, 52, 56.
11. "Case of William Graves," Samuel Wyllys Papers, Dispositions on Cases of Witchcraft Tried in Connecticut [1662-1693] Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT, W-8, W-9.
12. "The answer of some ministers to the questions propounded to them by the honored magistrates" 20 October 1669, *Witch-Hunting*, 182-183.

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