Power to Charm

Witchcraft in England, New England, and Penn's World

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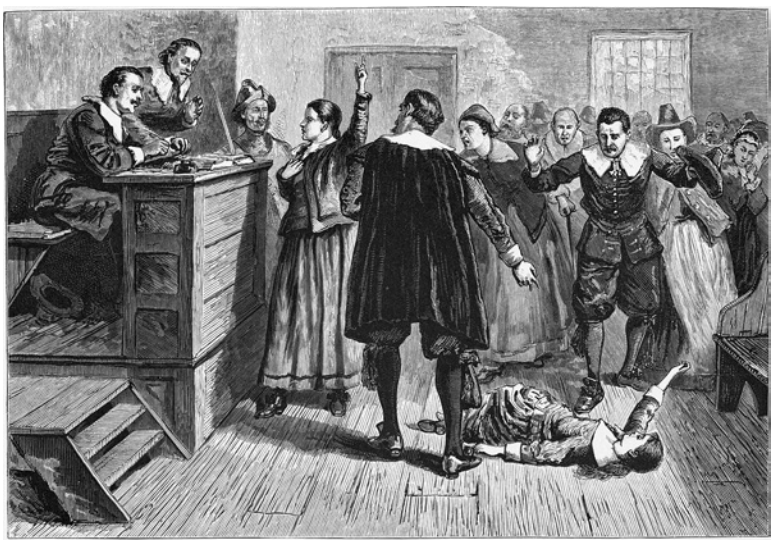
EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is based on a presentation made by Dr. Dillon at the October 2016 public meeting of the Society.

Hallowe'en is just around the corner. Pumpkins are everywhere and soon there will be another discussion of the Salem witch trials. They were not the first in New England, but they get all the publicity.

There was a definition of a witch in an 18th-century dictionary: "A woman given to unlawful arts."[1] Offenders were not always women; in the legal action taken against 144 people in New England, 58 of them were men. The earliest trials occurred in Hartford, Connecticut. The accused were women, all over 40, without family but not necessarily poor. In Massachusetts, there were trials in Andover that preceded those in Salem. They involved many of the same factors: accusations based on "fits" that occurred when the accusers were brought into the presence of those charged with witchcraft; touching the afflicted by the accused to remove the spell; physical examinations that searched the bodies of the accused for the "devil's teat." Additional proofs were often presented: a family history of witches; the presence of familiars (often cats); small figurines or puppets; testimony about spells that affected family members and/or livestock. Sometimes there were confessions from the accused themselves. There were various trials to determine if the accused was indeed a witch.



In this 1876 engraving by William A. Crafts, the central figure in the Salem witch trial courtroom is usually identified as Mary Walcott.

Procedure after an accusation followed a series of steps. The first was to handle the problem within the family; the father investigated the disturbances within his household. If unsuccessful in resolving the problem, the community became involved. The next step involved the church; sermons, prayers, and applications of scripture attempted to remove or solve the problem. If these proved unsuccessful, the legal system became involved.

> *VI. A sixth species of offense against God and religion... is a crime of which one knows not well what account to give. I mean the offense of* ***witchcraft****,* ***conjuration****,* ***inchantment****, or* ***sorcery****. To deny the possibility, nay, actual existence, of witchcraft, is at once flatly to contradict the revealed word of God, in various passages both of the old and new testament: ...the civil law punishes with death not only the sorcerers themselves, but also those who consult them; ...ranking this crime in the same class with heresy, and condemning both to the flames ...all witchcraft and sorcery to be felony without benefit of clery ...and suffer death.*[2]

The colonists brought attitudes as well as language, customs, and household goods when they came. Their experiences in England and northern Europe contributed to the witch scares on this side of the Atlantic. Ignorance, fear, and superstition saw witchcraft as the cause of disasters great and small—the Black Death, the cow going dry unexpectedly, the death of a child.

Religious turmoil following the Protestant Reformation brought "heretics" into the picture. When James VI of Scotland succeeded to the English throne as James I in 1609, the concern with witchcraft grew because he was obsessed with it. He even wrote a book about it. During his reign, English colonies were established in North America: Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 and the Pilgrim settlement in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. It is not surprising that concerns about witches came with them.

In addition to the large concerns, like heresy, there were homely, domestic ones. Women, especially old women, gathered plant lore over the course of their lives and this could sometimes prove to be a dangerous pursuit. In addition to providing healing salves and other medicines, they knew how to concoct love potions and could provide death drinks. If the former were successful, an unmarried girl might come for a solution to her "problem." Plants like calamint that could "bring down the courses"[3] could be used to induce an abortion, both a crime and a sin. So-called death drinks, or poisons, could be used out of kindness—euthanasia—or because of greed or for revenge. For women who were healers and/or midwives, this knowledge and its use could put them under suspicion and in a precarious position.

As a result of the Salem trials, fifty-four people confessed; of those, fourteen women and five men were executed, mostly by hanging, with some protesting their innocence to the end. One man was pressed to death for refusing to say anything about his wife. At least four people died in prison.[4]

The Trial of George Jacobs, August 5th, 1692, painted by Tompkins Harrison Matteson, 1855. Peabody Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

Various explanations have been offered for the Salem trials. One argued that they were the result of Puritan theology and its emphasis on sin, the devil, and so forth.[5] Another historian explained matters in terms of the unstable nature of adolescent females.[6] A third study found relevance in settlers' experiences of Indian raids and wars.[7]

Things were somewhat different in "the world of William Penn" and the penalties tended to be less severe. Several years before the Salem trials, and not too long after the arrival of Penn and "his" colonists, a woman named Margaret Mattson and her daughter, Yeshro Kendrickson, were indicted by the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania on the charge of witchcraft. There is no mention of this in Proud's History of Pennsylvania, published in 1798, but it can be found in Council minutes of 1683–1684:

Henry Drystreet attested, saith he was tould 20 years agoe, that the prisoner at the Barre was a Witch, & that severall Cows were bewitcht by her; also that James Saunderlang's mother tould him that she bewitcht her cow, but afterwards said it was a mistake, and that her Cow should doe well againe, for it was not her Cow but an other Person's that should dye.

Charles Ashcom attested, saith that Anthony's Wife being asked why she sould her Cattle; was because her mother had Bewitcht them, having taken the Witchcraft of[f] Hendrick's Catthle, and put it on their Oxon; she might keep noe other Cattle, and also that one Night the Daughter of ye Prisoner called him up hastily, and when he came she sayd there was a great Light but Just before, and an old woman with a Knife in her hand at ye Bedd's feet and therefore she cryed out and desired Jno. Symcock to take away his Calves, or else she would send them to Hell.

James Claypoole attested Interpritor betwixt the Proper and the Prisoner.

The affadavid of Jno. Vanculin read, Charles Ashcome being a Witness to it.

Annakey Coolin attested,saith her husband tooke the Heart of a Calfe that Dyed, as they thought, by Witchcraft, and Boyled it, whereupon the Prisoner at the Barr came in and asked them what they were doing; they said boyling of flesh; she said they had better they had Boyled the Bones, with severall other unseemly Expressions.

Margaret Mattson saith that she Vallues not Drystreet's Evidence; but if Sanderlin's mother had come, she would have answered her; also denyeth CharIes Ashcom's Attestation at her Soul, and Saith where is my Daughter; let her come and say so.

...

The Prisoner denyeth all things, and saith that ye Witnesses speake only by hear say.

After wch ye Govr gave this jury their Charge concerning ye Prisoner at ye Barr.

The jury went forth, and upon their Returne Brought her in Guilty of haveing· the Comon Fame of a Witch, but not guilty in manner and forme as she stands Indicted.

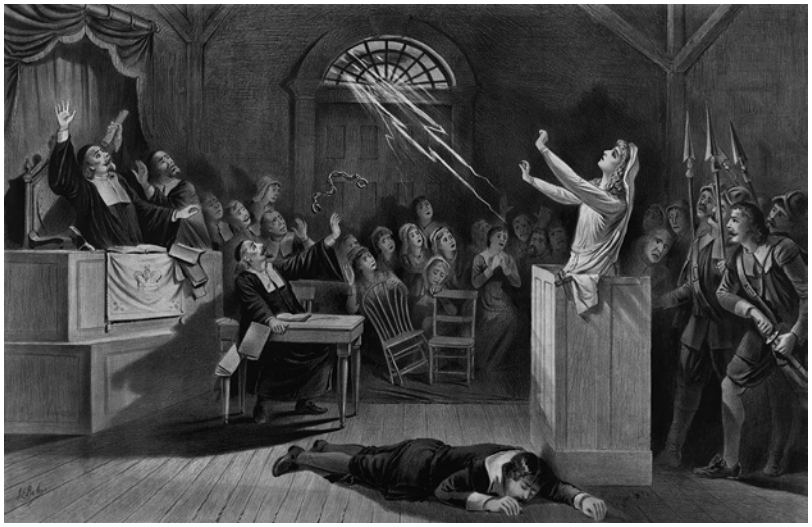
Neels Mattson and Antho. Neelson Enters into a Recognizance of fifty pounds apeice, for the good behavior of Margaret Mattson for six months.

Jacob Hendrickson Enters into the Recognizance of fifty pounds for the good behavior of Getro Hendrickson for six months.[8]

In 1701, a petition concerning an accused witch was filed with the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania.

21 May 1701: A Petition of Robt. Guard and his Wife being read, setting forth That a Certain Strange Woman lately arrived in ·this Town being Seized with a very Sudden illness after she had been in their Company on the 17th Instant, and Several Pins being taken out of her Breasts, One John Richards, Butcher, and his Wife Ann, charged the Petitioners with Witchcraft, & as being- the Authors of the Said Mischief; and therefore, Desire their Accusers might be sent for, in Order either to prove their Charge, or that they might be acquitted, they Suffering much in their Reputation, & by that Means their Trade.

Ordered, that the Said John & Ann Richards be sent for; appearing, the matter was inquired into, & being found trifling, was Dismissed. [9]



In a lithograph created c. 1892 by artist Joseph E. Baker (c. 1837–1914), a bolt of lightning breaks the shackles from an alleged witch and strikes down her accuser—an event he imagined from the Salem witch trials. *Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division*

Another incident reportedly occurred in Westtown, Pennsylvania in 1785. According to a 19th-century newspaper account, a solitary old woman named Moll Otley was accused of bewitching a girl from a local Quaker family. A crowd, perhaps a mob, seized her and tested her several ways. They weighed her against the Bible and had her touch the afflicted girl. They also tried something unusual: they shot her picture with silver bullets; if she had been guilty, bullet holes would have been found on her body. Since none of the tests proved her guilty, it was proposed to try the trial by water, or ducking. After some protests that it was winter and she was old and frail, no water test was tried. Moll was set free and there were no additional tests. This incident was described in an 1876 newspaper and picked up in the 21 February 1999 *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Newspapers are not the most reliable sources and there was no formal charge or proceeding so we cannot be sure about the incident.

There were incidents across the Delaware River in New Jersey as well. Before 1730, a petition was circulated in Burlington.

...now sum Peopel has raised a Reporte that my wife is a Witch, by which I and my famely must sarinly suffer for if she cant be clear'd of the thing and a Stop Poot to the Reporte for Peopel will not have no Delings with me on the account... she is Desirous that she may be tried by all Maner of Ways ... so that she can get Cleare of the Reporte... Jeames Moore. [10]

An extensive description of a "trial" was published in the 22 October 1730 *Pennsylvania Gazette*. The article stated that "...some Persons...had been charged with making their Neighbours Sheep dance...and with causing Hogs to speak and sing Psalms, &c. to the great Terror and Amazement of the King's good and peaceable Subjects..." After having been searched, each of the accused was weighed in a scale against a Bible, but "...to the great Surprise of the Spectators, Flesh and Blood came down plump, and outweighed the Great Book by abundance." When all the accused had been so tested and found innocent, trial by water was administered. Stripped, bound hand and foot, and placed horizontally in the water, all "...swam very light upon the Water..." showing them guilty, but "The more thinking Part of the Spectators were of the Opinion, that any Person so bound and plac'd in the Water (unless they were mere Skin and Bones) would swim till their Breath was gone, and their Lungs filled with Water. ... It is said they are to be tried again next warm weather, naked."

Some suggested that this report was a joke, perpetrated by Benjamin Franklin, publisher of the *Gazette*. There is, however, an account of what seems to be the same incident in a memoir.

[September 1734] ... to Mount Holly, where I was witness to one of the strangest Pieces of Folly that Man ever acted . Certain old Women of Melancholick Physiognomy, had got the Character of Witches; and being questioned on that Account, and not able to clear themselves, were obliged to undergo a Ducking, in order to prove whether or not they were such.

The Notion run, if they sunk, they were no Witches; but if they swam, they were, and shou'd be punished as such. But they miraculously escaped the Censure of the Levy, by sinking, tho' they remained a considerable Time on the Surface of the Water. But this not satisfying one Jonathan Wright, he proposed to weigh them in Scales against the Bible, and concluded if they were Witches, they would not weigh so heavy as the Bible; but to the Surprise of the Beholders, they weighed down both Prophets and Apostles.

After this foolist Adventure, I went back to Burlington.[11]

I would be more comfortable with this trial if a third description could be found.

There is more evidence of the belief in witchcraft in colonial Pennsylvania. In an archaeological excavation of the Taylor family house, once erroneously thought to have been the Printzhof, or home of Governor Printz of New Sweden, in Tinicum Township, Delaware County, a witch-bottle was discovered; it had been buried upside-down near a chimney foundation. Inside the former wine bottle were six bent pins and in the hole with it were a bird's bone and a small redware shard. The bottle may have contained urine along with the pins. It was supposed to work by identifying the person bewitching the bottle's owner: when the perpetrator urinated, the pins in the bottle would cause great pain, thus identifying the ill-wisher. Many witch-bottles have been found in England.[12]

There may be other witch bottles waiting to be found in our area. No written references have been located to date. Since this bottle has been dated circa 1740, it could have been put in place any time after that, but not before. Nothing is known about a suspected witch in Tinicum Township.

For believers, there were simpler methods of protection. Carrying mistletoe would guard your person. Putting holly sprigs on the doors of your house would protect the residents.

Since we cannot talk to people involved in the witch trials discussed or others accused of causing unnatural occurrences, we can only consider what was reported and perhaps speculate why. Interpretations may change as knowledge expands, but we depend on what people wrote down about they thought. As more evidence, archaeological and written, is found, we may know more. Now, we can only wonder.

Endnotes

1. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language:* ... in 2 vols. (London: Printed by W. Strahan ... 1755; facsimile reprint by Longman Group UK Limited, Harlow, UK, 1990), n.p.
2. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, in 4 vols. (Oxford, UK: The Clarendon Press, 1769; facsimile reprint printed by The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979), Vol. IV, pp. 60–61.
3. John Gerard, *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes*, rev. and ed. by Thomas Johnson. (London: Printed by Adam Islip...1633; facsimile reprint by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1975 , p . 688.
4. Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*... (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), pp. 3–4.
5. Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*: ... (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1987 & 1989).
6. Marion L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*: ... (Garden City, NY. Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969; originally published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1949).
7. Norton, op cit.
8. "Trial of Margaret Mattson and Yeshro Hendrickson," Council in Philadelphia 7 December 1683; *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Printed by Ja. Severns & Co., 1852), Vol. I, pp. 95–96.
9. *Minutes of the Provincial Council.* (Harrisburg: Printed by Theophilus Penn, 1838), Vol. III, p. 15.
10. Amelia Gummere, *Witchcraft and Quakers* (Philadelphia: Biddle, 1908), p. 56, cited in Appendix H, William Moraley, *The lnfortunate*..., 2nd. ed., ed. by Susan E. Klepp and Billy G. Smith (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005) , pp. 148–9.
11. Moraley , op cit., pp . 87–8.
12. "Witch Bottle," article in *PAST MASTERS NEWS*; Vol. V, No.1, Winter, 2002, pp. 4–5.

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