

The Witches of Hartford:

Social Misfits of Colonial America in the early 1600s

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History 489

11/16/2016

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Abstract

In my paper I want to tell the stories of the “witches” of Hartford, Connecticut and one witch from East Hampton who was case was tried in Hartford. There stories help to show why they were accused and what made these cases different from places like Salem. The stories of these “witches” also shows what made people believe they had these “magic” abilities. The paper mainly focuses on the accused witches Elizabeth Seager and Elizabeth Garlick, their stories were unique among stories of witch accusations. Seager was accused and brought to court three times, while Garlick after she was found not guilty her husband turned and sued the town for slander. All in all they have unique and interesting stories, so my paper will focus on their stories and their towns. This is an important topic because it teaches us how religion can affect the way people feel, think and act, which is important to understanding a culture and its history.

“Villagers “A Witch! She’s a Witch! Burn Her” Witch: I’m not a witch Sir Bedevere: But you are dressed as one! The Witch: *They* dressed me up like this! Crowd: We didn’t! We didn’t...The Witch: And this isn’t my nose. It’s a false one. Sir Bedevere: [lifts up her false nose] Well? Peasant 1: Well, we did do the nose. Sir Bedevere: The nose? Peasant 1: And the hat, but she is a witch! Crowd: Yeah! Burn her! Burn her! Sir Bedevere: Did you dress her up like this? Peasant 1: No! Peasant 3, Peasant 2: No! Peasant 3: No! Peasant 1: No! Peasant 3, Peasant 2: No! Peasant 1: Yes! Peasant 2: Yes! Peasant 1: Yeah, a bit. Peasant 3: A bit! Peasant 1, Peasant 2: A bit! Peasant 2: A bit! Peasant 1: But she has got a wart!”¹

¹ Monty Python and the Holy Grail. By Terry Gilliam, Terry Gilliam, Graham Chapman, John Cleese, and Eric Idle. Performed by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, and Eric Idle, 1975

Intro

Witchcraft, what is it and why did people believe in it so strongly? Now things during the times of the witch trials did not go exactly the same as in Monty Python of course, but many people (particularly women) were accused of being witches and well over half of those accused were executed. When I look back on witch hysteria I think that these people, who were live during the witch hysteria, had to be absolutely crazy to think that these people were witches. Which made me want to know why people throughout the Europe and Colonial America thought that everything bad that happened in the colonies was the fault of the witches. In this paper I will tell some of the stories of the more unknown witches, meaning those before Salem. I will also spend a large part of the paper talking about how these trials came about, where witches came from and what made people in the time of the “witches” believe in them so strongly. The witch trials were something that has been studied for years and years but often, people only learn about the Salem trials and some about the trials in Europe, so that is why I would like to talk about the lesser known trials of the colonies and what separated them from Salem; for example, why are these trials and towns less known and less talked about?

Picture of hanging during the European trials



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/e/ec/Witches_Being_Hanged.jpg

This picture paints a picture of what trials looked like in Europe and what happened to the various people (mostly women, as you can see in the picture) accused of witchcraft in Europe. Its important because it shows what happened in Europe and it helps the viewer compare it with the trials in America.

The witch trials began in Europe and moved onto the colonies. The trials and witch hysteria had been unleashed and many would become victims of the trials. The most famous witch trials were those of Salem, Massachusetts but most people do not know that there were many trials before Salem. The trials happened mostly in Puritan towns where people strongly believed in the Christian religion and felt that everything in life could be solved with religion.² There was a lot behind the story of witches, like what a witch was, what they did and what about them was so “evil”. What was built in to these “witch” societies, was a town psychology and social

² John Demos, *Enttraining Satan*, Oxford University press, 68-73

construct that lead to people being so sure that their fellow villagers were associating with the devil.³ Throughout this paper I will be taking about the stories of some of these unknown witches and the way their towns and stories are different. The main focus of this paper will be Hartford Connecticut and Elizabeth Seager, a women accused three times of being a witch. The stories behind these witches express the social constraints and ideas in colonial society.

There are many stories of witches from places all over New England , in towns we know of today, such as Hampton, New Hampshire and Boston, Massachusetts; there were a few cases in New York but Connecticut and Massachusetts had the largest number of cases.⁴ Most people know about Salem, Massachusetts, but that was certainly not the only city in Massachusetts with witch trails, there were cases in Boston, Ipswich, Hadley and a few other towns which at the time belonged to Massachusetts but are currently apart of Maine and New Hampshire, such as Portsmouth and Kittery. Along with Massachusetts there was another colony in which there was a large number of witch trials and that colony was Connecticut. Connecticut like Massachusetts was also suffered from witch hysteria. The town which suffered the most from the witch trials was Hartford, Connecticut; they suffered from witch hysteria about 50 years before Salem. This paper will ask the question what are the stories of these before Salem women, why don't people know about them like they know about Salem, what makes a believable witch and what makes some of these stories unique.

³ John Demos, *Enttraining Satan*, Oxford University press, 25-31

⁴ *Ibid* (402-409)

Background/Mythology

To better understand why people were so sure that their neighbors were witches a person should learn about the Christian idea of a witch. What is a “Witch”? In Christian mythology: a witch is a person who sold her/his soul and made a contract with the Christian devil.⁵ In colonial times this myth about witches being the cause of the all the bad things happening in the town and witches created and used spells to kill crops, make those who offended them sick and so on. Since religion was very important to the colonists they used it to explain when someone got sick, or livestock died.⁶

Christianity has throughout history used the Bible to condemn witches or anyone who is allegedly involved with magic. The Bible has passages that describe how witchcraft is thought of as displeasing to god. The most famous example is from the tale of King Saul, where the Bible express how god got angry when King Saul consulted the dead, which was a lady known as the Witch of Endor, for political advice instead of consulting with god about it.⁷ Christianity devolved the idea that this story means god frowns upon interacting with magic. So because religion was such a strong factor in the colonies it allowed these witch hunts to spread throughout the entire region. The regions where witchcraft was persecuted the most was in the

⁵Kathryn A. Edwards, *Werewolves, Witches, and Wandering Spirits: Traditional Belief and Folklore in Early Modern Europe*. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2002. P 54-55)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ First Book of Samuel, chapter 28:3–25., 630 B.C. http://biblehub.com/1_samuel/28-7.htm

Puritan colonies. They were the strongest prosecutors of witches, which is why colonies like Massachusetts had so many victims compared to other colonies in colonial America.⁸

The idea of a witch is very different depending on where in the world the myth comes from for example in ancient Egypt/Greek mythology where it was viewed that withes had powers which could be used for good or bad, so they were respected by the people of those times. When Christianity came around things began to change myths of witches which became tales of non-human creatures who associated with devil and were mostly women around middle age, and either married or widowed. These people (witches) were originally human but they gave up their humanity in exchange for powers and other benefits.

What a Witch was?

A witch is defined as someone who practices magic. As I mentioned before in Christianity witches were not viewed in a favorable way, so because Europe and Colonial America were such large Christian nations, they blamed witchcraft for disasters that befell their countries. Those accused of being a Witch were usually women who were a bit isolated from society, typically they were widowed or married, middle aged and did not always act in the way the village wanted. Usually these people who were accused, did not behave in a way that the town thought was socially acceptable or they would often fight with their neighbors.⁹

Sociology of Witches and Witch towns

With witchcraft when bad things would happen, such as farm animals dying, people falling to disease and such, so angry villagers need someone to blame. They would often go after

⁸ Keith Tomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, 241-243

⁹ John Demos, Entertaining Satan, 170-171

the people who did not fall into the expected social norms of the village. The sociology of the time period in which, witchcraft existed is so important to understanding the history of the witch trials and why towns like Easthampton only had one accused witch, while place like Hartford and Salem had so many more. Many times the people who were accused often behaved in ways that were against the social norms of the town or they were in some cases for women in particular they were in line to inherit large amounts of money or property because they did not have male children and their husbands were quite a bit older, members of the town would sometimes develop feelings of jealousy towards these people or anger.¹⁰ The women who were tried at Hartford (not all but most of them) were likely because the judge in charge of these trials in Hartford seemed to be skeptical of the involvement of the devil, so often after finding them not guilty, he would encourage people accused to behave in a neighborly way, so they do not end up back in court.¹¹ These towns were a typical patriarchal society, where men were at the top and women at the bottom, so women who stepped out of those boundaries usually became the main targets.

Where Witch Trials Started and Ended

Witch trials started out in Europe around the early 1500s and then moved to the colonies in the early 1600s. There are many stories of witch accusations in Europe, that not long after moved to the colonies. The trials in the late 1500s and early 1600s in Europe lead to witch hysteria spreading all over Europe and then on to the colonies, especially the puritan ones. The first known trials in Europe were the Valais witch trials in 1428 (around the western alps area). After the witch trials took place there, many other areas of Europe soon followed after.

¹⁰ Keith Tomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Penguin Books, 1971, 331-332

¹¹ *Ibid* 218

The events of the 1st group of trials lead to the creation of the Basel Council in Switzerland, which developed the standard of the stereotype of the devil's witch. This idea spread and lead to the creation of all the writings that were published on witches, some of the more famous ones being the *Malleus Malificarum*, published in the mid-1400s, which ended up being one the most common writings to use when identifying a witch (In both Europe and the Colonies)

Question I

Of those against whom the Power of Witches availeth not at all.

Chapter I

Of the several Methods by which Devils through Witches Entice and Allure the Innocent to the Increase of that Horrid Craft and Company.

Chapter II

Of the Way whereby a Formal Pact with Evil is made.

Chapter III

How they are Transported from Place to Place.

Chapter IV

*Here follows the Way whereby Witches copulate with those Devils known as Incubi.*¹²

(This is an index with the first 5 chapters of the document show the identification and rules of witchcraft according to this document, it gives a good indication of what kind of things the document covered and what people thought a witch did. There is more detail on each chapter within the document but I think the title is enough to get the main point)

The *Malleus Malificarum* was probably the most well know document in which people in the Christian faith would identify witches. The index from the *Malleus Malificarum* above lists a few of the things that someone who was identified as a witch was accused of doing above only

¹² Institoris, Heinrich, Jakob Sprenger, and Pennethorne Hughes. *Malleus Maleficarum. The Hammer of Witchcraft.* Table of Contents London: Folio Society, 1968. Accessed online

lists a few of them but there was a long list of actions and things that the *Malleus Malificarum* would claim witches often did and if the people of a town felt like someone was a witch they would accuse them of doing the things on documents like the *Malleus Malificarum*.

The peak of trials in Europe was around the late 1500s to early/mid 1600s. During this time period the largest and most famous witch trials were held in Europe, some of these being the Trier witch trials (1581–1593), the Fulda witch trials (1603–1606), the Basque witch trials (1609–1611), the Würzburg witch trial (1626–1631) and the Bamberg witch trials (1626–1631).¹³ The witch hysteria in Europe had caused so much panic and fear to spread that the death toll and the harm to their fellow citizens just ended up growing and growing.¹⁴

The trials in Europe were some of the biggest trials in the history of the witch trials, meaning many were accused and executed, but what happened in the Colonies? Mostly everyone who thinks about the witch trials in the Colonies starts to think about Salem, but what happened in the other parts of the colonies, where trials were held? Well before Salem there was many prosecutions of supposed witches, some as early as fifty years before Salem. One of the places that had a large amount of witch trials and executed people for being “witches” 30 years before Salem was Hartford, Connecticut. Hartford, Connecticut was just one of the biggest there were many other accusations and trials before Salem, largely in the Connecticut/Massachusetts area but happened in other colonies like New York and Rhode Island had their fair share. The trials started to slow down around the last 1600s although they still happened after this point, one happened in the U.S. as late as the 1800s.

¹³ Kathryn A. Edwards, *Witches, Werewolves and Wondering Spirits* 60-65

¹⁴ Keith Tomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* 334-338

Historiography

Witches and the witch trials have been studied by many for quite some time. The most famously studied trials are the Salem witch trials, but there have been some authors who have spent time focusing on the towns behind the witch, what the psychology and sociology of the town and the people living there were and what happened and became of witches. I use quite a few web secondary sources for this paper but the source I focus on the most is John Demos "Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England" this book contains detailed information about many witch cases from multiple different areas of colonial America and even includes an appendix of all the documented witch trials in the colonial U.S. John Demos researched and studied many trial documents to write his book, his source list is over a hundred pages long. I also consulted the book "Religion and the Decline of Magic" by Keith Tomas, which was printed in 1971. The book focuses in how religion affected the belief in magic and witchcraft and what the historical value of the connection between religion and magic was. The other main secondary source that I used was "Werewolves, Witches and Wondering Spirits: Traditional Belief & Folklore in Early Modern Europe" edited by Kathryn A. Edwards, talks about folk tales which describe the European view of mythical creatures like witches.

The main primary sources that were used for this research paper were the Samuel Wyllys papers, which are a much of documents from Connecticut that contain information of various witch trials throughout the Connecticut area. Malleus Malificarum and using the Samuel Wyllys papers focusing on the trials of Elizabeth Garlick and Elizabeth Seager. I only used a few trials from the Hartford Connecticut trials because I choose to only use the ones that focus on Seager, Greensmith and Ayers, because they are all connected in one big trial.

Witches of Connecticut

Hartford Connecticut ended up having quite a few accused witches, some being Elizabeth Garlick (technically lived in East Hampton, but tried in Hartford) Rebecca and Nathaniel Greensmith, Elizabeth and John Wethersfield, Goody Ayers (full name unknown), Elizabeth Seager, James Wakely, and Judith Varlet; but the strange thing is only 1 person was executed.¹⁵ The one that was accused of witchcraft that was executed was Rebecca Greensmith she was also the only “witch” in Connecticut that confessed (that we know of), after R. Greensmith confessed she claimed that there were others in the town who joined her in her witch activities. She said that she had danced and eat under a tree in the forest with other witches.¹⁶¹⁷ She claimed that there were other withes in the town who participated in the above events.

Elizabeth Garlick was accused of witchcraft in 1658. She had lived for years in Easthampton with her husband and her children; Garlick was around the age of 45-50 (this is important because that was the average age of accused withes). Elizabeth Garlick was thought of as a witch for many years before she was actually accused. Garlick was a sort of home remedy/plants and herbs doctor for the town. Garlick sold herbs called “dockweeds” to others in the town, so because she sold medical plants like dockweeds, she was often gossiped about by the other villagers (typical women who were middle aged and dealt with plants/herbs were thought of as witches) There had been rumors going around between her neighbors for years but nothing actually happened nor was there official accusations until the death of one of the member if a more elite family in Easthampton passed away claiming that Garlick came before her on her death bed.¹⁸

¹⁵ John Demos, *Entertaining Satan* 405

¹⁶ Testimony of Robert Sterne, *Case of Goodwife Seager*, Connecticut Library, Online Source, 1662-63

¹⁷ Testimony of the Inquest Committee, *Case of Goodey Ayers*, Connecticut State Library, Online, 1662

¹⁸ John Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 213

The woman who claimed that Garlick had cursed her was Elizabeth Howell, she was a part of an upper class family in Easthampton; Howell had just given birth to her first child and fell ill. Howell had been bedridden for days after her child's birth and the night before she died she claimed that Garlick had come to her and pricked her with pins in the night, trying to "tear her to pieces" and "Goody Garlick! Goody Garlick! (Goody means housewife, basically goodwife) I see her at the far corner of the bed, and a black thing of hers at the far end of the corner"¹⁹. Howell was claiming that Garlick could do all the things that witches could stereotypically do, so such as shapeshift, come and go with magic and usually had some kind of familiar (like a magical creature)²⁰ with them. (Usually those accused of witchcraft had supernatural powers and did the devil's bidding) After she passed away the rumors about Garlick became full on accusations and she was arrested and brought to trial.

Elizabeth Garlick was the first and only accused witch in Easthampton. The trial became so big that the trial was moved to Hartford, Connecticut. Lucky for Garlick a new judge had just been appointed his name was John Winthrop Jr. The reason this was lucky for Garlick was that John Winthrop Jr. was one of the very few people of the 17th century that did not fully believe that the devil and magic had much to do with each other. Thanks to the court of Connecticut having a level-headed judge and level-headed jury for many women who faced trials in Hartford this saved them from execution. The reason for this was because John Winthrop Jr. was a scholar who devoted his life to studying the ways in which the forces of nature worked, instead he would usually find them not guilty or give them a short sentence and then try to convince these so called "witches" that if they try to follow social norms people will probably not bother them as

¹⁹ John Demos, *Entraining Satan* 216

²⁰ Kathryn A. Edwards, *Witches, Werewolves and Wondering Spirits* 68-69

much. John Winthrop Jr being the skeptic of the whole devil thing that he was, hardly believed that these women who had studied the ways of nature much less then he had could not possibly accomplish these things that the townspeople would claim.²¹

Elizabeth Seager

Elizabeth Seager was an interesting and unique case among the many witch trials that plagued colonial America. She was originally named Elizabeth Moody and Married Robert Seager in 1649. By the time she was first accused of witch craft she was 34 and had four children who were around 8-12 years of age. This was very different then the idea of the average witch who was in her 40s-60s, had either few or no children and had a kind of old hag image. None of the stereotypical ideas of a witch fit Seager expect that she was known as quite the outspoken character.²² Elizabeth Seager was accused three times, acquitted twice and convicted once, and one year later after being convicted she was released on the fact that there was not enough evidence. The evidence against Seager was viewed as not vailed because the testimonies were too unclear, one example is in the testimony of Robert Stern, he claimed he saw Seager, Greensmith and a few other women dancing with dark creatures around a kettle.²³ According to the jury's verdict they felt suspicious of Stern's testimony because it was declared he was too far away from the incident to clearly tell who was participating or what was clearly happening.²⁴ The fact that the Hartford jury had a lot of logical thinking level-headed people, which greatly helped Seager and other accused witches' cases.

²¹ John Demos, Entertaining Satan 332-335

²² Case of Good Wife Seager, Connecticut State Library, Online Source 1662-1665,

²³ Testimony of Robert Stern, Connecticut State Library, Online Source, 1662-65

²⁴ Staggering's of the Jury, Connecticut State Library, Online Source 1662-3

Elizabeth Seager was first tried in the year 1663 around early January.²⁵ She was accused of consorting with the devil and dressing up and dancing in the woods with other accused witches at the time. The person who claimed she saw her doing this was Rebecca Greensmith she was also accused of witchcraft but Greensmith confessed and claimed that Seager and a few other members of the town were involved in witchcraft with her. According to Seager's trial document she was accused of often having conversations with Satan, making villagers sick, killing livestock, and troubling with towns people.²⁶ After she was found not guilty twice in 1663, she was brought to court again and found guilty but was released by the judge because he claimed there was not enough evidence. According to the testimony of Mrs. Migatt, Goody Seager came by her house many times to harass her, one of these times Seager was floating above her and attacked her while she was in bed with her husband.²⁷ Mrs. Migatt also claimed Seager came to her and said god was not and started to shake her.²⁸ These are typical behaviors of witches according to the *Malleus Malificarum*, they often act in strange ways and appear in spirit form in front of their victims.

²⁵ John Demos, *Entertaining Satan* 405

²⁶ Testimony of Mrs. Migatt, *Case of Elizabeth Seager*, Connecticut State Library, online source, 1662-65

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid



<https://i.ytimg.com/vi/jiCNOBvFFmI/hqdefault.jpg>

(This image shows witches dancing in the woods with the supernatural creatures they supposedly worked with, this was what towns people thought witches did and is even in the *Malleus Malificarum*)

Rebecca Greensmith claimed that her, Seager and others did in the woods. The above image is important because it shows what people thought all witches did such as dancing with strange creatures and making spells together. Since Greensmith decided to confess she choose to take a few other people with her, making sure she did not go alone and could remove some of the blame from herself. ²⁹ Others such as Robert Stern claimed to have

Fortunately for Elizabeth Seager she had the same judge, John Winthrop that Elizabeth Garlick had. In the town of Hartford Connecticut Elizabeth Seager did not have a super great

²⁹ John Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, Oxford University Press , 1982,

relationship with her neighbors, before the accusation she was often in arguments with others.³⁰ So of course that turned people against her because in the 1600s women were not supposed to talk too much.³¹ She often did not behave in a way that society at the time approved of. One example in Seager's last trial after likely being tired of being accused so many times she said instead of saying that god knows she is not a witch, she told the people in court to go and ask the devil himself because he know she was no witch.³² A testimony from Daniel Gabbett and Margaret Garret said that Seager sent Satan to their house to tell them she was no witch, when asked why she did not send God, she said because Satan knew she was no witch.³³ This caused shock throughout the court house one of the auditors at her trial even asked her to repeat herself and she said again she will call on Satan as a witness to show that she was not a witch.³⁴ Goody Seager was probably sick and tired of being called into court so she went and spoke her mind. That was something that was probably looked at unfavorably though because this was of course way before women had any of their own rights.³⁵ Since Elizabeth Seager often said things like this and was such a strong outspoken woman, she received a lot of dislike in the community and people often acted like she was always nothing but trouble.

Women like Elizabeth Seager were often targeted because either they did not fit into the social circle for example some would act against their gender roles, while other cases were because of hate or Jealousy, for example many in East Hampton were very Jealous of Elizabeth

³⁰ Case of Good Wife Seager, Connecticut State Library Archives, 1662-1665, Doc 1-2, Online

³¹ John Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, Okford University Press , 1982, 301-306

³² Case of Good Wife Seager, Connecticut State Library Archives, 1662-1665, Online

³³ Testimony of Robert Stern, Case of Elizabeth Seager , Connecticut State Library, 1662-65 Online,

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ John Demos, *Entraining Satan*,

Garlick because even though they were middle class, many liked and respected her husband, but did not respect her.

Conclusion

As I talked about in the beginning of the paper there were many more stories and accusations of witchcraft in Colonial America than Salem. The stories of these “witches” shaped the future of their town and created its image. An example of this is Salem because Salem is famous for its witch trials and execution, while towns like Easthampton are famous as a great vacation spot. The way the cases were handled in the town and by the town's government created a completely different outcome for so many accused witches, maybe if Salem's leaders had thought more like John Winthrop, so many lives could have been spared. My conclusion is that these trials are less talked about simply because so many were found not guilty, even though there was a lot of anger and distrust in the community the accused witches were more like social misfits. They stuck out in their towns and usually had disagreements with their neighbors.

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