

Accused, exiled, acquitted: surviving witchcraft charges in colonial New England

by

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Dedication

For my parents, Laura and Lonnie Jansonius, and my Papaw, Glen Graham, who nurtured my
love for history and encouraged me to stay curious.

Preface

At first glance, Mary Staples, Katherine Harrison, and Mary Webster have little in common. Staples was married, of lower socioeconomic status, and had at a family that also consisted of suspected witches. Harrison was a wealthy widow whose children also inherited large sums upon her husband's death. Webster's family consisted of herself and her husband, both of them quite poor and reliant on their community for support. Their cases were adjudicated by different colonial judiciaries, and even the scholarly attention that each has received varies wildly. These women, separated by time and space, had one thing in common: each successfully evaded the witchcraft accusations that threatened their lives.

Each of these case studies demonstrates the lasting stigma brought on by witchcraft accusations. Mary Staples was first named as a witch in the 1650s—the suspicion followed her into the era of the Salem panic in 1692. Katherine Harrison was dismissed from service as a maid for fortune telling decades before formal accusations were brought against her in 1668, and even after her exile accusations plagued her. Mary Webster, who was acquitted in 1683, was nearly murdered by her fellow townspeople after being found innocent.

Mary Staples, Katherine Harrison, and Mary Webster even survived their ordeals in different ways – there was not a set recipe for success when it came to avoiding execution. Mary Staples was saved by her husband's quick mobilization of her defense, mounting a slander case against her primary accuser. Katherine Harrison, though she was found guilty, was exiled rather than executed because the magistracy was in no mood to put to death a wealthy widow accused of participating in similar occult and alchemical activities that they themselves were engaged in.

Mary Webster's accusers relied on primarily spectral evidence, which the jury found too weak to hang her upon.

Chapter 1 explores the slander trial of Mary Staples against Roger Ludlow, a prominent Puritan in Fairfield, Connecticut in 1653. A woman in good standing with her church, Staples's reputation took a turn after the witch trial and execution of Goodwife Knapp in 1653. Staples had been a staunch defender of the convicted witch and an outspoken critic of Roger Ludlow, one of the most prominent men in Fairfield. Ludlow began gathering evidence against Staples both to settle a personal vendetta against the Staples, who owned land adjacent to his own and were often at odds with him, as well to save his own floundering reputation.

In response, Mary's husband Thomas Staples mobilized swiftly in her defense. Rather than waiting for Ludlow to gather testimonies against his wife and bring formal charges before the court, he began gathering evidence that Ludlow had slandered his wife. Ludlow, seeing the writing on the wall as his welcome in the colony of Connecticut wore thinner and thinner, absconded first to Virginia but ultimately quit the colonies altogether and returned to England. The slander suit continued in his absence, his last-ditch effort to save his reputation having failed.

Chapter 2 details the trial and exile of Katherine Harrison of Wethersfield, Connecticut from 1668-1670. Though formal accusations did not materialize until after her husband's death in 1666, she had long been suspected by residents of Hartford, Hadley, and Wethersfield of witchery. Beginning life in the colonies as a servant in Hartford, Harrison was eventually dismissed from service for fortune telling. She would later marry John Harrison, and the couple would go from being of lower socioeconomic status to becoming some of the wealthiest people

in the region. Upon his death, John left his wife the estate and around £900, with money set aside for his three daughters as well. So fell the Harrison's small fortune into the hands of women.

Two years after John's death it was clear to the community that Katherine had no intention of remarrying, leaving the estate and the money within her own control. Official witchcraft charges were brought against her in May 1668. After spending nearly two years in jail and having much of her property damaged or destroyed, Harrison was found guilty in October 1669. The magistrates, led by Governor John Winthrop Jr., however, remained unconvinced of her guilt. He called upon a group of ministers led by his good friend and prominent Puritan divine Gershom Bulkeley to answer three relevant questions regarding standards of evidence. In May 1670, the conviction was overturned and Harrison was exiled.

Chapter 3 examines the little-known trial and extrajudicial hanging of Mary Webster in 1683/4 in Hadley, Massachusetts. She was sent to Boston for trial in May 1683 after being formally accused of "suspicion of having familiarity with the Devil," which emphasized her relationship with Satan rather than the specific malefic acts she was being remanded for. She was brought before the magistrates there, which included the likes of William Stoughton who more famously sat on the bench at Salem. She was found innocent that October and returned to Hadley.

Little evidence against Mary Webster survives, and any recreation of her ordeal is necessarily truncated by the lack of surviving primary sources overall. The fallout from her case, though, was documented by Cotton Mather in *Magnalia Christi Americana* in 1702. In January 1683/84, Philip Smith, who Mather writes was instrumental in bringing accusations against Webster, was seemingly bewitched. Suspecting that Webster was to blame, a group of young

men dragged her from her house, hanged her from a tree, and buried her body in a snowbank. Much to their surprise and displeasure, Webster survived. Philip Smith did not.

Methodologically, this study follows in the tradition of microhistory, an approach that examines seemingly marginal historical cases to illuminate broader historical patterns and cultural dynamics. By focusing on the experiences of Staples, Harrison, and Webster, this work builds upon Malcolm Gaskill's *The Ruin of All Witches: Life and Death in the New England Frontier*, which demonstrated how the close examination of a single witchcraft case—that of Hugh and Mary Parsons in 1650s Springfield—can illuminate the broader anxieties and power structures of colonial frontier life.¹

The examination of witchcraft in colonial America has evolved significantly over the past century, shifting from the emphasis on communal hysteria to more nuanced explanations that incorporate gender, social control, economic tensions, and cultural anxieties. This evolution not only reveals the development of different methodologies, but also a broader transformation in how historians understand early American culture and society.

Early twentieth century examinations of colonial witch trials frequently framed accusations as manifestations of religious zealotry. Marion L. Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts* exemplifies this approach, presenting the Salem panic as a case of mass hysteria driven almost exclusively by religious fanaticism.² These analyses paint Puritans as irrational or even primitive, blinded by religious intolerance and easily pushed into panicking. Other authors, such as Perry Miller, downplayed witchcraft as an uninteresting afterthought in the grand scheme of Puritan intellectual history. In *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* Miller goes

¹ See Gaskill's *The Ruin of All Witches: Life and Death in the New England Frontier*.

² Marion L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Inquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 18-45.

so far to assert that “the intellectual history of New England up to 1720 can be written as though no such thing ever happened... it had no effect on the ecclesiastical or political situation.”³

By the 1970s and 1980s historians were applying social science methodologies to their study of witchcraft cases. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum’s *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* marked a significant methodological shift by examining how socioeconomic tensions within Salem Town and Salem Village contributed to the panic of 1692.⁴ Their alignment of patterns of accusations with factional divisions demonstrated how economic development and fissures within the community created conditions conducive to accusations of witchcraft. This economic interpretation has proven valuable for understanding cases such as Katherine Harrison’s, where wealth and economic independence contributed to her vulnerability, though the geographical arguments Boyer and Nissenbaum made have been rebutted sufficiently by Benjamin Ray in *Satan and Salem: The Witch-Hunt Crisis of 1692* and did not contribute heavily to my research.⁵

John Putnam Demos’s *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of New England* brought in anthropological and psychological approaches to analyze witch trials as expressions of community tensions and psychological conflicts.⁶ Demos used a case-focused examination of trials to reveal broader social patterns, an approach which informs this study’s methodological approach.

³ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 191.

⁴ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 23-58.

⁵ See Benjamin C. Ray’s *Satan and Salem: The Witch-Hunt Crisis of 1692* for more information on how scholars are now approaching the Salem crisis through multiple lenses rather than reducing the panic to a single cause or explanation.

⁶ John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and Culture of Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 9-12.

Perhaps the most significant historiographical shift arrived with Carol F. Karlsen's groundbreaking work, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*. Karlsen dug into the gendered nature of witchcraft accusations in New England, demonstrating conclusively that women challenging patriarchal norms constituted the vast majority of the accused.⁷ Her statistical analysis revealed that women who had no brothers, sons, or otherwise stood outside of normative patterns of male property inheritance were especially at risk of accusation.

Feminist scholarship such as Karlsen's has been invaluable in recovering the agency of the accused, challenging early portrayals of those tried as witches as passive victims. Jane Kamensky's *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* examined how women's speech was regulated and how verbal defiance could lead to suspicions of witchcraft.⁸ Her discussion of disorderly speech in particular is relevant to the case of Mary Staples, whose outspoken defense of a convicted witch contributed to suspicions against her.

More recent scholarship has emphasized the legal dimensions in witchcraft prosecution. Malcolm Gaskill's *Two Worlds: How the English Became Americans* examines how witch trials represented English legal traditions to colonial contexts.⁹ Paul Moyer's *Detestable and Wicked Arts: New England and Witchcraft in the Early Modern Atlantic World* has further developed this approach, examining how colonial legal authorities navigated differing evidentiary standards and jurisdictional conflicts.¹⁰

⁷ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 46-116.

⁸ Jane Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73-95.

⁹ Malcolm Gaskill, *Between Two Worlds: How the English Became Americans* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 184-211.

¹⁰ Paul Moyer, *Detestable and Wicked Arts: New England and Witchcraft in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 98-156.

There has also been an increased emphasis on regional approaches in witch trial scholarship. Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* connected the Salem panic to frontier anxieties and King William's War.¹¹ Her detailed analysis of the relationship between colonial anxieties regarding Indigenous peoples, frontier violence, and supernatural fears offers valuable insights for understanding how Mary Webster's case in frontier Hadley related to regional tensions and conflicts. Richard S. Ross's *Before Salem: Witch Hunting in the Connecticut River Valley, 1647-1663* also takes the regional approach and focuses on largely under-studied witchcraft cases in a specific geographical area, examining in particular the cultural dynamics underlying the trials in the Connecticut River Valley.¹²

Despite this rich historiography surrounding colonial witchcraft, the attention paid to survivors of witchcraft accusations and trials has been sparse. Most studies have focused on those who lost their lives, and if survivors are studied at all, it is the survivors of large panics such as Salem and Hartford who have received scholarly attention. The absence of studies regarding individual cases outside of Salem, particularly those that did not end at the end of a rope, represents a significant gap in the literature. By focusing on Mary Staples, Katherine Harrison, and Mary Webster, this study contributes to the understanding of how some women were able to successfully navigate and evade the accusations against them. Their stories illuminate not only the mechanisms of accusation but also the strategies of survival and resistance available to women in colonial New England.

Historiographically, this study builds upon the gendered analysis pioneered by Carol F. Karlsen while incorporating insights from legal and comparative approaches. By examining case

¹¹ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 41-65, 83-112.

¹² Richard S. Ross, III, *Before Salem: Witch Hunting in the Connecticut River Valley* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017), 1-9.

studies of women who survived accusations rather than those who perished, and by focusing on smaller-scale trials rather than panics, it seeks to further the understanding of how witch trials functioned as mechanisms of social control, and how some women were able to circumvent those mechanisms. The experiences of Staples, Harrison, and Webster reveal that witchcraft accusations were not monolithic in their effects, but rather contested processes whose outcomes depended on a complex interplay of personal, legal, and sociocultural factors.

To better understand how these women escaped the gallows, we must outline witchcraft as it was understood in the colonies, as well as the cultural contexts in which these trials took place. Diabolism and maleficium were two key concepts central to witch belief in the Early Modern period. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they represent distinct fears about witches and their ability to impact the communities in which they lived. Diabolism primarily refers to a pact made with the Devil, while maleficium refers to harmful magic or sorcery. While elites both in Europe and in the colonies were most concerned with the former, the laity were most worried about the latter. This led to complex accusations that often involved both diabolism and maleficium, which made witchcraft both a theological and secular crime.

Diabolism, the rejection of God in favor of devoting oneself to the Devil, was what mattered most to the elites of the early modern period. It was not that witches were causing harm to their neighbors, but what the witches were doing to get the power to do so. They were not simply placing curses on their neighbors' cattle, they were renouncing Christ and worshipping the Devil instead. The primary crime of the witch in the eyes of the elite was the "renunciation of

God as her master,” and the malevolent acts that the witch perpetrated were a result of her devotion to the Devil rather than acts motivated by actual social conflicts.¹³

Maleficium can best be defined as injury or harm committed through means of magic, such as severe weather events, stillborn infants, crop failures, and livestock deaths.¹⁴ Ordinary people were much more focused on this aspect of witchcraft because it affected them directly. It was not *how* a witch acquired their power that bothered the layperson, but rather the harm that the witch caused once they had obtained it. This is not to say that the common folk were ignorant of the diabolic side of witchcraft (certainly their ministers were preaching about it during this time), but that the health and well-being of themselves and their loved ones mattered more than their neighbors having demonic orgies.¹⁵

The common folk belief in maleficium was not enough to sustain the large numbers of witch trials taking place during the early modern period. Accusations of maleficium brought alleged witches into the courts, but until the diabolical aspect of witchcraft was added, the elites were reluctant to prosecute them.¹⁶ The people, in general, believed in maleficium but did not worry about witchcraft as a cumulative concept.¹⁷ A witch-believing populace was essential in the hunts; without it, there may have even been public opposition to the trials.¹⁸ If the laypeople in these communities did not see witches as a threat to their lives and the lives of their children, far fewer witches would have been accused.

¹³ Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 154-155. Jonathan Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender, and Society in Early Modern Germany*. (Boston, 2007), 50.

¹⁴ Moyer, *Detestable and Wicked Arts*, 38-47.

¹⁵ Moyer, *Detestable and Wicked Arts*, 47.

¹⁶ Brian Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2013), 31.

¹⁷ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 176.

¹⁸ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 176.

Even as Puritans viewed the New World as a place to construct a society that would be a ‘city upon a hill,’ they also believed it to be the Devil’s domain. The environment was unforgiving, the wilderness threatening to consume them at every turn. The denizens of this environment, then, were heathens in need of either conversion or destruction. Missionaries such as John Eliot ministered to Indigenous populations, translated biblical texts, and established praying towns in an attempt not only to convert Native Americans but to reduce conflict between the tribes and colonists themselves.¹⁹

The Pequot War, King Philip’s War, and skirmishes on the frontier further heightened tensions in colonial communities. Towns such as Fairfield, Wethersfield, and Hadley lived under near constant threat of attack. Imperial tensions more broadly also contributed to witch trials in the Connecticut River Valley. The social and political upheaval wrought by the English Civil Wars, the Restoration, and the First and Second Anglo-Dutch Wars allowed for accusations to more easily take root.

Though witch trials took place in a variety of faith communities, Puritanism is the Christian sect most associated with the practice. Conflict seemed to follow wherever they settled—in Bermuda, in New England, even in England proper.²⁰ In diverse environments experiencing political upheaval, social factionalism frequently devolved into trials and accusations.²¹ Puritanism fostered a worldview in which spiritual warfare was seen as an everyday reality, with Satan actively working through human agents.²² Further, the emphasis on

¹⁹ For more on John Eliot, Praying Towns, and the fundamental misunderstanding of Indigenous religion, see *Facing East from Indian Country* by Daniel K. Richter and *John Eliot’s Mission to the Indians Before King Philip’s War* by Richard W. Cogley.

²⁰ Virginia Bernhard, "Religion, Politics, and Witchcraft in Bermuda, 1651-1655," *William and Mary Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (October 2010): 678.

²¹ Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy* (London: John Murray, 2005), 43, 78.

²² Gaskill, *Witchfinders*, 78.

a constant vigilance against such influence created a culture of anxiety where moral failings could be interpreted as evidence of diabolic influence.

Each of the accused women that this study explores could be described as divergent. Mary Staples was outspoken, calling out leaders in her community and opposing the execution of fellow townswoman Goodwife Knapp for witchcraft. Katherine Harrison was engaged in a number of lawsuits against her neighbors. Mary Webster was known to be disagreeable.

The concept of witch trials as a gendered form of social control is not new, but it has been studied largely in the context of larger panics such as the Salem outbreak of 1692. By looking at individual trials rather than instances of so-called witch hysteria, this study seeks to establish witch trials as a way to eliminate **specific** socially marginalized individuals rather than to cull divergence in one fell swoop. These were not sweeping accusations that demanded every ‘nasty woman’ who didn’t conform to Puritanical standards be hanged, but rather a way to target divergent women individually.

The Puritan conception of female spiritual vulnerability stemmed from the belief that women’s inherent physical weakness made them more susceptible to Satanic influence than the men in their communities. Puritan conversion narratives reveal distinctly gendered differences in the ways in which immorality and sin were conceptualized. Women frequently characterized themselves as fundamentally corrupt beings whose narratives were rife with references toward an evil innate within them, while men who gave these narratives repented for particular sins without seeing themselves as inherently wicked.²³ This gendered disparity meant that women’s religious experiences were shaped by a state of constant vigilance against Satan, and that women required strict moral oversight lest they fall into temptation.

²³ Reis, *Damned Women*, 38.

The cases of Mary Staples, Katherine Harrison, and Mary Webster reveal the intricate web of fear that shaped colonial witchcraft accusations. While these women ultimately escaped execution, their stories illustrate how accusations functioned as tools of social control wielded against those that defied community norms. The Puritan elite's near obsession with diabolism combined with the laity's preoccupation with maleficium created a volatile legal and social landscape where allegations were simultaneously religiously, politically, and personally motivated. The instability of colonial life, including imperial tensions, Indigenous conflicts, and internal religious discord exacerbated the need for scapegoats.

In this environment, women who challenged authority through outspoken defiance, legal disputes, or simply existing outside of the prescribed social order became convenient targets. These accusations were not merely the results of mass panic in times of unrest, but were often strategic, isolating and neutralizing specific individuals rather than indiscriminately persecuting all non-conforming community members. By examining individual trials rather than collective panics, this study underscores the calculated nature of witchcraft accusations as a means of maintaining order in an uncertain world. Staples's, Harrison's, and Webster's survival of their respective ordeals further highlights that execution was not inevitable.

There are gaps in the evidence – such is the nature of writing about early colonial women who are often only present in the historical record at their baptism, marriage, and death. But this does not mean that we as historians must resign ourselves to studying accounts and events which have left behind ample evidence alone, only that we must work diligently to reconstruct the contexts in which underrepresented cases occurred.

Chapter 1 - Accused: Mary Staples

A woman sits in chains after being condemned to die, every attempt to save her life exhausted. Neighbors, a minister, and people she once called friends demand constantly that she confess, to go before God with a clean conscience and name her co-conspirators. Later, when her body's still warm and she's removed from the gallows, the moles and freckles on her body are seen as further proof of her guilt.

Another townswoman—a friend, a neighbor, history does not remember—is her fiercest defender. Publicly declaring the damned woman's innocence calls the authority of magistrates into question, and paints a target on her back.

A once-respected public figure is now running out of time. He packs up his family and boards a boat bound for Virginia as accusations of treason and slander begin closing in all around him. His last-ditch attempt to salvage what remained of his reputation has failed, and he's heading back to England.

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The interconnected stories of Goodwife Knapp, Mary Staples, and Roger Ludlow illustrate the complex ways in which accusations of witchcraft were often weaponized and reveal the often volatile nature of colonial justice. Their interactions, centered on the trial and execution

of Goodwife Knapp in 1652, unfolded against a backdrop of profound political turmoil and social upheaval that extended far beyond New England's shores.¹

The year 1653 marked the height of the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654), a contest primarily fought in the European theater over commercial supremacy in the colonies.² As naval engagements disrupted Atlantic trade networks, settlements in New England found their economic ties with England and the Netherlands strained, which created shortages and heightened anxieties in frontier communities such as Fairfield.³ These external pressures intensified domestic tensions, providing fertile ground for witchcraft accusations.

At the same time, relations between English colonists and Indigenous peoples had reached a critical juncture. Following the Pequot War (1636-1638), in which Roger Ludlow had been an active participant, the relationship between the English and neighboring tribes could be characterized as an uneasy coexistence.⁴ By the 1650s, expanding colonial settlements increasingly encroached on Native lands, while cultural misunderstandings and religious differences fueled mutual suspicion. The perception that the New World beyond colonial settlements remained a stronghold for the Devil contributed to a siege mentality that further fed into to a culture of fear and suspicion.⁵

The shadow of Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth also contributed to unrest. The execution of Charles I in 1649 and the establishment of Puritan rule in the motherland created

¹ Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 157-159.

² Jonathan Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585-1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 211-215.

³ Mark Peterson, *The City-State of Boston: The Rise and Fall of an Atlantic Power, 1630-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 87-90.

⁴ Katherine A. Grandjean, *American Passage: The Communications Frontier in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 112-115.

⁵ David D. Hall, *Wolds of Wonder, Days of Judgement: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 145-148.

both opportunities and uncertainties in the colonies.⁶ Connecticut's government generally aligned with Cromwell's regime ideologically, and the political instability in England meant that imperial oversight of the colonies was less intensive than it had been under the monarchy. This lack of supervision allowed colonial leaders like Ludlow greater autonomy, but also fostered anxiety about the future.⁷

Though no testimony against her survives, Goodwife Knapp's trial and execution during this tumultuous period in colonial history reveals the precarious position of women who fell outside of community norms during times of unrest.⁸ Unlike cases in which accused women found protection through family connections or were able to utilize their economic standing to defend themselves, Knapp faced her accusers with limited social capital.⁹

The slander trial brought by Thomas Staples on his wife Mary's behalf in the face of growing accusations from Ludlow further sheds light on countermeasures against witchcraft accusations, and how with a swift defense, the gallows could be avoided. This legal strategy—employing defamation law as a shield—represents a crucial but understudied aspect of colonial jurisprudence. The Staples's aggressive legal response demonstrates that witchcraft accusations could be successfully countered when met with immediate and forceful litigation.¹⁰

Ludlow

⁶ Carla Gardina Pestana, *The English Atlantic in an Age of Revolution, 1640-1661* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 71-75.

⁷ Michael P. Winship, *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 180-183.

⁸ Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 121-125.

⁹ Lyle Koehler, *A Search for Power: The "Weaker Sex" in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 231-235.

¹⁰ Mary Beth Norton, *In The Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 29-32.

Back in England the Ludlow family was prominent. Roger came from a family of lawyers in Wiltshire, and became a lawyer and barrister himself. His decision to remove to Massachusetts Bay was influenced by religious tension as well as civil unrest plaguing Britain at the time. He set sail with his family aboard his ship, the *Mary and John*, in 1630 at the age of 40.¹¹ While not a part of the Winthrop fleet specifically, Ludlow's immigration to England's Atlantic holdings came as a part of the mass exodus of Puritans known as the Great Migration. Between 1630 and 1640, approximately 20,000 people removed from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony.¹²

Ludlow began his public service career in the colonies the same year. He served as a justice of the peace alongside John Winthrop and Sir Richard Saltonstall at the first session of the Massachusetts General Court.¹³ Whether from a desire to keep their newfound positions of authority focused in their hands alone or the genuine belief that colonists needed time to settle before duly electing their own leaders, Ludlow and his compatriots voted to designate office holders for the offices of Governor and Deputy Governor amongst themselves. Freemen, then, would not be allowed to vote on who governed them, and the laws of the land would be left up to this handful of wealthy men. As one could imagine, this decision went over like a lead balloon. The colony's charter guaranteed freemen the right to vote.¹⁴ One hundred and eighteen men took the freemen's oath in May 1631, and rescinded the votes pushed through by the Assistants. Shortly afterward, Massachusetts became a religious commonwealth with a resolution passed that "no man should be admitted to the freedom of this body politic but such as were members of

¹¹ Richard S. Ross, *Before Salem: Witch Hunting in the Connecticut River Valley, 1647-1663* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017), 47.

¹² David L. Ammerman, "The Great Puritan Migration," EBSCO Research Starters, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/great-puritan-migration>.

¹³ John M. Taylor, *Roger Ludlow, The Colonial Lawmaker* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), 19.

¹⁴ Lucius R. Page, "List of Freemen of Massachusetts, 1630-1691" (1849; repr., Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1982), 3, <https://archive.org/details/listoffreemenofm00paig/page/2/mode/2up>.

some of the churches within the limits of the same.”¹⁵ The right to vote was now tied directly to church membership.

In April 1632, Thomas Dudley resigned from his position as Deputy Governor over a dispute with Governor John Winthrop.¹⁶ The disagreement that led to his departure is not recorded—what Winthrop *did* note in his journal was the dissent of the Assistants at Dudley’s exit. His quitting in the middle of his term was disallowed, and he was called back. At his first meeting back in May 1632, Winthrop let the Assistants know that at the next session of the General Court the freemen were planning to petition for the Assistants themselves to be subject to election on a yearly basis. If the court was contentious before, it was now in an uproar.¹⁷ Loudest among the dissenters was Roger Ludlow. He “grew into a passion” and declared loudly that they may as well not have a government at all—just “an interim wherein every man might do what he pleased”.¹⁸ While the other Assistants eventually calmed down and became generally agreeable to being elected as magistrates year-by-year, Ludlow continued in his original stance, even claiming that if this were allowed “he would then return back to England.”¹⁹

Ludlow stayed. In 1634 the people whose power he had originally attempted to stifle elected him Deputy Governor, with Thomas Dudley elected Governor. The very next year, however, he was left completely out of the magistracy.²⁰ In response, Ludlow claimed that “several towns had agreed upon the election before they came.”²¹ The court heard his complaint

¹⁵ Taylor, 42.

¹⁶ John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649*, ed. James Kendall Hosmer (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 76.

¹⁷ Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop*, 78.

¹⁸ Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop*, 78.

¹⁹ Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop*, 78.

²⁰ Frank Thistlethwaite, *Dorset Pilgrims: The Story of West Country Pilgrims Who Went to New England in the 17th Century* (Tiverton, Devon: Westcountry Books, 1993), 98.

²¹ Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop*, 149.

in May, and summarily dismissed his concerns that the election had been rigged against him. This began his falling out of favor with the government of Massachusetts Bay.

Meanwhile, Massachusetts's restrictions regarding political participation were inspiring dissent. Thomas Hooker, the pastor of the earliest established church at Cambridge, disagreed that suffrage should be limited to freemen who were fully covenanted church members and with the centralized power held by Massachusetts's leadership. Hooker advocated for a more democratic system that derived its authority from the consent of the governed rather than being controlled by a religious elite.²²

Puritanism was not monolithic. Traditionalists such as John Cotton and John Davenport leaned more conservative with regard to church membership (and by extension voting rights), while Thomas Hooker was far more progressive.²³ This put him at odds with members of the General Court of Massachusetts, and he petitioned the General Court in 1634 for leave to remove from the colony in 1634.²⁴ While the Court did not reach a consensus, Roger Ludlow found himself on the side of Hooker rather than his fellow magistrates on the Court. In 1636, Reverend Hooker led around 100 colonists, many of whom had been a part of his congregation since his days of preaching in England, out of Massachusetts and into what would become the colony of Connecticut, settling initially at Hartford.

Roger Ludlow was among them, and quickly established himself as a leading figure in the new colony. He was an active participant in the Pequot War (1636-1638). The Pequot controlled significant trade networks with the Dutch and other tribes, and the arrival of English

²² Sandra Slater, "'Two Suns in One Firmament': John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, and the 1655 New Haven Sodomy Statute," *Church History* 87, no. 4 (December 2018): 1005, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640718002366>.

²³ Slater, "Two Suns in One Firmament," 1005.

²⁴ Slater, "Two Suns in One Firmament," 1012-1013.

settlers disrupted those relationships as the colonists attempted to establish their own economic dominance in the area.

The beginning of the war has often been attributed to the murder of John Stone in 1633, though it would be a whole year before the government of Massachusetts Bay would use his death as an excuse to justify violence against the Pequot.²⁵ Before his death, Stone had been expelled from the colony, and “ordered upon pain of death to come here no more.”²⁶ It seems that the initial reaction to news of his death was at best ambivalent, and at worst, smug. One young settler wrote, upon hearing of his passing, “thus did God destroy him that proudly threatened to ruin us.”²⁷

It was not until a year later that the government of Massachusetts Bay used Stone’s death as a bargaining chip in its negotiating with the Pequots. That the Pequots had not surrendered those responsible for the Englishman’s death, they argued, was evidence of a conspiracy against every Englishman in the colony.²⁸ Negotiations stalled until 1636, when the murder of John Oldham rekindled fears of a broader scheme to rid the New World of Englishmen altogether.²⁹

As the Deputy Governor of the Connecticut colony at the time, Ludlow was heavily involved in the organization of the military expeditions against the Pequot that would follow, shaping colonial response to Native American resistance in the process. He rallied colonial forces, secured alliances with Indigenous peoples opposed to the Pequot such as the Narragansetts and Mohegans, and ensured that colonial forces had the supplies necessary to confront them. While Ludlow was not directly involved in significant events such as the Mystic

²⁵ Alfred A. Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 72-74.

²⁶ Cave, *The Pequot War*, 74.

²⁷ Cave, *The Pequot War*, 74.

²⁸ Cave, *The Pequot War*, 74-76.

²⁹ Whether or not the Pequot were responsible for Oldham’s death has been a matter of some debate. See Chapter 3 of Cave’s *The Pequot War*.

Massacre in May 1637, his position allowed him to influence post-war policies regarding the division of Pequot lands and the subjugation of survivors.

Ludlow was also present at the Fairfield Swamp Fight in July 1637 with John Davenport and Israel Stoughton. Together with the men in their command they beheaded two sachems and followed the retreating Pequot into a swamp.³⁰ After hours of firing back and forth, the Pequot surrendered, and “life was offered to all that had not shed English blood.”³¹ Around two hundred women and children emerged from the swamp, but the men decided to fight on. In all, there were about 700 Pequot slain or taken captive.³²

One of the only lawyers in the new colony, Ludlow was also instrumental in drafting the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut in 1639. This document is often regarded as one of the first written constitutions that established a framework for self-government, and cemented Ludlow’s role as a prominent leader in the colony.

Ludlow next set his sights on expanding English settlements further west. Early in 1639, the General Court granted him permission to set up a plantation at Pequannocke (later Fairfield), and he negotiated with the local Paugussett tribe to purchase land along the coast. However, upon returning to Hartford, he was taken to task for exceeding his commission. According to the Court, he had obtained more land from the Paugussett than they had given him the dispensation for, expanding Fairfield’s borders past the designated acreage.

Fairfield and the Empire

³⁰ Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop*, 226.

³¹ Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop*, 227.

³² Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop*, 227; Cave, *The Pequot War*, 160.

Inspired by the success of intercolonial cooperation during the Pequot War, the colonies of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Haven, and Plymouth banded together to form the New England Confederation, sometimes referred to as the United Colonies of New England. In this compact colonial leadership agreed to mutually defend one another against threats from the Dutch, French, and Indigenous people in the area.³³ This confederation negotiated the Treaty of Hartford, which established a permanent boundary between the English colonies and New Netherland in 1650. The Dutch had limited trading posts near the Connecticut River, with most of their outposts located on the Hudson. With English settlers pouring into Connecticut by the 1640s, it made little sense to maintain outposts such as the House of Hope located on the Connecticut River when there were so few Dutch settlements nearby. Petrus Stuyvesant, the Director-General of New Netherland, exchanged Dutch claims along the river for a firm demarcation line fifty miles west and a promise not to expand English settlement on Long Island.³⁴

While the Treaty of Hartford was ratified by the Dutch East India Company and the Confederation, Cromwell's government in England refused to assent to it for a number of reasons. The treaty would have effectively legitimized Dutch claims to territories surrounding the Hudson River, which England had long coveted.

Additionally, allowing England's colonial holdings to independently negotiate treaties with foreign powers ran counter to Cromwell's goal of asserting greater control over the English colonies in North America. The New England Confederation had acted autonomously in

³³ "Articles of Confederation of the United Colonies of New England; May 19, 1643," The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, accessed March 15, 2025, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/art1613.asp.

³⁴ Ronald D. Cohen, "The Hartford Treaty of 1650: Anglo-Dutch Cooperation in the Seventeenth Century," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (October 1969): 311-332, <https://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/NYHSR01/id/21220>.

arranging the treaty, but the English government did not view the colonial governments as having the authority to make such decisions on behalf of England. By refusing to ratify the treaty, Cromwell further strengthened the central authority of the Commonwealth and reasserted that colonial agreements with foreign powers required his government's approval.

Tensions further heightened with the passage of the Navigation Act of 1651, which aimed to restrict foreign merchants from trading with English territories and to weaken the Dutch Republic's economic influence. Under the Act, all goods imported into England or its colonies had to be carried on English ships or ships of the country that produced the goods.³⁵ The Dutch dominated the shipping industry, and this measure effectively excluded them from English trade routes and prohibited them from transporting goods to and from the colonies. The Dutch Republic through the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC) had become the most powerful trading nation in Europe, making enormous profits from shipping products globally. The English under Cromwell saw this as a threat to their own economic ambitions and believed that they could boost their own economy by restricting Dutch shipping.³⁶

The Navigation Act was a direct challenge to Dutch economic interests and negatively impacted Anglo-Dutch relations, contributing directly to the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654). The war was primarily a naval conflict with battles in the North Sea, the English Channel, and the Caribbean. The repercussions in New England were especially profound. The Dutch had fostered profitable trade relationships with many Indigenous nations, and the disruption of these

³⁵ *An Act for Increase of Shipping, and Encouragement of the Navigation of This Nation*, 1651, in *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660*, ed. C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1911), 559-562, accessed March 7, 2025, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/acts-ordinances-interregnum/pp559-562>.

³⁶ Simon Groenveld, "The English Civil Wars As a Cause of the First Anglo-Dutch War, 1640-1652," *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 3 (1987): 562, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639159>.

networks increased tensions not only with Dutch settlers in the area but Indigenous peoples as well.

Goodwife Knapp and the Pressure to Name Others

It is against this backdrop of imperial conflict that in 1653 Goodwife Knapp was tried and executed for witchcraft. Though the early records of Fairfield were destroyed by the British during the American Revolution, some details can be extrapolated about its ecclesiastical structure by examining broader religious trends in the colony of Connecticut. Under the Fundamental Orders, Connecticut was generally more politically and religiously inclusive than Massachusetts Bay or the neighboring New Haven, though it was still predominately Puritan.³⁷ Fairfield would have likely followed the Congregationalist model, but its governance was less theocratic than Massachusetts Bay. Because Connecticut did not strictly require church membership to obtain the right to vote, the church at Fairfield may have been more lenient in religious matters.³⁸

The details of Goodwife Knapp's trial and execution for the capital crime of witchcraft would be all but lost to history if not for the testimony given during a slander case only a matter of months after her passing. There is no record of the testimonies given against her, but thanks to the slander suit brought by Thomas Staples on behalf of his wife Mary against Roger Ludlow, historians can piece together what took place between her condemnation and execution.

³⁷ *The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut*, 1639, in *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters, and other Organic Laws of the United States*, ed. Francis Newton Thorpe (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909), 529-533.

³⁸ While the government of Massachusetts Bay tied voting rights explicitly to church membership in May 1631, there was no such declaration in the more liberal Connecticut Colony. For the specific voting requirements in Connecticut, see Section 7 of the *Fundamental Orders of Connecticut* (1638/1639).

Though popular consensus holds that Roger Ludlow was among the magistrates that presided over Goodwife Knapp's trial, I can find no definitive evidence that he was involved to this degree. As Ludlow was one of the most prominent men in the colony at the time it stands to reason that he was involved in prosecuting her, but primary sources naming him explicitly in this context are lacking.

One of the few things known about Goodwife Knapp's trial is that she was searched for witches' marks by Goodwife Pell, the town doctor's wife, and Goodwife Odell, the midwife. While the presence of these marks were not enough to convict her, the court added their presence to the growing stack of evidence against her.

After Knapp's conviction, a committee of women made up of Goodwives Odell, Pell, Lockwood, and Purdy was sent by the court to the jail where she was being held to convince her to confess to her crime and to name other witches.³⁹ Goodwife Pell further compelled her to name her accomplices, saying that "before she was condemned, she might think it would be a means to take away her life, but now she must die, and therefore should discover (disclose) all."⁴⁰

The next day the committee returned, this time with the Reverend Jones and Pell's two daughters in tow. Again they urged her to confess and name any other witches she knew, implying this time that Goodwife Staples was the one whose testimony sealed her fate. Goodwife Sherwood, who visited shortly after and had heard what the women said about Staples, encouraged Knapp to speak with the jury about Staples's testimony. Staples's testimony,

³⁹ Mrs. Jones, the minister's wife, was there as well. That there was an official committee of women at all was brought to light by Goodwife Sherwood, who ran into them on her way to comfort Knapp in her jail cell.

⁴⁰ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven, From May, 1653 to the Union. Together with New Haven Code of 1656* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Company, 1858), 84.

according to Sherwood, had been no different than that of the other townsfolk, and had certainly not been the damning evidence that the committee was making it out to be.⁴¹

The committee made one final plea to Goodwife Knapp. The day before her execution, Mrs. Pell went with her two daughters, Mrs. Ward, and Goodwife Lockwood to entreat her to “lay open herself and make way for the minister to do her good.”⁴² Elizabeth Pell, one of Mrs. Pell’s daughters, said that she should reveal all that she knew to be witches as the witch in the other town had done. Knapp replied that she “must not say anything that is not true” and refused to confess her guilt or to give them a name.⁴³ She told the women congregated with her in the jail that if she had anything to confess she’d do so in private, to “Mr. Ludlow or the minister” just before she went up to the gallows.⁴⁴ Elizabeth warned her that if she waited until she were upon the ladder that “the Devil will have you quick,” meaning that the Devil would stop her from confessing her guilt and naming others if she waited until she was at the gallows.⁴⁵ Knapp snapped at the young woman to “take heed that the Devil have not *you*.”⁴⁶ Knapp again refused to name Staples, saying “I have sins enough to answer for already, and I hope I shall not add to my condemnation.”⁴⁷ Goodwife Knapp refused to add false testimony to the list of transgressions for which she would soon be hanged. Thomas Lyon, one of the men watching her in her cell, cautioned Knapp not to sow discord among her neighbors before dying. Knapp again repeated that she knew nothing about Staples as a witch, and did so again after the women left.

Absent from the laundry list of visitors to Goodwife Knapp’s jail cell was Goodwife Mary Staples. One might argue that this was to distance herself from the associating with a

⁴¹ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 85-86.

⁴² *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 84.

⁴³ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 84.

⁴⁴ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 84.

⁴⁵ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 84.

⁴⁶ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 84.

⁴⁷ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 84.

convicted witch, or to stave off the growing rumors that she herself was a witch, but it would be reasonable to believe that Mary was kept from visiting her by her husband Thomas, who may have already been beginning to build her defense. In the days leading up to her death, Knapp revealed that he had been there to see her and spoken harshly with her about things she'd supposedly said against his wife, though she again asserted that she'd said nothing against Mary.⁴⁸

What happened at the gallows is contested. While there is one witness who recalls Goodwife Knapp whispering to Roger Ludlow before she was hanged, none of the other witnesses testified to this effect.⁴⁹ Even if Knapp was allowed to step off of the ladder to make a last-minute remark, there was no one to hear what she said but Roger Ludlow himself.

Insurrection

In November 1653, the same month that Goodwife Knapp had been executed, Roger Ludlow was wrapped up in yet another controversy. The Dutch and Indigenous peoples allied with them were closing in around Fairfield, with a Dutch ship anchored on the Long Island Sound just outside of town.⁵⁰ Prominent town members, such as Roger Ludlow, petitioned the colonial governments to send troops and support to Fairfield. However, colonial powers were loath to mobilize without a direct provocation.⁵¹

While awaiting their responses, Fairfield felt the pressure of the Dutch at their doorstep. The townspeople decided that they needed to mobilize a militia to combat Dutch presence in the area, and elected Roger Ludlow its commander in chief.⁵² Ludlow, however, had no dispensation

⁴⁸ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 81.

⁴⁹ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 77-88.

⁵⁰ Taylor, Roger Ludlow, *The Colonial Lawmaker*, 129-130.

⁵¹ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 44-48.

⁵² *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 47.

from any colonial power to claim this title. Military leadership roles were not decided by a simple consensus of the town they inhabited. His letter to Governor Eaton, informing the colony of New Haven about the town's organizing of a militia and a request that the colonial government send in its own troops, was not met with enthusiasm.⁵³ The court concluded that with winter approaching, and with Connecticut's willingness to take up arms against the Dutch unclear, that they were not at that time called into war.⁵⁴ The court at New Haven did, however, stipulate that should Connecticut "agree to carry it out now that this court would join with them."⁵⁵

Ludlow's defenders argued that he was merely fulfilling a duty, citing English Parliament's declaration that the Dutch were enemies of the commonwealth. However, his personal motivations lay outside of a sense of civic duty alone. His history of political disputes with New Haven, particularly the settlement of Fairfield under Connecticut's jurisdiction rather than New Haven's, created a strained relationship between the colonial government and the man himself, even as the relationship between New Haven and Connecticut continued to be somewhat contentious.⁵⁶

Worse yet for Ludlow, his actions were being equated to the same sort of rebellious sentiment stirring elsewhere in Connecticut. In March 1653/54, the General Court of New Haven was informed of the misdeeds of Thomas Baxter, who had turned from privateering for Rhode Island against the Dutch to piracy and committed various other offenses across multiple

⁵³ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 47.

⁵⁴ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 47.

⁵⁵ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 47.

⁵⁶ Slater, "Two Suns in One Firmament", 1005.

jurisdictions.⁵⁷ They requested that New Haven send two men with the marshal that they had dispatched to apprehend him in Fairfield. The court at New Haven agreed, and also addressed several other matters related to Baxter's crimes and pending apprehension. He'd been involved in seizing a vessel and fleeing Rhode Island. In Stamford, CT, he had threatened a constable and attempted to rally volunteers to his cause. He also struck a man from Milford with a half-pike and threatened him with a sword when he was confronted for stealing his canoe.⁵⁸

Two of Baxter's men were also detained. William Ellitt and Abraham Frost had drawn swords up and down Fairfield's streets in a threatening manner. Charges were also brought against Robert Basset, who during Baxter's arrest incited a skirmish between Baxter's other followers and the authorities who apprehended him.

Robert Basset's involvement with this case is perhaps the most interesting. His wife admitted that her husband had sent letters and papers to be hidden away, leading the court to further believe that there was a vast, seditious conspiracy against colonial leadership. One of the letters received by Basset stated that "Baxter was a rogue, and Mr. Ludlow was his brother."⁵⁹ Since Ludlow and Baxter were not siblings, this suggests Ludlow's involvement with challenging jurisdictional authority, particularly in undermining the governance of New Haven and the idea of a possible insurrection. The author of the letter, then, is equating Baxter's actions to Ludlow's.

⁵⁷ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 50; Simon Middleton, "Order and Authority in New Netherland: The 1653 Remonstrance and Early Settlement Politics," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2010): 57, <https://doi.org/10.5309/willmaryquar.67.1.31>.

⁵⁸ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 53.

⁵⁹ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 58.

Racing to Build a Case

Though Ludlow's motivations for accusing Mary Staples of witchcraft cannot be known for certain, it was clear that his welcome in the colonies was wearing thin. If he wanted to redeem himself in the eyes of his community and in the eyes of the colonial governments of which he'd run afoul, he needed to build an airtight case, and quickly. His neighbor Mary Staples made an excellent target based on her staunch (and often public) defense of Goodwife Knapp and the already tumultuous relationship he had with her husband Thomas.

Thomas Staples and Roger Ludlow were neighbors, both living in Block No. 1 (nicknamed "Ludlow Square") and had been involved in several different court cases against one another. In July 1650, Ludlow sued Staples for slander and defamation.⁶⁰ The specifics of this case are not recorded, but the jury found in favor of Ludlow.⁶¹ This case also gives us some insight into the financial situation of the Staples household. The fine of 40 shillings was reduced to 20 shillings "with some greater aggravation," suggesting that Staples would be unable to pay the full fine.⁶²

It was essentially a race against the clock—could Thomas Staples mount a case against Roger Ludlow, the man most likely to formally accuse his wife, before he had the chance to accuse her? Staples was quicker. Roger Ludlow was brought into custody, though he was released and counter-sued Thomas Staples for false imprisonment.⁶³ Seeing that the defamation case was going forward and possibly fearing reimprisonment, Ludlow fled Fairfield between

⁶⁰ *Records of the Particular Court of Connecticut, 1639-1663*, ed. Charles Burrows (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1928), 86.

⁶¹ *Records of the Particular Court of Connecticut*, 87.

⁶² *Records of the Particular Court of Connecticut*, 87.

⁶³ *Records of the Particular Court of Connecticut*, 127.

April 26 and May 29, 1654. He stayed with his brother in Virginia for around a month before returning to England.

Thomas Staples's slander case went forward without Ludlow, coming before the Court of Magistrates held at New Haven in May 1654.⁶⁴ John Banks represented Thomas Staples, and Ensign Bryan remained Ludlow's lawyer in his absence.⁶⁵ Staples accused Roger Ludlow of defamation on three grounds. First, Ludlow allegedly told John Davenport, one of New Haven's cofounders, and his wife that Mary Staples had drawn suspicion onto herself for witchery by commenting on the body of Goodwife Knapp after her execution in November 1653. According to the accusation, Staples observed the alleged witches' marks on the remains and remarked that if these were the mark of a witch then she had them as well. Second, that Ludlow claimed that Goodwife Knapp had told him that Mary Staples was a witch just before she was executed. Third, that Ludlow had slandered Staples by saying that she was a habitual liar.⁶⁶

The first testimony was that of Mr. and Mrs. Davenport. Under oath, Mr. Davenport confirmed that Ludlow informed both he and his wife of Goodwife Knapp's accusations against Mary Staples. Davenport dismissed the claim as malicious and false.⁶⁷ His wife, Mrs. Davenport, confirmed what Ludlow said and affirmed that her husband had spoken up on Staples's behalf.

The willingness of the Davenports to testify against Ludlow traces back to the earlier dispute regarding the direction of Puritanism in the colonies. Roger Ludlow, in following the Reverend Thomas Hooker, had allied himself with more liberal-leaning Puritans while Davenport (and much of New Haven's government) remained conservative.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 77.

⁶⁵ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 77.

⁶⁶ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 77-78.

⁶⁷ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 78-79.

⁶⁸ Slater, "'Two Suns in One Firmament'," 1005; For more on John Davenport, see Chapter 7 of Francis Bremer's *First Founders: American Puritans and Puritanism in an Atlantic World*.

To support the claim that Ludlow had slandered Mrs. Staples by calling her a liar, Goodwife Sherwood and John Thompson confirmed that he had repeatedly accused Mary of speaking falsely or “going on in a tract of lying.”⁶⁹ Goodwife Gould further testified that during a debate in the churchyard Mrs. Staples challenged Roger Ludlow to provide a single example of a lie she’d told. Instead of offering evidence, Ludlow dismissed the request, asserting that she’d “gone on in a tract of lying.”⁷⁰

Following the presentation of these testimonies, Ensign Bryan was given the opportunity to respond on Ludlow’s behalf. He attempted to submit written statements intended to refute the claims against his client, but Staples’s lawyer objected. Rather than providing original documents which had been certified by an impartial officer, the defense presented copies of testimony in Ludlow’s own handwriting. Despite this objection, the court decided to review the testimonies to determine their validity.

The first testimonies involved Goodwife Knapp’s alleged accusations against Mary Staples as a witch, particularly regarding an encounter she’d had with an Indigenous woman. The day after Goodwife Knapp was condemned, Hester Ward visited her in jail. Unprovoked and unprompted, Knapp had told her that “an Indian brought unto her... two little things brighter than the light of the day, and told the said Goodwife Staples that they were Indian gods... that if she would keep them, she should be so big rich... and Staples told the said Knapp that she gave them again to the said Indian, but she could not tell whether she did so or no.”⁷¹ This story was corroborated by Lucy Pell, the town doctor’s wife and one of the women who searched Goody

⁶⁹ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 79-80

⁷⁰ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 80.

⁷¹ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 80.

Knapp for witches' marks.⁷² Pell also recalled that Knapp initially resisted naming Mary Staples as a witch, but eventually conceded that she knew her to be one.

Further depositions reinforced the allegations against Goodwife Staples. Thomas Sherrington, who had served as one of the wardsmen at the jail, Christopher Comstock, and Goodwife Baldwin all testified that prior to her death, Goody Knapp had claimed to know someone who had received "Indian gods," though she did not name Mary Staples as Hester Ward and Goodwife Pell claimed.⁷³

Given the tensions with the Dutch it is perhaps unsurprising to see that testimony against Staples included allegations of conspiring with Indigenous people or handling "Indian gods."⁷⁴ Fears about a vast Dutch conspiracy to ally with Native Nations to slaughter the English were far from assuaged. From Long Island came reports that English colonists had been told that they should be prepared for an "East India breakfast," referencing an incident in Amboyna where the Dutch had butchered English traders thirty years earlier.⁷⁵ Pamphlets and tracts to this effect published in England did nothing to ease those anxieties.

Rebecca Hull, the minister's daughter, recalled that in the moments leading up to Knapp's death, Mary Staples had remained insistent upon Knapp's innocence. When she had been pressed by the Reverend Jones and Roger Ludlow to name her accomplices, Mary had spoken up on Knapp's behalf, asking the men "why should she confess to what she was not?"⁷⁶ Goodwife Gould, who had heard Staples, said, "Sister Staples, she is a witch and has confessed

⁷² *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 81.

⁷³ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 80.

⁷⁴ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 80.

⁷⁵ Louise A. Breen, *Transgressing the Bounds: Subversive Enterprises Among the Puritan Elite, 1630-92* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 120-121.

⁷⁶ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 83.

to have had familiarity with the Devil.”⁷⁷ Mary, in Knapp’s defense, snapped that “I was with her yesterday, or last night, and she said no such thing.”⁷⁸

Most of the witnesses in Ludlow’s defense were women who had gone to Goodwife Knapp’s grave alongside Mary Staples. After Knapp’s execution, a group of women including Elizabeth and Mary Brewster, Goodwife Lockwood, Goodwife Odell, Goodwife Pell, congregated where her body had been deposited before burial to see what witches’ marks could be found on the body.⁷⁹ These women each testified to Mary Staples having been adamant in her search for the marks, which at first were not able to be found.⁸⁰ Goodwife Odell, who had been involved in searching Knapp for witches’ marks during her trial, pointed them out. Staples declared that “they were no witch’s teats, but such as she herself had, and other women might have the same.”⁸¹ She seemed upset at seeing the supposed marks, tugging at them and demanding that Goodwives Lockwood, Pell, and Odell come look at them more closely.⁸² She took to “wringing her hands and taking the Lord’s name in her mouth,” reiterating that “I have such myself, and so have you if you search yourself.”⁸³ Goodwife Lockwood shot back, “If I had such, I would be hanged... and deserve it.”⁸⁴ Staples eventually yielded, according to Odell, and agreed that they were the marks of a witch.

In an effort to counter the written testimony presented by Ensign Bryan on Roger Ludlow’s behalf, John Banks introduced additional witnesses. Goodwife Whitlock recalled that at the execution of Goodwife Knapp several women, not just Goodwife Staples, searched the

⁷⁷ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 83.

⁷⁸ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 83.

⁷⁹ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 81.

⁸⁰ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 81-82.

⁸¹ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 83.

⁸² *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 81.

⁸³ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 82.

⁸⁴ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 82.

body for witches' marks.⁸⁵ Many among the women assembled, herself included, couldn't find any until Pell and Odell came and pointed them out. Whitlock further testified that Staples said she'd never seen such marks in her life, and that "no honest woman had such things as those were."⁸⁶ As Knapp's remains were interred, both Whitlock and Staples went back to town. Goodwife Barlow also testified that she and other women had gone to examine the body, and that Staples remarked that she'd never seen marks like Knapp's before.⁸⁷ This was also affirmed by the wives of Richard Lyon and John Thompson.

After all of the testimonies had been read or given in person, Ensign Bryan said that there was a charge that he had not heard before and was not prepared to answer.⁸⁸ The court found Ludlow guilty on the first and second charge, and agreed to give Ensign Bryan the time that he needed to gather evidence as to the third charge. In its verdict, the court also said that it "shall incline more in favor than possibly they should if Mr. Ludlow was here."⁸⁹ Whether the court meant to say that they would have ruled more in Ludlow's favor had he been present or that they were giving him the benefit of the doubt in his absence is unclear. As it stood, though, the court saw "no cause to lay any blemish of a witch upon Goodwife Staples" and ordered that Thomas Staples be paid £15, ten for "reparation of his wife's name" and five "for his trouble."⁹⁰

Things for Mary Staples could have turned out very differently. She was an outspoken woman, disliked by prominent men in her community, and her family seems to have been financially unstable.⁹¹ This could have been a recipe for an execution, or even the spark that set

⁸⁵ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 84.

⁸⁶ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 84.

⁸⁷ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 84.

⁸⁸ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 88.

⁸⁹ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 88-89.

⁹⁰ *Records of the Colony or Jurisdiction of New Haven*, 88-89.

⁹¹ Ludlow's reputation in the community and the colonies at large had deteriorated significantly by the time he began building his case against Staples. That Staples, who in front of several witnesses questioned the authority of

off a larger witch panic. Mary Staples's life was likely saved by her husband's quick reaction to suspicions whispered about in the community. He recognized the signs, and mobilized quickly in his wife's defense. This likely saved her life, and helped diffuse a witch panic in the making.

Aftermath

Mary Staples disappears again from the historical record until 1692, when witch panics were spreading like wildfire across New England. Though the Salem trials are most often associated with this period, there was another in Stamford, Connecticut that has received significantly less scholarly attention.⁹²

Mary Staples, her daughter Mary Harvey, and her granddaughter Hannah Harvey were accused of witchcraft by Katherine Branch, who was afflicted by fits that left her screaming and contorting on the ground.⁹³ Apparitions, or specters, appeared to her, and she'd ask them questions about their identities. On one such occasion, she claimed that all three women had come to her and told her their names after she persuaded them to, but that "they were terribly mad at me for telling things against them."⁹⁴

Magistrate John Selleck, who had witnessed these episodes firsthand, remained unsure of how to best prosecute these three women. Public trust in the colony's legal system when it came to witch trials had been diminished by the high number of acquittals in the Connecticut witch hunts of the 1660s. Women such as Katherine Harrison, who will be discussed in a subsequent

the magistracy and the existence of witches altogether, had neighbors as well as men as prominent as John Davenport defending her speaks to just how disliked Roger Ludlow was by the time of his egress.

⁹² For more on the Stamford trials, see Richard Godbeer's *Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692*.

⁹³ Richard Godbeer, *Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47.

⁹⁴ Godbeer, *Escaping Salem*, 50.

chapter, were even found guilty of the crime, but the magistracy was unwilling to execute them.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, Mary, Mary, and Hannah were detained and imprisoned while they awaited trial.⁹⁶ When the court finally convened in September, the jury believed that Katherine Branch's testimony should be enough to justify trying the women, but the magistrates were unconvinced by the spectral evidence alone.⁹⁷ Only two witnesses appeared, both of whom presented *more* spectral evidence against Mary Staples. The three women were set free days later, with the magistrates declaring that "all persons are commanded to forebear speaking evil of the aforesaid persons for the future upon pain of displeasure."⁹⁸ They were clearly in no mood to hear cases in which spectral evidence alone was presented.

The trial of Goodwife Knapp and the slander case involving Mary Staples exemplify how personal and community anxieties converged with political tension. While Mary Staples ultimately avoided the gallows, her slander case in 1654 and witch trial (or lack of one) in 1692 underscore the fragility of safety and the importance of one's reputation in times of instability. Both serve as reminders that localized witchcraft accusations reflected broader colonial tensions.

⁹⁵ Godbeer, *Escaping Salem*, 54.

⁹⁶ Thomas Staples had passed away by the time of the 1692 accusations against the women in his family. Witchcraft was believed to have run in families, and to have been primarily passed matrilineally from mothers to daughters, and in rare cases such as Staples's, granddaughters as well. See Carol F. Karlsen's *Devil in the Shape of a Woman*.

⁹⁷ Godbeer, *Escaping Salem*, 60.

⁹⁸ Godbeer, *Escaping Salem*, 61.

Chapter 2 - Exiled: Katherine Harrison

A widow furiously scratches out her pleas on paper, a last ditch attempt to stop the destruction of her property. She entreats the court to investigate the popular retribution of her fellow townsfolk against her as she awaits trial. Her livestock are maimed, her fields trampled as accusations of witchcraft are closing in around her.

The Governor of Connecticut presides over a troubling case. A wealthy woman in good standing with her church has found herself at odds with her community and accused of occult activities that he himself engages in. Eager to prevent bloodshed and return harmony to the community while keeping accusations of maleficium at bay, he entreats a good friend—a minister—to answer three questions.

A respected minister leads a small group of clergy in writing a letter that will answer the questions that have troubled the collective consciousness of the colony for decades. In its aftermath, witchcraft accusations all but dry up and convictions become nearly impossible. It will be twenty two years before another witch is hanged in Connecticut.

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The trial, conviction, and exile of Katherine Harrison are unique among isolated witch trials in that her ordeal was so well documented. Depositions from her accusers, her complaints against her neighbors, and other primary sources are plentiful whereas the trials on which the other case studies in this study are based left relatively little evidence behind.

Of the three case studies examined here, Harrison's has received by far the most scholarly attention. Historians such as Carol F. Karlsen, John Putnam Demos, and Walter W. Woodward have covered Harrison's case in detail, each arguing about the roles of class, gender, and socioeconomic status in her trial and exile. This study, however, differs in that it also examines the fallout of the Second Anglo-Dutch War as a cause for the unrest in Wethersfield, and ultimately in the trial of Harrison herself.

The Restoration of the Monarchy and Second Anglo-Dutch War

The transition in English leadership from Oliver Cromwell to the restored monarchy of Charles II marked a significant shift in Anglo-Dutch relations that directly contributed to the Second Anglo-Dutch War. Despite conflicts over commercial interests that led to the First Anglo-Dutch War, England's relationship with the Dutch could be viewed as a reluctant coexistence. The treaty at the war's end avoided humiliating the Dutch after England's victory, and the terms of peace were not altogether unfavorable toward VOC and Dutch interests in the New World.¹

Cromwell, despite his aggressive commercial policies, recognized the value of Protestant solidarity. He actively sought Dutch support for his "Western Design" against Catholic Spain, though the Navigation Act of 1651 certainly strained the relationship between Britain and the Netherlands, and aimed for cooperation with Protestant powers whenever possible.²

The Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 fundamentally changed the relationship between the United Provinces and England. Charles II harbored a significant amount of personal

¹ Simon Groenveld, "The English Civil War as a Cause of the First Anglo-Dutch War, 1640-1652," *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 3 (1987): 541-566.

² Carla Gardina Pestana, *The English Atlantic in an Age of Revolution, 1640-1661* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 157-158.

animosity toward the Dutch, stemming from his experiences with them during his exile from 1651-1660. The Dutch expelled Charles II from their territory in 1651 after Cromwell demanded they do so, a slight not soon forgotten by the restored king.³ This personal grudge against the Dutch only served to amplify the commercial grievances of the Crown against the other colonial power.

Beyond a personal hatred for the Netherlands, Charles II's court featured prominent anti-Dutch voices, namely merchants who had supported the Royalist cause. James, Duke of York (later James II), was especially hostile in his position as Lord High Admiral. Under his leadership, the Royal Navy became exceedingly aggressive toward Dutch shipping.⁴

In New England more specifically, this transition of power and sentiment had very tangible effects. Charles II took a more active role in colonial governance to further his commercial goals than Cromwell had during the Interregnum.⁵ The Duke of York took a particular interest in North American colonial affairs, especially in the annexing of New Netherland which occupied a strategic position between New England and the Chesapeake. By 1664, relations had deteriorated to the point that armed conflict seemed likely.

Before war was formally declared, an English fleet led by Colonel Richard Nicolls arrived off New Amsterdam. The expedition had been commissioned by the Duke of York, who had received a royal grant for territories including the Dutch colony. Facing an overwhelming show of force and receiving no support from the Netherlands, Dutch governor Petrus Stuyvesant surrendered New Amsterdam with little resistance.⁶

³ Steven C. Pincus, "Popery, Trade and Universal Monarchy: The Ideological Context of the Outbreak of the Second Anglo-Dutch War," *The English Historical Review* 107, no. 422 (1992): 1-2.

⁴ Pincus, "Popery, Trade and Universal Monarchy," 9.

⁵ Christopher L. Tomlins, *Freedom Bound: Law, Labor, and Civic Identity in Colonizing English America, 1580-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 210-228.

⁶ Robert C. Ritchie, *The Duke's Province: A Study of New York Politics and Society, 1664-1691* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 15-32.

The surrender of New Amsterdam is significant for a number of reasons. The Dutch colony of New Netherland represented a significant strategic vulnerability for English colonial ambitions in the New World. Situated between New England and the southern colonies, it controlled the Hudson River Valley, the Delaware River Valley, New Amsterdam, and parts of modern-day New Jersey.⁷ The geographical positioning of the colony gave the Dutch the potential to disrupt both trade and communication between the English colonies while withholding their access to the fur trade. This preemptive strike effectively eliminated Dutch colonial power in North America and established contiguous English control from Maine to the Carolinas.

The Treaty of Breda formally ended the war in 1667, confirming English possession of New Netherland while allowing the Dutch to retain Suriname in South America and relaxing the Navigation Acts of 1651.⁸ This settlement solidified English control over the Atlantic, and eliminated a significant rival colonial power from the continent.

It also served as evidence to the colonists that imperial rule was tightening. Gone were the days of leniency, of the Interregnum that was more tolerant toward Puritans than the monarchy had been before it. Puritans found themselves out of favor with a restored Anglican monarch who remembered their support for Cromwell, and was certain that the colonists were responsible for sheltering at least three regicides, men who had been responsible for his father, Charles I's, execution.⁹

⁷ Oliver A. Rink, *Holland on the Hudson: An Economic and Social History of Dutch New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 210-218.

⁸ *A Proclamation for Publishing the Peace Between His Majesty and the States-General of the United Netherlands*. Early English Books Online. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed April 1, 2025. <https://name.umd.umich.edu/B02118.0001.001>.

⁹ The regicides Edward Whalley and William Goffe fled to the colonies after Charles II's Indemnity and Oblivion Act, discussed further in Chapter 3. John Dixwell was also known to have fled for the New World after the Restoration.

Despite the majority of significant naval battles in the war occurring in European waters, the Second Anglo-Dutch War affected New England as well. Before the Treaty of Breda was signed there were very tangible fears of violence and disruption of trade. Connecticut's position, with its valuable access into the interior by way of the Connecticut River, was especially vulnerable to these anxieties. Special watches were established and fortifications along the river were enhanced, reflecting the colony's sense of vulnerability during the conflict.¹⁰

The fear of the Dutch in Connecticut was not strictly limited to the years in which war had officially been declared, and anxieties surrounding the Netherlands made their way more directly into witch beliefs. In 1662, Anne Cole of Hartford was afflicted with fits in which she seemed possessed by a demon which spoke in a "Dutch-Tone," confounding Reverend Samuel Stone and other prominent men about town.¹¹ Cole's "devil" accused Rebecca Greensmith of not only maleficium, but of diabolism as well.¹² This association of the Dutch with diabolism is perhaps unsurprising given the Puritan belief in their mission to set up the colonies as a "city upon a hill." The Dutch became diabolic for much the same reason that the Indigenous people in the area had: they stood in the way of the divine mission.

Katherine Harrison

It is in the immediate aftermath of the political and social upheaval of the Second Anglo-Dutch War that Katherine Harrison's ordeal took place. Her trial occurred during a period of economic recovery following wartime disruption, and Harrison's substantial wealth made her a

¹⁰ J. Hammond Trumbull, ed., *The Colonial Records of Connecticut*, vol. 2 (Hartford: Brown & Parsons, 1850), 532-534.

¹¹ George Lincoln Burr, ed., *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 18-20, <https://archive.org/details/narrativesofwit00burr/page/48/mode/2up>.

¹² Walter W. Woodward, *Prospero's America: John Winthrop Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 232.

“ready target in a community seeking explanations for misfortune.”¹³ Puritans viewed the Anglo-Dutch conflict, as well as Indigenous raids, bad storms, and agricultural failure as signs of God’s displeasure.¹⁴ Harrison’s wealth, despite the tragedy all around her, made her a convenient scapegoat.

Suspicious about Katherine Harrison began forming while she was a servant in the house of Captain John Cullick. While in his service she gained a reputation as a Sabbath breaker and fortune teller. On multiple occasions she bragged that she knew “many matters that were in future time to be accomplished.”¹⁵ Many of these predictions were focused on the younger members of the Cullick household. Elizabeth Bateman, another servant in the house, had a suitor that Captain Cullick disapproved of. Katherine predicted that Elizabeth would instead marry a man named Simon rather than her longtime beau. Years later, Elizabeth testified against Katherine and identified herself as the wife of Simon Smith.¹⁶

She was terminated from her position with Captain Cullick, though the exact reason is disputed. At trial, Katherine claimed she left voluntarily over a disagreement with another servant. Her accusers, however, claimed that it was because of her “evil conversation” and fortune telling.

Whatever the reason for her departure from Hartford, Katherine arrived in Wethersfield, Connecticut by 1653 and married John Harrison. Given her own lower socioeconomic status, it would be fair to assume that John was also quite poor at the time of their marriage. He held

¹³ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 116-118.

¹⁴ Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 157-159.

¹⁵ Testimony of Elizabeth Smith, Harrison, “1668 Sep 23,” Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:211559/>.

¹⁶ John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 356-357.

minor local offices, but overall his public service was quite limited, which further points to his lack of distinction among his fellow community members.¹⁷ In time, however, the family began to prosper. His business ventures seemed to be flourishing, Katherine became known for her abilities as a healer rather than as a fortune teller, and their family was growing. They had three daughters.

This ‘rags to riches’ story of a family who elevated their station through hard work and good luck likely caused some resentment within the community. Such rapid success, especially when other neighbors were less fortunate, was often attributed to supernatural causes.¹⁸ If the people of Wethersfield suspected that the Harrisons had attained their wealth by allying themselves with the Devil, however, they kept it to themselves until John passed in 1666. Within two years of his death, accusations of maleficium began taking shape.

There has been some debate as to the two years between John’s death and formal accusations brought against Katherine. Scholarly consensus in this area suggests that by the time Katherine was accused, it had become apparent that she had no intention of remarrying. This meant that the fortune left to her by her husband would stay her own, and would eventually pass to her three daughters.¹⁹

Harrison’s relationship to the Gilbert family also could have raised suspicions. There is some debate as to whether or not she was the daughter of Lydia Gilbert, who was executed as a witch in Hartford in 1654.²⁰ Some genealogists identify Harrison as her niece, but whether their relationship was familial or simply friendly, Harrison and the Gilberts were close. After

¹⁷ Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 358.

¹⁸ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 110-111.

¹⁹ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 83.

²⁰ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 83.

Governor John Winthrop Jr. refused to reallocate the inheritance of her daughters, whom Harrison believed to have been short-changed in their father's will, she appointed John, Jonathan, and Josiah Gilbert as the executors of her estate and as guardian of her daughters.²¹

Formal accusations against Katherine were lodged in May 1668, after which her relationship with the people of Wethersfield swiftly deteriorated. As her adversaries were gathering evidence for the trial, three suits over property were decided against her, and she found herself the defendant of two slander cases brought forth by Michael Griswold and his wife Ann.

In the first, Katherine was accused of claiming that "Michael Griswold would hang her even if it meant damning a thousand souls" and later that his "own soul... had been damned long ago."²² In the second slander suit, Ann Griswold claimed that Katherine had called her "a savage whore."²³ She was found guilty on both occasions and fined £40, though she immediately filed an appeal with the Court of Assistants.²⁴

Her slander against Michael Griswold is perhaps most interesting. The case was brought forth as testimony against her was being gathered from Wethersfield, Hadley, and Hartford, suggesting his involvement in the gathering of that testimony. Harrison's slandering of Griswold can then be understood as a claim that the depositions and witnesses he was producing were false. How better to damn a multitude of souls than to convince her neighbors to give false testimony against her in court?

In her defense, Katherine admitted to wrongdoing on her part but argued that the Griswold's were more interested in a "full purse" than an apology.²⁵ She further described

²¹ Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 86; Katherine believed that her daughters should have received a larger inheritance after their father's passing.

²² County Court, Hartford, September 3, 1668, in *Connecticut Colonial Probate Records*, vol. III, leaves 78-80.

²³ County Court, Hartford, *Connecticut Colonial Probate Records*, 3:78-80.

²⁴ Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 359.

²⁵ "The Declaration of Katherine Harrison, in Appeal to the Court of Assistants," Connecticut Archives: Crimes and Misdemeanors, series one, 1662-1789, 1, part one, no. 34-3.

herself as being “beset by overbearing exercises inflicted by evil instruments,” referencing the numerous injustices she’d suffered since her husband’s death. In a petition submitted in October 1668, Katherine gave an account of the ways in which unnamed members of the community had damaged her property:

We had a yoke of oxen one of which spoiled... so bruised that he was altogether unserviceable. About a fortnight or three weeks after the former, we had a cow spoiled, her back broke and two of her ribs... Next I had a cow at the side of my yard, her jawbone broke, and one of her hooves, and a hole bored in her side... I had a three-year-old heifer in the meadow stuck with a knife or some weapon and wounded to death. Next I had a cow in the street wounded in the bag as she stood before my door, in the street... I had a sow that went out into the woods, came home with ears lugged [torn] and one of her hind legs cut off. Lastly my corn in Mile Meadow was much damnified [destroyed] with horses, they being staked upon it... I had my horse wounded in the night, as he was in my pasture no creature, save three calves with him. More, I had one two year-old steer the back of it broke, in the barnyard; more I had a matter of 30 poles of hops cut and spoiled- all which things have happened since my husband’s death.²⁶

Thirteen separate incidents were reported to the authorities by Katherine, each with two or more witnesses and each reflecting how hopelessly at odds with her community she’d become. The prosecution of the case against her was, in many ways, a natural escalation of the harassment she faced.

Most of the testimony in Katherine’s trial was regarding incidents that had happened years prior, reflecting the longstanding suspicion of the people of Wethersfield and the surrounding area. Her ordeal lasted two years, from May 1668 to May 1670. People from the towns of Wethersfield, Hartford, and Hadley gave statements against her, accusing her of fortune telling, appearing as a specter to her neighbors, causing agricultural mischief, and causing general malefic harm to the community.

²⁶ David Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 170.

Witnesses from Hartford drew on her time as Captain Cullick's servant. William Warren testified that Harrison expressed that she was a fortune teller who "had her skill from Lilly."²⁷ Thomas Whaples testified that Katherine was "a noted liar", that she "had read Mr. Lilly's book in England" and that she "did spin more than he judged could be spun without some unlawful help."²⁸

The Lilly that these men referred to was William Lilly, an English astrologer, and the alleged connection between he and Harrison complicated her case further. His textbook, *Christian Astrology*, brought the study of the occult to a broader audience and enabled the laity to research natural magic in ways that would otherwise have been inaccessible.²⁹ Whether or not Harrison knew Lilly personally or was simply familiar with his work remains contested.

The names of some of the Hadley townsfolk that testified against Harrison will sound familiar. Philip Smith and his wife Rebecca of Hadley, MA, would later be involved in the trial of Mary Webster in 1683. Rebecca testified that while she was staying with Jonathan Gilbert and his wife that Katherine Harrison borrowed a black cap from Goodwife Gilbert. After having it for some time, Harrison wanted to buy it from Goodwife Gilbert, who refused to sell it. After getting the cap back, Goody Gilbert put it on, and "when she had the cap on her head, her head and shoulders were much afflicted."³⁰

Smith also suspected that she was being bewitched by "some evil person" for nearly a year, with her "thigh and leg being stiff like a stick" and that "she was usually most afflicted on

²⁷ William Warren, Testimony in the Case of Katherine Harrison, October 27, 1668, *Samuel Wyllys Papers*, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT.

²⁸ Thomas Whaples, Testimony in the Case of Katherine Harrison, August, 1668, *Samuel Wyllys Papers*, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT.

²⁹ Woodward, *Prospero's America*, 246.

³⁰ Rebecca Smith, Testimony in the Case of Katherine Harrison, October 12, 1668, *Samuel Wyllys Papers*, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT.

the Sabbath day.”³¹ She also claimed that her fits ceased around October 6th, 1668, in the approximate time that Harrison’s complaint against the unknown persons about town destroying her property came before the court.³²

Philip Smith did not directly testify, but he was mentioned in the testimony of Joseph Dickinson. Both men, and later Samuel Belden, had seen her calling for her cattle to come home about a mile from where they were grazing.³³ The cattle, according to Belden, were “running with great violence tail on end homewards.”³⁴ The men did not know how the cows had been called home from such a distance, or why they returned home with such urgency.

This was not the only instance of an agriculturally related malefic act in the Harrison case. John Graves reported that he had conducted an experiment while grazing his cattle in a pasture adjacent to John and Katherine Harrison’s land. Believing that if Katherine was a witch his cattle would be unable to graze peacefully, Graves tied his oxen to his cart and waited some distance away to see what would happen. The cattle refused to feed, and Graves witnessed “the cart-rope of its own accord untie and fall to the ground.”³⁵ He went back and tied them again, only for the oxen to become frightened and run “with such violence that the force and speed of their running made the yoke so tied... fly six foot high.”³⁶

John Wells also claimed that Harrison had been guilty of bovine-based maleficium. He claimed that Harrison had paralyzed him seven or eight years ago after he saw her “rise up from

³¹ Smith, Testimony in the Case of Katherine Harrison.

³² Smith, Testimony in the Case of Katherine Harrison.

³³ Testimony of Joseph Dickinson, Harrison, "1668 Oct 13," Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:211565/>.

³⁴ Testimony of Joseph Dickinson, Harrison, "1668 Oct 13," 1.

³⁵ Testimony of John Graves, Harrison, "1668 Oct 29," Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:211568/>.

³⁶ Testimony of John Graves, Harrison, "1668 Oct 29," 1.

a cow that was not her own with a pail in her hand.”³⁷ His affliction ended once Harrison was safely over the garden wall and out of his reach. Richard Montague, another former Wethersfield resident, also testified to Harrison’s using magic over animals. He testified that a swarm of her bees flew across the river, and that she fetched them back in such a short time that he believed she “neither went nor used any lawful means to fetch the said bees.”³⁸

The spectral evidence against Katherine Harrison ranged from harmless sightings of her specter to actual harm committed by the image of the accused. Perhaps the most violent attack of Harrison’s visage upon one of her fellow townspeople was attested to by Mary Hale, who was troubled by Harrison’s specter after she was already imprisoned.³⁹ The specter struck at her fingers, turning them “black and blue” and came back for several nights, “oppressing her very sore” by placing a crushing weight on her legs and stomach.⁴⁰

This continued each night for nearly a month, until the voice that she would later recognize as Katherine Harrison’s told her that she would have stopped coming, but continued to do so because Mary did not seem to be afraid of her. Mary replied that she was not; the voice then promised, “I will make you afraid before I have done with you.”⁴¹ The young woman again felt the crushing weight and called out to her parents from across the room. Harrison’s specter told her that it was no use, that her parents would not be able to hear her calling for them to save her. She further told the young woman that God himself had given her “a commission to kill

³⁷ John Wells, Testimony in the Case of Katherine Harrison, June 29, 1668, Samuel Wyllys Papers, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT.

³⁸ Richard Montague, Testimony in the Case of Katherine Harrison, August 13, 1668, Samuel Wyllys Papers, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT.

³⁹ Testimony of Mary Hale, Harrison, "1669 May 25," Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:211577/>.

⁴⁰ Testimony of Mary Hale, Harrison, "1669 May 25."

⁴¹ Testimony of Mary Hale, Harrison, "1669 May 25."

her.”⁴² Mary, still being crushed by an invisible weight, argued that God would never give commission for murder, and that the Devil had surely deceived her if she thought he had.

This was not the only time that Harrison’s specter was seen at someone’s bedside. Thomas Bracey claimed that after he voiced his suspicions about her witchery, she and James Wakely, another townspeople he had a grievance against and who had been accused of witchcraft in 1663, appeared at his bedside “consulting to kill him... James Wakely said he would cut out his throat, but Katherine counseled to strangle him.”⁴³ Both Harrison and Wakely “pulled or pinched him so as if his flesh had been pulled from his bones”, and the next day the “marks of the said affliction” were seen by Mr. Martin and his wife.⁴⁴

More spectral evidence was given by Joan Francis, Goodwife Johnson, and Mary Kercum. Harrison’s specter had appeared in Francis’s window just before her child fell ill, and appeared again by her fire later on.⁴⁵ Mary Kercum saw Harrison’s specter in the middle of her room with a black dog.⁴⁶ Goodwife Johnson testified that the specter of Katherine Harrison appeared at her door and caused her late husband’s nose to bleed after she had failed to cure him of an illness and they called upon another healer.⁴⁷

In May 1669, after the testimonies were gathered and presented before the court, the jury could not decide upon a verdict. The magistrates asked them to continue their deliberations and return to the October session of the court with their ruling. They found her guilty at the next

⁴² Testimony of Mary Hale, Harrison, “1669 May 25.”

⁴³ Testimony of Thomas Bracey, Harrison, "1668 Aug 13," Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:211578/>.

⁴⁴ Testimony of Thomas Bracey, Harrison, “1668 Aug 13.”

⁴⁵ Testimony of Joan Francis, Harrison, "1668 Oct 29," Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:211571/>.

⁴⁶ Testimony of Mary Kercum, Harrison, "1668 Oct 29," Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:211544/>.

⁴⁷ Testimony of Goodwife Johnson, Harrison, "1668 Oct 29," Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:211544/>.

session, but the magistrates, led by Governor John Winthrop Jr., questioned the legality of their verdict and deferred sentencing.

Winthrop

Governor Winthrop's skepticism regarding the decision reached by the jury was rooted in his own study of natural magic and the occult. Like the work of Walter Woodward and Richard Godbeer, this rejects the claim that the Puritan elite in the colonies found the practice of their religion and the pursuit of the preternatural mutually exclusive.

Winthrop's exploration of the alchemical was no secret to his contemporaries. His skills as a negotiator with Indigenous groups, an entrepreneur, a political thinker, and an alchemical physician made him the subject of a bidding war between Hartford and New Haven to win him as a resident.⁴⁸ Perhaps the most important skill he brought to whichever township he would settle in, however, was his skill as a healer. In Hartford's recruitment letter, Samuel Allyn implored Winthrop to consider Hartford's need of a good physician when he was choosing where he should reside.⁴⁹ Even Cotton Mather referred to Winthrop as "Hermes Christianus," a nod to his combining occult medicine and knowledge of natural magic with Christian ministry.⁵⁰

Rather than viewing alchemy and the pursuit of scientific knowledge as diabolical, early modern intellectuals viewed them as tools to better understand both the divine and the natural world around them.⁵¹ The issue that arose, however, was identifying the difference between sanctioned, intellectual magic—which did not run counter to Puritan philosophical practice—and

⁴⁸ Woodward, *Prospero's America*, 213.

⁴⁹ Woodward, *Prospero's America*, 214.

⁵⁰ Cotton Mather, "Hermes Christianus: The Life of John Winthrop, Esq.; Governour of Connecticut and New-Haven United," in *Magnalia Christi Americana: or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England ...* (London, 1702), Book 2, Chap. 11, 30–33.

⁵¹ Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997), 155.

diabolic manipulation. The use of astrology as a tool to predict specific future events about specific individuals was forbidden (nobody, except by divine revelation or intervention on the part of the Devil, could know the future), but natural astrology focusing on agriculture or weather was allowed.⁵²

The ways in which acceptable and unacceptable magic were ultimately diagnosed or determined had to do with class, race, reputation, religious conformity, and gender.⁵³ As an educated, land-holding white man with a good reputation, Governor Winthrop's exploration of the occult did not draw the same ire as Katherine Harrison's.

The magistrates would likely have found the accusation that Harrison "had her skill from Lilly" to be the most personally troubling, especially since in the aftermath of her trial she did not deny it in her lengthy "Answer to Mr. Winthrop."⁵⁴ Harrison refuted almost every other accusation against her in this letter, but when it came to the accusations against her prophesying or fortune telling her only response was that she knew "nothing of it."⁵⁵ Her lack of a convincing response left reasonable doubt. Supposing Katherine Harrison *was* familiar with William Lilly, whether personally or through reading his work, her fortune telling could instead be seen as predictive astrology, not unlike the sort of natural magic men such as themselves were interested in. Convicting Harrison on these grounds set a dangerous precedent: if she could be hanged for it, so could they.

⁵² Woodward, *Prospero's America*, 217.

⁵³ Woodward, *Prospero's America*, 218.

⁵⁴ William Warren, Testimony in the Case of Katherine Harrison.

⁵⁵ "Harrison's Answer to Winthrop," 1669, Winthrop Family Papers, microfilm, reel 9, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

Three Pressing Questions

The solution? The magistrates called upon a group of ministers to answer the questions troubling them: was a plurality of witnesses required to establish the same evidence as fact; could the Devil create a specter or apparition of an innocent person; and was accurate fortune telling practiced by a “vicious person” proof of familiarity with the Devil?⁵⁶

The leading voice among the ministers belonged to a good friend of Winthrop, Gershom Bulkeley, who had been preaching at the church in Wethersfield since 1667.⁵⁷ In addition to his ministry, Bulkeley was an alchemist and practitioner of occult medicine.⁵⁸ As was the case with other minister-physicians in New England, Bulkeley incorporated Christian ministry into his healing practices and alchemical studies, linking the practice of medicine to the “promise of the Resurrection.”⁵⁹ Bulkeley’s response to the three questions put forth by Winthrop became instrumental in distinguishing diabolic from natural magic.⁶⁰

To the first question, the ministers responded that if the evidence was purely based on testimony, it was necessary to have more than one witness to it.⁶¹ As justification they used John 8:17, arguing that Christ in this verse had decreed that the testimony of two witnesses to the same fact proved its veracity. Many people had accused Harrison of maleficium, but in almost every case there was only one witness to each misdeed. Prior to Harrison’s trial, a broader interpretation of the two-witness standard was utilized which allowed convictions based on

⁵⁶ “The Answer of Some Ministers to the Questions Propounded to Them by the Honored Magistrates, October 20, 1669.” Harrison, “1669 Oct 20,” Brown Archival & Manuscript Collections Online, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:211605/>

⁵⁷ Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 243.

⁵⁸ Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 243.

⁵⁹ Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 201.

⁶⁰ Bulkeley also later served on a committee appointed by the Connecticut General Court to advise on disputes about church membership and baptism, and influenced the decision to allow the Halfway Covenant to be practiced in Connecticut in 1669. See Thomas W. Jodziewicz’s 1987 article, “The 1699 Diary of Gershom Bulkeley of Wethersfield, Connecticut.”

⁶¹ “The Answer of Some Ministers,” Harrison, “1669 Oct 20.”

individual testimony if each person testified to seeing diabolical acts on separate occasions.⁶² By narrowing this scope, Bulkeley was effectively redefining standards of evidence required to secure convictions.

In answer to the second question, the ministers stated that “it is not the pleasure of the most high to suffer the wicked one to make an indistinguishable representation of any innocent person,” and that spectral evidence was permissible given the plurality of witnesses to it.⁶³ The ministers’ answer confirmed the validity of spectral evidence while effectively taking away its teeth. Spectral evidence was still reliable, *if and only if* there were multiple witnesses to it. The Devil might allow the specter of an innocent to be seen by one witness, but God would never allow for several people to see an innocent person’s specter all at once.

The ministers’ answer to the third question is perhaps most interesting. The question, whether or not fortune telling practiced by an immoral person could be a demonstration of familiarity with the Devil, suggests that the difference between acceptable and unacceptable magical practices had to do with a person’s social standing. In their response, the ministers took great pains to create a distinction between exploring occult natural philosophies and the truly diabolical. Rather than focusing on class or social standing as the determining factor as the original question from the magistrates implied, the ministers’ response focused on the difference between natural knowledge and that which was “indeed secret, that is, cannot be known by human skill in arts or strength of reason.”⁶⁴

There was a clear difference, the ministers decided, between what Winthrop and other Puritan elites were up to and what witches did to gain knowledge of events yet to pass. This

⁶² Woodward, *Prospero’s America*, 244.

⁶³ “The Answer of Some Ministers,” Harrison, “1669 Oct 20.”

⁶⁴ “The Answer of Some Ministers,” Harrison, “1669 Oct 20.”

validated the accusers' testimony while simultaneously shielding men like Governor Winthrop and Bulkeley from suspicion. Astrology, alchemy, and natural magic, then, were forms of acceptable knowledge. Fortune telling was not.

Aftermath

With much of the testimony against Harrison now rendered null and void by the ministers' answers, Harrison's conviction was overturned in May 1670. They dismissed her from her imprisonment upon the paying of her jail fees and banished her from Wethersfield, which was both for her own safety and "the contentment of the people who are her neighbors."⁶⁵ The ministers' responses, adopted as the standard by the Connecticut courts, made obtaining future witchcraft convictions incredibly difficult. Katherine Harrison's would be the last conviction in the colony until 1692.⁶⁶

Harrison relocated to Westchester, New York in June 1670 in compliance with the court's order to leave Wethersfield, but her reputation as a witch preceded her.⁶⁷ In July 1670, Thomas Hunt Sr. and Edward Waters of Westchester went before Governor Lovelace on the town's behalf to demand her removal.⁶⁸ The governor ordered her removal from the town, admonishing her "to return to the place of her former abode."⁶⁹

Caught between governors and probably loath to return to the town where she'd narrowly avoided execution, Harrison stayed put. A month later, Governor Lovelace issued an official order for Harrison to appear before him with Captain Richard Panton, whose home she was

⁶⁵ Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England*, 184.

⁶⁶ Woodward, *Prospero's America*, 251.

⁶⁷ Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 88.

⁶⁸ Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 48.

⁶⁹ Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 49.

staying in.⁷⁰ The townspeople who objected to her presence in Westchester were also told to attend so that Lovelace could “endeavor a composure of this difference between them.”⁷¹

Harrison and Captain Panton appeared before Governor Lovelace on August 24th, 1670 carrying a letter from the treasurer of the Connecticut Colony testifying to Harrison’s innocence.⁷² Lovelace penned an order the following day permitting her to stay within Westchester until the next session of the General Court that October. The governor seemed set against the residents of Westchester. Connecticut had cleared her of the charges, and he was likely hesitant to start witchcraft proceedings against someone whom Governor Winthrop had already acquitted.

In the order, Governor Lovelace wrote that the reasons for Westchester’s suspicions against Harrison “do not so clearly appear to me”, even going so far as to accuse the complainants against her of pretending that “their fears be of a public concern.”⁷³ He was clearly in no hurry to contradict Winthrop’s findings. The court reconvened in October 1670, and finding that “nothing appears against her,” allowed her to remain in Westchester.⁷⁴

Katherine Harrison’s well-documented case provides critical insights into the sociopolitical dynamics that shaped witchcraft accusations in the Connecticut River Valley. In the immediate aftermath of the Second Anglo-Dutch War, economic instability, political realignment, and religious anxiety created fertile ground for scapegoating and persecution. As a woman who rose from obscurity and servitude to relative prosperity, Harrison embodied a dangerous independence that contradicted community standards and patriarchal expectations.

⁷⁰ Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 49.

⁷¹ Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 49.

⁷² Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 50.

⁷³ Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 51.

⁷⁴ Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 52.

Her abilities as a healer and reputation as a fortune teller further painted her as a target. Her predictions were not well met—very few would want to be told that their sweetheart was not in fact who they were destined to marry—and her failed healings further alienated her from her community.⁷⁵

The stark contrast between how Harrison’s alleged malefic activities were viewed compared to elite men such as Governor Winthrop and Gershom Bulkeley further reveals the profoundly unequal application of religious and legal standards. While Winthrop’s exploration of the occult was considered a scholarly endeavor aligned with Protestant intellectual traditions, Harrison’s was deemed diabolical.

⁷⁵ See John Demos’s *The Enemy Within* for more on the balance “cunning” people had to strike. Those who healed were believed to also be able to harm.

Chapter 3 - Acquitted: Mary Webster

A man lays dying in the cold of a Massachusetts winter, plagued by fits and fever. Pots of medicine are mysteriously empty, a cat that evades capture races around under his quilt, and his bed periodically catches fire. Neighbors and townsfolk are alarmed as a pillar of their community begins to babble almost incoherently about the woman who has bewitched him.

A group of young men are committed to saving him. After determining the cause of his sickness, they set out for a neighboring farm with a length of rope and what they believe to be a viable solution. They drag a woman to a tree on her husband's property and do the unthinkable.

A woman claws her way out a snowbank, shivering and possibly hypothermic. Rope burns around her neck sting for days as the people of her community, people she has known for most of her adult life, marvel that she is still alive. The men who tried to kill her are never brought to justice.

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This is the story of Philip Smith, the community of Hadley, Massachusetts, and perhaps most importantly, of Mary Webster. In January 1684, months after being accused and acquitted of witchcraft, Mary Webster was the victim of an extrajudicial hanging attempt that the hands of the young men of Hadley. A decade before the Salem witch panic that consumes the popular imagination, Webster was accused of familiarity with the Devil. Religious and community

tensions as well as conflicts with Indigenous groups created a culture of fear in Hadley; everyone seemed to be searching for “the enemy within.”¹

The life and trial of Mary Webster reflects the deep social, religious, and gendered tensions of Puritan New England, especially the precarious position of women in a society governed by strict religious doctrine. Her case offers valuable insight into the fear of witchcraft in the seventeenth century, as well as the ways in which community dynamics, gender, and personal reputation could shape an individual’s fate.

Hadley

The Connecticut River Valley has been at times described as a “valley of discord”, and rightly so.² In no other region of New England do religious strife, imperial politics, and Indigenous conflict coalesce to create such contentious communities. Towns such as Hadley, Massachusetts were situated on the furthest reaches of the frontier. By examining Hadley’s history, the major religious and political developments both in the colonies and in the British empire at large can be better contextualized.

Hadley was a town founded in religious conflict. Comprised of families from Hartford, Wethersfield, and Windsor, Connecticut, the community’s first settlers were staunch opponents of a liberalization in church membership practices known as the Halfway Covenant and what they perceived as a general loosening of religious commitment throughout the colonies. From 1656-1659, conflicts over pastoral succession and Congregationalist doctrine led to the Hartford Controversy, which in turn led to the foundation of Hadley.

¹ John Putnam Demos, *The Enemy Within: 2,000 Years of Witch-Hunting in the Western World* (New York: Viking, 2008), 3.

² Paul D. Lucas, *Valley of Discord: Church and Society along the Connecticut River, 1636-1725* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1976), xi.

The three oldest towns in the colony of Connecticut—Windsor, Wethersfield, and Hartford (est. 1633, 1634, and 1635, respectively)—were all established under the leadership of the Reverend Thomas Hooker. This prominent Puritan divine held significant sway in the area until his death in 1647.³ He was succeeded by Samuel Stone, who held a more authoritarian view of the relationship between the clergy and their congregations. According to Cotton Mather, Stone even went so far as to claim that “Congregational Church-Government... was a speaking aristocracy in the face of a silent democracy.”⁴ William Goodwin and Captain John Cullick formed a group of around 20 dissenters that found Reverend John Russell’s church in Wethersfield to be geared more toward the laity, and requested that their church memberships be transferred to his congregation. The dissenters believed that Russell’s congregation was more congenial, and that their voices would be better heard in Wethersfield. As all full members of early Congregational churches were bound not only in their covenant to God but to their specific body of believers, dismissal to join another congregation elsewhere was a messy affair, and the dissenters’ petition for dismissal was summarily rejected.⁵

The councils of Hartford’s First Church and the church at Wethersfield assembled in 1656 and 1657 to reach a settlement, but Wethersfield already had problems of its own. John Russell was in danger of being ousted by his own congregation over his conflict with John Hollister. Hollister alleged that Russell’s teachings and beliefs were more in line with Presbyterianism than independent Congregationalism, and Russell in turn excommunicated him without a church trial.⁶ In response, Hollister, ten full church members, and 38 others in good

³ For more on the Reverend Thomas Hooker, see George Leon Walker’s *Thomas Hooker: Preacher, Founder, Democrat*.

⁴ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Book 3, Chapter 16 (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1853), 116-118.

⁵ Carl Hammer, *Pugnacious Puritans: Seventeenth Century Hadley and New England* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), xvii.

⁶ Henry R. Stiles, *The History of Ancient Wethersfield, Connecticut*, vol. 1 (New York: Grafton Press, 1904), 159.

standing within their community petitioned the Connecticut General Court requesting permission to choose another minister.⁷ The mediation between the two congregations was unsuccessful and in May 1658, Cullick and Goodwin petitioned the General Court of Massachusetts Bay to create a new community in their colony.⁸ Not unaware of the religious tensions in their neighboring colony, The Bay Court agreed that the withdrawers could be transplanted within their borders only after a more thorough effort at mediation had been made.⁹ These efforts, too, failed, and in 1659 settlers began forming what would become the community of Hadley.

Though Hadley was positioned on the outer edge of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the community played a fascinating role in imperial politics. The Second English Civil War saw the execution of King Charles I at the hands of Parliamentary forces with 59 men (later labeled regicides) signing the king's death warrant. When Charles I's son, Charles II, came to power in 1660 with the Restoration, he began trying and executing those who had signed the warrant, though others who had committed treason during the civil war had been pardoned under the Indemnity and Oblivion Act. Edward Whalley and his son-in-law, William Goffe, were among those who signed, and rather than taking their chances with the Crown they fled to the colonies.

Upon their arrival in Boston, Whalley and Goffe were lauded as heroes of the faith for their role in the king's execution. As the Crown's pursuit of the regicides intensified, however, the pair went into hiding in New Haven.¹⁰ They were hidden both by Governor Leete and Reverend John Davenport until 1664, when the full charter of neighboring Connecticut would incorporate New Haven into its borders. The governor of the former, John Winthrop, had

⁷ Stiles, *The History of Ancient Wethersfield, Connecticut*, 160.

⁸ *Selected Papers from the Sylvester Judd Manuscript* (Northampton, MA: Forbes Library, 1976), 31.

⁹ Hammer, *Pugnacious Puritans*, xviii.

¹⁰ Before its incorporation into the colony of Connecticut, New Haven was seen as largely anti-monarchical and was judged a safer place for the regicides to hide than the Bay Colony, where there had been an official injunction for their immediate arrest.

demonstrated previously that he would not tolerate the regicides' presence in his colony, so Whalley and Goffe fled under cover of night to Hadley.¹¹ There they were under the protection of John Russell, a close personal friend of John Davenport, and Massachusetts authorities were so confident in their sheltering there that in May 1665 when the king again demanded their arrest they insisted that no such criminals were in the colony.¹²

Whalley and Goffe were successfully hidden in Hadley for over a decade until King Philip's War reached the settlement and the most apocryphal tale involving the town is said to have taken place. Sometime between June and September 1675 there was an Indigenous attack on Hadley during a religious service that caught the community totally off guard.¹³ The town was apparently all but overwhelmed when the now elderly Goffe emerged to lead the town's defense. The attack was successfully repelled, and the regicide went back into hiding.¹⁴

The idea that Goffe, later dubbed the Angel of Hadley and memorialized in local legend, came to the town's aid fits neatly into the Puritan worldview of being a chosen people protected by God. Regardless of the story's veracity, the legend of the Angel of Hadley reflects the deep anxieties and religious convictions of colonial settlers in a time of extreme crisis. This community came together to protect Whalley and Goffe, a treasonous act, and yet no one reported his presence to Crown authorities in the colony. Any one of the townspeople could have reported the regicides at any time during their time in Hadley, but instead they shared this open secret at the risk of losing their own lives.

¹¹ Hammer, *Pugnacious Puritans*, xxv.

¹² Hammer, *Pugnacious Puritans*, xxvi.

¹³ Historians have long debated the veracity of the legend of the "Angel of Hadley" – this is not helped by Mather's suppression of the story in an effort to protect the regicides. For more on this debate, see Carl Hammer's *Pugnacious Puritans*.

¹⁴ Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, vol. 2 (Boston: Thomas and John Fleet, 1767), 249.

Despite the devastation of King Philip's War, the conflict reinforced the English settlers' belief in their divine mission to colonize New England. The legend of the Angel of Hadley became part of this larger narrative of English survival and triumph over Native Americans, despite the human cost and cultural destruction wrought by the war. Indigenous conflicts had a significant, though until recently overlooked, impact on the witch trials in colonial New England. These conflicts exacerbated societal tensions, increased fear and paranoia, and heightened the search for scapegoats in a region already dealing with religious and social pressures.¹⁵ The violent confrontations between Native Americans and English settlers, particularly during King Philip's War, played a role in the cultural and psychological environment that fostered witch panics and smaller-scale trials.

The Connecticut River Valley was especially vulnerable to attack. The proximity of these towns to the Connecticut River made Indigenous raids easier to carry out, providing a quick way to get to and from communities before local militia men could stop them. On 19 September 1677, over a year after the war's official end, the town of Hatfield just across the river from Hadley came under attack.¹⁶ Twelve colonists were killed, four wounded, and seventeen taken hostage.¹⁷ All but five were women and children. They continued on to Deerfield, then Northfield. They stayed north of Northfield and set up camp, where they stayed for three weeks. During this time 80 more women and children were captured and brought to the camp. A date was set to negotiate their release (October 14), but the Indigenous people never showed up. Later

¹⁵ For more information on conflicts between colonists, Indigenous peoples, and their effects on witch trials, see Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare*.

¹⁶ Hatfield was once a part of Hadley, and the town was divided by the Connecticut River. However, residents of what would one day become Hatfield did not wish to continue crossing the river to attend church services. The towns separated after a prolonged mediation process.

¹⁷ Sylvester Judd, *History of Hadley: Including the Early History of Hatfield, South Hadley, Amherst and Granby, Massachusetts* (Springfield, MA: H.R. Huntting & Co., 1905), 167, 183.

that month Hadley was attacked, with the mill being burned to the ground before the group moved into Canada.

Witchcraft in the colonies was inextricably tied to Indigenous communities. Believing that it was their mission from God to set up New England as a “city upon a hill”, those who stood in the way of that vision were thought to have been of the Devil. Add to that the culture clash with Indigenous groups and what seemed to colonists to be strange and foreign religious practices, and Devil worship was really only a step away.¹⁸

In the aftermath of Indigenous raids on frontier towns, families had important choices to make. Some packed up and headed back to England, quitting the colony entirely in their grief over lost property and lost loved ones. Others stuck around, either because their belief in their godly mission propelled them forward, because they could ill afford to move, or just out of spite. Still others decided on a middle road. Such was the case with Samuel Belden, mentioned in depositions against Katherine Harrison years before, whose wife was killed in the Hatfield raid of 1677.¹⁹ He and his young daughter Anne moved across the river to Hadley, which held itself to the same strict Puritan standards as Hatfield. She would attempt to murder Mary Webster just three years later.

The Erosion of Trust in the Judiciary

As discussed in Chapter 2, several of the depositions against Katherine Harrison came from residents in Hadley. The names Richard Montague, John Dickinson, and Philip and Rebecca Smith are no doubt familiar.²⁰ One of the most prominent families in the new settlement were the Smiths, who were among the town’s founding families. Lieutenant Philip Smith also

¹⁸ Demos, *The Enemy Within*, 3, 83.

¹⁹ Judd, *History of Hadley*, 176.

²⁰ Judd, *History of Hadley*, 24.

served as a county officer under Major John Pynchon during King Philip's War.²¹ Philip and his father Samuel were among the signatories of the original petition to remove to Hadley, and the former served for many years as a selectman.²² During a period when social standing was deeply intertwined with legal and religious matters, Smith's election to the position of selectman further reflects both the family's prominence and respectability.

Harrison's banishment likely disillusioned both Wethersfield and the surrounding communities. Her neighbors, friends, and extended family had given what they believed to be solid testimony against her, a jury had even found her *guilty*, and yet she was allowed to live! Connecticut had been one of the most ruthless executors of witches since its founding, yet it had let a woman accused both of diabolism and maleficium remove to New York. This sense of moral outrage almost certainly eroded community faith in the judicial system, and the feeling that justice was not being served surely worsened with the trial and eventual acquittal of Mary Webster.

Mary Webster

Any attempt at reconstructing Mary Webster's life will be disappointingly incomplete. The depositions and testimonies given against her in court have been lost, to say nothing of personal correspondence or perhaps a personal journal of some kind. Though Webster's marks upon the historical record are much more limited, the community's dislike for her in the years leading up to her official accusation can perhaps best be demonstrated by the attempt made on her life in 1680.

²¹ George M. Bodge, *Soldiers in King Philip's War* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill Press, 1906), 475.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t91835q5c>.

²² *Selected Papers from the Sylvester Judd Manuscript* (Northampton, MA: Forbes Library, 1976), 31.

Anne Belden, the 16 year-old survivor of the raid on Hatfield which killed her mother, attempted to murder Mary that September. Her father Samuel was fined 20 shillings, and Anne was punished with a public lashing.²³ The fact that such an extreme act was directed toward Webster years before she was formally accused highlights the level of animosity she faced from her neighbors. Judd, one of the only historians to mention Webster's case, called this early attempt on her life a "strange affair" that defied explanation.²⁴ However, when the popular association of witchcraft with Indigenous peoples is coupled with the child's traumatic experience of losing her mother in the raid on Hatfield, it is reasonable to assume that Mary's reputation for witchery was enough to trigger a violent response.

Webster's position within the community of Hadley was already precarious and fraught with tension. According to oral histories taken by Sylvester Judd, Webster utilized her malefic powers to overturn carts of hay that her neighbors attempted to drive across her property, took away a child's sense of smell, and slammed an infant from its crib down onto the floor.²⁵

Mary Webster was formally accused of witchcraft in 1683. The official charge laid against her in the Hampshire County Court was as follows:

Mary wife to William Webster of Hadley being under strong suspicion of having familiarity with the Devil or using witchcraft, & having been in examination before the worshipful Mr. Peter Tilton, and many testimonies brought in against her, or that did seem to center upon her, relating to such a thing, & ye worshipful Mr. Tilton aforesaid binding her to appear at this court, & this court having examined her yet further and testimonies aforementioned, looks upon her case or the matter as belonging to the Court of Assistants to figure of and therefore have and send the said Mary Webster to be by the first convenient season sent to Boston Jail and committed there as a prisoner to be further examined there as aforesaid... as to further the prosecution of said matter.²⁶

²³ Hampshire County Court Records, Inferior Court of Common Pleas, General Sessions of the Peace, no. 1, 1677-1728, 42.

²⁴ Judd, *History of Hadley*, 228.

²⁵ *Selected Papers from the Sylvester Judd Manuscript* (Northampton, MA: Forbes Library, 1976), 302-303. These oral histories make no mention of her husband, who was undoubtedly alive during her ordeal, and consistently refers to the property as belonging to Mary.

²⁶ Hampshire County Court Records, Inferior Court of Common Pleas, General Sessions of the Peace, 65.

The charge against Mary Webster emphasized her relationship with Satan rather than the specific ills she was causing her community.²⁷ The Hampshire County Court could not try capital cases, so Webster was sent to Boston to be tried by a panel of judges which included the likes of Governor Simon Bradstreet and William Stoughton.²⁸ Mary was first brought before the Court of Assistants in Boston on May 22, 1683. The jury was empaneled, and she “made no exception against them, leaving herself to be tried by God & the Country”.²⁹ Her official charges at the Court of Assistants emphasized her relationship with the Devil:

...for that she not having the fear of God before her eyes & being instigated by the devil hath entered into covenant & familiarity with him in the shape of a warraneage & had her imps sucking her & teats or marks found in her secret parts as in & by several testimonies may appear contrary to the peace of our Sovereign Lord.³⁰

The “warraneage” mentioned in the Court of Assistants’ official charge refers to an indigenous wild cat, emphasizing the relationship between accused witches and Native Americans in the area. The court that convened that day in May decided that more evidence against Webster was needed before a verdict could be brought down, and she was remanded into custody to await further trial.³¹

On 4 September 1683, Mary Webster was brought again before the jury. The charges against her were restated, and evidence against her was given.³² These testimonies and depositions do not survive. She was found not guilty that day, and returned to Hadley after her

²⁷ Hampshire County Court Records, Inferior Court of Common Pleas, General Sessions of the Peace, 65.

²⁸ William Stoughton is perhaps more famous for his involvement with the Salem witch trials that took place almost a decade later.

²⁹ Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1692. (Boston: County of Suffolk, 1901-28), vol. 1. 233.

³⁰ Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 233.

³¹ Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 230.

³² Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 233.

release.³³ Life rarely, if ever, returned to business as usual after one was accused of witchcraft. The stigma followed Katherine Harrison to New York, and women such as Mary Staples leveled slander cases against their accusers for the damage that witchcraft accusations could do to one's reputation. Perhaps Mary Webster and her husband were too poor to move out of Hadley. Perhaps Mary knew that wherever she went, she was a marked woman.

The most infamous part of Mary Webster's story came months after her acquittal. Philip Smith was growing sick, feverish, and delirious. During moments of lucidity, Smith claimed Mary Webster was the one tormenting him.³⁴ Pots of medicine were suspiciously empty, his bed was mysteriously set on fire, and something as large as a cat seemed to be scurrying about beneath the covers.³⁵ Believing that the woman who Smith had accused of witchcraft less than a year prior was responsible for his deteriorating condition, they decided to distract Webster in an effort to ease Smith's suffering. They disturbed Webster at her home four separate times throughout the night, believing that by doing so they would break the witch's concentration and alleviate Smith's suffering. When they returned, the man who had stayed behind claimed that three or four times throughout the night Smith actually seemed to feel better.³⁶

This was all more than these young men could bear. Convinced that Mary Webster had bewitched Philip Smith, they dragged her from her home through the snow to a large tree on her husband's property, where they hanged her. When they believed her to be dead, the men cut her down and hid her body in a snowbank.³⁷

³³ Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 233.

³⁴ Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions: A Faithful Account of Many Wonderful and Surprising Things, That Have Befallen Several Bewitched and Possessed Persons in New-England*. (Boston: 1689), 57.

³⁵ Mather, *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions*, 57.

³⁶ Mather, *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions*, 57.

³⁷ Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 18.

Satisfied that Mary Webster could torment Philip Smith no longer, the men went home. Despite their efforts, Philip Smith passed away. The jury that viewed his body noted that the man looked to have been bludgeoned, face and body black and blue with fresh blood running down his cheeks.³⁸ His chest was swollen, and his back was covered in holes, as though nails or an awl had pierced his flesh.³⁹ His body was also said to have been unnaturally warm for the New England winter. To add insult to injury, Mary Webster was not dead.⁴⁰ She survived the second attempt on her life and spent the rest of her days in Hadley. She disappeared again from the historical record, and passed away in 1698.⁴¹

The men responsible were never charged with the crime. Given the tight-knit nature of this community, this is as tragic as it is unsurprising. The same town that banded together to keep Whalley and Goffe a secret now protected a band of would-be murderers. How must it have felt for Mary and her husband to see these men in the marketplace? To attend the same town meetings and church services with the same people who ignored her pleas for mercy and hung her that cold January night? Whether or not the authorities in Hadley knew that these men would leave Mary buried in a snowbank beforehand, they certainly weren't willing to prosecute them afterward. They hung together. Mary hung separately.

There is little mention made of the original accusation against Mary in contemporary sources, and only other reference in the Hampshire County Court Records was a request from one Samuel Partridge to take leave for Boston to seek out the testimonies and deposition records against her from her trial the previous September.⁴² His request mentioned both Mary and her

³⁸ Mather, *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions*, 59.

³⁹ Mather, *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions*, 59.

⁴⁰ Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay*, 18.

⁴¹ Mary Webster was buried in Hadley, MA alongside her husband William in the Old Hadley Cemetery.

⁴² Hampshire County Court Records, Inferior Court of Common Pleas, General Sessions of the Peace, 95.

husband being accused, though in the original arraignment only Mary's name was listed.⁴³ This migration of suspicion was nothing unusual. Many of the smaller-scale panics that predated Salem began because accused witches, mostly under duress, named accomplices, and as previously discussed, witchcraft was thought to run in families. Anyone closely associated with the accused, even spouses, were also at risk of being accused.

Conclusion

Accusations of witchcraft most often arose during times of social stress or uncertainty, and they provided an outlet for communal fears. Mary Webster's trial in 1683 occurred in the context of this religious unease, intensified by the sense that the community was straying from its mission to operate as an example of piety. As the formation of Hadley reflected concerns about declining church membership and spiritual purity, witchcraft accusations served as a communal response to perceived moral threats. Both emerged from the sense that Puritan society was failing to uphold its original religious ideals.

When moral decay seemed imminent, communities were quick to label individuals as witches. In Mary Webster's case, her acquittal by the courts did not alleviate the fears of her community. The people of Hadley, still gripped by their belief in her guilt and the fear that her actions could bring further harm to their community, took the law into their own hands. This extrajudicial attempt on Webster's life reflects a communal determination to root out perceived evil, even when legal institutions were unwilling to act. The town's actions show how the anxiety over declining church purity through the adoption of the Halfway Covenant and spiritual purity more broadly pushed people to the extreme.

⁴³ Hampshire County Court Records, Inferior Court of Common Pleas, General Sessions of the Peace, 65.

The history of Hadley and the case of Mary Webster both reveal how Puritan religious anxiety shaped social and religious life in 17th century New England. As Puritan communities wrestled with the implications of declining church membership, they also faced growing fears of divine retribution and the deterioration of the very morals on which the communities were established. The case of Mary Webster illustrates how these fears could lead to violent actions, even when legal proceedings found no evidence of wrongdoing.

Webster's trial also reflects the pattern of witchcraft accusations targeting women specifically. There were an estimated 344 women and 60 men tried for witchcraft in New England during the seventeenth century.⁴⁴ Women seen as deviating from traditional gender norms were even more at risk.⁴⁵ Mary Webster fits the mold of the disagreeable woman, refusing to allow Philip Smith and other neighbors to trespass upon her husband's property.⁴⁶ Despite her acquittal, Webster continued to face violent harassment from her community, underscoring the persistence of social prejudices in the absence of a legal conviction.

Webster's case also highlights the influence of local dynamics and personal grudges in witchcraft accusations. Webster's cantankerous reputation likely contributed to her accusation, as witch trials often provided a socially sanctioned way to eliminate troublesome individuals. Personal enmities were often cloaked in religious language to justify accusations.

The trial, acquittal, and extrajudicial hanging attempt of Mary Webster demonstrates how religious conflicts exacerbated community tensions, how gendered expectations influenced accusations, and how local fears were projected onto socially marginalized individuals. Despite her acquittal, Webster's continued harassment reveals the enduring nature of suspicion and fear

⁴⁴ Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 68.

⁴⁵ Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 81.

⁴⁶ *Selected Papers from the Sylvester Judd Manuscript* (Northampton, MA: Forbes Library, 1976), 303.

that pervaded Puritan communities, providing valuable insights into the complex social dynamics underlying witchcraft accusations across New England.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

The cases of Mary Staples, Katherine Harrison, and Mary Webster demonstrate that witchcraft accusations often functioned as targeted mechanisms for social control directed at specific individuals who challenged community norms. These targeted accusations contrast with the sweeping nature of larger panics such as Salem, suggesting that individual trials had more specific sociopolitical aims.

This claim is further supported by the timing of the accusations against the women examined. Suspicion fell upon Mary Staples after she publicly defended Goodwife Knapp and challenged Roger Ludlow's authority. Though the communities of Hadley, Hartford, and Wethersfield had long known Katherine Harrison as a "cunning" person, it was not until she was widowed that those dissatisfied with her work equated it to maleficium. Her refusal to remarry, to allow a man about town to control her or keep her disciplined, further contributed to their contempt.

The gendered nature of witchcraft accusations in the colonies is also exemplified through the study of these three cases. Mary Staples, Katherine Harrison, and Mary Webster each challenged patriarchal norms in various ways: Staples through her blatant defiance of judicial authority; Harrison through her control of a large estate with no male oversight; Mary Webster through her reputation as an impoverished, disagreeable woman.¹

The cases examined in this study unfolded against a backdrop of profound colonial anxieties. Conflicts with English colonists' Dutch and Indigenous neighbors coupled with religious discord coalesced into a climate of fear in which supernatural explanations for

¹ See Carol F. Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* for more on the gendered nature of witchcraft accusations.

misfortunes flourished. Witchcraft accusations provided communities with a scapegoat during times of unrest and uncertainty.²

The regional contexts of each case reveal how local conditions influenced accusations. The community of Hadley was a frontier settlement periodically set upon by Indigenous peoples in the area. In the handful of years before Mary Webster's trial, both Hatfield and Hadley had been attacked. Katherine Harrison's case unfolded in the aftermath of the Restoration of the monarchy and the Second Anglo-Dutch War, which brought on a serious economic downturn for Wethersfield. Mary Staples faced accusations in the middle of the First Anglo-Dutch War and aftermath of an uprising. In each instance, the specific anxieties of these communities shaped how witchcraft accusations functioned and who they were directed against.³

These regional variations can be extrapolated out to other individual trials and communities as well. The study of these communities demonstrates that rather than representing monolithic phenomena across colonial New England that witchcraft accusations were adaptive mechanisms that emerged in response to specific communal concerns. While sharing common theological and cultural foundations, witch hunting took different forms depending on the particular anxieties and social dynamics of each community. This regional diversity helps explain why some accusations led to executions while others, like those examined here, did not. Put another way, these individual trials did not spark panics because they did not need to. Even in cases where accusations showed signs of spreading, as in Fairfield after Goodwife Knapp's trial and execution, a more reconciliatory attitude prevailed—the need for a scapegoat was satisfied.

² See Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare* for more on the ways in which conflicts with Indigenous groups contributed to witch trials.

³ See Sylvester Judd's *History of Hadley* for more information on the legend of the Angel of Hadley, the attack on Hatfield, and the attack on Hadley.

Outcomes of trials such as those studied here highlight the importance of legal procedures and evidentiary standards in determining how witchcraft cases played out. Mary Staples's success in redirecting attention to Ludlow's slander rather than her alleged witchery shows how legal counter strategies were sometimes effective in neutralizing accusations. Katherine Harrison's exile, despite the jury finding her guilty, demonstrates the ability of magistrates to exercise discretion in adjudicating witchcraft cases. Mary Webster's acquittal suggests that the Boston magistrates applied stringent standards for acceptable evidence, finding the spectral evidence against her insufficient for a conviction.

Though these courts disproportionately executed women for witchcraft, they also contained safeguards and off-ramps that allowed for leniency. Governor Winthrop's intervention in the Harrison case demonstrates that some colonial leaders approached witchery with caution rather than credulity. Mary Webster's case similarly suggests that the outcomes of these cases were not predetermined, even in a culture that broadly accepted the reality of witchcraft and had little problem executing those that they felt were guilty of it.

Communal responses to the accusations levied against each woman varied significantly. Not everyone in Fairfield accepted Roger Ludlow's characterization of Mary Staples as a witch, allowing for counternarratives that would aid in her husband's slander suit against him. Katherine Harrison faced a more unified community response, but was able to garner the sympathy of the magistrates, demonstrating that elite figures were able to mediate between popular beliefs and legal standards and sometimes temper community demands for retribution. Mary Webster, of course, faced the most hostile response from her community, with residents attempting to hang her extrajudicially after her acquittal and the court's refusal to bring charges against the men responsible.

The intertwined nature of community dynamics and individual agency is also critical in understanding the outcomes of these cases. While women accused of witchcraft are often thought of as passive as their communities rally against them, the women studied here each demonstrate the agency of the accused. Mary Staples actively countered Ludlow's accusations against her with legal action. Katherine Harrison refused to bend to popular pressure to remarry after her husband's death, entreated the judiciary to protect her property, and wrote directly to Governor Winthrop in her own defense. When the young men of Hadley attempted to hang Mary Webster, she fought to stay alive, surviving not only being hanged but hours spent buried in a snowbank.

The cases of Mary Staples, Katherine Harrison, and Mary Webster reveal that survival was possible. Through differing combinations of legal strategizing, elite intervention, and sheer physical resilience, these women avoided the gallows that claimed the lives of so many others before and after them. Their stories complicate the popular perception of witch trials as monolithic, unstoppable mechanisms for persecution, showing instead how individual agency, community divisions, legal procedures, and social capital could sometimes interrupt the road from accusation to execution. Their experiences also confirm the profound social cost of accusation. Staples, Harrison, and Webster endured imprisonment, property damage, exile, permanent marks upon their reputation, and even physical violence—their cases, more than many others which have been at length analyzed by scholars in the field, demonstrate that legal exoneration did not equate to social rehabilitation.

This study's emphasis on the women who survived the charges against them has sought to broaden the understanding of witch trials as contested processes rather than inevitable tragedies. Further, by pulling focus away from the large scale panics, the recovery of these narratives also highlights the challenges of studying early colonial women. The fragmentary

nature of the evidence in such cases should not deter further scholarship and study, but rather push historians to think more creatively in their approaches to recovering women's experiences from male-dominated archival resources. The stories of Mary Staples, Katherine Harrison, and Mary Webster show us that such narratives, no matter how marginalized, can add to our understanding of colonial women who, against all odds, survived the accusations designed to destroy them.

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