

Finding Family – September 2018

A “Witch” in My Tree

By Lanita Stillwell

To me, one of the fascinating things about genealogy is getting to “meet” your ancestors and learn about their times. In my journey into the past, I have found ordinary people, some doing extraordinary things; going on crusades, fighting with Wm. The Conqueror, crossing the ocean to the “new” world at only eight years of age, forging a home out of the wilderness, fighting in the Rev. War, the Civil War, etc. And you get to share, vicariously, in some of the joys, excitement and tragedy of their lives.

The story I tell you today is one of sorrow, because in 1692 a terribly tragedy happened in the family of my 10th Great Grandfather, William Towne. Although he had died a number of years earlier, his family was living in the Salem, Massachusetts area at this time.

William was born in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, England and was baptized on March 18, 1598/99. His wife, Joanna Blessing, was also born in England around 1600. William and Joanna were married March 25, 1620 in the beautiful, old Church of St. Nicholas in Great Yarmouth, England. (St. Nicholas Church was founded in 1123 and dedicated to St. Nicholas in 1251.) They sailed to the colonies from New England around 1635 with their 6 children and settled in Salem, part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The first record of the family in the colonies was in the town book of Salem in 1640 and records show that William was granted “a little neck of land right over against his house on the other side of the river”. In 1651 he purchased 40 acres in the neighboring town of Topsfield, where they lived in an area called North Fields. In 1652 he sold his property in Salem and bought additional property in Topsfield in 1656. This land south of the river got him involved in land disputes with the Putnam family of Salem, which may have had some impact on his family some forty years later. During this time, William once served as a Constable in Salem and was made a Freeman on August 18, 1637. He and Joanna also had 2 more children for a total of 8 children (Rebecca, John, Susanna, Edmund, Jacob, Mary, Sarah, and Joseph). He died in 1671 in Topsfield and his wife, Joanna, died about ten years later, in 1682, in Topsfield.

In 17th century colonial North America, the supernatural was considered part of everyday life; many people believed that Satan was present and active on Earth. This concept had emerged in Europe around the 15th century and spread with the colonist to North America. As this “witchcraft craze” rippled through Europe, tens of thousands of supposed witches – mostly women – were executed in one manner or another. In this framework, men and women in Salem believed that all their misfortunes could be attributed to the work of the devil. When events such as infant death, crop failures, or social friction among the congregation occurred, the supernatural was blamed.

In 1689, English rulers, William and Mary, started a war with France in the American colonies. Known as King William’s War to the colonists; it ravaged regions of upstate New York, Nova Scotia and Quebec, sending refugees into the county of Essex and, specifically, Salem Village in

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the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The displaced people created a strain on Salem’s resources and aggravated existing rivalries between families.

In January of 1692, 4 girls from Salem started having “fits”; screaming, throwing things, uttering strange sounds, and contorting themselves into strange positions. Under pressure from local magistrates, the girls blamed three women for “afflicting” them – Tituba, a Caribbean slave who ran the household of Vicar Parris; Sarah Good, a homeless beggar with a child; and Sarah Osborne, an elderly impoverished woman. All three women were brought before the local magistrates, interrogated for several days and jailed. Two of the women claimed innocence, but Tituba (the Caribbean slave) confessed and said there were other witches in Salem looking to destroy the Puritans. This group of “afflicted girls” eventually grew to 8 or 11.

With the seed of paranoia planted, and “politics” at a high point, a stream of accusations followed eventually touching the Towne family.

A special court was established and the first case brought before them was Bridget Bishop, an older woman known for her gossipy habits and presumed promiscuity. She had been married three times and had a baby. Although she pleaded innocent, she was found guilty and, on June 10, became the first person hanged on what was later called Gallows Hill.

Rebecca (Towne) Nurse, my 9th Great Aunt (and the sister of my ancestor, Jacob Towne, the son of William), was a 71-year old grandmother and wife of a prominent, local businessman (Francis Nurse, a tray maker) when she was accused of witchcraft, arrested, and put in chains on March 24, 1692 during the madness in Salem. (It was thought that it was necessary to put all “witches” in chains lest they perform some magic and escape, even though many were old and frail like Rebecca.) This arrest came as a complete surprise to the citizens of Salem because Goody Towne (Rebecca) was considered such a pious and upstanding citizen, having raised and educated her children with much care, love and respect for the Lord. Rebecca was accused of witchcraft by the “afflicted girls” (Betty Parris, Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam, and Mercy Lewis) and several adults who claimed to have seen her spirit torment a local woman, Ann Putnam Sr.

Many historians believe that the root of the hysteria began in the Parris household with Tituba and the girls exploring sorcery (which Tituba had brought with her from her native Jamaica); and that the Putnam family was behind much of the accusations. Rebecca and her husband, Francis, had a long-standing dispute with their neighbors, the Putnam family, over a boundary of their adjoining lands and all of her accusers were either members of the Putnam family or friends of the family. In addition, Rebecca had often criticized the afflicted girls in the past for dabbling in fortune-telling and was not a supporter of Vicar Parris, the “fire and brimstone” head of the Salem Village Church and a firm believer in the existence of witch-craft and its role in the sins of the world.

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Since many Salem residents who criticized the witch trials and the people involved were often accused of being witches themselves, Rebecca’s criticisms made her even more of a target. And, although Rebecca was known for her piety and a member of the Salem Church, she was also known for occasionally losing her temper. In addition, Francis Nurse and the Putnam family had fought in court several times over land issues.

All this came together to cause Rebecca to stand trial. However, at the end of the trial, Rebecca was found not guilty by the jury. The verdict was not surprising, as Rebecca was well liked and respected in Salem and 39 people had risked their lives to sign a petition in support of her.

However, after the “not guilty” verdict was read in court, the afflicted girls began having fits and cried out against Rebecca again. (According to the book “The Salem Witch Trials: A Reference Guide”.) She was brought before the court again and questioned further. This time she was found guilty of witchcraft. Rebecca, at age 71, had partial deafness and it is thought that her hesitation in answering questions, and lack of a response at times, was due to this - she may not have even heard some of the questions asked of her. Unfortunately, it was thought that this probably also contributed to her guilty verdict.

Again, however, there was an intersession and Gov. William Phips granted her a reprieve. Almost immediately her accusers renewed their fits, a sign to many residents that Rebecca was, in fact, guilty. Rebecca sent a personal letter to the court professing her innocence, to no avail.

She was sentenced to death by hanging and executed on July 19, 1692. As an extra insult, she was excommunicated from her church, which she had faithfully attended over the years. After all this, though, Rebecca ultimately went to the gallows without anger; but with forgiveness and a prayer on her lips – four other women were hung at same time.

Because those accused of being witches were not allowed a proper burial; after her execution she was hurriedly thrown into such a shallow grave or ditch that some body parts remained exposed. Under darkness of night, her family retrieved her body, carefully and lovingly cleaned the dirt from her, placed her in a wooden coffin, and buried her secretly on their family farm. The location of this burial has never been completely established.

Rebecca’s two sisters, Mary Towne Easty and Sarah Towne Cloyce, were also accused of witchcraft after coming to Rebecca’s defense. During a sermon that Rev. Parris preached on witchcraft, Sarah had walked out and slammed the door. Mary was arrested April 21 and hung September 22; while Sarah managed to escape and run away with her husband. Her case was later dismissed.

In Salem, between 1692 and 1693, more than 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft and jailed. Twenty-four were executed – 19 by hanging. One 71-year-old man pleaded not guilty and refused a trial, but was still found guilty. He was subsequently stripped naked by his

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accusers, a board was placed on his chest, along with as many heavy stones as the board could hold, and he was pressed to death. He died a slow, painful death after two days as the residents looked on. Many others died in prison.

Sadly, some victims did not even know the girls who accused them. Perhaps only one, Sarah Good, even knew why. The destitute Good, it seems, had committed the unpardonable, and very witch-like sin, of cursing neighborhood children who had refused her pleas for charity.

It has been noted that those accused of witchcraft seemed marked more by differences than similarities – men, women, rich and poor, liked and disliked, religious and non-religious. The hangman’s noose had no favorites. People fed names to the accusers, either in a sincere belief that the individual was a witch or for motives rooted in greed, malice, or the need to justify the proceedings. And sadly, a variety of individuals, with various motives, responded to the open invitation of the society in which they lived to provide names to those who had been defined as the “witch finders” of the day. This all resulted in a continuous supply of fresh names for the accusers. And transpired into something more akin to an inquisition.

Much later, on August 25, 1706, Ann Putnam Jr., in formally joining the Salem Village Church, apologized “for the accusing of several persons of a grievous crime, whereby their lives were taken away from them. Whom now I have just grounds and good reason to believe they were innocent persons...”. She named Rebecca Nurse specifically.

In 1711, the church and community changed their mind and three gold sovereigns were given to Sarah and the family in reparation. In 1712, the Salem church reversed the excommunication of Rebecca Nurse.

Many studies have been done on this time in our history and an article published in 1976 in *Science* by psychologist Linda Caporael, blamed the abnormal habits of the girls on the fungus ergot, which can be found in rye, wheat and other cereal grasses. Toxicologists say that eating ergot-contaminated foods can lead to muscle spasms, vomiting, delusions and hallucinations. This fungus thrives in warm, damp climates; not too unlike the swampy meadows in Salem Village, where rye was the staple grain during the spring and summer months. Could this have contributed to one of our most notorious cases of mass hysteria and subsequent horrors? Was it a case of ergot, or misogyny and envy?