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# Witchcraft In Early Springfield: The Parsons Case

by Christine Wrona

Belief in witchcraft had existed from earliest times; and in even the most “enlightened” countries of Europe, thousands of persons were accused of being witches, and many were executed.<sup>1</sup> In the 17th century, the witch hunts came to New England, along with the Puritan settlers. “The cry of ‘witch...witch’ echoed through the dirt streets of the tiny settlement of Springfield more than 40 years before the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692.”<sup>2</sup>

Some time before 1645, Mary Lewis came to Springfield. She had been previously married, but her husband had deserted her seven years earlier. Mrs. Lewis claimed that the seven years’ abandonment by her husband gave her the privilege of legally remarrying; on October 27, 1645, she married Hugh Parsons, a bricklayer.<sup>3</sup> By 1650, they had three children, two boys and a girl.<sup>4</sup>

In 1649 Mary Parsons began to tell people that she suspected a widow named Marshfield, who had recently arrived from Windsor, of practicing witchcraft. Widow Marshfield complained to the Magistrate, William Pynchon (a founder of Springfield).<sup>5</sup>



WILLIAM PYNCHON  
from the illustration collection of the Springfield City Library

Pynchon found Mrs. Parsons guilty of slander and “sentenced her to be well whipped...with 20 lashes by the Constable” unless she paid the widow Marshfield three pounds “for and towards the reparation of her good name.”<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Parsons satisfied the debt with twenty-four bushels of Indian corn.<sup>7</sup>

The punishment seems to have had little effect upon Mary Parsons. Indeed, now she began to say that her husband was a witch. However, it was not until early 1651 that Pynchon examined Parsons.<sup>8</sup> It appears that the complaint was heard beginning on February 27, 1651, and ending in early April of that year. During this time witnesses gave their testimony, and Parson’s wife was one of his accusers.<sup>9</sup>

A neighbor, Hannah Lankton, testified that several times she had found her pudding cut from end to end when she took it out from the bag; and on one such occasion, Hugh Parsons appeared at her door shortly after her discovery. As Parsons could not satisfactorily explain that to the court, it was inferred “that the spirit that bewitched the pudding brought him thither.”<sup>10</sup> Another resident, Thomas Miller, told the Magistrate that while a member of a lumbering gang, he had joked about the pudding incident. Parsons had remained silent, and a few minutes later, when the men resumed their work, Miller cut his leg.<sup>11</sup> It was also reported that after contact with Parsons, cows unaccountably dried up or gave milk of a strange color.<sup>12</sup> Another neighbor, Blanche Bedortha, told how she became convinced that Parsons was a witch when she noticed sparks coming from her flannel nightgown.<sup>13</sup> Also she said that her two year old son cried that he was afraid of Parson’s dog; Parsons had no dog.<sup>14</sup>

Mrs. Parsons testified that when her husband was asleep she searched his body for the small black marks placed by the devil on those who were witches. She could not find the devil’s mark upon his body, but she reported that he talked wildly in his sleep, and that he had disturbing dreams which he described upon waking.<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Parsons complained that her husband mistreated her, and that he was frequently absent from home.<sup>16</sup>

Since the case was beyond Pynchon’s jurisdiction, Parsons was sent to Boston for trial.<sup>17</sup> The case was delayed for a year, probably due to “the difficulty of bringing witnesses to Boston.”<sup>18</sup> It is safe to assume that Parsons was in the Boston prison between March of 1651 and his trial in May of 1652.<sup>19</sup>

On May 12, 1652, a grand jury presented an indictment against Hugh Parsons for “not having the feare of God before his eyes, but being seduced by the instigation of the divill.”<sup>20</sup> It was alleged that he “had familiar and wicked converse with the divill, and hath used divers divillish practices, or witchcrafts, to the hurt of diverse persons.”<sup>21</sup> Then, a jury found him guilty, but the Court of

Assistants did not accept the verdict and the case came before the General Court. This body, on May 31, 1652, considering the evidence brought against him, decided that he was “not legally guilty of witchcraft.”<sup>22</sup>

Although Parsons was acquitted, he never returned to Springfield. He settled in Watertown, where he later remarried. John Pyncheon sold the Parsons’ Springfield property, and he sent the proceeds to the new address of the bricklayer.<sup>23</sup>

At some point during Hugh’s examination, Mary Parsons was suspected of witchcraft and was examined by Pyncheon. She very likely was sent to Boston in the spring of 1651.<sup>24</sup> It was reported that Joshua Parsons, Mary’s five-month old son, died on March 4, 1651. Then, Mary declared herself to be a witch, and she confessed to having killed her baby.<sup>25</sup>

Mary Parsons was very ill when her case was heard by the General Court. She was tried on a charge of witchcraft, and was acquitted. However, she pleaded guilty to the charge of murder and was sentenced to death by hanging.<sup>26</sup> It appears that the death sentence was never carried out. It was reported that “upon the morning named for the execution she was too feeble to be moved from her cell, and she was respited. The second day of doom came, but Mary Lewis Parsons lay dead upon her couch.”<sup>27</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Henry M. Burt, ed., *The First Century of the History of Springfield, The Official Records from 1636 to 1736*. Vol. 1 (Springfield, 1898), p.73.
2. *Springfield Daily News*, September 23, 1975, p.B5, col.1.
3. Mason A. Green, *Springfield 1636-1886, History of Town and City* (Springfield, 1888), pp.81-82.
4. Burt, *First Century*, p.73.
5. Moses King, *King’s Handbook of Springfield* (Springfield, 1884), p.14.
6. Joseph H. Smith, ed., *Colonial Justice in Western Mass., 1639-1702, The Pyncheon Court Record* (Cambridge, 1961), p.220.
7. Green, *Springfield*, p.104.
8. Smith, ed., *Pyncheon Court Record*, p.21.
9. Burt, *First Century*, p.74.
10. *Ibid.*, p.74.
11. *Ibid.*, p.74.
12. Writers Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Massachusetts, *Springfield, Mass.* (Springfield, 1941), p.13.
13. *Springfield Daily News*, September 23, 1975, p.B5, col.1. (The explanation for static electricity was unknown in the 1600’s).
14. Green, *Springfield*, p.106.
15. *Ibid.*, p.107.
16. Burt, *First Century*, p.75.
17. Smith, ed., *Pyncheon Court Record*, p.22.
18. Burt, *First Century*, p.76.
19. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness, The First Century of Urban Life in America 1625-1742* (New York, 1938), p.74. (This reference indicates Boston did have a prison at this time, as one was erected in 1632. Also, on p.74, Bridenbaugh states “...that the main function of our early prisons was to serve as places of detention for those under arrest and awaiting trial.”)
20. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of Massachusetts*, Vol. IV, Part I, 1650-1660, p.96.
21. *Ibid.*, p.96.
22. Smith, ed., *Pyncheon Court Record*, pp.22-23.
23. Frank Bauer, *At the Crossroads* (Springfield, 1975), p.4.
24. Smith, ed., *Pyncheon Court Record*, p.21.
25. Burt, *First Century*, p.75.
26. *Ibid.*, p.75.
27. Green, *Springfield*, p.109.