

Witchcraft in the American Colonies Beyond the Limits of Salem

Amanda Underwood

In the United States, witchcraft has become synonymous with Salem. When it comes to the history of witchcraft in the United States the conversation tends to be dominated by Salem, as the words witchcraft and Salem seem to have become synonymous. What is also well known is that the Salem Witch Trials led to the deaths of so many and the imprisonment of dozens more. However, fears of witchcraft and witch hunts and trials have occurred all over the world. There is documentation of witches and persecution of people thought to be witches on every continent that people inhabit. In the last few decades, as the subject of women's history has flourished there has been an abundance of research done on the topic of witchcraft and its impacts in the American colonies. However, a majority of this research and the scholarly writings have focused on the Salem Witch Trials. While this has drawn more of the general population into the topic, there is still far more research that is needed on the other witch trials that occurred in the American colonies. Salem has a well-publicized and understood history when it comes to witchcraft and trials, but there are many trials that preceded and followed those that occurred in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The earliest, and arguably the most influential, known book on the subject is *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*); it was published in 1486 by two Dominican friars and it was the "definitive work on how to discover and punish witches."¹ While the definitions of witchcraft and terminology vary between different cultures, nearly every culture in the world has some sort of stories about the awful things that witches do, from curses and charms to causing peoples' deaths and using their corpses for foul reasons, even for cannibalistic means. Christians in particular had a great fear of witchcraft and those that were accused of it. The accused were seen as worshippers and servants of the devil that were there only to inflict pain and suffering upon the God-fearing Christians. This led to witch hunts all across Europe with many people, specifically women, being burned at the stake or tortured for confessions.

As European nations colonized other areas of the world, they spread their faith and their beliefs. This spread of beliefs and Christianity, of course, included the spread of the fear of the devil and of those they thought were committing acts of witchcraft. The colonies stayed under the laws of the empire to which they belonged; in the case of the American colonies they fell under English law, as they were a part of the English empire. Each of the colonies had their own experiences when it came to the trials and punishments of accused witches. The Salem Witch Trials in 1692 are well-known and heinous, but there were over ninety-five other cases in the American colonies that involved witchcraft before 1692.² In addition to the cases that happened before the Salem Witch Trials there were dozens more that occurred in the following years.

In the American colonies, there were many cases after the Salem Witch Trials as well. However, as the Age of Enlightenment was changing the world, it was also affecting the witch trials that were occurring. There were witchcraft cases in all of the other colonies, but the first and last cases that are documented today both occurred within the Virginia Colony. The first case being that of Joan Wright who was accused in 1626, but never officially went to trial. The last documented witchcraft case in the American colonies occurred in 1730 with the trial of John Samford's servant named Mary who was convicted and punished.³ The trials that occurred in the Virginia Colony were far less tragic than those that were occurring in the other colonies; there was no mania that occurred when it came to finding witches, as had happened in Salem. Unlike some of the other

¹ Carson O. Hudson Jr., *These Detestable Slaves of the Devill: A Concise Guide to Witchcraft in Colonial Virginia*, (Haverford, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2001), 19-20.

² Frederick C. Drake, "Witchcraft in the American Colonies, 1647-62," *American Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1968): 694-725, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2711403>, 697.

³ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 31-55.

colonies, there were no executions in the Virginia Colony and most of the cases that were brought to court in the Virginia Colony were cases of women and their husbands suing others for slander and defamation because the women had been called a witch. There were not very many criminal cases for witchcraft in the Virginia Colony.

Setting the Stage for the Witch Trials in the American Colonies

Historians do not know exactly when witch trials began happening in England, but there have been scatterings of records for centuries before the first official English law criminalized witchcraft. The first law criminalizing the practice of witchcraft was not passed by Parliament until 1542 during the reign of King Henry VIII.⁴ This act only lasted five years before it was repealed, but it left a heavy impression on the people and it set a great precedent. Before this act, witch trials had fallen under the purview of the Church and had been handled by ecclesiastical courts, but now they were to be handled by the judiciary. The second act that criminalized the practice of witchcraft, called the Act of 1563, was passed during the reign of Henry VIII's daughter, Queen Elizabeth I.⁵

This act was a reflection of the witchcraft manias that were occurring across the continent of Europe. There were witchcraft trials in England, France, Scotland, and many other nations; these trials were occurring as late as 1722 when the last execution for witchcraft occurred in Scotland.⁶ The act also stated that anyone found to have been committing acts of witchcraft that led to deaths or destruction "shall suffer pains of death as Felon or Felons."⁷ Queen Elizabeth I was known to be a strict Protestant, and this most definitely had an influence on this act. She wanted to rid her queendom of the witchcraft that was affecting the continent. Queen Elizabeth's witchcraft law was harsher than the previous one that had been passed by her father, but it was nowhere near as severe and concise as the law that would be passed under King James I. His act would have an even greater impact on the witch trials in the American colonies than was expected, and it was part of the reason that the following witch trials in the American colonies were so varied and dramatic in some areas.

In 1597, James VI of Scotland wrote his *Demonologie*, which was written as "fictional, philosophical dialog between two scholars," that stated that witchcraft and those that practiced it existed and that they needed to be hunted down and prosecuted.⁸ It was a very influential work during this time and it had a tremendous impact on the beliefs of the English. He wrote about how to find witches, different ways that they hurt people, and how they need to be punished. He intended to rid England and possibly Europe of the witch atrocity that he saw to be a great plague set upon Christians by the devil himself. James VI who became James I of England in 1603, also wrote in his book about how witches are more common in the wilder parts of the world.⁹ This anecdote in James I's *Demonologie* influenced the early colonists when they went to explore the New World; it made them fear the natives because they thought that they were devil worshippers and they were trying to help Satan hurt the colonists that were settling in North America.

When he was crowned King James I of England in 1603, he continued his mission to hunt down witches. The following year, James I and Parliament passed a law that was called "An Acte against Conjuracion, Witchcraft and Dealing with evill and wicked Spirits." In this law, witchcraft was split into two levels of severity and it was decided how witches were to be punished depending on which of the two degrees of severity of the crime they had committed. James I decided that when it was the first offense and it did not cause any harm that witches deserved one more chance to repent to God. In his eyes, this seemed the Christianly thing to do as God showed mercy on his children.

⁴ Monica C. Witkowski and Caitlin Newman, "Witchcraft in Colonial Virginia," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 23 February 2012, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Witchcraft_in_Colonial_Virginia#start_entry (accessed October 20, 2018).

⁵ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 65-68.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁹ James VI and I, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh: 1597), (London: 1616).

The lesser degree of witchcraft became known as petit witchcraft and that included “offering to find buried treasure, locate stolen goods, or using potions or charms to provoke ‘unlawful love.’”¹⁰ People that were convicted of petit witchcraft were punished by one year of imprisonment and after they were released they had to publicly confess their sins every three months in a public pillory. They received some leniency on their first offense, but if they committed a second offense they were put to death. The other and much harsher degree of witchcraft was defined as:

Any pson or persons,... [that] shall use practise or exercise any Invocation or Conjuracion of any evill and wicked Spirit, or shall consult covenant with entertaine employ feede or rewarde any evill and wicked Spirit to or for any Intent or purpose; or take up any dead man woman or child out of his her or there grave, or any other place where the dead bodie resteth, or the skin bone or any other parte of any dead person, to be employed or used in any manner of Witchcrafte Sorcerie Charme or Inchantment; or shall use practise or exercise any Witchcrafte Inchantment Charme or Sorcerie, whereby any pson shalbe killed destroyed wasted consumed pined or lamed in his or her bodie, or any parte thereof;¹¹

The punishment for any of these practices was pain of death and a loss of benefit of the clergy; anyone that helped the accused or in any way aided them was likely to receive the same punishment as well. The loss of benefit of the clergy was seen as the worst part of the punishment because it was common for people to be able to get out of execution by reading from the Bible. If they were successfully able to read the passage, then they were branded and released instead of facing death. This may not have been of much help to those that could not read, but for those that could it would save them from the hangman. This act was not repealed until 1736; however, the last known witchcraft trial in the colonies took place in the Virginia Colony in 1730.¹²

King James I's Bible published in 1611, along with the passing of the act detailing the punishment for witchcraft, set the stage for the witch trials that were to come in the colonies. He commissioned for the Bible to be rewritten because he believed that some translations were inaccurate and teaching people the wrong message. The new edition that he commissioned would be, in his eyes, uncorrupt and it was this version that was used across England and across the American colonies. In the Virginia Colony, churches used this as the common prayer book of the Church of England. In the new edition that King James I had published, there were two verses in particular that were used when witchcraft was suspected. The first verse was “thou shall not suffer a witch to live.”¹³ The other verse that was commonly used when talking about witchcraft was “there shall not be found among you any that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch.”¹⁴ These verses stuck in the minds of the colonists when they were establishing their homes in North America and they truly believed that these verses were what God wanted and that is part of the reason that so many women and some men were killed during the various witch trials that occurred in the American colonies from 1626 to 1730.

Beliefs About Witchcraft in the Virginia Colony

Within the English colonies there were a few beliefs that were widespread when it came to witches and witchcraft. John Putnam Demos has stated that “a rich lore of occultism arrived with the first settlers of New England” and that cannot be understated because they brought their beliefs with them from England.¹⁵ When

¹⁰ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 12-13.

¹¹ “An Acte against Conjuracion Witchcrafte and dealing with evill and wicked Spirits,” 1604, 1 Jas. 1, c. 12, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/An_Acte_against_Conjuracion_Witchcrafte_and_dealing_with_evill_and_wicked_Spirits_1604.

¹² Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 54-55.

¹³ Exodus 22:18.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 18:10.

¹⁵ John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 368.

it came to the Virginia Colony, however, their “beliefs had more to do with folklore than theology.”¹⁶ The Virginia Colony had a far greater population of Anglicans than some of the other colonies. Salem and the Massachusetts Bay Colony for example, had a large population of Puritans and that is also one of the factors that is believed by many historians to have influenced the mass hysteria of the Salem Witch Trials in 1692. When compared to the Puritans they were far less radical in their views of witchcraft.

There were many commonly held beliefs that the American colonists maintained from their English heritage. The first was the belief that witches were always causing problems and that they had sworn their soul to Satan. They were blamed for illness, death of livestock, death of people, failing crops, and many other tragedies and woes that everyday people experienced; they were said to be the servants of the devil to cause strife. One of the very common natural disasters that were blamed on witches were sea storms. They were thought to be bewitching the weather in order to kill those that were aboard sea vessels. This led to three known executions of women in or near Virginia colony waters.¹⁷ The idea that witches caused sea storms seems in contrast to the fact that colonists believed that water was a way to find out if someone was a witch. However, this was another one of the beliefs and traditions that they had inherited from England. To perform this water test, which was often called a ducking, they would bind the hands and feet of the person being accused and drop them into a pond or lake. If the person sank, they were thought to have been accepted by the purifying waters and therefore they could not be evil and working with the devil. If the person floated that meant that they were a witch and then they would likely be convicted and depending on the colony they were likely to be executed.¹⁸ This was a test that was common practice in England and therefore became normal in the colonies as well.

Another common belief among the colonists was that all witches had a devil’s mark. This mark was usually in a hidden place and also called a witch’s teat. In order to find these marks, courts impaneled a group of people that were of the same gender as the accused witch and they would go into a private area to search the body of the accused for any marks that could be a devil’s mark. This mark could be anything from a birthmark or a mole to a scar. Usually the impaneled jury would be a group of older, well-respected women because the majority of those accused of witchcraft were women. The devil’s mark was where the witch was supposed to feed their familiar, another common thing that all witches were said to have had. They were supposed to have a familiar that was their demon servant who was there in order to help them cause chaos. It was supposed to have been given to them when they sold their souls to the devil. Witches were also thought to be able to transform into different creatures like bats or cats in order to sneak around and cause more mischief. There were cases in Virginia where women were accused of turning into cats when they were trying to flee from their curses. In the colonies, there was also the belief that witches would have puppets or dolls that they made in order to curse their victims. The dolls were made of clay, wax, wood, or dough; the dolls often had clothes, hair, or nail clippings from the witch’s intended victim.¹⁹ This was one of the many things that the courts would have people look for in the homes of defendants.

Many witches were accused of having ridden their victims. When a person was ridden by a witch, they were used like a horse to take the witch wherever it was that she needed to go, and they were bewitched so that they had to obey her command. People claimed to have had “experiences of being ‘ridden’ like a beast of burden by supposed witches.”²⁰ Witches were said to have gone on hag rides, in which a witch would bewitch a mare or farm animal in order to get where she need to go, but if the witch was not able to find a mare, they were said to bewitch people instead in order to get where she needed to go. She would climb on the back of a human and

¹⁶ Richard Beale Davis, “The Devil in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 65, no. 2 (April 1957): 131-149, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4246295>, 136.

¹⁷ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 6-7.

¹⁸ Monica C. Witkowski, “Grace Sherwood (ca. 1660 – 1740),” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, 7 October 2011, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Sherwood_Grace_ca_1660-1740#start_entry (accessed October 20, 2018).

¹⁹ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 5-6.

²⁰ John Demos, *The Enemy Within: 2,000 Years of witch-hunting in the Western World* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 88.

make them gallop, like a horse, and obey the witch's command. These activities were always done at night at that is where the term "night-mares" is said to have come from.²¹

There were two main ways that the colonists, specifically those in Virginia, thought that they could defend themselves. The first was with horseshoes; they were thought to ward off any witches and were often nailed above the doorway and over the place so that a witch could not enter the house, and neither could her familiar or her curses. The other way that the Virginia colonist thought that they could protect themselves was with witch bottles. These were bottles that were usually filled with goat's urine; they also usually had brass pins and a small scroll with a piece of scripture or the Lord's Prayer written on it. They were also thought to keep witches from entering one's home. The witch bottles were "buried underneath of a hearth or at a doorsill or under a windowsill to keep witches from entering the building. The theory was that the glass flask would simulate the witch's bladder, and would burst, or be in pain if they tried to pass" into the dwelling.²²

In addition to the beliefs about witchcraft there were also the beliefs that the individual colonies had when it came to religion and how far that pervaded their lives. In the New England colonies, the majority of the colonists are Puritans and they believed that "because women's bodies were weaker, the devil could reach women's souls more easily, breaching these 'weaker vessels' with greater frequency" and that is why women were so much more likely to be witches than men.²³ Puritans usually had a much stricter view on Christianity and the ways to be a good Christian. They, like Calvinists, demanded that one must fully devote one's life to God and that anyone that did not was undeniably going to burn in Hell. Anglicans, on the other hand, tended to also focus on good works and on personal faith. They were a little more forgiving when a person sinned. Puritans tended to be much more violent when it came to the trials of witches; this may partially have to do with their great devotion to God and the fact that they believed that some people simply could not be saved. They wished to rid themselves of the sinners and that could be why there were far more executions in both the New England colonies.

In comparison, there were no executions in the Virginia Colony. Religion played a huge role in the witchcraft accusations and trials in both England and the American colonies. Religion played a tremendous role in the way that colonists looked at witches because they believed "that two sins of a general character permeate the entire continuum of witches' behavior: the sin of lying and the sin of pride."²⁴ Both of these sins were considered to be very serious. The sin of pride was Satan's greatest sin and the sin of lying and deception was the means by which Satan inflicted his foulness and misery. Since these were considered to be the sins that witches committed in addition to the sin of witchcraft in itself there was a great fear that surrounded witches and there was also hatred and need to get rid of these creatures that were plaguing their lives. Religion drove these fears and strengthened them. However, the Anglicans had a greater tendency to let accused witches have fair trials and to allow them to repent and try to find their way back to God. Puritans were not as forgiving. They feared for not only their mortal lives, but also their eternal lives. They did not want to succumb to the devil and spend an eternity in hell.

In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the majority of the settlers were Puritan and there were also a great deal of religious leaders that were involved in the witch trials that took place there. Religious leaders and governmental leaders often mixed and overlapped in the New England colonies; this was less true in the Virginia Colony. This is likely to have had to do with the way the judicial and governmental systems were established and ran. In the Virginia Colony, the judicial systems were county based because it was a more rural area. In the counties there were smaller towns that ran independently, but witch accusations and trial handled on the county level. In New England, trials took place at the town level because the societies were somewhat more urban.

²¹ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 4.

²² Carson Hudson, "Witches in the Colonies," interviewed by Lloyd Dobyns, *Colonial Williamsburg*, 27 October 2008, <http://podcast.history.org/2008/10/27/witches-in-the-colonies/#transcript>.

²³ Elizabeth Reis, "The Devil, the Body, the Feminine Soul in Puritan New England," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (June 1995): 15-36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2081913>, 15.

²⁴ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 147.

Therefore, there were fewer respected men to serve in the court systems in New England and the clergy were more likely to be on the juries. Richard Beale Davis argues the fact “there was no black page of real torture or persecution seem due to the fact that the Anglican clergy rarely took part in such beliefs, and that juries of laymen were rational men who shunned hysteria or superstitious credulity.”²⁵ The trials in the Virginia colonies were far less violent and hysterical; there was no witch panic where everyone was accusing their neighbors of bring witches. The leaders in the Virginia colony did everything that they could to prevent mass hysteria from taking over.

However, it was still the same kinds of people that were being accused in the Virginia Colony as were being accused in the other American colonies. There was still an emphasis on women when it came to who was being accused of witchcraft. This was one of the many beliefs about witchcraft that link the England to the colonies. Carol F. Karlsen wrote “perhaps the strongest link between witchcraft in England and in New England was the special association of this crime with women and womanhood.”²⁶ It can be seen in nearly every colony and in England as well that women were far more likely to be accused of witchcraft. It is also worth noting that many of the women who were accused of witchcraft, especially those in New England, had reputations as healers or were midwives. Infanticide was a common reason that women were accused of witchcraft. In many cases when a baby or its mother died during childbirth the midwife was blamed. In the case of Margaret Jones of Charleston, Massachusetts in 1648, she was known as a healer and even was known to have practiced some midwifery. She was convicted with evidence that she caused others harm and sickness and that she created potions.²⁷ She was executed a month after her trial. She is just one of many women that were seen to be healers that were tried as witches.

In the Virginia Colony, there are records of two men being accused of witchcraft out of all the cases that happened in the Virginia Colony.²⁸ When it comes to the New England colonies this is also true. There are records of at least 344 people being accused of witchcraft between 1620 and 1725 and there are 342 cases in which the gender of the accused person can be identified. Of the 342 cases, 267 were female. That is roughly seventy-eight percent. That means that there were 75 males that were accused of witchcraft. However, in 36 of the male cases, nearly half, the men were considered to be “suspects by association”: they were husbands, sons, other kin, or public supporters of female witches.²⁹ Part of this has to do with the social concept of women being the weaker sex, therefore they were also more susceptible to evil. In most of the American colonies the majority of people that were being accused of witchcraft were women. There were a few men that were accused and even convicted of witchcraft, but it was far less likely for the person being accused to be male as opposed to female.

The Salem Witch Trials

The Witch Trials in Salem have basically written the narrative of what happened during the witch trials in the American Colonies. The history of what happened there is far more well-known than the witch trials and panics that took place in the other American Colonies. During the panic that occurred in 1692, there were more than thirty accused witches that were brought before the Court of Oyer and Terminer. Approximately two-thirds of the cases that were brought before that court ended with the accused being hanged and only three known acquittals.³⁰ The panic that took over during this time was immense and generally follows what is seen today as the typical witch hunt narrative, similar to what occurs in Arthur Miller’s novel *The Crucible*. A few girls were afflicted and having fits and they began accusing people of practicing witchcraft on them. While each case was a little different the general stereotype stands. In many cases, a poor woman was accused by her neighbors

²⁵ Davis, “The Devil in Virginia,” 136.

²⁶ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 3.

²⁷ David D. Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History, 1638-1693* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 21-23.

²⁸ Witkowski and Newman, “Witchcraft in Colonial Virginia,”

²⁹ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 47-48.

³⁰ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2002), 315-317.

of practicing witchcraft on them and having caused them bodily injury. There are many questions still today about how to understand the actions of the afflicted girls that led to the accusations and often deaths of dozens of people. Mary Beth Norton raises the question of how we should interpret their actions in today's modern light.³¹ Were the girls faking the fits and the other reactions or was there truly something wrong with them? It is possible that they had mental problems or that they had ingested something that had caused them to hallucinate. However, the really wonder is how the panic spread so greatly. There are many different arguments to this question. There is little doubt that religion played a heavy role in the panic. There is one case that is a stereotypical example of what to place in Salem in 1692; it is the case of Bridget Oliver Bishop.

At the time of she was accused on April 18th, Bridget Oliver Bishop had not been connected to the crisis that was taking place. However, she already had a fairly bad reputation, as she had been tried and acquitted of witchcraft twelve years before.³² She did not know any of those that had accused her of witchcraft in 1692 and that was quite different from the previous cases in which most of the people involved in the cases had personal relationships. She was arrested on the following day because of the accusations that were being made.³³ After her first accusation and the following arrest, there were more accusations that arose; many of the accusations were from the afflicted girls. "On May 27, [Sir William] Phips established a special court Oyer and Terminer to try those accused of witchcraft."³⁴

Bishop's trial began on June 2nd, 1692 in the Salem Town courthouse. There were dozens of accusations against Bishop. Some accusations stated that she had caused them bodily harm, while other stated that she had bewitched them or someone that they knew. A couple of the accusations against her said that she had done something to their animals that had made them act odd.³⁵ The entire time she stayed strong and maintained her innocence. She believed that if she told the truth she would be acquitted. However, the accusations and the evidence against her continued to stack up. As was custom during the time, each of the women that were being tried during this session including Bishop were examined by a jury of women to find any witches marks that may be on their bodies.

The first search that occurred found that the three women had an odd mark in the exact same hidden place on their bodies. On the second search the women said that the mark was gone, replaced by dry skin. This was extremely suspicious to the jury of women. They also noted during their first search the breasts of the three women were much fuller in appearance than they were upon the second search. This led them to the conclusion that they must have fed their animal familiars in between the two examinations.³⁶ She plead not guilty to all of the accusations against her but was still found guilty. Bishop was sentenced to "Death accordingly passed ag^t [sic] her as the Law, directs." She was the first person found guilty of witchcraft during the craze. On "Friday, June 10, Bridget Bishop was hanged on Gallows Hill in Salem, without, remarked Robert Calef, 'the least Confession of anything relating to Witchcraft.'³⁷ She like many who followed her, was most likely innocent of any crimes associated with witchcraft and was merely a victim of the witchcraft panic that enveloped Salem in 1692. The trials for witchcraft occurred all over the American Colonies, but few colonies had the violence and panic that occurred in Salem.

The Witch Trials in the Virginia Colony

There were hundreds of witchcraft cases that occurred in the American colonies between 1626 and 1730; both the first and last of these trials occurred in the Virginia Colony. They typically had a more level head when

³¹ Ibid., 305-308.

³² Ibid., 112-113.

³³ Winfield S. Nevins, *Witchcraft in Salem Village in 1692: Together with some account of other witchcraft prosecutions in New England and Elsewhere* (Salem, MA: North Shore Publishing Company, 1892), 148.

³⁴ Sarah-Nell Walsh, "Bridget Bishop," *Salem Witch Trials: Documentary Archive and Transcription Project*, 2001, <http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/people/bishop.html> (accessed March 24, 2019).

³⁵ W. Elliot Woodward, *Records of Salem Witchcraft, copied from the original documents* (Roxbury, MA: Priv. Print, 1864): 143-172.

³⁶ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 204-205.

³⁷ Ibid., 210.

it came to accusations of witchcraft; there needed to be sufficient evidence and even when there was what they then considered evidence it was still unlikely that the person would actually be convicted. In all the documented cases there were no cases in which a person who was convicted of witchcraft actually received the punishment that they should have received under the 1604 witchcraft act that was passed by James I. Those that were convicted, in every documented case, received different punishments than they were supposed to receive according to law and it was always far less severe than that which they should have received. The majority of the recorded cases of witchcraft were actually defamation suits.³⁸ Between the years 1647 and 1662 there was another witchcraft panic that was similar to the one that occurred in Salem.³⁹ Since there were such a great number of cases that were defamation there was a fear that someone would be wrongfully executed. In order to help prevent not only the defamation and slander suits, but also a wrongful execution there was a law passed in a county in the Virginia Colony.

There was only one law that was passed in Virginia regarding witchcraft; it was passed on May 23, 1655. It was passed by the General Court in Lower Norfolk County where there were many accusations of witchcraft.⁴⁰ The act was intended to stop the false accusations of people. It made it illegal to falsely accuse someone of witchcraft and the punishment for committing this offense was a fine of 1,000 pounds of tobacco and if the accusation was serious enough they also could face further charges if the court deemed it necessary.⁴¹ This act made a tremendous difference in the Virginia Colony and is likely the reason that, as far as historians can find record of, there were only two cases of a person being convicted of witchcraft in the colony. However, the fact that this was the only law or act that was passed, in regard to witchcraft in the colony, shows that it was not an important concern for the majority of the colony.

The first case in the Virginia Colony was the case of Joan Wright in September of 1626. She was a married woman and a midwife, and she was accused by her neighbors of using witchcraft to cause the death of a newborn, killing crops and livestock, and accurately predicting the death of another colonist.⁴² There were many testimonies that claimed she was a witch and, in some way, had affected their lives. However, “the evidence presented against demonstrates how charges of witchcraft were so often born out of the grief and resentment of untimely deaths, allowing troublesome members of the community such as Goodwife Wright to serve as likely scapegoats for malefic wrongdoing.”⁴³ It was easy for people to blame witchcraft for the deaths of their loved ones and for the bad things that happened around them because they had no other explanation. They did not have the medical or technical knowledge that is a part of today’s society, so they explained away tragedy by it being the work of the devil and his minions.

This lack of understanding of the natural world also led to the case of Katherine Grady in 1654. She was on a ship that was headed to the Virginia Colony and they encountered a violent storm. During this time, people believed that witches caused sea storms and for reasons unknown she became the target of their wrath and fear and she was the person that the other passengers accused of being a witch. They convinced the captain and he had her hanged in an attempt to end the storm and get them all to shore safely. When they made it to shore the captain was brought in front of a court to answer for his actions.⁴⁴ The court records have been lost and considering the great fears that English settlers had when it came to witches and the supernatural powers that they possessed, especially when it comes to sea storms, it is assumed that the captain was most likely not convicted of any wrongdoings in regards to Katherine Grady’s execution. There most likely was also no real investigation into her death because the ship was not truly in the jurisdiction of the Virginia colony. The

³⁸ Demos, *The Enemy Within*, 88.

³⁹ Drake, “Witchcraft in the American Colonies, 1647-62,” 697.

⁴⁰ Davis, “The Devil in Virginia,” 143.

⁴¹ Witkowski and Newman, “Witchcraft in Colonial Virginia.”

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Lindsey M. Newman, “‘Under an Ill Tongue’: Witchcraft and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia” (master’s thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2009),

<https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/31667/LMNewmanThesis1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, 41.

⁴⁴ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 35.

passengers and crew were English and the only true relation that they had to Virginia was that it was where they were headed. She was just a victim to the fear of a group of terrified passengers who wanted to make it Virginia and feared that they would not make it due to the terrible storms that they were facing.

The fact that the ship was headed for Virginia is the only reason that this case is generally related to the other case in Virginia. This case is quite controversial for historians because there are those that argue that the case should not be lumped in with other Virginia Colony cases because it did not occur in the colony and there was never an actual case brought against her. There is also the argument that it should fall under English cases because the vessel was an English vessel. However, it usually is tied to the Virginia colony and that is where the disagreement about whether or not there were any executions in the Virginia Colony comes into play.

The case of William Harding occurred two years later in November of 1656 in Northumberland County; he was accused by a local minister of witchcraft and sorcery.⁴⁵ Since the accusation was by a minister and a respected member of the community it carried tremendous weight when it came to the jury. The jury heard several other testimonies and decided that at least some of them accusations were true because he was convicted and sentenced to “ten stripes upon his bare back, and forever banished from the county, as well as paying all the costs of the trial.”⁴⁶

This case is one of only two known legal convictions for witchcraft in the Virginia Colony. He is also one of only two men that were tried in the Virginia Colony for witchcraft and it is worth noting that he was convicted since he was a man and was far less likely to have been found guilty or to have been accused at all because of the fact that he was male rather than female. Even though he was convicted of witchcraft he was not sentenced to death nor did he receive a year of imprisonment and then forced public confessions every three months as the law said he should have since he was found guilty. There obviously was some proof in order for him to have been convicted and received the punishment that he did, but it can be seen that the view that the Virginians took when it came to the prosecution and punishment of suspected witches was far different than that of the other American colonies especially the Massachusetts Bay Colony. This could have been because the Virginia Colony leaders wanted the situation to be over and finished so that there would not be a long and drawn out process of handling the punishment. Instead there was the flogging, a fine, and then William Harding would no longer be a problem because he was exiled. This process was much quicker and more finalized than the punishment that the law has for petit witchcraft. He received one of only two known witchcraft convictions in the Virginia Colony. The fact that only two people were convicted in Virginia during the more than 100 years of witchcraft crazes and panics that plagued the American colonies is quite unique.

In January of 1679, there was another interesting case that exemplifies the stance that the Colony of Virginia typically took when it came to witchcraft accusations; it was the case of Alice Cartwright. She was accused of having bewitched John Salmon's child and causing the child's death. If she had been convicted, she, by law, should have faced death and given the circumstance if she had been found guilty, she likely would have faced death. He claimed that she had to have bewitched his child and that there was no other reason for the child to have died. Most of the records from the trial have been lost, but what remains states that a test was ordered to judge her as a witch. The test that was ordered by the court was for a jury of women to search Alice's body for a devil's mark.⁴⁷ This was extremely common, especially when it came to witchcraft trials in the Virginia Colony. Searching the accused's body was an easy and painless way to see if the person was a witch because they believed that anyone practicing witchcraft had to have a devil's mark. The jury found no such marks on Alice's body and therefore she was judged to not be a witch and the panel of women recommended to the court that Alice be released and that the accusations be dismissed.⁴⁸

Another case that stands out and helps to define the witchcraft trials in Virginia is the final case that occurred in the Virginia Colony and is thought to be the last case of witchcraft in the American colonies is the

⁴⁵ Davis, “The Devil in Virginia,” 141.

⁴⁶ Drake, “Witchcraft in the American Colonies, 1647-62,” 705.

⁴⁷ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 41-42.

⁴⁸ “Witchcraft in Virginia,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (January 1893): 127-129, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1939689>, 128.

case of John Samford's servant. His servant, Mary, was a white indentured servant who was accused of "Inchantment, Charm, witchcraft, or Conjuraton, to tell where Treasure is or where goods left may be found."⁴⁹ She was examined for devil's marks, as was typical in a witchcraft accusation in the Virginia Colony, and several persons testified against her. It appears that the justices found the evidence against her to be sufficient because she was found guilty and her punishment was decided to be thirty-nine lashes upon her bare back. Her crimes would have fallen under the category of petit witchcraft and she could have been sentenced to a year of imprisonment and public confessions of her sins every three months, but she was not. It appears that the court wanted the matter to be settled quickly, as seems to have been quite common for courts in the Virginia Colony.

Grace Sherwood: the Virginia Witch

The last case that truly demonstrates the differences between witchcraft accusations and trials in the Virginia Colony as opposed to the other American colonies is the cases that involved Grace Sherwood. Her experiences with witchcraft accusations were quite unique. If she had lived in New England it is highly likely that she would have been killed. Her case shows the divergence that colonial Virginia took from not only the other colonies, but also from England and the laws that they were governed by. In her life Grace Sherwood saw each facet of the Virginia Colony's witchcraft responses. She partook in defamation suits and she faced a full trial and examination by a jury of women.

The most well-known victim of witchcraft accusations in the history of the Colony of Virginia is Grace Sherwood. Her trials are some of the best documented records of witchcraft from that time and her trials were some of the most extensive in the history of colonial Virginia. To this day she is known as "the Virginia Witch." There is little known about Grace from before the trials except that she married her husband around the year 1680, but the accusations of her being a witch first began to occur in 1697 when Richard Capps began calling her a witch. While he never actually accused her of being a witch, he did call her one and the Sherwoods were upset by this. They decided to sue Richard for defamation on February 4, 1698. Richard did not appear in court, so they had a continuance and during that continuance it appears that the two parties decided to settle the matter outside of court because the suit was dropped in March of that same year.⁵⁰

Her case represents how Virginians felt about witchcraft accusations. Since the majority of the witchcraft cases that were brought to court in the Colony of Virginia were suits for defamation and slander when one person was calling another a witch this is a great example. It also helps to show that many instances of witchcraft accusations were related to the issues that individual people were having with others. They likely accused her of being a witch because she was a social outcast and she made them mad for some reason or another and not because they legitimately thought that she was a witch.

The witch accusations did not stop for long because six months later there were more of her neighbors calling her a witch and telling others what she had supposedly done to them. John and Jane Gisburne spread stories around town that Grace had bewitched their cotton and caused the death of their pigs. At the same time another woman in the town, Elizabeth Barnes, told people in the town that Grace had come into her house one night and ridden her then left through a crack in the door like a black cat.⁵¹ This was quite a claim that Elizabeth Barnes made. If these women had taken their accusations to the court, there almost definitely would have been a trial. With these two claims Grace was being accused of bewitching crops and animals, riding another person, and transforming into a creature. With all these claims, under law, she would have been sentenced to death. However, none of them had taken their claims to court until Grace and her husband sued them for defamation in two separate lawsuits. The Sherwoods lost both lawsuits that day, but there were no official charges brought

⁴⁹ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 54-55.

⁵⁰Edward W. James, "Grace Sherwood, the Virginia Witch," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (October 1894): 96-101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1914583>, 99.

⁵¹ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 45-46.

against Grace.⁵² She did not have any other appearances in court until after her husband passed, but there were still rumors that were being spread by her neighbors.

In 1705, there appears to have been a fight of some sort between Grace and one of her neighbors, Elizabeth Hill. After the incident happened, Grace went to court and charged her neighbor with assault and battery. She also brought a suit against Luke Hill and his wife Elizabeth on December 7, 1705.⁵³ She won the suit but was only given a very small amount of money as restitution. A month later, the Barnes formally filed charges against her for witchcraft. It is believed by some historians that the Hills brought formal charges of witchcraft against Grace Sherwood because of the suit and the fact that they had lost to Grace. However, it is entirely possible that they instituted a charge of witchcraft against Grace because they truly believed that she was a witch and that she was a threat to society. Either reasons behind them charging Grace are likely.

On January 3, 1706, Grace Sherwood was brought before the justices of Princess Anne County. Elizabeth Hill claimed that Grace had bewitched her. Since Grace was not in attendance that day the court proceedings were pushed back to February 6, 1706 and on that following day the court ordered that a jury of women be gathered in order to search Grace's body. The panel was convened in order to search Grace's body for a devil's mark which would prove that she was a witch. It was common practice and if they found a devil's mark on her body, they would have strong evidence against Grace. However, they were not able to hold those proceedings right away and they were pushed back another month.

On March 7 of the same year, the court met again, and the women were sworn and proceeded to examine Grace. The exact proceedings of how the examination occurred is unknown, but it is likely that the women, along with Grace, are taken either to a private room or to a house where Grace was stripped of her clothing in order to be examined by the jury of women. When they searched Grace, they stated that they found two marks on her body that were abnormal. The record states "wee of the jury have Serchtt Grace Sherwood and found Two things like titts with Severall other Spotts."⁵⁴ This was a damning statement about Grace, and in other colonies she may have been executed. It is worth noting that the forewoman of the jury of women who examined Grace was Elizabeth Barnes whom Grace and her husband had sued for slander in 1698. Today, this would absolutely be considered a conflict of interest, but since the community in which this took place was not very large there were not very many women that could be considered for the position. The fact that she was on the jury does lead some historians to believe that the marks may not have actually been unnatural.

At this point they were unsure of how to proceed; they could have possibly had a witch on their hands and they had to ensure public safety. Since the local government was not sure how to proceed, they had to consult the Governor's Council and the Queen's Attorney in Williamsburg. The Governor's Council ordered the Queen's Attorney to consider the matter and report back in a month's time. When he reported back on April 16 of that year, he stated that in his opinion they should continue to investigate the matter. On May 2, 1706, the justices in Princess Anne County decided to take the advice of the Queen's Attorney and continued with their investigation of Grace Sherwood. They also decided that in order to ensure public safety they needed to take Grace into custody where she would remain until the trial was finished. They also ordered the search of her "House and all Suspicious places Carfully for all Images and Such like things as may and way Strengthen The Suspicion."⁵⁵ The justices also ordered that another jury of women be assembled in order to search Grace's body again, but they refused to appear. Since they refused to appear a second panel of women was summonsed to search her body and her house again, but, like the previous time, did not appear.⁵⁶ This could indicate that they feared that she truly was a witch and that they feared her powers. However, it could also mean that they

⁵² James, "Grace Sherwood, the Virginia Witch," 100.

⁵³ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁵ George Lincoln Burr, ed. "The Virginia Case of Grace Sherwood, 1706," *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1946), https://heinonline.org.proxy.wichita.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.death/nwitca0001&div=17&start_page=433&collection=religio_n&set_as_cursor=0&men_tab=srchresults, 439-440.

⁵⁶ Newman, "Under an Ill Tongue," 47-48.

believed that she was innocent and that the charges were ridiculous; given her past and the treatment that she received from her neighbors the former is more likely to have been correct.

On June 6 and 7, the court met again; this time it was considered to be a criminal suit. There were witness testimonies given again and Grace had little to say in her on defense. However, since the women had not appeared to examine Grace the justices ordered that the sheriff assemble another body of women to examine Grace's body by the next court session. The next session was not until July 5. Again, the women did not appear in court as they had been ordered to do, so the justices decided it was time to do another test instead. They "ordered Grace Sherwood 'by her own consent to be tried in the water by Ducking.'"⁵⁷ This showed that even though they feared Grace Sherwood and suspected her of being a witch they still allowed her some rights when it came to her person; they still had some regard for her liberties. They wanted to ensure that she was guilty before they were to hand down any punishments. In their minds, it would determine her guilt or innocence; if she sank, she was innocent and if she floated, she was guilty. This test was not nearly as common in the Colony of Virginia as it was in some of the other American colonies, but it was deemed necessary. The justices did express some concern over the well-being of Grace Sherwood because they postponed the water test a couple of days because of the weather being bad and they feared it would inhibit them being able to get Grace out of the water after it was over. The test actually took place on July 10. She was taken to a pond and stripped down to her shift and inspected by a few women to make sure she was not concealing anything that could affect the test. She was then bound hand to foot and then a rope was secured around her waist in order to pull her out of the water. There were men in a boat near her so that they could keep her from drowning. Grace failed the test; she floated.

After the test was over, her body was searched by a group of five women again. They found the same two marks that were found the first time that the court ordered her to be searched. She was then taken back into custody and imprisoned. She was ordered by the court to have a future trial, but it is unclear of what happened after that as many of the records were destroyed years later during the Civil War. She may have been sent to see a trial in Williamsburg under the Governor's Council or she may have stayed imprisoned until it was seen fit to release her. There are no records of what happened after she was imprisoned except that in June of 1714, she received a land "for 145 acres of land, which had belonged to her father."⁵⁸ From this it can be concluded that she was not imprisoned for more than eight years. This is quite odd considering that she failed a water test. In almost any other colony or in England she would have been executed for witchcraft. Under the law she should have been in the Virginia Colony as well, but instead the justices decided that she deserved to live.

The fact that she was out of jail eight years later is just another example of how the courts in the Colony of Virginia were much different than that of the other colonies. In New England she would have been killed for being found guilty by the water test. Her will was dated for 1733 and it was executed in 1740.⁵⁹ It is a minor miracle that she lived for nearly 34 years after she was accused of being a witch, examined by a jury of women who found what they thought were devil's marks, and failing the water test. In the case of Bridget Oliver Bishop, it took far less than the water test for her to have been sentenced to death.

In many ways the Virginia Colony was quite different from the other colonies, but it was especially different when it came to the way that witchcraft accusations and trials were handled. In the colony, there were far less accusations of witchcraft and often when there were rumors of witchcraft there were not many actual trials. People rarely made formal accusations against their neighbors in the Virginia Colony. During the witchcraft panic in Salem, there were more than one hundred legal complaints relating to witchcraft.⁶⁰ There were only two official criminal convictions for witchcraft in the Virginia Colony and there were also very few cases that were actually criminal accusations. The majority of the cases that dealt with witchcraft in the Virginia

⁵⁷ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁸ Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 52-53.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁰ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 321.

Colony courts were suits for slander and defamation because one person was claiming that another was a witch and that it had impacted them in some way. The courts were focused on keeping their citizens safe, but they also wanted to make sure that the people that were convicted not only received a fair trial, but that they also received a punishment that fit their crimes. This is one of the reasons that the punishments that those convicted of witchcraft received were not what they were supposed to be under law. The punishments that were handed out were much different as well. They gave punishments that were usually ended quickly; in William Harding's case he was convicted and fined and was whipped, but he did not face imprisonment or death like he would have in most other colonies and in England as well. Another way that the Virginia Colony stood out in this area was the fact that no one was executed in the Virginia Colony. This in itself is a major distinction from the other colonies, especially from Salem, and from England.