

Hoadly, Charles J. "A Case of Witchcraft in Hartford." *Connecticut Magazine* 5, no. 10 (October, 1899): 557-61 [CSL call number F 91 .C625]. A discussion of the case of Nathaniel and Rebecca Greensmith.

The case of Rebecca Greensmith and her husband, now to be related, was considered by Increase Mather, taking into account the circumstances of her confession, to be as convictive a proof of the reality of witchcraft as most single examples he had met with.

This author published at Boston in 1684, a small book entitled *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*, which is among the rarer of the Mather publications. It was reprinted in London in 1856, and is perhaps best known as Mather's *Remarkable Providences*. This book and a letter to the author, dated Dec. 4, 1682, by Rev. John Whiting, pastor of the Second Church in Hartford, have been drawn on for a considerable part of this narrative: the record and a single deposition being all the official papers connected with the trial which have come down to us. Cotton Mather published an abridged account of the case in the *Magnalia*.

There are in every community those who for one cause or another unfortunately incur the dislike and suspicion of the neighbors, and when belief in witchcraft prevailed such persons were easily believed to have familiarity with the evil one. Nathaniel Greensmith and Rebecca his wife, Elizabeth wife of Richard Seager, the wife of William Ayres, Andrew Sanford and Mary, his wife, were of this class. They all lived in Hartford in 1661-2, 1—2, and, as I think, south of the little river. Greensmith owned a house and barn with some twenty acres of land, valued at 46 pounds. He seems to have been engaged in agriculture. In March, 1650, he was found by the court guilty of stealing a bushel and a half of wheat. In June of the same year he was convicted of stealing a hoe and lying in the face of the court; in March,

1651-2, he was the unsuccessful defendant in an action of battery. He married Rebecca, widow of Jarvis Mudge, previously widow of Abraham Elson of Wethersfield, by whom she had two daughters who at the date of this tragedy were about 17 and 15 years old. She had no children by her second and third husbands. Rev. John Whiting speaks of her as "a lewd, ignorant and considerably aged woman."

In the spring of 1662 the daughter of John Kelley, a child of 8 years, died after a short illness. In her delirium she cried out against goody Ayres as afflicting her. Her parents and sundry of the neighbors thought the child was bewitched to death. Thereupon sundry persons were examined by the magistrates; some were committed to prison, while some managed to escape. Goody Ayres was arrested, and on some testimony being given in court said, "This will take away my life." However, by the aid of some friends she succeeded in escaping and with her husband fled with great precipitation. James Walkley was one who fled and took refuge in Rhode Island. Judith, daughter of Caspar Varleth, a dutchman, was imprisoned on "pretend accusation of witchery," as we learn from a letter in her behalf from her brother-in-law, Governor Peter Stuyvesant, dated Oct. 13, 1662. May 13, 1662, Nathaniel Goldsmith brought against William Ayres an action of slander respecting his wife, which we may suppose had relation to charges of witchcraft, but it never came to trial, the plaintiff and his wife being soon arrested for alledged familiarity with satan, and the defendant out of the court's jurisdiction. On the 13th of June, 1662, Mary, wife of Andrew Sanford, was indicted for having had familiarity with the great enemy of God and mankind and by his help having acted, and also come to the knowledge of secrets in a preternatural way beyond the ordinary course of nature, to the great disturbance of several members of this commonwealth. She was found guilty by the jury, but we do not know what became of her

or whether her case had anything to do with the Greensmiths. We only know that she was a reputed witch.

Ann Cole, daughter of John Cole, a godly man who lived next neighbor to the Greensmiths, had some time been afflicted and in some fears about her spiritual estate. In the year 1662, she was taken with strange fits, wherein she (or rather the devil as 'tis judged, making use of her lips) held a discourse for a considerable time. The general purport of it was to this purpose, that a company of familiars of the evil one (who were named in the discourse that passed from her) were conspiring how to carry on their mischievous designs against some, and especially against her, mentioning sundry ways they would take to that end: as that they would afflict her body, spoil her name, hinder her marriage, etc., wherein the general answer made among them was, "She runs to her Rock." This method having been continued some hours, the conclusion was, Let us confound her language that she may tell no more tales. And then, after some time of unintelligible muttering, the discourse passed into a Dutch tone (a family of Dutch then living in the town), and therein an account was given of some afflictions that had befallen divers. Among the rest a young woman (next neighbor to that Dutch family) that could speak but very little (laboring of that infirmity from her youth) had met with great sorrow, as pinchings of her arms in the dark. etc., whereof she had before informed her brother (one of the ministers in Hartford, probably \Whiting.) In that Dutch toned discourse there were plain intimations, given, by whom and for what cause such a course had been taken with her. Judicious S^r. Stone being by when the latter discourse passed, declared it in his thoughts impossible that one not familiarly acquainted with the Dutch (which Ann Cole had not at all been) should so exactly imitate the Dutch tone in the pronunciation of English. Sundry times such kind of discourse was uttered by her which was very awful and amazing to the hearers. Mr. Samuel Hooker, minister of Farmington, was present the first time, and Mr. Joseph

Haynes, a young man of about 21, then perhaps supplying the pulpit of Wethersfield, who wrote what was said; so did Mr. Whiting, colleague with Mr. Stone in the Hartford church, (from whose letter I am quoting), when he came into the house some time after the discourse began. Extremely violent bodily motions she many times had, even to the hazard of her life in the apprehensions of those that saw them; and very often great disturbance was given in the public worship of God by her and two other women who had also strange fits. Once in special, on a day of prayer kept on that account, the motion and noise of the afflicted was so terrible that a godly person fainted under the appearance of it.

There was a day of fasting and prayer on account of Ann Cole, and at which she was present, kept at the house of Mr. Wyllys, college class mate with Messrs. Hooker and Whiting, when Ann Cole cried out against Elizabeth Seager as a witch. Goody Seager hearing of it remarked that Mr. Haynes had writ a great deal of hodge podge that Ann had said that she was under suspicion for a witch. We should agree with goody Seager in regard to the matter, but it was hardly safe then so to characterize Ann's hysterical ravings. Seager was herself indicted for witchcraft Jan. 6, 1662-3 ; a second time, July 2, 1663; and a third time July 16, 6, 1665, when she was found guilty and after about a year's imprisonment she was released and found Rhode Island a more congenial place of residence.

To return to goody Greensmith, who was then in prison on suspicion of witchcraft. The court sent for Mr. Haynes and Mr. Whiting, to read what they had written; which when Mr. Haynes had done (the prisoner being present) she forthwith and freely confessed those things to be true, that she (and other persons named in the discourse) had familiarity with the devil. Being asked whether she had made an express covenant with him, she answered she had not, only as she promised to go with him when he called (which she had

accordingly done several times). But that the devil told her that at Christmas they would have a merry meeting, and then the covenant should be drawn and subscribed. Thereupon the fore-mentioned Mr. Stone (being then in court) with much weight and earnestness laid forth the exceeding heinousness and hazard of that dreadful sin; and therewith solemnly took notice (upon the occasion given) of the devil's loving Christmas.

A person at the same time present being desired the next day more particularly to enquire of her about her guilt, it was accordingly done, to whom she acknowledged that though when Mr. Haynes began to read she could have torn him in pieces, and was so much resolved as might be to deny her guilt (as she had done before) yet after he had read awhile, she was as if her flesh had been pulled from her bones, (such was her expression,) and so could not deny any longer. She also declared that the devil first appeared to her in the form of a deer or fawn, skipping about her, wherewith she was not much aifrighted, but by degrees he contrived talk with her; and that their meetings were frequently at such a place, (near her own house;) that some of the company came in one shape and some in another, and one in particular in the shape of a crow came flying to them. Amongst other things she owned that the devil had frequent use of her body.

At a particular court held at Hartford, December 30, 1662, the following indictment of Nathaniel Greensmith and of Rebecca, his wife, was found:

"Nathaniel Greensmith thou art here indicted by the name of Nathaniel Greensmith for not having the fear of God before thine eyes) thou hast entertained familiarity with Satan, the grand enemy of God and mankind, and by his help hast acted things in a preternatural way beyond human abilities in a natural course, for which according to the law of God

and the established law of this commonwealth thou deservest to die.”

The magistrates holding the court were Matthew Allyn, moderator, Samuel Wyllys, Richard Treat, Henry Wolcott, Daniel Clark, secretary, John Allyn. The jury were Edward Griswold, Walter Filer, Ensign Olmsted, Samuel Boardman, Gregory Winterton, John Cowles, Samuel Marshall, Samuel Hale, Nathaniel Willett, John Hart, John Wadsworth and Robert Webster.

Nathaniel Greensmith made no confession. Here is all that we know of the evidence given in against him:

Rebecca Greensmith testifieth in court January 8, 1662.

"1. • 'That my husband on Friday' night last, when I came to prison, told me that now thou hast confest against thyself let me alone and say nothing of me and I will be good unto thy children.

"2. 'I do now testify that formerly when my husband hath told me of his great travail and labor, I wondered at it how he did it; this he did before I was married, and when I was married I asked him how he did it, and he answered me, he had help that I knew not of.

"3. 'About three years ago, as I think it, my husband and I were in the woods several miles from home, and were looking for a sow that we lost, and I saw a creature, a red creature, following my husband, and when I came to him I asked him what it was that was with him, and he told me it was a fox.

"4. 'Another time when he and I drove our hogs into the woods beyond the pound that was to keep young cattle, several miles off, I went before the hogs to call them, and looking back I saw two creatures like dogs, one a little

blacker than the other; they came after my husband pretty close to him, and one did seem to me to touch him. I asked him what they were, he told me he thought foxes. I was still afraid when I saw anything, because I heard so much of him before I married him.

"5. 'I have seen logs that my husband hath brought home in his cart that I wondered at it that he could get them into the cart, being a man of little body and weak to my apprehension; and the logs were such that I thought two men such as he could not have done it.

I speak all of this out of love to my husband's soul, and it is much against my will that I am now necessitate to speak against my husband. I desire that the Lord would open his heart to own and speak the truth.

"I also testify, that I being in the woods at a meeting, there was with me goody Seager, goodwife Sanford and goodwife Ayres. And at another time there was a meeting under a tree in the green by our house, and there was there James Walkicy, Peter Grant's wife, goodwife Ayres, and Henry Palmer's wife, of Wethersfield, and goody Seager; and there we danced and had a bottle of sack. It was in the night and something like a cat called me out to the meeting, and I was in Mr. Varlet's orchard with Mrs. Judith Varlet, and she told me that she was much troubled with the marshal, Jonathan Gilbert, and cried; and she said if it lay in her power she would do him a mischief, or what hurt she could. Taken upon oath in court.'

"The jury return that they find the prisoner at the bar, Nathaniel Greensmith, guilty of the indictment.

"Respecting Rebecca Greensmith, the prisoner at the bar, the jury find her guilty of the indictment.

"The said Rebecca confesseth in open court, that she is guilty of the charge laid in against her."

This, with the concurrent evidence, brought the woman and her husband to their death as the devil's familiars.

On the 6th of January, 1662-3, Mary Barnes, of Farmington, was indicted for witchcraft and found guilty by the jury. It is quite likely that she was put to death; but we know nothing of her evil deeds, nor is her name mentioned in any of the depositions of evidence which have come to our hands.

The diary of Goffe, the regicide judge, as quoted in Hutchinson's History of Massachusetts Bay, says under date of January 20, 1662 (3) "Three witches were condemned at Hartford." — February 24. "After one of the witches was hanged the maid was well." These dates must be understood as those of the entry by the diarist, and not of the events recorded. Goffe was at this time living in concealment at Milford. In the office of the court of probate in this city may be seen "An inventory of the estate of Nathaniel Greensmith, who was executed the 25th of January, 1662 (s.)" It was filed but not recorded, and is in the handwriting of William Pitkin. The amount of the inventory was 137 pounds, fourteen shillings, one penny, besides forty-four pounds, four shillings, four pence, claimed by Hannah and Sarah Elson. On February 11, 1662-3, the magistrates took order as to the estate and the disposition of the two daughters; and at the quarter court held at Hartford, March 5th following, allowance was made to Daniel Garret, the jail keeper, of six shillings a week for keeping Nathaniel Greensmith and his wife, besides their fees, which is to be paid out of Greensmith's estate, and for keeping goodwife Barnes three weeks, twenty-one shillings, besides her fees, which goodman Barnes is to see discharged.

After the suspected witches were either executed or fled, Ann Cole was restored to health. She joined the church,

married Andrew Benton of Hartford, by whom she had children, and was living in good repute when Mather published his book in 1684. Andrew Benton, aged 63, died July 31, 1683. His gravestone is still standing in the old cemetery at Hartford. Ann (Cole) his second wife, died in 1686 according to Savage.

Mather tells a story about a man and woman mentioned in Ann Cole's Dutch toned discourse, (who I think were William Ayres and his wife,) who were put into the water bound hand and foot, to try whether they were witches or not. They floated, and doubting that a halter would choke them though the waters would not, they took their flight and were not seen in that part of the world afterwards. Mather condemns this mode of probation as superstitious and unlawful.

Mather also tells a story about a brother of Ann who was struck dead by lightning while at a prayer meeting at the home of his father-in-law, Henry Condliff at Northampton, April 28, 1664. He says he was informed, that when Matthew Cole was killed by lightening, the demons which disturbed his sister Ann (forty miles distant) in Hartford, spoke of it, intimating their concurrence in that terrible accident. Savage gives the date as April 28, 1665. As Ann was delivered from her trouble in 1663, there seems to be a discrepancy in the dates.