The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there

British novelist L.P. Hartley

Decades before the Salem, Massachusetts witchcraft hysteria, eleven people were hanged as witches in the Connecticut Colony. Individuals accused of witchcraft were brought to trial, most of them held at the Particular Court in Hartford. Ministers considered experts on witchcraft and demonic possession advised the court and gathered testimony and evidence for the prosecution.

Accused women—and a few men—had the opportunity to defend themselves against the charges in court. A jury determined their guilt—and some cases their innocence.

No one knows where the people executed for witchcraft were buried. They almost certainly would not have been interred in the Ancient Burying Ground, the primary graveyard in Hartford in the 1600s. Fourteen men who played a part in the Connecticut witchcraft trials, or had some connection to them, do lie in the Ancient Burying Ground.

Learn more about the diverse, complex history of the residents of early Hartford on our websites and follow us on social media.

Donations

The ABGA relies on individual generosity to help fund the upkeep of the burying ground. Your contributions support landscape maintenance, gravestone conservation and grounds preservation. Your gift at any level will help! For information about donating to the ABGA, visit theancientburyingground.org africannativeburialsct.org

Generally open from 8:30am to 5:00pm except for major holidays.

P. O. Box 347, Hartford, CT 06141-0347

Ancient Burying Ground Association

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Andrew Benton (1620-1683)
Andrew Benton purchased the property of husband-and-wife Rebecca and Nathaniel Greensmith five years after they were hanged for witchcraft in 1663. Following the death of his wife in 1672, he married Ann Cole, who a decade earlier accused Rebecca Greensmith and others of witchcraft. Ann lived with Andrew in the Greensmith's former house until his death. She continued to live there until her own death in 1686.

Thomas Bull (1605-1684)
In 1662, Thomas Bull served on a committee of inquest to determine if Goodwife Judith Ayres and Goodwife Margery Whipples had bewitched eight-year-old Elizabeth Kelly to death. Upon being touched by Goodwife Ayres, a red spot appeared on the cheek of Elizabeth Kelly's corpse. This was considered unnatural, and some suspected her death was caused by witchcraft. Subsequently, an autopsy was performed on her corpse. The physician conducting the autopsy misinterpreted normal decomposition as preternatural (beyond what is normal or natural) which was presumed as evidence of witchcraft. Goodwife Ayres was charged with witchcraft, and she and her husband were jailed. Friends broke them out, and they fled to the safety of Rhode Island.

Thomas Bull also served as a juror in the witchcraft case of Katherine Harrison of Wethersfield on May 25, 1669. The jury failed to reach a verdict and Katherine was retried later that year.

David Gardiner (1636-1689)
David Gardiner was the son of Lion Gardiner; Lion was known for commanding the Saybrook fort during the Pequot War 1636-37. David was the brother of Elizabeth (Gardiner) Howell, a sixteen-year-old new mother, who accused Elizabeth Garlick of East Hampton, Long Island of bewitching her. After her death, Elizabeth Garlick was brought to Hartford for trial. Although the testimony was compelling, she was not found guilty and returned to Long Island with the warning to behave properly. Some historians have seen the testimony from this trial later influencing little Elizabeth Kelley’s vicious accusations against Goody Ayres.

Jonathan Gilbert (1618-1682)
As marshal in Hartford, Jonathan Gilbert carried out the hangings of convicted witches Mary Sanford (1662), Rebecca and Nathaniel Greensmith, and Mary Barnes in 1663. Rebecca Greensmith had confessed in court to witchcraft and implicated her husband. Another alleged witch, Judith Varlet, jailed but never tried, deposed Gilbert, threatening that, “if it lay in her power, she would do him mischief or what hurt she could….”

Governor John Haynes (1594-1654)
Connecticut Colony Governor John Haynes served as a magistrate in the witchcraft trials of John and Joanne Carrington in 1650. The couple were convicted and hanged in 1651.

Reverend Joseph Haynes (1641-1679)
Reverend Joseph Haynes, the son of Connecticut Colony Governor John Haynes, was pastor of the First Congregational Church in Wethersfield. He was a member of a prosecutorial tribunal of ministers established in 1662 led by the Reverend Samuel Stone to investigate charges of witchcraft. Reverend Haynes recorded the ravings of Ann Cole while allegedly possessed by a demon, during which Cole accused many people of witchcraft, including Rebecca Greensmith. Greensmith was already in jail on suspicion of witchcraft. While awaiting trial she made a confession that was written down by Reverend Haynes and Reverend John Whiting. When at her trial Greensmith denied having confessed, Reverend Haynes read to the court his record of her previous admission. Greensmith then admitted having had “familiarity with the Devil,” and named other people including her husband as witches.
Reverend Thomas Hooker (1586-1647)

Reverend Thomas Hooker was the first pastor (1635-1647) of the First Church of Hartford. Hooker had previous experience dealing with the supernatural. In 1618, while still in England, he was invited by Mrs. Joan Drake's husband to help relieve his wife of "Satan's windings and turnings." He successfully conducted a "spiritual cure" of Mrs. Drake and left her house in 1621. Later he was chosen moderator at the Massachusetts Synod to try Ann Hutchinson for heresy. At that time, any discords in the Congregational churches of New England were attributed to Satan's influence. On May 26, 1647, the first person in New England executed for witchcraft was Alice Young (s), a native of Windsor, Connecticut. Since there are no records of the first trial for witchcraft in Connecticut, there is no evidence of the role Thomas Hooker might have played in the trial, however, clergy were usually called on as expert witnesses.

On June 20, 1647, twenty-four days after Alice's execution, Hooker preached a sermon in the Congregational Church of Windsor. The subject was "the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and the unrighteousness of men." One line in this sermon likely resonated among his listeners having just experienced Alice's trial and execution, "the sinner is like a living hell." Thomas Hooker died shortly after delivering this sermon, on July 7, 1647.

James Richards (1631-1680)

James Richards served as a magistrate at the 1665 trial of Elizabeth Seager, which resulted in a guilty verdict that was set aside by Connecticut Colony Governor John Winthrop Jr. Richards was a magistrate at the trial in October of 1669 that found Katherine Harrison guilty of witchcraft. After a group of ministers reviewed the evidence against Harrison, the court did not impose the death penalty. Instead, Harrison was fined and forced to leave the Connecticut Colony.

Reverend Samuel Stone (1602-1663)

Reverend Samuel Stone, pastor of the First Congregational Church of Hartford, played a role in many events of the Hartford witchcraft hysteria. As a result of Reverend Stone's inquisitorial guidance, at her trial in 1648 Mary Johnson of Wethersfield confessed to "familiarity with the Devil," the essence of witchcraft. She was found guilty, and reportedly thanks to Stone's pastoral counseling, was "judged very Penitent" at her hanging.

In 1663 Reverend Stone led a panel of three other ministers who served as a presbyterial tribunal to investigate charges of witchcraft. Reverend Stone described as "awful and amazing" the claims of Ann Cole, who accused multiple people in Hartford of being witches. Cole experienced violent physical fits and when allegedly possessed, she spoke gibberish and words in a Dutch accent.

Gregory Wilterson (also spelled Wilterton or Wolverton) (1593-1674)

Gregory Wilterson, a tanner by trade, in 1662 served on the committee of inquest to determine if Judith Ayres had killed eight-year-old Elizabeth Kelly with witchcraft. The findings of that committee and the prosecution that resulted are described in the entry for Thomas Bull.

Wilterson also sat on the jury that tried and convicted Rebecca and Nathaniel Greensmith and Mary Barnes and sent them to the gallows in January 1663. He was also a member of the first trial in 1665 of Elizabeth Seager for witchcraft which delivered a verdict of not guilty.

Samuel Wyllys (1631-1709)

Samuel Wyllys was a magistrate on the trials that convicted Elizabeth Garlick of witchcraft in 1658, Mary Sanford in 1662, and Rebecca and Nathaniel Greensmith and Mary Barnes in late 1662 and early 1663. All were executed. He was a magistrate for the trial in June 1665 in which Elizabeth Seager was convicted of witchcraft. However, a year in prison, Seager's verdict was overruled, and she was set free.

Samuel Wyllys saved many depositions of charges of witchcraft, which are the source of much of what is known today about those cases. The documents passed down in the Wyllys family for nearly two hundred years. Part of the collection was acquired by the Connecticut State Library early in the twentieth century, and the rest are at Brown University.
William Leete (1613-1683)
William Leete, deputy governor of the Colony of Connecticut, was a member of the court that indicted Katherine Harrison on witchcraft charges in 1660. She was found guilty, but not sentenced to death. Instead, she was fined and banished from Connecticut.

William Pitkin (1635-1694)
William Pitkin assisted with the autopsy on eight-year-old Elizabeth Kelly’s corpse in 1662 that led to Goodwife Judith Ayres being charged with witchcraft. The findings of that autopsy and the prosecution that resulted are described in the entry for Thomas Bull. Pitkin also sat on the grand jury that in 1662 convicted Mary Sanford of witchcraft, for which she was executed.

Nathaniel Willett (1618-1698)
Nathaniel Willett was the step-grandfather of eight-year-old Elizabeth Kelly, who on her deathbed accused Goodwife Judith Ayres of killing her with witchcraft. Willett served on the committee of inquest that investigated Elizabeth’s death. The findings of that committee and the prosecution that resulted are described in the entry for Thomas Bull.

Willett was also a member of the jury that in late 1662 and early 1663 found Mary Barnes and Rebecca and Nathaniel Greenough guilty of witchcraft, and sentenced them to hang, which was carried out in January 1663.