
Witchcraft in New York

The Cases of Hall and Harrison

George Lincoln Burr, ed., *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases 1648-1706*,
(New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1914) 41-52

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INTRODUCTION

by George L. Burr

IT is not strange that in the Dutch colony of New Netherland we hear nothing of witches. The home land of the Dutch had, beyond all others, outgrown the panic. It was a physician of Netherlandish birth, Johann Weyer, who in the later sixteenth century first wrote effectively against its cruelties. When his English pupil, Reginald Scot, protested yet more boldly, it was in Holland alone his book found reimpression. So far as is known, the seventeenth century saw there no executions for witchcraft, and after 1610 no trials. If the leaders of Dutch Calvinism were content with silence, the most eloquent spokesman of their Arminian rivals, Episcopius, was a frank disbeliever in the witch-pact and the witch-confessions. It was his fellow Arminian Grevius, who first demonstrated the iniquity of torture, the fruitful source of such confessions throughout Christendom; and that other Dutch-man, Balthasar Bekker, who in 1691 struck at the root of the terror by doubting the Devil himself, was but the last of a long line of such bold thinkers. These were of course in advance of their fellows; but that Holland was throughout the century a refuge for the victims and the foes of witch-persecution in neighbor lands would seem to point to a general skepticism, and how cautious, with all their credulity, even Calvinist divines had grown in such an atmosphere, New England learned in 1692 when she asked an opinion from her New York neighbors.^[1]

No wonder, then, that (as Mrs. Van Rensselaer tells us) "the one and only sign of the delusion . . . to be found in the [Page 42] annals of the Dutch province is a fear expressed by Governor Kieft that the Indian medicine-men were directing their incantations against himself. . . ,^[2] Accusations of witchcraft the New York jurisdiction did not wholly escape; but they followed the English occupation and were, in differing ways, a legacy from New England. Even the Dutch dominion had included towns peopled from New England; and it was to these that in 1662 (the same year in which, as we have seen, he was interceding with the Connecticut government for his young kinswoman Judith Varlet)^[3] Governor Stuyvesant found it wise, while granting them their own magistrates and their own courts, to prescribe that "in dark and dubious matters, especially in witchcrafts, the party aggrieved might appeal to the Governor and Council."^[4] But when in 1664 the English king bestowed upon his brother, the Duke of York, the territory occupied by the Dutch colony and equipped him with the means to take it by force, he added to the gift that greater eastern half of Long Island which had not only been settled, but till now had been governed, by the New Englanders. There, from the

first, witchcraft was in thought for the earliest settlement, at Southampton, had adopted for its code the law of Moses as codified by the Rev. John Cotton, with the death penalty both for witchcraft and for consulting a witch. [5] Already in 1658 Elizabeth Garlick, of Easthampton, had been indicted for witchcraft and sent to Connecticut for trial.[6] It is intelligible, therefore, that in [Page 43] 1665, the very first year of English control at New York, there came up from Seatalcott, or Setauket, the later Brook-haven, whose settlers had been drawn from the region of Boston, a case of witchcraft for trial by the supreme court of the colony, the "Court of Assizes." [7]

The two documents which make up the extant record of this case, with those relating to a woman who crossed the border after trial for witchcraft in Connecticut, form, so far as is known, the entire witch-annals of the New York province. They must serve us here in lieu of a narrative.

The documents of the Hall case, first printed perhaps in the New York National Advocate (August 2, 1821) and thence borrowed by Niles's Weekly Register (August 11), were included by Yates (with a part of the Harrison papers) in the appendix to his edition of Smith's History of New York (Albany, 1814), and more fully printed by O'Callaghan in his Documentary History of New York (quarto ed., Iv. 85-88; octavo ed., IV. 133-138). Those of the Harrison case, more fully ferreted out by Mr. Paltsits, are printed by him with especial care and with valuable notes, in the Minutes of the Executive Council of New York (Mban, 1910), 1. 390-395, II. 52-55. The originals of the Hall documents perished in the fire which befell the State Capitol at Mban on March 29, 1911; the Harrison documents were but slightly damaged

[Page 44] THE CASES OF HALL AND HARRISON

At the Court of Assizes held in New Yorke the 2d day of October 1665 etc.

The Tryall of Ralph Hall and Mary his wife, upon suspicion of Witchcraft.[8]

The names of the Persons who served on the Crand Jury.[9]

Thomas Baker, Foreman of the Jury, of East Hampton.

Capt John Symonds of Hempstead.

Mr. Hallet of Jamaica

Anthony Waters of Jamaica

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Thomas Wandall of Marshpath [10] Kills.

Mr Nicolls of Stamford

Balthazer de Haart of New Yorke

John Garland of New Yorke

Jacob Leisleri of New Yorke

Alexander Munro of New Yorke

Anthonlo de Mill of New Yorke

Thomas Searle of New Yorke

The Prisoners being brought to the Barr by Miard Anthony, Sheriffe of New Yorke, This following Indictmt was read, first against Ralph Hall and then agst Mary his wife, vizt.

The Constable and Overseers of the Towne of Seatalcott, in the East Riding of Yorkshire^[11] upon Long Island, Do Present for our Sovereigne Lord the King, That Ralph Hall of Seatalcott aforesaid, upon the 25th day of December, being Christmas day last was Twelve Monthes,^[12] in the 15th year of the Raigne of our Sovereigne Lord, Charles the Second, by the Grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith etc, and severall other dayes and times since that day, by some detestable and wicked Arts, commonly called Witchcraft and Sorcery, did (as is suspected) maliciously and feloniously, practice and Exercise at the said towne of Seatalcott in the East Riding of Yorkshire on Long Island aforesaid, on the Person of George Wood, late of the same place, by wch wicked and detestable Arts, the said George Wood (as is suspected) most dangerously and mortally sickned and languished, And not long after by the aforesaid wicked and detestable Arts, the said George Wood (as is likewise suspected) dyed.

Moreover, The Constable and overseers of the said Towne of Seatalcott, in the East Riding of Yorkshire upon Long Island aforesaid, do further Present for our Sovereigne Lord the King, That some while after the death of the aforesaid **[Page 46]** George Wood, The said Ralph Hall did (as is suspected) divers times by the like wicked and detestable Arts, commonly called Witchcraft and Sorcery, Maliciously and feloniously practise and Exercise at the said Towne of Seatalcott, in the East Riding of Yorkshire upon Long Island aforesaid, on the Person of an Infant Childe of Ann Rogers, widdow of the aforesaid George Wood deceased, by wh wicked and detestable Arts, the said Infant Chide (as is suspected) most dangerously and mortally sickned and languished, and not long after by the said Wicked and detestable Arts (as is likewise suspected) dyed, And so the said Constable and Overseers do Present, That the said George Wood, and the sd Infante sd^[13] Chide by the wayes and meanes aforesaid, most wickedly maliciously and feloniously were (as is suspected) murdered by the said Ralph Hall at the times and places aforesaid, agst the Peace of Our Sovereigne Lord the King and against the Laws of this Government in such Cases Provided.^[14]

The like Indictmt was read, against Mary the wife of Ralph Hall.

There upon, severall Depositions, accusing the Prisonrs of the fact for which they were endicted were read, but no wisse appeared to give Testimony in Court *viva voce*.

Then the Clarke^[15] calling upon Ralph Hall, bad him hold up his hand, and read as followes.

Ralph Hall thou standest here indicted, for that having not the feare of God before thine eyes, Thou did'st upon the 25th day of December, being Christmas day last was 12 Moneths, and at sev'all other times since, as is suspected, by some wicked and detestable Arts, commonly called witchcraft and Sorcery, maliciously and feloniously practice and Exer- **[Page 47]** cise, upon the Bodyes of George Wood, and an Infant Childe of Ann Rogers, by which said Arts, the said George Wood and the Infant Childe (as is suspected) most dangerously

and mortally fell sick, and languisht unto death. Ralph Hall, what dost thou say for thyselle, art thou guilty, or not guilty?

Mary the wife of Ralph Hall was called upon in like manner.

They both Pleaded not guilty and threw themselves to bee Tryed by God and the Country.

Where upon, their Case was referr'd to the Jury, who brought in to the Court, this following verdict *vizt* [16]

Wee having seriously considered the Case committed to our Charge, against the Prisoxirs at the Barr, and having well weighed the Evidence, wee finde that there are some suspitions by the Evidence, of what the woman is Charged with, but nothing considerable of value to take away her life. But in reference to the man wee finde nothing considerable to charge him with.

The Court there upon, gave this sentence, That the man should bee bound Body and Goods for his wives Apperance, at the next Sessions, and so on from Sessions to Sessions as long as they stay wthin this Government, In the meane while, to bee of their good Behavior. So they were return'd into the Sheriffs Custody, and upon Entring into a Recognizance, according to the Sentence of the Court, they were released.

A Release to Ralph Hall and Mary his wtf from the Recognizance they entred into at the Assizes.

These Are to Certify all whom it may Concerne That Ralph Hall and Mary his wife (at present living upon Great Minifords Island) [17] are hereby released and acquitted from any and all Recognizances, bonds of appearance or othr obligations-entred into by them or either of them for the peace or good behavior upon account of any accusation or Indic temt upon suspition of Witch Craft brought into the Cort of Assizes against them in the year 1665. There haveving beene no direct proofes nor furthr prosecucion of them or [Page 48] eithr of them since.-Given undr my hand at Fort James in New Yorke this 2lth day of August 1668.

R. Nicolls

At the Fort July 7th 1670.

Before the Governor.

Upon the Complaint of Thomas Hunt Sen'r and Edward Waters on behalfe of the Towne of West Chester against a Woman suspected for a Witch who they desire may not live in their Towne; The Woman appears with Capt. Ponton [18] to justify her selfe; her Name is Katharine Harryson. [19]

Their Peticion, as also another from Jamaica against her settling there were read.

Shee saith shee hath lived at Wethersfield 19 yeares, and came from England thither; Shee was in Prison 12 Months.

Shee was tryed for Witchcraft at Hartford in May last, found guilty by the Jury, but acquitted by the Bench, and released out of Prison, putting her in niinde of her Promise to remove. [20]

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An Ordr for Katherine Harrison to Remove from Westchestr.

Whereas Complaint hath beene made unto me by the Inhabitants of Westchestr agt Katherine Harrison late of

Wethersfeild in his Ma' ties Colony of Conecticott widdow. That contrary to the consent and good liking of the Towne she would settle amongst them and she being reputed to be a person lyeing undr the Supposicion of Witchcraft hath given some cause of apprehension to the Inhabitants there, To the end their Jealousyes and feares as to this perticuler may be removed, I have thought fitt to ordr and appoint that the Constable and Overseers of the Towne of Westchestr do give warning to the said Katherine Harrison to remove out of their precincts in some short tyme after notice given, and they are likewise to admonish her to retorne to the place of her former abode, that they nor their neighbours may receive no furthr disturbance by her. Given undr my hand at Fort James in New Yorke this 7th day of July 1670.

[FRANCIS LOVELACE].

An Ordr for Katherine Harrison and Ca ptn Richard Panton to appeare at the Fort before the Governour.

Whereas Complaint hath beene made unto me by the Tnhabitants of Westchestr agt Katherine Harrison widdow I'hat she doth neglect or refuse to obey my late Ordr concerning her removall out of the said Towne, These are to require you that you give notice unto the said Katherine Harrison as also unto Captn Richard Panton at whose house she resydeth, That they make their personall appearance before me in this place on Wednesday next being the 24th of this Instant month, when those of the Towne that have ought to object agt them doe likewise attend, where I shall endeavor a Composure of this difference betweene them. Giveu undr my hand at Fort James in New Yorke this 20th day of August 1670.

[FRANCIS LOVELACE.]

To the Constable of Westchestr.

[Page 50] Pres't At the Fort. Aug: 24th 1670.

The Governour

Mr. Delavall

The Secretary

The Matt'r to bee considered of is the Complaint of the Towne of West-chester against Katharine Harryson Widdow suspected of Witch-craft etc :

They being all appointed to appeare before the Governour this day;

There appeared for the Towne Edward Waters Constable and John Quinby;

For the Woman Capt. Ponton, Thomas Hunt Senr, and Junr, Roger Townsend, and one More. [21]

Capt. Ponton produced a Lett'r from Capt. Talcott [22] to him in Justification of the Womans Innocency, and another Letter from John Allen Secretary of Conecticott Governm't, in excuse of not sending the Womans Papers.

Josiah Willard [23] being desired to say what hee knew concerning the Woman, making Relation of what is certified by Mr. Allen, hee is one of that Governm't that knew of her Arraignment, and was spoken to (that hee would bee present) by the Constable, but hath nothing to say further.

It being taken into Consideracion, It is Ordered that the Discussion of this Matter bee referrd to the next Gen[er]al Court of Assizes ; In the meane time that shee give Security for her good Behaviour, during the time of her Abode amongst them at West-Chester.

A warrant to the Constable of Westchestr ro take an Account of the Goods of Katherine Harrison.

These are to require you to take an Account of such Goods as have lately beene brought from out of his Ma'ties Colony of Conecticott unto Katherine Harrison, and having taken a [Page 51] Note of the perticulers that you retorne the Same unto me for the doeing whereof this shall be yor warrant. Given undr my hand at

Fort James in New Yorke this 25th day of August 1670.

[FRANCIS LOVELACE.]

To the present Constable of Westchester.

An Ordr concerning Katherine Harrison.

Whereas severall Adresses have beene made unto me by some of the Inhabitants of Westchestr on behalfe of the rest desiring that Katherine Harrison late of Wethersfeild in his Ma'ties Colony of Connecticott widdow at present residing in their Towne may be ordered to remove from thence and not permitted to stay wthi their Jurisdiction upon an apprehension they have of her grounded upon some troubles she hath layne undr at Wethersfeild upon suspition of Witchcraft, the reasons whereof do not so clearly appeare unto me, Yett notwithstanding to give as much satisfaction as may be to the Complts^[24] who pretend their feares to be of a publique Concerne, I have not thought fitt absolutely to determyne the mattr at present, but do suspend it untill the next Genril Cort of Assizes, when there will be a full meeting of the Councell and Justices of the peace to debate and conclude the same. In the meane tyme the said Katherine Harrison wth her Children may remaine in the Towne of Westchestr where she now is without disturbance or molestation, she having given sufficient security for her Civill carriage and good behaviour. Given undr my hand at Fort James in New York this 25th day of August in the 22th yeare of his Ma'ties Raigne Annoq.^[25] Domini 1670.

[FRANCIS LOVELACE.]

Anno 1670.

Appeals, Actions, Presentmts etc. Entred for Hearing and Tryall at the Gen[er]all Cort of Assizes to bee helit in New Yorke beginning on the first Wednesday of Octobr 1670.

Katherine Harryson bound over to appeare upon the Complt of the Inhabitants of Westchester upon suspicion of Witch-craft.

[Page 52] In the case of Katherine Hanyson Widdow, who was bound to the good Behaviour upon Complt of some of the Inhabitants of Westchester untill the holding of this Court, It is Ordered, that in regard there is nothing appears against her deserving the continuance of that obligacion shee is to bee releast from it, and hath Liberty to remaine in the Towne of Westchester where shee now resides, or any where else in the Governmt during her pleasure.^[26]

[FRANCIS LOVELACE.]

Footnotes

[1] Mass. Hist. Soc., *Proceedings*, second ser., I. 348-358. See p. 195, below.

[2] *History of the City of New York in the Seventeenth Century*, I. 203. [3] See. P. 18. note 2.

[4] Bolton, *History of the County of Westchester* (revised ed., New York, 1881), II. 280, quoting vol. XXI.

233-238 of the "Albany Records."

[5] Howell, *Southampton*, pp. 47, 465; *The First Book of Records of the Town of Southampton* (Sag Harbor, 1874), p. 18 ff.

[6] The evidence against her may be found in the *Records of the Town of East-Hampton* (Sag Harbor, 1887 ff.), I. 128-140, 152-155, the record of the Connecticut court (she was acquitted) in the *Historical Magazine*, VI. 53, and a letter of Governor Winthrop to the Easthamptonians in the *Public Records of Connecticut*, I. 572-573. That Mary Wright, of Oyster Bay, who in 1660 was punished for Quakerism in Boston, was sent thither on a charge of witchcraft, as has been stated, seems contradicted by what we know of her case (see Hutchinson, *History of Massachusetts*, I. ch.I, *sub anno* 1660; Bishop, *New-England Judged*, ed. of 1703, pp. 220, 340, 461; *N. Y. Gen. and Biog. Record*, III. 37 ff.)

[7] This colonial "Court of Assizes" was made up of the governor and his council, with the sheriff of the colony and the justices of the three "ridings." It was a new creation, and, having come together on September 28 for its first annual session, it found this among its earliest cases. It was, however, with the aid of members of this court that in the preceding winter Governor Nicolls had drawn the code "the Duke's Laws," as they were to be called which now governed the colony.

[8] Their troubles antedated the change in government, and it would seem that at first their neighbors were on their side; for, under date of June 9, 1664, the town records recite that "The magistrates having Considered the Complaintes of Hall and his wife against mr. Smith, doo judge the sayde of mr. Smith hath not sufficiently made good what he hath sd. of her, and therefore mr. Smith is orderred to pay the woman five markes." (*Records, Town of Brookhaven, up to 1800*, Patchogue, 1880, p. 38.) But they had made a dangerous foe, for at Setauket "Mr." Smith could then hardly have meant any other than that well-known Long Island Character, Richard Smith, the founder of Smithtown, who had himself at Boston and at Southhampton experienced imprisonment and Banishment for Quakerism or Quakerly behavior, but was now a man of note in his region the "Bull" Smith of local legend. (Bishop, *New England Judged*, ed. of 1703, p. 11; Howell, *Early History of Southampton, L. I.*, second ed., Albany, 1887, p. 448; *Early Long Island Wills*, New York, 1897, p. 78 ff.)

[9] Of this jury only the foreman was from the part of Long Island just gained from New England. The four next-named, though English, were from those western townships which under Dutch rule had been a place of refuge for secretaries of every sort. "Mr. Hallet" was probably William Hallett, the sheriff who in 1656 had lost his place by opening his house to Baptist preaching. Most puzzling is "Mr. Nicolls of Stamford" for Stamford was not even claimed by the New York province. Can it be that William Nicolls (son of Matthias Nicolls, now secretary of the province and a member of the court), who was later to have so large a place in New York history, had temporarily established himself at Stamford, on the border? Notable among the six New Yorkers is the name of Jacob Leisler, later to play so strange a role.

[10] Maspeth.

[11] When, in honor of its new proprietor, New Amsterdam became New York, Long Island was for the same reason named "Yorkshire." Its "East Riding" was the portion, now Suffolk county, which had hitherto been New England's.

[12] *I. e.*, a year ago last Christmas December 25, 1663: the years of Charles II.'s reign were reckoned from the death of his father.

[13] This repetition of "sd" is clearly accidental.

[14] "The Laws of this Government" "the Duke's Laws," as they were later called had been drawn up in the preceding winter by Governor Nicolls himself, with the aid of other members of this court; and, though based on those of the New England colonies, they omitted all mention of witchcraft. That was significant; but it meant only that there was no provision for its punishment *per se*, as insult to the majesty of Heaven: harm wrought by witchcraft, whether to person or property, was covered by the general statutes, and where, as in this case, the harm charged was death, the offense (as the indictment shows) was accounted murder.

[15] The clerk.

[16] *Videlicet*, "to wit": we now abbreviate it by "viz."

[17] Now "City Island" in the Long Island Sound, at its western end.

[18] Captain Richard Panton, of West Chester, in whose home she had found shelter.

[19] Katherine Harrison was the widow of John Harrison, of Wethersfield, who died in 1666, leaving her an ample estate and three daughters. Rebecca, the eldest (born February 10, 1654), became at some time before June 28, 1671, the wife of Josiah Hunt of West Chester, or Westchester, son of that Thomas Hunt who now (July 7) is named as a complainant against her on behalf of that town, but in a following document (August 24) appears on her behalf. It is possible that this marriage antedated her coming to West Chester and explains it, more likely that it was a result of it and explains the changing attitude of Thomas Hunt. (See Adams and Stiles, *History of Ancient Wethersfield*, New York, 1904, I. 682, II. 416; *N.E. Hist. and Gen. Register*, XVIII. 58; *N.Y. Gen. and Biog. Record*, XLIII. 117; *N.Y. Executive Council Minutes*, I. 53, note.)

[20] There then follows a transcript, from the records of the Connecticut Court of Assistants, of this action in her case in its session of May 20, 1670. The documents of her trial, still extant at Hartford in the records of the county court and in those of the Court of Assistants (I. 1-7), and in part printed in the *Connecticut Colonial Records* (II. 118, 132), in Adams and Stiles, *Ancient Wethersfield* (I. 682-684), and in Taylor, *The Witchcraft Delusion in Colonial Connecticut* (New York, 1908), pp. 47-61, show that she was imprisoned and indicted in May, 1669, tried in October and found guilty by a jury, but by a special court of Assistants, to which the General Assembly had referred the matter with power, was in May, 1670, dismissed, as stated above, with a reminder of her promise to leave Wethersfield.

[21] *I.e.*, one more appeared.

[22] Captain John Talcott, then treasurer of the Connecticut colony, was one of its foremost men. He was a member of the Court of Assistants, and was doubtless largely responsible for its action. He was well known at West Chester, for in 1663 at the head of a troop from Connecticut he had taken the place from the Dutch.

[23] Of Wethersfield a trader, and doubtless here on some mercantile errand. He was a brother of the Rev. Samuel Willard, whom we have met (pp. 21-22) and shall meet again.

[24] Complainants.

[25] *I.e.*, "and in the year of Our Lord": the *q* stands for the enclitic *que*, and.

[26] Alas, it is to be feared that her neighbors did not make her life happy. Certain documents as to her property (printed in the *N.Y. Executive Council Minutes*, II. 393-395) make it probable that she left Westchester in May; and an entry of May 9, 1672, in the records (yet unpublished) of the Connecticut Court of Assistants "The court upon account of work done by Katherin Harrison for Danell Gerrad Twenty Shillings" may mean that she was permitted to return to Hartford, though perhaps it refers to work done while she was in custody. In any case, she in New York later, for, "during the temporary occupation of New York by the Dutch in 1673, an accusation was brought against her before Governor Colve, but was promptly and contemptuously dismissed" (Drake, *Annals of Witchcraft*, Boston 1869, pp. 133-134; Levermore, "Witchcraft in Connecticut," in the *New Englander*, XLIV. 812).

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