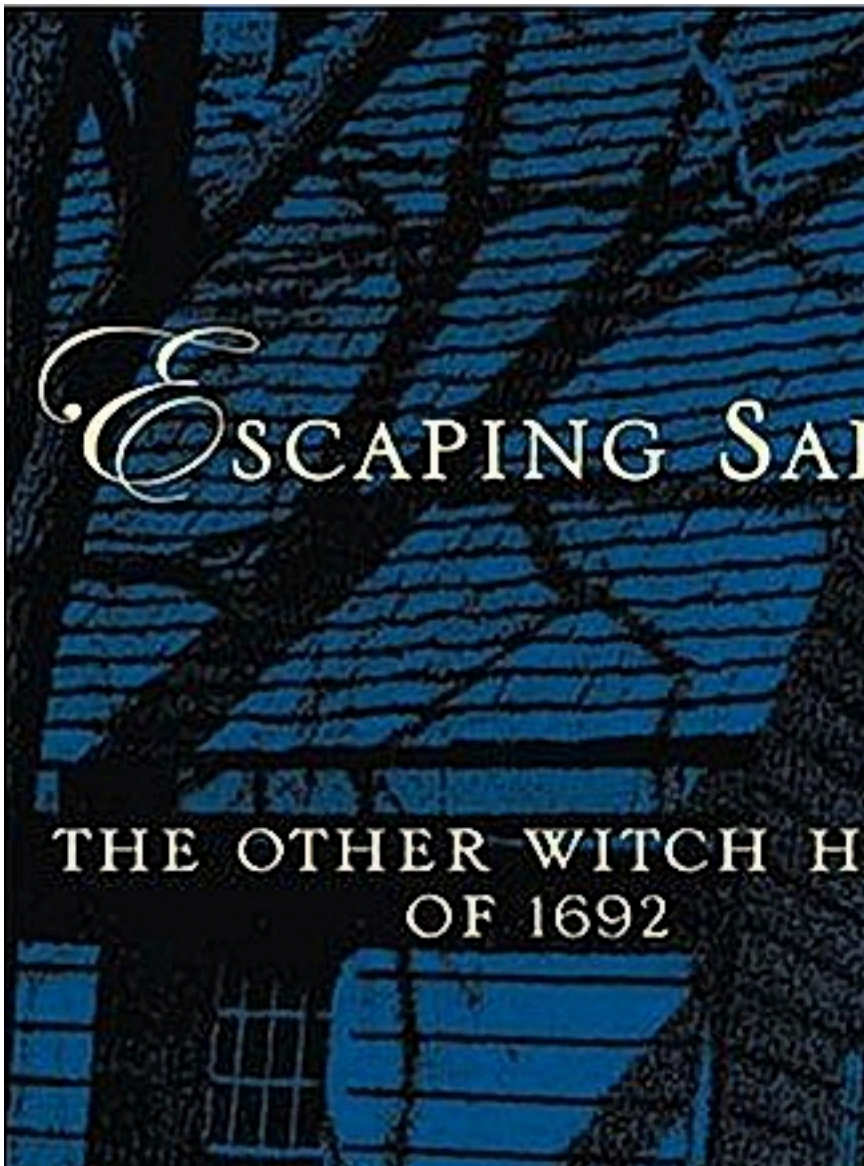
ESCAPING SA
THE OTHER WITCH H
OF 1692

Escaping Salem
New Narratives in American History

Series Editors
James West Davidson
Michael B. Stoff

Escaping Salem

The Other Witch Hunt of 1692

Richard Godbeer

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

2005

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York
Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai Dar
es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata Kuala
Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi São
Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Godbeer, Richard.
Escaping Salem: the other witch hunt of 1692 / by Richard Godbeer. p. cm.—(New narratives in American history)
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 0-19-516129-7—ISBN 0-19-516130-0 (pbk.)
1. Trials (Witchcraft)–Connecticut–Stamford–History–17th century. I. Title. II. Series.
KFC3678.8.W5G66 2004
133.43097469–dc22 2004043399 Printing number: 9 8 7

6 5 4 3 2 1

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on acid-free paper

for all those
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Foreword

In matters of witchcraft, the outbreak at salem village is the Jupiter of the solar system. It has attracted more notice in the popular press—and even among scholars—than any other such episode in American history. Yet the sheer magni tude of the outbreak, with its multiple trials, attendant hyste
ria, and wide geographical spread, has created a kind of grav itational distortion that has colored our broader notions of witchcraft. Although Salem was not typical of most outbreaks in colonial New England, it remains, by default, the archetype through which most Americans understand, or misunder stand, the subject.

Yet Salem was not the only community to serve up a witch hunt in 1692. Farther south, another incident roiled the area around Stamford and Fairfield, Connecticut, without producing an equally lasting notoriety. As Richard Godbeer demonstrates in the engrossing narrative presented here, in many ways the Stamford controversy reveals more about the anguish and am
biguities of witchcraft than do the more frequently examined tumults at Salem. Godbeer has drawn upon a rich trove of court transcripts and depositions to recreate the events arising out of

the fits of one Katherine Branch, a servant in the household of a respected Stamford townsman.

Escaping Salem is one of Oxford's New Narratives in Ameri can History, a series of books that foregoes the detached, often Olympian manner of much historical prose. We have challenged our authors to envision less traditional approaches to their sub jects, both in method and in language. Godbeer conjures the world of Stamford in 1692 not by deploying the explicitly ana lytical techniques of the social scientist but through a deceptively simple rendering of events, viewed from the perspectives of the various participants. At the same time, the insights of the social sciences have not been neglected, for as the afterword reveals, they very much shape the way the narrative is drawn.

Readers may be surprised to learn that the men and women struggling to understand Katherine Branch's fits exhibited a broad range of emotions and ideas. They were not always eager to blame the Devil for Branch's afflictions, on the one hand, or to assume, on the other, that she was either an impostor or a woman beset by mental illness. In Godbeer's carefully recon
structed world, all these readings were options, as the natural and supernatural coexisted uneasily alongside folk wisdom, supersti tion, and skepticism, as well as the natural philosophies and the ologies of early New Englanders.

James West Davidson
Michael B. Stoff

Series Editors

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Acknowledgments

It was in the late 1980s that i first encountered the cast of characters whose ordeal in the year of their Lord 1692 this book reconstructs. The witch hunt that began in Stamford, Connecti cut, a few months after the outbreak of afflictions in Salem Vil lage appeared as a short case study in my doctoral dissertation
and later in my first book. I had a feeling at the time that there was much more to be written about the Stamford witch hunt and its significance, but this was clearly another project for an other day. Since then I have often used the transcripts in an un dergraduate course that I teach on witchcraft in early New Eng land. That experience has taught me that Stamford's witch hunt has much to tell us about the varied, often remarkably cautious, ways in which New Englanders reacted to allegations of witch craft; it also shows with singular clarity how disagreements be tween neighbors over who or what was really causing an alleged bewitchment could compromise and undermine accusations. Above all, it is a gripping story that deserves to be told as such. Watching and listening as my students reacted to the documents,

pondering the implications of their questions, and digesting their insights has been an indispensable part of the process through

which the story of what happened that year took form in my mind's eye.

Now I have an opportunity to tell that story, thanks to Ox ford University Press. Peter Coveney has my sincere thanks for shepherding this project so deftly over the past two years; work ing with Peter, his editorial assistant June Kim, production edi tor Celeste Alexander, and copyeditor Terri O'Prey has been a genuine pleasure.

I am also grateful to the John Hay Library at Brown Univer sity, the Connecticut State Library, and the Stamford Historical Society for preserving documents from the 1692 Connecticut tri als and for giving me access to them. Local historians Ronald Marcus and Barbara Kaye have shared their deep knowledge of Stamford's past—I greatly appreciate their help and that of Irene Hahn, a volunteer archivist at the Stamford Historical Society. Many years ago John Demos kindly lent me his own painstak ing transcript of the depositions from these trials; that tran scription and David Hall's recently published edition of the trial documents, produced with the assistance of Emma Anderson and Anne Brown, have provided an invaluable basis for com parison as I developed my own version.

Writing has once again proven to be as much a collective as an individual endeavor that depends on the support

and advice of friends and colleagues. Michael Bellesiles, Wendy Lucas Cas tro, Madeline Duntley, Mary Francis, Denise Garrison, Piotr Gorecki, and Elizabeth Reis offered insightful and encouraging comments on the manuscript at various stages of its develop ment. Christine Heyrman, my professional fairy godmother who still casts her magical dust over all that I write, has been charac-

teristically savvy and forthright in her exhortations. But my prin cipal debt this time around is to Jim Davidson, who has guided this project from its first conception through to the final revi sions of the manuscript. I have had more than my fair share of good fortune in teachers, especially in the craft of writing. Jim is my latest mentor. People who are almost always right can prove rather trying, but Jim somehow manages to be completely right and yet completely likeable—this is quite a coup. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to learn from so benign a master of the craft.

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CONNECTICUT

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Norwalk

Bedford

Stamford

Greenwich

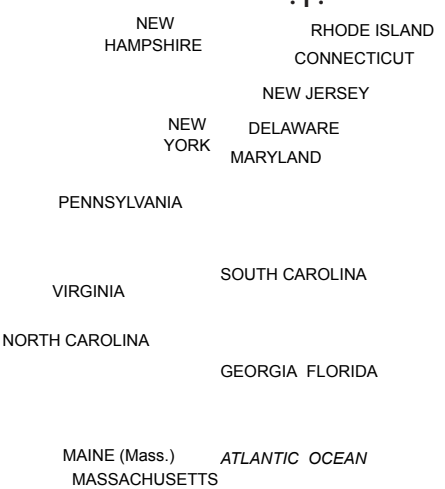
Prologue

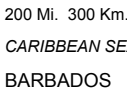
"A Witch! A Witch!"

It was early one evening in June 1692 and dusk was falling over Stamford, Connecticut, a compact little town of some five hundred souls perched on the northern

shore of the Long Island Sound. A young man named Ebenezer Bishop was strolling homeward through the town, hungry for his supper after help ing one of his neighbors mend a broken fence. Mary Newman, a woman in her early thirties whom Ebenezer had known since childhood, was heading in the opposite direction. They greeted each other cordially as their paths crossed and Ebenezer contin
ued on his way. But a few seconds later he came to an abrupt halt in front of Mister Wescot's house as a young woman's scream erupted from inside—a piercing, blood-chilling scream followed by a prolonged wail of pain and fright.

Ebenezer shuddered. He looked back over his shoulder, ex changed a meaningful glance with Mary, and then quickened his





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pace to put some distance between him and Mister Wescot's house. The scream came as no surprise to him or Mary. Both had witnessed the horrors that tormented the Wescot household. Like many of their neighbors in the close-knit town, they had visited Daniel and Abigail Wescot to lend support as the couple kept watch over the afflicted young woman in their charge. What they saw there had convinced Ebenezer and Mary that Kather ine Branch, a seventeen-year-old maidservant in the Wescot home, was bewitched.

Kate, as she was known, had been in that tormented state since the end of April. Without warning and for no apparent reason she would suddenly collapse into agonized convulsions, crying out that she was pinched

and pricked by invisible creatures, weeping and moaning in helpless terror. At other times she would sink into a paralyzed trance, stiff as a board and com
pletely senseless. She told her master and mistress that during these fits she saw cats that sometimes transformed into women before her eyes and then changed back into animal form. It was these creatures that attacked her, she said.

Stamford, the site of these ghastly afflictions, was a remote southwestern outpost of Puritan New England. Although much closer to New York than to Boston, its character and layout were typical of a New England town. First settled in 1641, Stamford had grown largely through natural increase. The town was re
markably uniform in its ethnic and spiritual makeup: residents were mostly of English descent and identified with the Puritan faith. Most of the houses were clustered together within easy reach of the meetinghouse, which enabled the faithful to keep close watch over each other, protecting their neighbors and

themselves from sin. With few exceptions, the families who lived there supported themselves by farming on strips of land that sur rounded the town. The townsfolk aspired to a life of peaceful or der and purposeful spirituality. Yet Stamford was at the present time anything but peaceful or orderly. Indeed, it was under su pernatural attack.

Though Ebenezer Bishop had never before witnessed

such horrors, he knew well that afflictions of this sort did occur and that they were often the handiwork of spiteful neighbors who knew how to wield occult powers against their enemies. Many were the stories he had heard growing up of strange fits and other bizarre ailments, the unexplained death of livestock, the myste
rious withering of crops, and the premature spoiling of food. To be sure, such incidents could sometimes be traced to natural causes. Yet Ebenezer knew that supernatural forces were con stantly at work in the world. Sudden losses or mishaps might well be judgments from God, sent to chastise sinners and en courage moral reformation. But sometimes these misfortunes turned out to be the handiwork of someone closer to hand with much less exalted intentions, a malign neighbor using dark cun ning to torment and even destroy—witchcraft might be to blame.

Daniel and Abigail Wescot had feared from the very onset of their servant's afflictions that Kate was under an evil hand. Still, they were willing to consider other explanations and so called in the local midwife to examine the young woman for signs of a physical ailment, which would be a much less disturbing expla
nation for her torments. The midwife was reassuring: she evi dently thought that Kate's symptoms might well have a natural cause. But when the treatment she recommended had no lasting

effect, the Wescots concluded that their servant's affliction

must be supernatural. Kate herself was clearly convinced of that. “A Witch! A Witch!” she cried out in her fits. “Why will you kill me? Why will you torment me?”

Meanwhile, the Wescots’ neighbors argued among themselves over the cause of Katherine Branch’s fits. As news of her tor ments spread rapidly throughout Stamford, townsfolk went to observe the young woman’s symptoms and to help the Wescots look after her. Some declared that Kate was clearly under an evil hand, but others suspected that she was counterfeiting her symp toms. It was after Ebenezer Bishop heard these conflicting re ports that he decided to go and see the fits for himself. Those who gathered in the Wescots’ home witnessed strange and dis turbing occurrences: mysterious lights that entered and traveled through the house at night; the inexplicable appearance of bruises on Kate’s body; the materialization of pins in her hand that Kate claimed were put there by witches; and, of course, the fits themselves. Kate’s body went through horrifying contortions that seemed far from natural and she fought off those who tried to restrain her with a strength that she had never before exhib ited. Though some townsfolk remained suspicious, many became convinced—among them Ebenezer Bishop—that Kate was in deed bewitched.

If so, the likely culprit was close at hand. Elizabeth Clawson, a longtime resident of Stamford, had quarreled often with the Wescots and many other townsfolk. Indeed, Goodwife Clawson was notorious for her argumentative nature and her vengeful spite. Some locals believed that she used occult powers to injure her enemies: confrontations with Goody Clawson were often fol-

lowed by strange ailments or mishaps in the households of those with whom she quarreled. No one in the town was surprised when Katherine Branch named Elizabeth Clawson as one of her tormentors.

There were others. The Wescots had also quarreled with Mercy Disborough, who lived several miles away just outside the county town of Fairfield. Kate had never met Goodwife Disbor ough, but she had overheard conversations about her. Goody Disborough's neighbors had long suspected her of witchcraft and Kate now claimed that Mercy was afflicting her as revenge for the quarrel with her master and mistress. As the days and weeks passed, Kate named additional women as her tormentors. Some were Stamford residents; others Kate knew only by reputation . . . until they began to visit her as apparitions during her fits.

How many witches, wondered Ebenezer as he neared his home, were involved in tormenting Katherine Branch? Why had they combined forces to afflict this one maidservant? And how would the authorities deal with them? News had reached Stam
ford that almost two hundred miles to the north, just outside Boston in the village of Salem, a group of girls and young women were wracked by fits similar to Kate's. They also had accused witches of afflicting them. Information about the afflictions in Salem had arrived piecemeal: there were as yet no newspapers in the North American colonies and so news spread slowly up and

down the Atlantic coastline, through letters or gossip carried by travelers; those who journeyed by land would stop at taverns along their way and share news with locals as they quenched their thirst. The road that connected Stamford to other towns was rocky and treacherous, with long and often ill-maintained

bridges that stretched precariously over deep ravines. Yet the town was not cut off from the rest of New England: it had a fine natu ral harbor and most travelers journeyed to and from Stamford by water. According to the merchants and seamen who sailed into the harbor, carrying with them news of the outside world, dozens of Massachusetts residents had already been arrested and charged with witchcraft. Was that about to happen in Stamford?

The Salem witch hunt is without doubt among the most in famous events of American history. Indeed it has the dubious distinction of being one of the few occurrences from the colo nial period with which most modern Americans are familiar. During 1692 over one hundred and fifty Massachusetts women and men were formally charged with the crime of witchcraft; many more were named informally as suspects. By the time that the trials came to a halt, nineteen of the accused had been hanged. Several others died in prison and one man was crushed to death during interrogation. This was by far the largest witch panic in colonial America: it convulsed an entire region and even today, over three hundred years later, it

continues to fascinate and ap pall students of history.

But it was not the only witch hunt to occur in New England that year. The other took place in Fairfield County, Connecticut, and began with Katherine Branch's torments. That other witch hunt of 1692 took a very different course from the panic in Mass
achusetts. Stamford townsfolk were for the most part remark ably cautious in reacting to Kate's accusations. The officials re sponsible for handling Connecticut's witch crisis refused to make hasty judgments about the accused and insisted on weighing

carefully the evidence against them: if witch suspects were to hang, their guilt must be irrefutable. *Escaping Salem* provides a corrective to the stereotype of early New Englanders as quick to accuse and condemn. That stereotype originates with Salem, which was, in its scale and intensity of hysteria, unlike other out
breaks of witch hunting in New England. Stamford's witch hunt was much more typical.

There were striking parallels between the Salem and Stamford witch panics. Both began with strange fits that many locals came to believe were caused by witchcraft. In both colonies accusa tions of witchcraft spread beyond the immediate community in which the afflicted lived. And there was no consensus in either Massachusetts or Connecticut as to whether the accused were guilty as charged. In the early summer of 1692 magistrates be gan convicting and hanging witch suspects in Salem based on

ev idence that some observers found problematic. Those who crit icized the court's actions—a growing chorus of magistrates, ministers, and other "gentlemen" in and around Boston—did not doubt the reality of witchcraft. Most of them also believed that the afflicted in Salem Village were bewitched. But how, they asked, could a court of law be sure that particular suspects had committed what were, after all, invisible crimes? The evidence presented against the accused was, they argued, insufficient to convict. By October of 1692 attacks on the court had become so forceful that the governor of Massachusetts, also worried by news that his own wife had recently been named, felt he had no choice but to suspend the trials. There followed an agonized post mortem over what had happened and why. The Salem witch hunt has been notorious ever since.

The witch trials in Connecticut did not begin until Septem ber 1692. We know that those involved were aware of recent events in Salem and the increasingly controversial convictions. The magistrates presiding over the trials in Fairfield County were determined to avoid the fatal errors of judgment that they be lieved had occurred in Massachusetts. It helped the cause of re straint that there was only one afflicted person at the center of the Stamford panic and that her own trustworthiness became, as we will see, a subject of debate. In fact, the magistrates agreed to prosecute only those suspects against whom there was evidence from witnesses other

than Katherine Branch herself. As a result, only two women came to trial: Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough. The limited scale of the witch hunt in Connecticut, especially when compared with what was happening in Massa chusetts that same year, accounts for its subsequent obscurity. But for the two women on trial and those who accused them, Connecticut's 1692 witch panic was no trivial matter. What fol lows is the story of their ordeal.

That story has two phases. Initially, the witch hunt took the form of a local and informal crisis as Stamford residents came together to interpret Katherine Branch's fits. Neither the Wescots nor their neighbors assumed straight away that Kate's fits must be the result of witchcraft. These were by no means the blink ered and credulous New Englanders that persistent stereotypes might lead us to expect. Neighbors came to observe Kate partly out of curiosity, partly to support the Wescots, and partly out of genuine concern for the young woman. But they also wanted to test Kate's claims. The Wescots' home became a laboratory of sorts as the people of Stamford watched Kate closely and carried

out experiments to ascertain whether her fits were natural, su pernatural, or perhaps counterfeit. Once the Wescots and other townsfolk became convinced that witchcraft was causing Kate's afflictions, her tormentors had to be identified, evidence had to be gathered, and witnesses had to be willing to speak out. All of this was risky given

that most previous witch trials in New Eng land had not resulted in conviction—if witches were tried, ac quitted, and released, they might wreak terrible revenge upon those who had testified against them.

The second phase of the story centers on the appointment of a special court to deal with the allegations against Elizabeth Claw son and Mercy Disborough. Both women were accused of hav ing "in a preternatural way afflicted and done harm to the bod ies and estates of sundry of their Majesties' subjects." Dozens of men and women now came together—as magistrates, jurymen, accusers, witnesses, and defendants—to participate in that most elusive of legal tasks, the prosecution of an occult crime. The two women had their supporters, especially Goody Clawson. But hos tile witnesses related feuds and confrontations between neigh bors, personal misfortunes that occurred soon after quarrels with the accused, and the venomous spite that apparently wove these stories together into a quilt of deadly vendetta. They had come to demand justice and retribution.

Yet the magistrates were committed to a careful and cautious sifting of that testimony, which placed them in potential conflict with those who believed that they and their neighbors had pro vided ample evidence to justify conviction. Much of the drama that unfolded in Fairfield County that year would center on the tension between fear of witchcraft and the scruples of the court.

Would the magistrates prove willing to convict the witches

whom local residents believed to be lurking in their midst? If not, they might save two innocent women from the hangman's noose. Or they might fail the past, present, and future victims of witchcraft by freeing malign individuals who would then continue to wreak havoc in their communities. At stake were the lives of two women, Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough, as well as those of their alleged victims.

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·*One*·

Katherine Branch's Fits

It was a beautiful afternoon in the last week of April 1692. Winter was giving way to a warm spring and the towns folk of Stamford were once again released from cramped winter companionship. Most families lived in small timber-framed homes with only four rooms, two downstairs and two above. A large stone or brick chimney stood at the center of the house, at its base an open fireplace. The outside walls were covered with clapboard. Inside the house a narrow entrance hall divided the two rooms on the ground level. A stairway, usually built along side the chimney, led to the upper chambers. The beams sup porting the steep shingled roof remained exposed, as did the other woodwork—these were unpretentious, utilitarian struc tures. Windows were mostly small and the houses dimly lit even during the day. There was no storage space, other than wooden chests, and so clothes and other belongings were all on view amidst the bustle of domestic activity. Some families created more space by extending the rear roof and adding more rooms, but most Stamford homes offered little in the way of privacy and must have seemed especially crowded by the end of winter. No

longer driven by the cold to huddle inside whenever they could, townsfolk now dispersed gladly into the fields, drawn by the free dom of being outdoors as much as the seasonal labors that came with springtime.

Abigail Wescot's husband, children, and servant had all left the house and she was enjoying a moment of peace. Though the Wescot family had not been spared its share of trials and tribu lation, Providence now seemed to be smiling upon them. Her children were flourishing, even her eldest daughter Joanna, who some years ago had fallen prey to strange pains and frights but was now fully recovered. Abigail's husband Daniel, who at forty nine was her senior by just over a decade, had become a leading figure in the town. Daniel's prominence in local affairs had re cently been confirmed by his election to a second term as one of Stamford's representatives to the colonial assembly. That their neighbors recognized Daniel's qualities was a source of much pleasure to Abigail. He was also a sergeant in the town militia and she hoped that he might one day become an officer. Mean while the Wescots' status in the town earned them the honorific titles of Mister and Mistress, much more satisfying than the mod est though respectable prefixes Goodman and Goodwife. And besides, the linen was drying rapidly outside in the spring sun shine. Praise be to God!

The tranquil silence was suddenly shattered as Katherine Branch, the family's seventeen-year-old servant, burst through the door. She had been sent to

pick herbs in a nearby field, but the wretched girl had none with her. Katherine was crying and moaning, her hands clutching her chest, and she was panting as though the Devil himself had chased her home.

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Katherine Branch's Fits

"Well, where are the herbs?" her mistress asked sharply, re sentful of this sudden end to her peaceful meditations. "What's the matter with you?"

Kate gave no answer, but fell to the floor, her hands clasped and her body strangely contorted; she wept piteously. Abigail's eyes narrowed. She neither liked nor trusted the young woman. Was this some trick to avoid completing her chores for the day? Or had something happened in the field to bring on this outburst?

A few hours later, Daniel Wescot returned home and Kate was still lying on the floor, her eyes red from crying and her hands clamped together as if held in place by some invisible force. He stopped short at the door, taken aback, and then shot a ques
tioning glance at his wife. Abigail knew exactly what the flicker of panic in his eyes meant. He was recalling the torments that had assailed their daughter Joanna some years back. Daniel had never quite gotten over the horror of that ordeal. Their little girl had been plagued by spasms of pain and insisted that something or someone entered her room at night to torment her; she saw creatures running from one hiding place to another when no one else could see them. These disturbances continued night after night for three weeks. So frightened

was the little girl that her parents could not persuade her to undress and go to bed in the house. Most nights they took her to stay with their neighbor next door, where she would calm down and eventually get some sleep. At the time Abigail and Daniel had worried that Joanna might be under an evil hand and so they sent her away to stay with friends in a nearby town. The torments subsided and Joanna re turned a few months later.

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ESCAPING SALEM

Abigail understood why the sight of Kate contorted in fear on the floor would remind her husband of Joanna's affliction, yet their maidservant's condition was surely different. She had not said that anyone was after her. Indeed, she was refusing to say anything. She just lay there, weeping and whimpering. Best let her be, Abigail thought, and the episode would likely pass. If not, they could call in Sarah Bates, the local midwife. Daniel had of ten lamented that Stamford had no physician, but Abigail had faith in Sarah's medical knowledge and skill. Meanwhile they must try to remain calm.

Sarah Bates found Katherine Branch lying immobile on a bed. The Wescots, who were clearly anxious, told Goodwife Bates that their servant had taken ill the day before. Some of the time Kate lay rigid as if in a trance, but she also had screaming fits and at times cried uncontrollably. The girl had said little since the on
set of these afflictions, though she did reveal during an interval of relief that whilst out in the field gathering herbs

she had been seized with a pinching and pricking at her breast.

Goody Bates had no formal training as a medical practitioner, but she did have many years of experience in observing and treat ing her neighbors' ailments. Her expertise ranged far beyond midwifery. It was grounded in centuries of herbalist tradition as well as the shared wisdom of the local female community in which she was raised. The women of Stamford—young and old, mothers and daughters, household mistresses and their ser vants—gathered regularly to support each other as they braved the travails of childbirth and illness. Women like Sarah Bates emerged as experts from those communities of mutual care, their

skills endorsed by the experience and gratitude of their neigh bors rather than university degrees or formal apprenticeship. Goody Bates had a finely honed instinct for discerning what ailed
a sick neighbor and was widely respected for her abilities. Sarah understood that the operations of the human body could be disrupted by divine judgment and devilish intrusion as much as by natural ailment. Any responsible diagnosis had to take into account the possibility of supernatural intervention. God might have inflicted the symptoms as a punishment for sin; ideally this would prompt repentance and reformation as the in flicted person recalled the moral lapses that had provoked God's anger. She also knew of occasions on which experienced

doctors and midwives had concluded that an ailing neighbor was be witched. Katherine Branch's symptoms were certainly odd and resembled closely descriptions that Sarah had heard of bewitch ment and demonic assault.

Kate's mother had also suffered from fits—the falling sick ness, or epilepsy, as some called it. Perhaps Kate had a similar malady. But medical experts disagreed as to what caused the falling sickness: some argued that it was rooted in a natural dis ease, others that the symptoms were brought about in at least some cases by possession or witchcraft. Goody Bates saw no rea son to ignore the possibility of a natural explanation. She advised the Wescots to burn feathers under Kate's nose, a method that she often found effective when dealing with fainting fits. The midwife then asked for a cup of water, drank gratefully, and ex changed a few pleasantries with Mister and Mistress Wescot. Be fore leaving she encouraged them to fetch her again if the ser vant's condition did not improve.

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ESCAPING SALEM

The following morning Mister Wescot came again for Goody Bates, this time, even more anxious. The feathers, he told her, had seemed to help at first, but Kate had since relapsed into a stupor: she was, he said, both senseless and speechless. Sarah found the servant much as Mister Wescot had described. Kate lay as though dead, her eyes half shut, though her pulse was beat ing normally. Mistress Wescot and her daughters were

gathered round the young woman, watching closely.

Since the feathers had not produced any lasting effect, some other form of treatment must now be chosen. But what? Mis tress Wescot wanted Kate bled. To be sure, purging the body of excess fluids so as to restore a healthy balance between the four humors—blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy—could solve many physical disorders. Yet the midwife knew that bloodletting was risky when dealing with a patient who seemed so close to death. She said as much, but Mistress Wescot insisted that they try, so Goody Bates removed a pin from her pocket.

Just as she was about to prick Kate's foot, the servant broke out of her stupor and exclaimed, "I'll not be blooded!" "Why?" asked Sarah, astonished that the maid should so sud denly revive.

"It would hurt me," Kate replied.

Mistress Wescot reassured her servant that "the hurt would be but small, like the prick of a pin." Kate then calmed down. Sarah observed the girl with growing suspicion as Kate held out her foot obligingly. This was a remarkably swift recovery from lying senseless on the bed. Sarah bled her a little and then Kate lay down again. A few minutes later, Kate suddenly grabbed the bedspread on which she lay and screamed.

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Katherine Branch's Fits

"Mother," gasped one of the Wescots' daughters, "she cried out!"

"She is bewitched!" declared Mistress Wescot.

Sarah flinched, recalling that the Wescots had reacted the same way some years earlier when their daughter Joanna had fallen sick. But the midwife had no time to consider this before the servant girl surprised her again. Kate turned her head away from the Wescots as if she would hide it in the pillow—and then she laughed.

Goody Bates did not know what to think. Was Kate convinced that her sickness was natural and so surreptitiously laughing at her mistress for thinking that she was bewitched? Or was she fak ing her symptoms and enjoying her success in duping the Wescots? Or was the laugh itself a symptom of her fits? Deter mining the true cause of Kate's behavior was not going to be easy.

When Goody Bates had first voiced her opinion that Kate's affliction might well have a natural cause, Daniel Wescot was willing to entertain that possibility. After all, finding a natural explanation would spare them from having to confront the darker possibility that their household was once again under oc
cult attack. But during the days that followed, all that Kate re vealed of her strange afflictions made Mister Wescot more and more convinced that his servant was indeed bewitched.

Shortly after the midwife's second visit, Kate announced that during her fits she saw a cat that spoke to her. It invited her, she said, to go away to a place where there were "fine things" and "fine folks." There followed more fits and she seemed much tor-

mented. When Daniel Wescot questioned her further, Kate said that the cats (for now there were several) told her they would kill her. A few days later she saw a room with a table on which was spread a variety of meats; there were ten cats eating at the table and they asked her to join them. But Kate told her master that she ran away to hide, explaining that she saw "a cat coming to her with a rat, to fling it in her face." Not long afterward she told him that the cats were again threatening to kill her, "because I told you of it." Sometimes, Kate declared, the cats turned into women and then back again, though who the women were she could not say.

One night, about two weeks after the afflictions had begun, Kate's fits became much worse and she suddenly cried out, "A witch! A witch!"

When her master asked what had happened, Kate said she had felt a hand reach out to her in the darkness.

As Daniel Wescot reflected upon Kate's fits, it seemed to him that the creatures she saw were more than likely witches in ani mal form, conspiring to lure his servant into their hellish band. He knew from the sermons he had heard on the subject that witches, the Devil's disciples on earth, were always campaigning to augment their hateful fellowship. It would not be surprising if they tried to tempt Kate with "fine things" and splendid feasts. Anyone could fall prey to such temptations—such was the moral weakness of all men and women. But Kate would be especially susceptible, given the circumstances under which she had come to live as a servant in his household.

It was not unusual for young people in New England

com munities to be “put out” by their parents to work in neighbor-

ing households so as to learn a trade or skill. Sometimes they lived there as well, especially if the distance between homes was great. Parents who feared that they were overly indulgent to their children might send their offspring to live for a while in house
holds where they would receive a stricter form of governance: ensuring a proper sense of discipline and humility was much more important than the immediate comfort of children or their parents. Whether sent away to learn a particular craft or to be saved from the sin of pride, such children knew that their being put out was temporary; at some point they would either return to their parents or set up households of their own. But other young people went to work as servants because their families were unable to support them or because they had been orphaned. Such was the lot of Katherine Branch: her parents were dead. She had no inheritance to use as a dowry and so had little prospect of securing an advantageous marriage. Kate might well crave “fine things,” ruminated her master, but she almost certainly would not get them. The servants of Satan were cunning: they knew the soft spots of potential recruits and went straight for them.

Any doubt in Daniel Wescot’s mind that they were dealing with witchcraft disappeared once Stamford’s minister became in volved. The venerable John Bishop was an

educated and experi enced man of God: he had graduated from Oxford in 1632, just a few years after the first wave of Puritan settlers sailed to New England; he had served as pastor in Stamford for nearly fifty years. Mister Bishop visited the Wescots' home several times to observe and counsel their servant. On one occasion he brought with him Thomas Hanford, the pastor in nearby Norwalk since

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1654. Both men were clearly convinced that Kate was bewitched. Surely they could be trusted to understand such things? The Reverend Bishop explained to Kate that the witches wanted her to join them in secret devotion to Satan—hence their anger when she told her master and mistress about them. God preserve her from such assaults! Both ministers warned Kate that she must not yield or else her soul would be lost to the Enemy of mankind. On leaving the house, the two ministers promised to observe a day of fasting and prayer in company with the Rev erend Abraham Pierson of Greenwich, a much younger pastor who had arrived in Connecticut the previous year. Daniel Wescot readily trusted their reading of the situation; he took comfort that they and the Reverend Pierson would be praying for his household in its affliction.

Before he left, John Bishop impressed upon the Wescots that they must keep a close watch over their young charge and be on hand at all times to protect her. Such was their duty as master and mistress. Like any

other servant, Kate was a member of their family, albeit in a subordinate station. The Wescots were responsible not only for meeting her material needs—food, clothing, and shelter—but also for supervising her education and spiritual welfare. The Reverend Bishop taught in his sermons that the head of a family should think of himself as fulfilling the role of a priest within his household: he must do all he could to nurture the spiritual well-being of those living under his roof. A household mistress also had a crucial role to play, setting an example of Christian conduct and protecting the young people under her care from temptation. Given that Kate no longer had any parents of her own, the Wescots had a special responsibility to-

The Devil as a black, horned creature with wings, ac companying witches on broomsticks *The woman on the ground may also be a witch, or the three figures on broomsticks may be urging her to join the witch confederacy. The crucial feature is the pres ence of the Devil—ministers insisted that he was behind all acts of witch craft and that those afflicted by witches were in great peril since the ser vants of Satan often promised to end their torments if the victims agreed to become new recruits.* (Source: Woodcut from *Wonders of the In visible World,* an account of the Salem witch trials written by Boston minister Cotton Mather, published in 1692.)

ward her. That duty to provide both practical and spiritual care would now take on a new and extreme form.

Watching over a servant as she endured these strange fits was, to be sure, not as heart-wrenching for the Wescots as it had been

to tend their own daughter when she went through similar tor ments. Yet it did distress them to see Kate—or indeed anyone— in such agony. They could hardly send the young woman away, as they had Joanna, to escape the evil eye of whoever was be witching her: Kate was their servant and they could not spare her labor. Nor could they simply turn her out. Abigail Wescot trusted Kate a good deal less than did her husband, but the couple did agree that as master and mistress it was their duty to see her through this ordeal.

That duty involved protecting Kate from the physical tor ments and insidious overtures of the creatures afflicting her. Sometimes those who fell victim to supernatural assaults harmed themselves or others during their fits. Clearly she could not be left alone. Abigail would have to keep an eye on her as Kate dressed and made ready for breakfast. Watching her during meals was easy enough. But she would also have to be supervised closely while doing her household chores. Whenever Kate went outside to work in the yard, someone must accompany her. And night would bring no reprieve, for during the hours of darkness she was constantly afflicted by strange visions and torments. One night she had near forty such episodes.

The Wescots followed their pastor's instructions, but their close observation of Kate disrupted completely their routine du ties, while their constant dread of her next fit played havoc with their nerves. Husband and wife were

soon exhausted. After con sulting with his wife, Daniel decided to ask their neighbors for help in keeping watch over Kate so that he and Abigail could get some rest. Neighbors could also help his wife to cope while he was away from home. Though the timing was unfortunate,

Daniel had to leave on a trip to Hartford, over sixty-five miles away.

The Wescots' neighbors responded readily. To request assis tance in time of need was customary and expected in a place like Stamford. At harvest the men would help each other gather their crops; women would often meet in each other's households to give help and companionship as they spun and wove, prepared to give birth, and struggled through illness. These were, in a very practical sense, communities of households, sharing labor, ex changing goods, and providing Christian fellowship.

But Daniel Wescot had other reasons for calling in his neigh bors. They could confirm that something supernatural was in deed plaguing his home. Daniel knew that some neighbors sus pected Kate of feigning her fits and he did not want it put about
that he was being duped by his own maid. Besides, if neighbors shared in watching over Kate, they could help identify the witches afflicting her. Kate's descriptions of the women who came to her during the fits were so far very hazy, but Daniel was determined to ferret them out. He thought he knew who might have tor
mented his daughter several years ago. Might not the

same per son be involved in his servant's bewitchment? If Daniel had wit nesses to confirm Kate's reports or, better still, if the watchers themselves saw women entering the house as afflicting specters, that would strengthen his hand, should he seek to prosecute the malefactors.

Daniel Wescot had no intention of letting Kate's tormentors get away with their attacks. Left unchecked, the afflictions might spread to other members of his household. It would break his heart if Joanna's fits returned; and there were the other children

to consider. Whoever was bewitching Kate might well be doing it to spite him and his wife rather than Kate herself. If so, the witches had to be stopped before they tired of tormenting the servant and went after his own kin.

It was over twenty years since anyone had been tried for witchcraft in Connecticut, but Daniel remembered hearing that an Irish woman had been hanged for witchcraft in Boston just a few years ago. He wanted the witches responsible for his household's afflictions punished and he wanted to be rid of them. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." That was, after all, God's Word.

David Selleck was feeling extremely anxious by the time he and Abraham Finch arrived at the Wescots' house to watch over Katherine Branch through the night. Mister Wescot and his wife looked worn and tense, which did nothing to calm David's nerves as he and Abraham sat with the Wescots and drank a cup of cider. The rituals

of hospitality over and done with, the master of the house led them up to the room where Kate was sleeping.

Mister Wescot told his neighbors they would need to take turns keeping watch over Kate as she slept. Someone had to be within easy reach to restrain her once the fits began and David agreed to go first, if only to get it over with. He settled on the narrow bed, just a few inches away from the young woman. He could hear her breathing, but she gave no other sign of life. Abraham sat nearby, gazing apprehensively at nothing in particular. It had been an arduous day and David felt tired, but there was no danger of him falling asleep—he felt far too tense.

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Katherine Branch's Fits

Suddenly the Wescots' youngest daughter cried out in another room. David sat up in alarm and glanced down at Kate; thank fully, she was still asleep. Abraham crept out to investigate and returned a few minutes later. Nothing more than a bad dream, he reported, and her parents were calming her down.

When the time came for David to be relieved, he carried a light into the adjoining room, where he paced to and fro, unable to relax. All of a sudden he heard Kate scream and rushed back into her room. There he found Abraham sitting up on the bed, deathly pale, with Kate lying across his feet in what seemed to be a dead faint.

"She cried out," Abraham said, "and when I looked up I saw a ball of fire as big as my two hands pass across the

room to the hearth, and then it disappeared."

Minutes later Kate came to her senses and they asked her why she had screamed. A woman had come into the room, she said, a woman with fiery eyes.

Once Kate settled down again, David took another turn lying beside her. Abraham, still shaken, lay on a chest nearby. Not long afterward David felt a pricking in his side that caused him to start. Abraham asked what had happened and he answered, "she pricked me."

"No, I didn't," Kate retorted, "it was Goody Crump." Before either man could ask who that was, Kate held her hand over the side of the bed, palm open, and said, "Give me that thing that you pricked Mr. Selleck with!"

She then closed her hand. Abraham took hold of it, opened it up, and found a pin, which he removed. Kate's hand had been

empty when she stretched it over the side of the bed, he would swear it. Both men were now completely unnerved.

A few nights later, Ebenezer Bishop, another of the Wescots' neighbors, was sitting beside Kate's bed when she suddenly called out: "Goody Clawson! Goody Clawson!"

Staring intently at what seemed to be an empty corner of the room, Kate declared, "Goody Clawson, turn head over heels!" After this she had a violent fit and cried out at the top of her voice, "Now they're going to kill me! They're

pinching me on the neck!"

Ebenezer took the light, leaned over from where he was sit ting, and examined the young woman's neck. He could see a red mark about the same size as a large coin. Shortly afterward Kate cried out that they were pinching her again and pointed to her shoulder, where he could now see another red patch.

A few hours later both marks turned black and blue as though she had been bruised. But who or what had done this to Kate? Ebenezer had been sitting right beside her. He knew that no vis ible force had caused those marks. Any doubts he may have had that Kate was under an evil hand faded as he observed the marks on her neck and shoulder darken to a stark, menacing color while she slept fitfully.

Joseph Garnsey offered to spend time at the Wescots' house while Mister Wescot was away in Hartford, partly as a gesture of neighborly support but also because he was curious to see the maidservant's fits for himself. How could he not, after hearing the descriptions of Kate's torments that were circulating through

the neighborhood? Abraham Finch had told him of the fireball. And the stories of her physical contortions were equally amaz ing. Samuel Holly, another neighbor who had watched over Kate, told Joseph that the young woman's breasts inflated like blad ders and then suddenly collapsed into her body, soon afterward filling out again.

“And there was a great rattling in her throat as if she was choking,” Samuel added. “Believe me, all that I saw was beyond nature.”

Mister Wescot himself claimed that during one of her fits Kate stuck out her tongue to a great length. “I put it back into her mouth again,” he said, “and then looked in her mouth, and could see no tongue but what looked like a lump of flesh down her throat.”

Kate’s master also described how on one occasion she had been lying on the bed and was suddenly flung up against the headboard. He had not been paying attention at that instant and so did not see her rise up, but, hearing a noise, he turned toward the bed and saw her coming down. Minutes later it happened again. This time he saw her go up and down, with no apparent means of propulsion. Another time Kate was lying on the bed and then suddenly sprang up without the help of her hands or feet, landing on the floor six feet from the bed. Joseph had heard many stories of bewitchment, but none to equal this. Surely such occurrences were “beyond nature.”

Yet Joseph had also heard talk about Kate’s fits being coun terfeit. Sarah Kecham told him about an experiment that she and several others had witnessed. After watching Kate lie in a stupor and then suddenly scream out in terror, Thomas Asten had de clared that he was sure she was bewitched. Sarah disagreed, say-

ing she did not believe there to be any witch in the town. Good man Asten replied, “I’ve heard it said that if a person

is be witched, you can take a sword and hold it over them and they will laugh themselves to death."

He took a sword and held it over Kate, whereupon she burst into laughter. Sarah whispered that Kate might have laughed sim ply because she knew that the sword was being held over her and Mister Wescot, who was present, signaled Goodman Asten to re peat the experiment in such a way that the servant would not know the sword was there. This time she neither laughed nor changed her expression in any way.

Joseph also wondered about Daniel Wescot's role in his ser vant's supposed affliction. Rumor had it that Nathaniel and Abi gail Cross had confronted Mister Wescot with the charge that Kate was counterfeiting her torments, to which he replied, "I'll venture both my cows against a calf that she'll do a trick to morrow morning that nobody else can." Goody Cross had wanted to know what Daniel Wescot meant by that remark. "Can you make her do it when you want?" she asked. "Yes," he de clared, "when I want I can make her do it." Did Mister Wescot have some kind of control over his servant's fits? Or was he try ing to make people believe that? And if so, why? Joseph decided to see the afflictions for himself and so vol unteered to watch over Kate in company with Nathaniel Wyatt. At first the young woman went about her chores as if nothing was wrong. Joseph was unsure whether to feel relieved or disap pointed. Then she went into the yard to fetch some clothes that were drying and the two men followed. All of a sudden Kate col lapsed. Joseph carried her hastily into the house and laid her on

a bed. She lay there motionless as if in a trance. Joseph prepared to sit with her in case she began to have fits and needed to be restrained, but Nathaniel had other plans. "There are some who think she dissembles," he reminded Joseph. "Now's our chance to make trial of that." True enough, especially since Mister Wescot was away and could not meddle.

The two men got permission from Mistress Wescot to carry out an experiment. Nathaniel, standing next to the bed, asked Joseph for a sharp knife. No sooner had Joseph reached for one than Kate came to her senses, jumped up, and ran outside to the henhouse. The two men smiled at each other: if Kate was truly senseless, how could she know that they were about to cut her and so run away to prevent them from hurting her? But their smiles vanished as they heard Kate's piercing scream. Joseph ran out to her and demanded to know what had happened.

"I'm in such pain that I cannot live," she declared and then fell into a paralyzed stupor. They carried her back into the house, stiff as a board, and again laid her on the bed. Joseph took up the knife a second time, determined not to be fooled by the young woman. As he brandished it, Kate again sprang to life, crying out, "You're going to cut me!" She then lay down again and said, "I'll tell you how it is with me. I'm possessed by the Devil and he appeared to me in the henhouse in the shape of a black calf. He wants me to be a witch and if I will not he'll tear me in pieces." The two men glanced at each other. Did she really expect them to believe this? But then Kate

screamed again, pointing toward the window. “I see him! There he is!” As Joseph looked in that direction, he was startled to see a light dart into the house and

across the room. Nathaniel had clearly also seen it and was equally astonished.

“Kate,” asked Joseph, “what else have you seen?”

“The Devil’s appeared to me in the shape of a white dog,” she replied, “and in the shape of three women.”

“Are the three women witches?”

“I cannot tell. They might be honest women for all I know, or they might be witches.”

Joseph stared at Kate, uncertain what to think. If she was truly bewitched, were these women the witches who were afflicting her? And if so, what could be done to stop them?

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Who Is It That Torments Her?

Daniel and Abigail Wescot's home had become the

stage for a grim and perplexing drama. At its center was the luridly physical and yet mystifying spectacle of Katherine Branch's fits. Around the young woman there crowded a growing cast of char acters, all determined to figure out who or what was causing her fits. The residents of Stamford were anything but hasty in con
cluding that witchcraft must be responsible for Kate's torments: differing points of view jostled and competed for ascendancy. At first, not even the Wescots assumed that their servant was be witched. Their first step was to call in the local medical expert, not the town minister: they began by seeking a natural cause for Kate's afflictions. Even once the Wescots became convinced that witches were in fact causing the young woman's torments, not all of their neighbors followed suit: some suspected that Kate was faking her symptoms. Those who believed that she was under an evil hand, and those who did not, were equally determined to justify their points of view. Their approach was experimental:

they converged upon the Wescots' home and turned it into a laboratory of the occult with Kate as the specimen under in vestigation. They watched her; they tested her; and they reached conclusions based on what they observed.

Daniel and Abigail Wescot knew that they could not take ef fective action against the witches afflicting Kate without the help of their neighbors. If the malign intruders were to be identified and tried for their crimes, the

Wescots would need supportive testimony. Mister and Mistress Wescot encouraged their neigh bors to visit them, partly because they needed help looking after Kate but also to let other folks see for themselves the maidser vant's ghastly symptoms and hear her accusations. Any visitor to their home was now a potential witness in court.

Katherine Branch's torments were impressive and a growing number of townsfolk had become convinced that she was indeed bewitched. Yet even those who agreed that Kate's afflictions were the result of witchcraft reacted in different ways. Stamford's pas
tor, John Bishop, saw the situation largely in terms of a spiritual struggle: he warned the young woman that Satan wanted to lure her into his service; the Devil's minions might promise to end her agonies if she succumbed, but she must resist or else face the greater torments of hell. He and neighboring ministers prom
ised to pray that God would give Kate the strength to withstand the Devil's advances. The Wescots appreciated Mister Bishop's support, but focused their own energies on the practical chal lenge of removing the human witches who were apparently caus ing Kate's affliction. Their next task was to discover who was tor menting their servant and making her unfit to carry out her duties. They wanted to end Kate's ordeal as quickly as possible,

for their sake as much as for hers, and they wanted those re sponsible to be made incapable of ever again afflicting a mem ber of their household.

At first Kate was extremely vague in describing those who tormented her, but about three weeks after the fits began, she became much more informative. Kate told the Wescots that she had seen the specter of a woman in the house wearing a silk hood and a blue apron. That evening, she went out of doors, apparently calm in spirits, but a few moments later ran back inside, clearly terrified, and grabbed Daniel Wescot around his waist. When he asked her what had happened, Kate told him that she had seen an old woman at the door with two firebrands in her forehead. Her master asked what kind of clothes the woman wore. Kate said that the woman was wear ing two homespun coats, one tucked up around her, the other hanging down.

It was on the following day that Kate first named one of the women afflicting her: Goody Clawson. This revelation came as no surprise to the Wescots. Elizabeth Clawson, a woman in her early sixties, had lived in Stamford with her husband Stephen ever since their marriage in 1655. Goody Clawson was suspected by many of having occult powers and of using them against her enemies. She was no friend of the Wescots. The Wescots had quarreled with Goody Clawson almost a decade before over the weight of some flax that she had supplied to them. Stamford's barter economy depended on the exchange of goods and labor. Flax, a fiber, was used to make cloth and also wicks for candles and lamps.

Since their disagreement over the flax, Goody Clawson had carried a grudge against the Wescots, especially Abigail, and leapt at any opportunity to insult her. On one occasion, as Kate's mis tress passed by the Clawsons' house, Goody Clawson came out side and threw stones at her. Abigail Wescot had good reason to believe that Clawson resented the status that she enjoyed as the wife of a prominent householder. Mistress Wescot was one day visiting the home of Stephen Clawson, Jr., when Goody Claw son followed her into the house, demanded to know why she did not visit her, and then became verbally abusive. "Proud slut!" she declared. "You're fond of your fine clothes and you love to be mistress, but you never will be mine!"

It was soon after this altercation that the Wescots' eldest daughter Joanna began to suffer from strange pains and night marish visions. At the time, the Wescots had suspected that their vicious and vindictive neighbor was somehow responsible for Joanna's afflictions. It now appeared that she was turning her bile against their servant.

"There she is," Kate cried, "sitting on the spinning wheel!" Later she saw Clawson perched on the back of a chair. "I'm sure you are a witch," she declared, "else you could not sit so."

During the days that followed, the woman whom Kate named as Goodwife Clawson appeared to her over and over again. On one such occasion the afflicted servant declared, "Goody Clawson, let's have a turn, heels over head. Shall you go first, or shall I?"

A brief silence followed. “Well, if I go first, you shall do it af ter.” And having said that, Kate turned heels over head two or three times and lay down on the floor, saying, “Come, if you won’t do it, I’ll beat your head against the wall!” Having spoken

these words, Kate got up and looked around. “She’s gone,” she declared, and then fell into convulsions.

On another occasion Kate described the woman’s attire in de tail. Mister Wescot went outside immediately after Kate had spo ken and saw Goodwife Clawson in the street, dressed exactly as Kate had described.

Soon after, Kate cried out during one of her fits that she could see a second specter in the form of a short and lame old woman. She called her “hook backed” and “crump backed.” This woman wore a homespun coat with a waistcoat underneath and a black cap. Kate confirmed the description on returning to her senses and the Wescots soon decided that the lame woman must be Goody Miller: she was, after all, the only person in Stamford who fit Kate’s description. Why Goody Miller wanted to bewitch their servant was a mystery since they had never quarreled with her and nor to their knowledge had Kate.

During the weeks that followed, several neighbors watching over Kate reported that they also heard her name Goody Miller, sometimes calling her “Goody Crump” or “Goody Hipshod.” David Selleck and Abraham

Finch watched in horror as Kate cried out during one of her fits, “Goody Miller, hold up your arm higher that the black dog may suck you better. Now I’m sure you are a witch for you’ve got a long teat under your arm.” Both David and Abraham had heard that witches fed demonic spirits in the form of animals—just as mothers fed their infant children, except that witches used a third nipple hidden somewhere on their bodies and nourished the familiars with blood, not milk. Once Kate came to her senses, the two men asked her what she

had seen during her fit. She answered that she saw Goody Miller give suck to a black dog and that the witch had a long teat un der her arm.

Soon after Kate first named Goody Clawson and Goody Crump, Daniel Wescot had to leave for Hartford to attend a meeting of the colony’s representative assembly. During his ab sence, Kate was disturbed again by cats, one of which turned into a third woman.

“Are you sure they were cats?” Abigail Wescot asked. “Couldn’t it have been your fancy?”

“They were cats,” Kate answered firmly.

“Well,” declared Mistress Wescot, “if they be cats they are no ordinary cats for ordinary cats can’t turn themselves into a woman and then into a cat again. What sort of a woman was it that you saw?”

“She was a pretty tall woman.”

“What was she wearing?”

“Woolen cloth, the best quality homespun.”

“Was there anything unusual about her face?”

“Not really.”

“What about her mouth?”

“I think she had pretty thick lips.”

Abigail Wescot saw that Kate’s eyes were once again glazing over: she was clearly no longer in her right senses. Mistress Wescot turned to Joseph Bishop, a neighbor who was also pres ent in the room. She presumed that she could speak to him freely without Kate hearing.

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Who Is It That Torments Her?

“I know a woman at Fairfield who was suspected formerly; she has thick lips. I suppose you know who I mean: Mercy Holbridge.”

Kate started and gasped, “There she is again.”

Mistress Wescot and her neighbor watched as Kate proceeded to ask the specter who she was. There followed a short silence, after which Kate announced that the woman’s name was Mercy Woodbridge, but then she paused. After a moment Kate said that she had misheard the name and that it was really Mercy Hol
bridge. She went on to ask where the woman lived. The specter replied that she lived at Compo. When Kate came out of her fit, she asked her mistress where Compo was. Abigail Wescot replied grimly that it was a village just outside Fairfield.

Mistress Wescot knew Mercy Holbridge’s history.

Originally from New Haven, she was now a resident of Compo and in her early fifties. The family was trouble. Mercy's father, Arthur Hol bridge, had been charged with theft and shady business dealings. Mercy had also been presented in court for various misde meanors; Abigail recalled that Daniel had at one time given tes timony against her. When Arthur Holbridge died, he left his family poverty-stricken and they became a charge upon the com munity. Mercy's life had changed for the better when she mar ried Thomas Disborough of Compo, but she was known to be a difficult and vindictive neighbor. This was not the first time that Mercy had been suspected of witchcraft.

Several days later when Daniel Wescot returned home from Hartford, he made Kate repeat her description of this third woman.

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"What does she look like?"

"She's of middle stature with thick lips." Mistress Wescot may well have noted the discrepancy between this answer and Kate's earlier description of the witch as a tall woman, though the thick lips did conform with what she had said before—and also with Abigail's own suspicions. Mister Wescot meanwhile continued his interrogation.

"How old is she?"

"Neither old nor young. She has on a dirty shift and a dirty cap."

"And where does she live?"

"Compo. I've been to Compo." This last remark doubtless perplexed Mistress Wescot. When Kate first spoke to the specter, she had not known where Compo was. Yet now she claimed to have been there.

Kate seemed to know that this third woman was no stranger to the Wescot household. "Mercy," she cried out during one of her fits, "why do you meddle with me? I never did you any wrong. What's it to me if my master did?" Once Kate emerged from the fit, Daniel Wescot asked her why she had spoken in that way.

"The woman told me that you wronged her in giving evidence against her." When she next went into a fit, Kate conversed again with the woman. "Why do you meddle with me? What's it to me if my master did that? But I've told him of it and he said noth
ing. I believe you lie."

Kate had now named three women. It was almost five weeks since the onset of her fits and her master decided that the time had come to act. Daniel Wescot lodged a formal complaint on

behalf of his servant and appeared with her before a preliminary court of inquiry on the twenty-seventh of May 1692. The court consisted of four local magistrates: Jonathan Bell and Jonathan Selleck, both of whom lived in Stamford, along with two men from nearby Fairfield, John Burr and Nathan Gold. Their task was to determine

whether the evidence that Mister Wescot pre sented justified a formal prosecution. Trials were time consum ing, costly, and not to be undertaken lightly. Preliminary courts of inquiry could identify accusations that were frivolous or for which there was little supporting evidence; they could dismiss cases there and then, or they could determine that a full-scale trial should go ahead.

The magistrates met with Mister Wescot and his maidservant at the Stamford meetinghouse, the same building in which reli gious services and town meetings took place. The meetinghouse was a simple thirty-eight-foot-square timber building with a steep roof, built two decades ago to replace a smaller structure that the town had outgrown. Since then the population had con tinued to expand and the town had recently installed additional seating. The wooden benches were austerely functional and there was little decoration such as one would see in an English parish church or a Catholic chapel. The meetinghouse was a straight forward, multipurpose structure. Daniel Wescot would have been used to spending time in the building for town meetings as well as for church services, though never before had he come there for a purpose such as this.

Mister Selleck and his fellow magistrates asked Kate if she knew who it was that afflicted her. She replied without hesita tion that she did.

"I've seen Goody Clawson sitting on a spinning wheel

and on the back of a chair. This very day I've also seen Goody Hipshod." "Who?"

"That's what I call her. I saw her sitting on the bedhead." "Have you seen any other?"

"Yes, a woman who used to be called Mercy Holbridge but is now Mercy Disborough."

"How do you know her name?"

"She told me. She lives at Compo."

"How do you know that?"

"I've been there."

One of the magistrates asked her how she got there. "I went on foot," Katherine explained, "and Mercy was my guide, there and back again."

Mister Wescot doubtless listened intently to this explanation. He had probably heard from his wife about the inconsistency in Kate's remarks about Compo: at first, in conversation with Mis tress Wescot, she had said that she did not know where Compo was; later, when questioned by Mister Wescot, she claimed to have been there. It now transpired that their servant had recently visited Compo in secret with Mercy Disborough, which would explain the apparent discrepancy. It was hardly reassuring, though, to learn that their servant was being led hither and thither by witches. Kate had been in her right mind since she en

tered the meeting house and gave calm, confident answers to the magistrates' questions. But she now fell into another fit and the magistrates decided to end their interrogation, at least for the time being.

The very next day, Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough were brought before the court for questioning. Clawson's home was within walking distance of the meetinghouse, but Disbor ough had to be fetched from Compo. Both women insisted that they were innocent.

"You have been named by a servant maid of Mister Wescot's as having a hand in afflicting her by witchcraft," declared Jonathan Selleck. "Are you one of those who afflict her?"

"I absolutely deny that I am any such person," replied Claw son. Her tone, the magistrates would have noted disapprovingly, was abrupt and far from respectful. She acknowledged that there had been "a dissension" between her and the Wescots some eight or nine years since, but denied that she was now taking revenge for that quarrel.

"I know of no means whereby the maid is afflicted," she declared.

Mercy Disborough also spoke confidently and without hesitation.

"I never saw or knew of the girl before," she declared, "and never heard there was such a person in the world till now." During Goody Disborough's examination, Kate was carried into the meeting house in a stupor. She came to her senses while Disborough was speaking and, endeavoring to raise herself up, asked, "Where is she?"

Mister Wescot helped Kate up and at that point Goody Dis borough turned to face her. Kate immediately fell down into an other fit. A few minutes later, she came to herself

again and asked, “Where is Mercy? I hear her voice.”

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ESCAPING SALEM

She had been lying with her face away from Goody Disbor ough, but now turned and saw her.

“It’s her! I’m sure it’s her!”

Kate straight away fell into another bout of convulsive fits. The magistrates gave orders for both women to be placed “under restraint of authority.” Mercy Disborough was sent to the county jail in Fairfield; Elizabeth Clawson remained in Stamford under house arrest for several weeks until she too was removed to Fairfield. Once they were “under restraint,” Kate said that she could no longer see their specters. When the apparition of the woman whom she called Goody Hipshod next appeared to her, Kate asked mockingly where the other two witches were and then informed the specter that they had been apprehended. Goody Hipshod, she declared, would soon be joining them.

Just over a fortnight later, on 13 June, Daniel Wescot arrived with Katherine Branch at the house of Jonathan Selleck, one of the magistrates who had questioned her at the meetinghouse and who wished to examine Kate further. Mister Selleck was the wealthiest man in Stamford and his house doubtless reflected that. It was probably bigger than the Wescots’ home and more expensively decorated. Some of the furniture may have been im

ported from England instead of being made locally and the woodwork would have been more elaborately carved than in most homes. The cut of Mister Selleck's clothes and the quality of fabric from which they were made would also have exhibited his social status. Kate may not have been inside the house pre

viously: perhaps she was awed by the magistrate and his evident wealth; or perhaps she was too preoccupied with the task in hand

The Hoyt-Barnum House in Stamford, built in the late seventeenth century and now restored to its original condition *Like most houses in New England, this one was built of wood; the framework consisted of posts and beams held together by wooden pins. The house had a stone foundation, and the chimney was also made from stones bonded by a mortar consisting of clay, animal hair, and straw.*

(Source: This photograph is reproduced by kind permission of the Stamford Historical Society.)

to take much notice of her surroundings. After all, she had a story to tell.

Kate told Mister Selleck that since her first examination four more women had appeared to her: a girl and her mother who both lived in Fairfield but whose names she did not know; a woman from New York who called herself Mary Glover; and an

other woman from Boston, whom the girl from Fairfield named as Goody Abison. Since Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disbor-

ough had been arrested, Kate added, they had come only once in the night to afflict her. But Goody Miller had tormented her repeatedly, along with these other women. Kate claimed that she was not their only victim: last night, she declared, Goody Miller and Goody Abison had dragged one of Mister Wescot's children out of bed and along the floor.

A woman named Mary Glover had indeed been accused of witchcraft in 1688, but she had lived in Boston, not New York, and was hanged that same year. Where was Kate getting her in formation? Mister Selleck asked Kate if her master or mistress or any other person had mentioned in her hearing any of the per sons whom she now accused of tormenting her. Kate answered that she had never heard their names until the apparitions them selves told her who they were. Mister Selleck then

asked Kate if she would take an oath as to the truth of what she said, espe cially her claim that nobody had mentioned the persons she ac cused before the specters themselves gave her the names. Kate answered that she would do so willingly.

At the end of June, Daniel Wescot brought Kate back to tell Jonathan Selleck about her most recent afflictions. Neighbors crowded into the house, some doubtless drawn by sympathy for Kate's plight, others by the thrilling prospect of witnessing one of her attacks. The room was thick with anticipation.

Kate told Mister Selleck that Goody Clawson had reappeared last Saturday night and tormented her more grievously than ever. "She held my head back, pulling my arms, and pressed upon me, causing me much pain." Daniel Wescot now stepped in to con
firm and elaborate on his servant's account. "She made a

screeching noise," he declared. "She cried out, 'Goody Clawson, Goody Clawson, why will you kill me? Why will you torment me?' Her head was bent backward and when I went to lift her up she seemed three times heavier than her normal weight. The maid cried out, 'Get off me!' several times. When she came to her senses, I asked her who was tormenting her and she answered, 'Goody Clawson, Goody Clawson, Goody Clawson.' During her fit, she and the bedstead shook so hard that we were all

much affrighted."

The torments had been repeated the following night, though not to such extremes. Then Elizabeth Clawson was finally re moved from Stamford and sent away to be kept with Mercy Dis borough at the jail in Fairfield, since when, Kate declared, she had been afflicted only by Goody Miller.

Once Mister Selleck finished questioning Kate, she left the house, accompanied by his Indian servant. But a few minutes later the Indian reappeared: Kate had got some three hundred yards from the house when she suddenly fell down in a fit. Mis
ter Selleck's son John and David Selleck, a cousin, went outside and carried Kate back to the house, stiff as a board. Coming out of her stupor, she screamed and cried out, "Goody Clawson, you kill me! Goody Clawson, you kill me!" Kate's head was bent back
ward, her arm twisted around to her back.

"You're breaking my arm," she cried and fell into such vio lent fits that two men could scarcely restrain her, to the amaze ment of those still gathered in the house.

Daniel Wescot and Jonathan Selleck decided not to move Kate until the following morning. All night long her torments con tinued. During brief gaps between spasms of agony she conversed with the apparitions. "Goody Clawson," she asked in a woebe-

gone tone, "why do you torment me so? I never did you any harm in word or deed. Why are you all come now to

afflict me?" A little later she declared, "I will not yield, for you are witches and your portion is hellfire to all eternity. Mister Bishop has often told me I must not yield and the minister from Norwalk has said the same, so I hope God will keep me from yielding to you."

Kate named five women whose specters she conversed with that night: Elizabeth Clawson, Mercy Disborough, Goody Miller, the little girl, and her mother. The girl she now addressed as Sarah.

"Is Sarah Staples your right name? I'm afraid you tell me a lie. Tell me your right name!"

This she repeated several times before declaring, "Yes, I must tell my master and Mister Selleck if they ask me, but I'll tell no one else."

A short silence.

"Hannah Harvey? Is that your name? Then why did you tell me a lie before? Well then, what is the name of the woman who comes with you?"

Another silence.

"Yes, I must tell my master and Mister Selleck if he asks me, but I'll tell no one else. You will not tell me? Then I will ask Goody Crump."

"Goody Crump," she said, turning in another direction, "what is the name of the woman who comes with Hannah Harvey?" She asked this several times and then declared, "Mary! Mary what? Mary Harvey? Well then, is Mary Harvey the mother of Hannah Harvey? Now I know it! Why did you not tell me before? There were more cats came at first, and I shall know all your names. What creature is that with a great head and wings and no body

and all black? Hannah, is that your father? I believe it is, for you are a witch. Hannah, what is your father's name? And have you no grandfather and grandmother? How came you to be a witch?"

She stopped again and then resumed after listening carefully. "A grandmother? What is her name?"

Another pause. "Goody Staples? What was her maiden name?"

Mister Selleck most likely knew that the husband of a New Haven woman named Mary Staples had won a slander suit many years before against a neighbor who accused her of being a witch and a liar. It had been an ugly business. Goodwife Staples had angrily confronted the neighbor in church. Many witnesses, including the local minister, later testified in court for one side or the other. Staples had a daughter Mary whose married name was Harvey; Mary had a daughter named Hannah.

Mister Selleck's attention was drawn back to Kate's fits. She began to sing songs and hum tunes, "gigs for them to dance by," as she said. She then recited a great many religious verses and also the dialogue between Christ and the Devil as well as the Lord's Prayer, the Commandments, and the Catechism (an outline of Puritan faith in the form of questions and answers that children in godly households learned by heart).

Early the following morning Jonathan Selleck wrote to Nathan Gold, who had presided with him over the initial

inquiry. “Yester day,” he reported, “Mister Wescot brought his maid Kate down to my house to be examined, and I took her relation concerning how she had been afflicted of late, which is too long to relate, but I re fer you to the bearer of this letter, my son John Selleck, who was a spectator with several others at the time. The poor girl was forced to stay all night and as yet has not come to her senses. But when

she does I shall examine her about what she discoursed in her fits. She said in her fits last night that there was a creature she saw among them with a great head and wings, all black, and Kate asked the girl she called Hannah if it was her father. I believe it is. What this may mean the Lord knows. I fear that all the persons she has named are wicked and I desire the Lord to make discovery of them.”

When Kate came to her senses that morning, Jonathan Sell eck questioned her about the previous evening’s ordeal. She de scribed again the torments inflicted by Elizabeth Clawson, Mercy Disborough, Goody Miller, and Mary and Hannah Harvey. “They were terribly mad at me for telling things against them.”

Kate began to weep quietly. No flailing and screaming, thought Mister Selleck, no drama and spectacle . . . just a frightened and exhausted young woman. Something truly horrifying must be caus ing such anguish. It was his responsibility to protect her and to punish those

responsible. Such was his duty as a neighbor, as a fel low Christian, and as an officer of the law. Daniel Wescot had placed his trust in him by bringing the maid repeatedly to his house so that he could attest to her fits, question her, and act on her al legations. Mister Selleck did not intend to betray that trust.

Jonathan Selleck knew that other residents of Stamford also suspected Goody Clawson of witchcraft and he had heard of the suspicions surrounding Goody Disborough in Compo. But how exactly would the Lord "make discovery of them" in such a way that their crimes could be proven in a court of law? And what of those neighbors who refused to believe in Elizabeth Clawson's guilt and were already mobilizing on her behalf? Ahead lay legal and political thickets that he was glad not to be facing alone.

· *Three* ·

"By the Law of God and the Law of the Colony Thou Deservest to Die"

As magistrate Jonathan Selleck pondered the chilling scenes that he had witnessed over the past few weeks, he

became increasingly worried about the dangers facing Stamford. Mister Selleck had spent his entire adult life in the town and was re garded as one of its foremost residents. Though born in Boston, he and his younger brother John had moved to Connecticut in 1660. Jonathan was twenty at the time, John seventeen. The two brothers became partners in trade, following in the footsteps of their father, a merchant who had traveled down to Barbados reg
ularly until his death in 1654. Jonathan was the more sedentary of the two; it was John who ferried their cargo back and forth, spending weeks and sometimes months away at sea. The town, realizing that it stood to benefit from the Selleck brothers' com
mercial ventures, had granted them land for a warehouse. Within a decade of their arrival the two brothers married two sisters, Abigail and Sarah Law, daughters of a wealthy townsman.

Each received a house as dowry. Jonathan soon became an offi cer in Stamford's militia and was given more land by the town as thanks for his leadership in the war against the Indians in 1676. He served regularly as an elected representative at the colonial assembly and for several years as a member of the governor's council. The brothers purchased real estate in the area and in herited yet more land on the death of their father-in-law in 1686, becoming major property owners in and around Stamford. The brothers' mercantile business had prospered until 1689, when John and his ship were captured by the

French, who had just declared war on England and its colonies—he was never heard from again. Jonathan was still reeling from this personal and financial blow, but he would not allow the family's maritime business, built up over many years, to be undermined by this French outrage and so he had recently joined with one of his sons and three other men to buy a replacement vessel. Jonathan Selleck had become a key player in local affairs and had close ties to the countywide network of leading families. It was becoming increasingly clear, much to Jonathan's delight, that his two sons would marry the daughters of Nathan Gold, a good friend and prominent citizen in Fairfield. Nathan Gold had sat with Jonathan Selleck on the preliminary court of inquiry in vestigating Katherine Branch's accusations; both men felt a keen sense of responsibility to defend Stamford against the threat posed by witches.

Yet how best to protect the town? Mister Selleck was well aware that allegations of witchcraft could multiply rapidly and plunge entire communities into crisis. In the early 1660s, soon after he and his brother moved to Connecticut, a witch scare in

Hartford had resulted in formal indictments against eleven peo ple. That investigation also began with mysterious fits that were blamed on local women. The Hartford witch hunt had become part of local lore. It now seemed darkly familiar in light of Kate's torments and recent reports from Massachusetts, where a wave of afflictions and

accusations threatened to engulf an entire county. Those reports were not encouraging as Jonathan Selleck and his fellow magistrates launched their own investigation. Mis ter Selleck knew that long-festering suspicions could resurface on such occasions. Mary Staples was a case in point: many years had passed since she sought restitution for being slandered as a witch, yet now the rumors were back to haunt her in old age. Katherine Branch claimed that the specter of Hannah Harvey had named Hannah's grandmother, Mary Staples, as a witch. Jonathan Selleck also knew that trying to prove an invisible crime in court was not easy and could lead to serious problems, both inside and outside the courtroom. Religious doctrine and the legal code invited accusations of witchcraft, yet court offi cials were often much less impressed by the evidence presented in such cases than were the accusers and their supporters. Min isters, magistrates, and ordinary townsfolk agreed that witches posed a real and serious threat, but agreeing on how to prove witchcraft in a court of law was quite another matter. A number of controversial acquittals in Connecticut had caused friction between officials determined to uphold legal stan dards of proof and local residents convinced of a defendant's guilt. Of the eleven women and men indicted during the 1662–63 Hartford witch hunt, only four were convicted, to the dismay of those who believed them all to deserve death. A few years later,

in 1665, another Hartford woman, Elizabeth Seager, was con victed of witchcraft by the jurymen charged with her case. But the governor refused to carry out the sentence, declaring the ev idence inadequate. Goody Seager was subsequently freed on the grounds that the jury's decision to convict was legally indefensi ble. The jurymen were furious and those who believed that Eliz abeth Seager was a witch, of whom there were many, made it clear that they felt betrayed. In 1668, Katherine Harrison of Wethersfield also escaped conviction after a prolonged and bit ter trial. When the magistrates charged with that case overturned the jury's verdict and released the accused woman, they insisted that she leave Wethersfield permanently, both for her own safety and for her neighbors' peace of mind.

These acquittals doubtless pleased the accused and their sup porters, but others were horrified. Elizabeth Seager's and Kather ine Harrison's survival dealt a heavy blow to public trust in the legal system and its willingness to protect settlers from witches. Between 1669 and 1692, there had been no witch trials in Con necticut. Ordinary folk had by and large kept their suspicions of neighbors to themselves and magistrates had done nothing to discourage that. But now Daniel Wescot had unleashed a wave of public accusations as people came forward to testify against Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough—though not against the other women whom Kate had named. Mister Selleck may well have felt that he and his fellow magistrates were themselves on trial as local residents watched closely to see how they would

handle the situation.

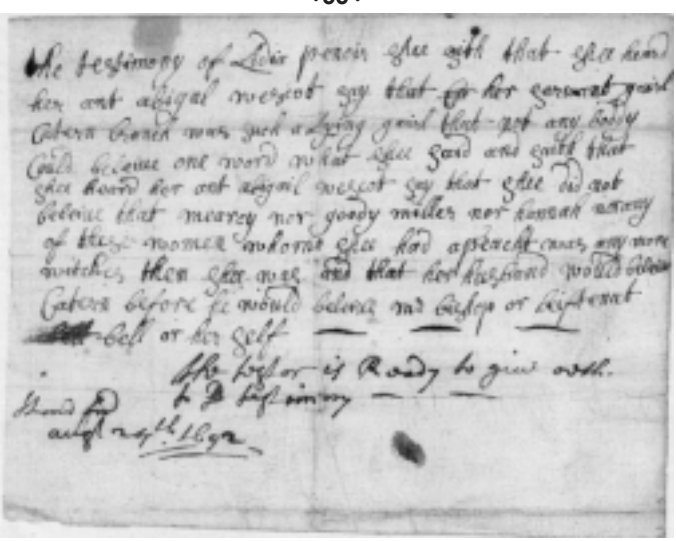
The magistrates' task was complicated by doubts and disagree ment among residents of Stamford on the subject of Katherine

Branch. Jonathan Selleck knew that some locals suspected Kate of dissembling. As neighbors visited the Wescot home to observe Kate's torments, opinions as to her credibility became ever more divided. Joseph Garnsey and Nathaniel Wyatt both swore that Kate told them she was possessed by the Devil, yet Lydia Penoir told the magistrates that Kate later denied having said any such thing. Goody Penoir, who was Abigail Wescots' niece, heard her aunt declare that Kate was "such a lying girl that no one could believe a word she said." Mistress Wescot had also remarked— with an edge of bitterness in her voice, no doubt—that her hus band would believe their maid over the pastor, or the town magistrates, or herself. "Neither Mercy, nor Goody Miller, nor Hannah, nor any of these women whom she impeaches, are any more witches than I am," proclaimed Mistress Wescot.

Daniel Wescot had apparently boasted that he could control Kate's convulsions. Some townsfolk wondered if he was also in fluencing whom she accused. Others suspected that Kate's nam ing of witches might have been influenced by her mistress. Ac cording to Joseph Bishop, Mistress Wescot told him in front of Kate that she thought Mercy Disborough was one of the women afflicting her. It was almost immediately after she made that re mark that

Kate named Goody Disborough. Mistress Wescot, confronted with the allegation that she was prompting her ser vant, replied that Kate was "in her fit" at the time and so could not hear her—she could tell from the way in which Kate's eyes glazed over. Not everyone found that explanation convincing.

Many townfolk were convinced that Kate was bewitched, but it did not necessarily follow that her allegations against specific women were reliable. Assuming that Kate was getting her infor-



Deposition given by Lydia Penoir and dated 24 August 1692, from the Samuel Wyllys Papers *The deposition reads as follows:*

> *"the testimony of Lidia penoir[:] shee saith that shee heard her a[u]nt abigail wescot say that her servant girl Catern branch was such a Ly ing gairl that not any boddy Could*

beleive one word what shee said and saith that shee heard her a[u]nt abigail wescot say that shee did not beleive that mearcy nor goody miller nor hannah nor any of these women whome shee had apeacht was any more witches then shee was and that her husband would beleive Catern before he would beleive mr bishop or Leiftenat bell or her self.

The test[at]or is Ready to give oath to s[ai]d testimony

Stanford
Aug[us]t 24th 1692"
(Source: Reproduced by kind permission of the Connecticut State

mation from the specters afflicting her, could they be trusted? Ministers taught that specters were demons who assumed hu man form on instruction from Satan: when witches signed a covenant with him, the Devil agreed to send demons on request to torment their enemies. According to the clergy, witches had no occult power of their own; demons acted on their behalf, tak ing on the appearance of the witches for whom they acted. Most people assumed that a specter's appearance matched the iden tity of the witch who wanted to harm the victim. But might specters appear as innocent people so as to incriminate harmless and virtuous individuals? In Massachusetts, a growing number of ministers and magistrates—learned and great men—were casting doubt on whether information collected from demonic sources should be taken on faith. Was not Satan the father of lies?

The court would need evidence that was untainted by the possibility of demonic fraud. Given that the crimes in question were occult in nature, such evidence might well prove hard to come by.

Jonathan Selleck and his fellow magistrates faced an addi tional problem. One of the accused, Goody Miller, heard that she had been named and promptly fled to Bedford, New York, where her two brothers lived. One was a magistrate, the other Bedford's chief military officer. This was a canny move on Goody Miller's part—and not just because her brothers were influential men who might be able to protect her. Several Stamford fami lies had moved away to found Bedford in 1680. The distance be tween the two towns was only ten miles and Bedford, though close to the New York border, was at the time under Connecti-

cut's jurisdiction. But in 1683 a revised boundary agreement shifted Bedford into New York. This meant that courts in Con necticut had no jurisdiction over Goody Miller, as long as she stayed with her brothers.

In June 1692 Daniel Wescot visited Bedford. He wanted the magistrates there to send Goody Miller back to Stamford for in terrogation. But Goody Miller's brother refused even to question her, let alone order her removal. He told Daniel Wescot bluntly that he knew what would become of his sister if she returned to Connecticut. Another local magistrate agreed at first to arrange for Goody Miller's return, but changed his tune after

consulting with her brothers. He did promise to discuss the matter with New York's attorney general, James Graham, but that gentleman also refused to cooperate (perhaps out of loyalty to Goody Miller's brothers or friends who had sided with them, perhaps because he was loathe to cooperate with Connecticut, or perhaps because he believed that Goody Miller was innocent).

Daniel Wescot was not alone in trying to influence officials across the border. Jonathan Selleck hoped to bring Goody Miller back through the personal intervention of Colonel Caleb Heath cott, an influential landowner in New York and a close friend of the governor. Jonathan Selleck and Caleb Heathcott had known each other since the early 1670s, but there were no guarantees that their acquaintance or Caleb Heathcott's friendship with the governor would ensure Goody Miller's extradition.

Meanwhile, preparations were underway to prosecute the five other women whom Kate had named: Elizabeth Clawson, Mercy Disborough, Mary Staples, Mary Harvey, and Hannah Harvey.

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"By the Law of God and the Law of the Colony"

Capital offenses, including witchcraft, were tried by the Court of Assistants, a judicial body of twelve men elected each May by the colony's representative assembly. (Lesser crimes were tried in lo cal county courts.) The Court of Assistants met in Hartford, Connecticut's center of government, some sixty-five miles away from Stamford. For people who lived in Stamford and Compo

to make that journey in order to testify would mean an absence of several days from their farms and families, with all the in convenience and expense that such a trip would involve. The lo gistics of transporting to Hartford all those who had volunteered information about the case would be daunting; the prospect of having to make that journey would most likely discourage other potential witnesses from coming forward.

There was an immediate precedent at hand for dealing with a situation like this. When the recent crisis in Salem had pro duced a deluge of accusations along with scores of witnesses, the Massachusetts governor appointed a special judicial commission to try the accused locally in Salem Town, even though Boston, the seat of government in Massachusetts, was much closer to Salem Village and the other affected communities than Hartford was to Stamford. Connecticut's representative assembly decided to follow the example set by its counterpart in Massachusetts and so on 22 June created a Court of Oyer and Terminer (meaning to "hear and determine"). The special court would meet in Fair
field to adjudicate the cases arising from Katherine Branch's ac cusations, "which are not so capable to be brought to a trial at the usual Court of Assistants by reason of the multiplicity of wit nesses that may be concerned in the case." The court included Governor Robert Treat, Deputy Governor William Jones, and

five of the Assistants, John Allyn, John Burr, Andrew

Leete, Moses Mansfield, and William Pitkin—an impressive group that would surely inspire respect and confidence. Jonathan Selleck and the three other local magistrates who had presided over the initial court of inquiry may well have been relieved to hand over responsibility for these cases to the special court. In its hands now rested the fate of the accused women.

When the special court convened two and a half months later, in mid-September, the magistrates dealt swiftly with the allega tions against Mary Staples, her daughter Mary Harvey, and her granddaughter Hannah Harvey. The depositions amassed throughout the summer included hardly any mention of these women, other than testimony from Katherine Branch and those who reported what she said. On Friday, 15 September, the Grand Jury presented Goody Staples, Goody Harvey, and little Hannah to the court on suspicion of witchcraft. The jurymen took the position that Kate's testimony was in and of itself sufficient to justify a trial, but the magistrates were reluctant to rely upon Kate's allegations: even if she herself was telling the truth about what the specters told her, they knew from the controversy brew
ing in Salem that this was a dangerous foundation on which to build a legal case.

The magistrates accordingly issued a formal proclamation that anyone with evidence against "the widow Mary Staples, Mary Harvey, the wife of Josiah Harvey, and Hannah Harvey" should come forward and would be heard. Only two witnesses appeared. Hester Grumman testified that during an illness that spring she had seen the specters of Mary Staples and Mercy Dis-

borough in her room, dancing at the foot of her bed. John Tash told the court that some thirty years before he had taken Goody Staples on his horse from one town to another as a favor and that while they were crossing some swampy ground he became worried that she was no longer on the horse. Goody Staples was a light woman, to be sure, so he reached back and felt for her; there seemed to be no one there. Yet as soon as they were back on firm land he could feel her behind him again.

Goody Grumman and Goodman Tash clearly felt that their depositions should count as compelling evidence. Yet, as one of the magistrates put it, such anecdotes could carry "no great weight" in a court of law. The magistrates therefore decreed on Saturday, 16 September, that the three women should be set free. "The aforesaid persons," they declared, "are acquitted by procla mation, nothing of consequence appearing against them, and all persons are commanded to forebear speaking evil of the afore said persons for the future upon pain of displeasure."

The court could now focus its attention on Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough. The evidence relating to Elizabeth Claw son was by no means entirely one-sided. Many of Goody Claw son's neighbors refused to believe the allegations against her and had come forward to testify on her behalf. At the request of her husband, no fewer than seventy-six townsfolk (forty-eight men and twenty-eight

women, including twenty-three couples) signed a petition of support. Among the women was Sarah Bates, the midwife who examined Kate soon after her fits began; Goody Bates now sided formally with those who rejected the servant's accusations against Goody Clawson. This was a sizeable group of Stamford residents, including many town leaders such as

Jonathan Bell, one of the magistrates who presided over the ini tial hearing in late May, and Abraham Ambler, who had over the years served as town selectman, town clerk, and representative to the colonial assembly. The petition, which was written in Abraham Ambler's hand and dated 4 June 1692, insisted that Goodwife Clawson did not have the temperament of a witch:

> Our neighbor Stephen Clawson having desired us whose names are under written, seeing there is such a report of his wife raised by some among us, that we would speak what we know concerning his said wife and her behavior among us for so many years. Now know all whom it may concern that we do declare that since we have known our said neighbor Goodwife Clawson we have not known her to be of a contentious frame nor given to use threat
> ening words nor to act maliciously towards her neighbors, but hath been civil and orderly towards others and never a busybody in other men's concerns.

Eleazer Slawson and Clement Buxton also vouched for Goody Clawson in separate declarations. "I have always observed her," declared Goodman Slawson, "to be a

person for peace and to counsel for peace and when she hath had provocations from her neighbors would answer and say, 'We must live in peace for we are neighbors,' and would never to my observation give threat
ening words, nor did I look at her as one given to malice." Other neighbors, however, portrayed Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough as argumentative and vindictive. Following the arrest of the two women, a wave of Stamford and Compo residents came forward to relate quarrels with one or the other which had been followed by mysterious illness or misfortune. These witnesses were clearly convinced that Elizabeth Clawson

and Mercy Disborough took revenge for disagreements or per sonal slights by bewitching the goods, cattle, or bodies of those who crossed them. The magistrates recognized that all of this tes timony would have to be examined with great care. But at least they need not depend in these two cases on Katherine Branch's controversial testimony.

Both women reacted to the allegations against them in ways that seemed to incriminate them further. Just over a week after the initial court of inquiry first questioned Elizabeth Clawson, Daniel Wescot went to confront her about the bewitchment of his servant and her anger toward his family. "You told the mag
istrates that you never lay down to sleep in anger," he declared. " How can that be when you're still angry with me? Are you still angry with me?"

"What do you think?" Goody Clawson replied. That

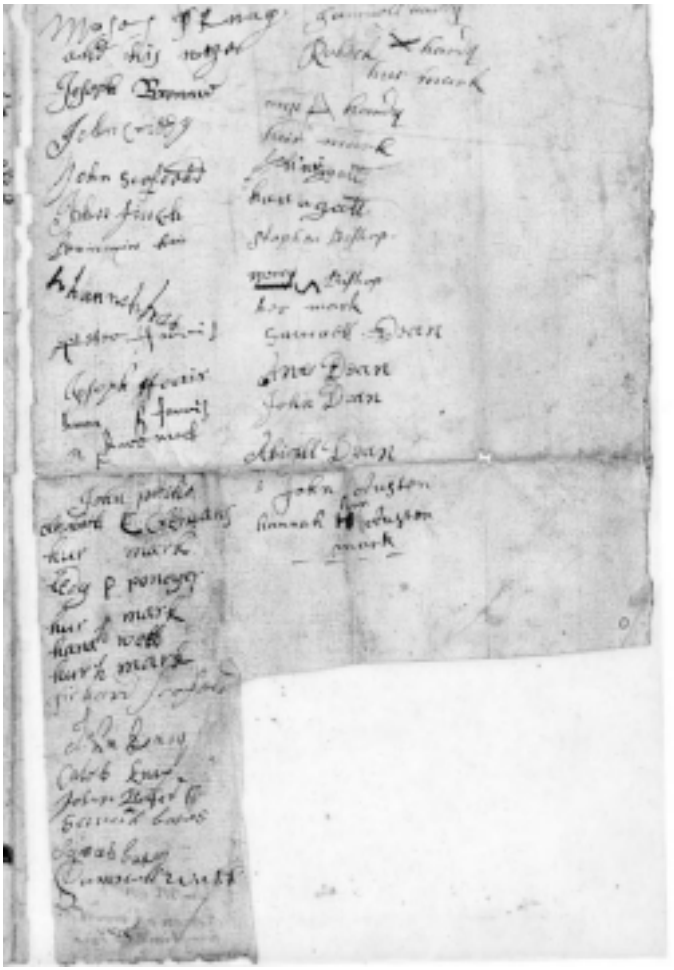
evening Kate's fits became more violent than they had been of late. Mis tress Wescot, hearing her youngest daughter cry out, went into the room where she had been put to bed. The infant was lying on the floor near the hearth, at some distance from the bed. A large chair and chest placed beside the bed would have made it impossible for the infant girl to fall of her own accord. Daniel Wescot followed his wife into the room and found her sitting on the chair by the bed, her face contorted in anger and fear.

Having returned his daughter to her bed, Daniel Wescot went to lie with Kate to prevent her falling off the bed or being thrown to the floor. Kate took hold of his hair and pulled it hard. Daniel grabbed Kate's hands and held them firmly in his own. At that moment something whipped across his face like a cord; it smarted for some time after.

. 63 .

A petition on behalf of Elizabeth Clawson, signed by seventy-six Stamford residents (forty-eight men and twenty-eight women), dated 4 June 1692 *A majority of the women signed with a "mark" because they could not write their names;*

. 64 .



some of those who could not write may have been able to read, which New Englanders saw as a higher priority because that enabled people to read holy scripture. (Source: Reproduced by kind permission of the Stamford Historical Society.)