

Children

The witchcraft crisis in Essex County, Massachusetts in 1692 has long been known for its unusual list of accused witches. The high proportion of men accused of witchcraft in the crisis has been noted by historians for decades, as has the unusual preponderance of wealthy, influential citizens and upstanding church members. There is one atypical group of accused, however, who have been largely overlooked. During the course of the crisis, at least eight children under the age of twelve were accused of witchcraft, and most were indicted. This examination of the eight cases of young children who were accused as witches will provide a vantage point from which to examine the dynamics of family and community that shaped the witchcraft crisis.

Full Essay-

Children

Written by Darya Mattes (copyright, 2004)

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"Accused Children in the Salem Witchcraft Crisis"

The witchcraft crisis in Essex County, Massachusetts in 1692 has long been known for its unusual list of accused witches. The high proportion of men accused of witchcraft in the crisis has been noted by historians for decades, as has the unusual preponderance of wealthy, influential citizens and upstanding church members.¹ There is one atypical group of accused, however, who have been largely overlooked. During the course of the crisis, at least eight children under the age of twelve were accused of witchcraft, and most were indicted. This examination of the eight cases of young children who were accused as witches will provide a vantage point from which to examine the dynamics of family and community that shaped the witchcraft crisis.

A study of the cases of these children reveals some notable common threads. First, in all of the cases, the only evidence offered against the children was spectral, and came from the "afflicted girls" of either Salem Village or Andover. In no case did anyone accuse a child of maleficium; every accuser was either an afflicted girl herself or someone acting on her behalf. All of the eight children also ultimately confessed to being witches while some, such as Sarah Carrier and Johanna Tyler, went as far as to offer descriptive confessions detailing their initiations into the service of the devil. Most notably however, every one of the eight had an accused witch for a mother. In each instance when a child under twelve was accused, his or her mother had been accused at some point during the previous weeks or months. Some, but not all, of the children's mothers had been convicted as well. The children themselves brought out this connection in their confessions: almost all professed that "thire mother mayd them witches."² The cases of the children accused of witchcraft in Salem are thus inextricably linked to the

witchcraft accusations of their mothers. A study of these unusual cases, in conjunction with an examination of the ways in which Puritan individuals were situated within the family and the religious sphere, can thus offer insights into the infamous events of 1692.

Before discussing the cases themselves, it is important to note that it is difficult to define a discrete category of "children" within the crisis. Whereas a study of men as witches is obviously quite clear-cut, it is less easy to say who was a child in the crisis of 1692, both for reasons of documentation and because contemporary notions of who was a "child" may have differed from modern ones. At times, it is simply difficult to determine how old individuals were during the trials; while a great deal of information can be gleaned from court records and other documents, or from each town's vital records, some people are hard to track. One young man from Manchester for example, Nicholas Frost, is listed in various places as having been born in either 1685, 1682, or 1672.³ It is therefore possible that he fits into my category of children under twelve and should have been included in this study, but he also may have been as old as twenty. I therefore did not try to include him, as his age was simply too ambiguous.

Additionally, my definition of a "child" as someone under twelve is entirely artificial. To our modern sensibilities, people who are eleven years old or younger are children. However Abigail Johnson, aged eleven in 1692, is described as a "singlewoman" in the court records,⁴ suggesting that her "child" status can not be taken for granted. It is unclear whether her case is substantially different from those of the twelve- or thirteen-year-old young people who were accused of witchcraft and who were all, at the time, considered too young to testify in capital cases.⁵ I chose to view only those individuals who were under twelve as children in order to avoid an analysis of Puritan adolescent issues by focusing on very young children who were still clearly tied to their parents. However it may be defined, a significant group of young children were targeted as witches in 1692. Although the precise eight individuals whom I have chosen to include in this group may be debatable, the group nevertheless exists, and I believe the conclusions I can draw from this sample are valid.

A brief description of each case will serve to highlight their recurring themes and possible implications. Two of the best-documented cases of accused children were those of Sarah Carrier and Thomas Carrier Jr. of Andover, aged seven and ten respectively.⁶ The cases of the youngest Carrier children stand as a prime example of witchcraft as linked to family ties: their mother, Martha Carrier, was hanged as a witch a week after their August examinations, and their older brothers, Richard and Andrew, had confessed to witchcraft as well, albeit probably under torture. Both Sarah and Thomas also explicitly implicated their mother in their confessions. Thomas stated that "his Mother taught him witchcraft" and baptized him as a witch, while Sarah emphasized that their mother was, in fact, the primary agent acting on them: she said her mother baptized her, and that the devil or black man was not there.⁷ The cases of the young Carrier children, then, show clearly the ways in which children accused of witchcraft were linked directly to other family members, most closely to their mothers.

Sarah Carrier named others besides her mother who were present at her diabolical baptism, specifically "Aunt Toothaker and her cousin."⁸ Sarah and Thomas Jr's cousin Margaret Toothaker, aged ten and living in Billerica, was in fact another one of the accused children.⁹ Margaret is unusual in that not once in the Salem court documents is she mentioned by name. Margaret's married sister, Martha Emerson,

was also an accused witch, and she and Margaret are sometimes hard to distinguish in the Salem records, as in a deposition against their father, an accuser makes reference to Roger Toothaker's "Daughter."¹⁰ However it seems clear that another Toothaker daughter besides Martha Emerson was implicated in the trials. One complaint, for example, lists "Toothaker" (not Emerson) as Roger Toothaker's accused daughter, and Elizabeth Johnson, another confessor, admits to seeing "goodwife toothaker & two of Toothakers Children" at a witch meeting. While records of Margaret's examinations do not survive in the court records, her case is enlightening precisely because her existence is so inextricably tied to her family. She was referred to repeatedly as the daughter of her father or her mother, or even as a cousin, but never as an individual, thereby highlighting the tight linkages that existed within families. She was also unusual in that not only her mother, but her father as well was accused of witchcraft. Margaret Toothaker was the only small child with two parents who were accused witches.¹¹

Another accused child with links to the Carrier family was Abigail Johnson, who was eleven years old and lived in Andover.¹² While I was unable to determine whether the Carriers and the Johnsons were actually related in any way, it is clear that their families were strongly tied to one another, at the least as neighbors in Andover. For example, Abigail and her older brother Stephen were kept together with Sarah Carrier as the responsibility of three Andover men in place of going to the Salem jail.¹³ There are also numerous cross-references between Johnson and Carrier confessions; Thomas Carrier Jr. "Saw Betty Johnson in the Company" at a witch meeting, while Elizabeth Johnson Jr. stated that "Goody Carrier baptized her when she Baptized her Daughter Sarah."¹⁴

Abigail, like Margaret Toothaker and the Carrier children, came from a family of witches: both her mother Elizabeth Sr. and her sister Elizabeth Jr. were accused as well, and both confessed to witchcraft. Abigail's case is also an example of the theme of spectral torture of "afflicted girls" that pervades the accusations of all of the children. Martha Sprague and Abigail Martin, both teenagers who complained against seventeen and seven people respectively, accused Abigail Johnson of afflicting them.¹⁵

Closely related to the Johnson family were Abigail's cousins Dorothy Faulkner and Abigail Faulkner, Jr., two more children accused of witchcraft.¹⁶ Dorothy, who was ten, and Abigail, aged eight, also lived in Andover. Their case returns to the theme of direct implication of mothers in children's confessions. Abigail Faulkner Sr. was an accused witch, and her daughters stated that "they were lead into that dreadfull sin of witchcraft by hir meanse." Also apparently led into witchcraft by Abigail Sr. was the last Andover child witch, Johanna Tyler, who was eleven in 1692. Although she directly implicated only Abigail Faulkner Sr. in her confession directly, stating that "Goode falkner Pirswaded her first," her mother Mary Tyler was also an accused witch.¹⁷

The one remaining child accused of witchcraft in 1692 was anomalous for several reasons. Dorcas Good was by far the youngest accused child at age "4 or 5," with the next youngest, Sarah Carrier, being "eight years old in November next." She was also the only child accused within Salem Village itself. In fact, she was essentially the only child accused outside of Andover. Margaret Toothaker lived in Billerica in 1692 but had lived in Andover previously and had relatives there,¹⁹ while the other six children all lived in Andover during the trials. The timing of her accusation was also anomalous; Dorcas was accused months

before the Andover children. Dorcas, who was often referred to as "Dorothy" in the court records, was thus unusual among the children in her age, her place of residence, and in when she was accused. However these differences help to highlight the similarities that pervade all of the children's cases, which remain in spite of divergent external circumstances.

Dorcas Good, like the other children, was accused exclusively by afflicted girls: in her case, Ann Putnam, Mercy Lewis, and Mary Walcott. They accused her of spectral torment and not of maleficium, which was the pattern in the cases of the other children as well. Dorcas also confessed to being a witch, implicating her mother in her confession by saying that her mother "had three birds one black, one yellow & that these birds hurt the Children and afflicted persons." Dorcas' mother, like the mothers of all of the other accused children, was also an accused witch; Sarah Good had been among the first to be accused and was one of the first to be hanged.²⁰

One notable discontinuity between the different children's cases is that some of their mothers confessed to being witches while others denied the charges against them. Martha Carrier and Sarah Good maintained their innocence and were hanged, while Abigail Faulkner, Sr., Elizabeth Johnson, Sr., Mary Toothaker, and Mary Tyler all confessed to being witches.²¹ This factor seems to have had little effect on the plight of their children. During the Salem witchcraft crisis everyone who was accused was presumed guilty; magistrates asked leading questions, and those who insisted upon their innocence, at least during the earlier trials, were generally executed. In such an environment, a confession or the lack thereof did not greatly affect other people's perceptions of an individual as a witch. Children of confessed witches and those whose mothers insisted on their innocence alike were suspected and often accused of witchcraft.

Thus common themes appear in each of the cases of children accused of witchcraft. Sarah and Thomas Carrier, Margaret Toothaker, Abigail Johnson, Dorothy and Abigail Faulkner, Johanna Tyler, and Dorcas Good were all accused by afflicted girls, they all confessed to being witches, all had mothers who were believed to be witches, whether confessed or not, and many implicated their own mothers in their confessions.

An important point to bear in mind in examining the witchcraft cases of young children is that the notion of a child as a witch did not contradict Puritan belief. Particularly in the unusual case of Salem, witches and children alike were seen as easily influenced and potential or existing conduits for the devil. Whereas more typical witchcraft cases tended to include accusations of maleficium and therefore were targeted more at older individuals with negative reputations in the community, the focus in Salem was on spectral torment. A witch in Salem was thus primarily defined as one who had made a covenant with the devil. He or she was perceived as working with him to afflict other individuals, often with the intent of coercing them to make a diabolical covenant as well. Because the devil worked through people in this way, no prior experience or knowledge was necessary to make someone a witch; thus the notion of very young, uneducated children as potent witches was perfectly compatible with Puritan belief. Cotton Mather stated this directly, remarking, "Are they Young? Yet the Devil has been with them already. They go astray as soon as they are born."²²

Puritan children were also often viewed as religiously precocious by the adults around them. Children were surrounded by deep and pervasive religious belief from the time of their births. For this reason, adults assumed a fairly high level of theological understanding in children at a very young age. The modern historian Levin Schucking notes that "A child who, like little John Ruskin preached sermons about 'Dod' from a kitchen chair, was not only a frequent and typical phenomenon in the Puritan nursery but for nearly three centuries an extremely popular one."²³ Puritan children were thus considered in many ways to possess a good understanding of religious principles. Compounded with the little theological knowledge that was expected in a believable witch, this fact meant that the notion of children as witches was not at all incongruous in Puritan belief.

In fact, Puritan practice may have made children more likely than adults in some ways to actually believe that they were witches. The historian Judith Graham notes that "Puritan girls and boys grew up in a culture that relentlessly required them to confront their sinfulness, and to contemplate the possibility of being separated from the regenerate and condemned to the palpable horrors of hell."²⁴ Puritan doctrine may thus have worked with childhood fears to convince children of their own inherent immorality and unworthiness. In such a context, it is hardly surprising that children as young as five or seven could convince themselves that their "sinfulness" had been translated into direct collaboration with the devil. The children's confessions from 1692 support this assumption.

More contemporary support comes from the Reverend Francis Dane, who was the father of Elizabeth Johnson Sr. and Abigail Faulkner Sr. He was thus intimately connected to the accused children and was unsurprisingly a critic of the trials.²⁵ He made almost precisely this point about childhood fear, writing that in the case of "some Children we have cause to feare that dread has overcome them to accuse themselves in that they knew not."²⁶ Even at the time of the trials, then, it was clear to some people that Puritan religious belief in general, and the witchcraft crisis in particular, may have been frightening the accused children into making confessions motivated primarily by fear. Children would have been likely, therefore, to confess to crimes that were already credible according to Puritan beliefs about both witchcraft and childhood.

The institution of the family was integral in Puritan society as well, occupying a central role in personal identity and spiritual well-being. Very visibly in the court documents, individuals are referred to through their linkages to others, as "wife of," "daughter of" or "son of." This is most true of women and children, who were almost invariably linked to family members for their identities. Notably, while women were always mentioned in connection with their husbands, children were not always described in terms of their fathers. Rather, particularly in the cases of children accused of witchcraft, the children were frequently referred to as the daughters of their mothers, as in "Dorrithy good Sarah goods daughter" or "dorritye Forknor and Abigale Forknor children: to Abigall Farknor."²⁷ This implicit alliance of children with their mothers has important implications for the way that conclusions were drawn and accusations made. As Richard Baxter wrote in 1673, "So it is an evident truth, that most of the mischiefs that now infest or seize upon mankind throughout the earth, consists in, or are caused by the disorders and ill-governedness of families."²⁸ Family "governedness," in turn was the provenance of parents, particularly of mothers. Thus if children were identified with their accused-witch mothers, witchcraft would have been perceived as a family disorder.

Even more specifically, Schucking states that "Religion is for the Puritan family religion. Divine worship is, not incidentally but primarily, family worship."²⁹ Thus not only were families tightly linked units in terms of general characteristics, but religious practices were interpreted as especially family-bound. The children's confessions in which they accused their mothers offer compelling support for this point. Sarah Carrier said, "My mother, she made me set my hand to a book," Thomas Carrier related how "his Mother baptized him in the ShawShin River," Dorcas Good confessed that her mother had given her a little snake as a familiar, and the Faulkner sisters stated that "thire mother apared and mayd them witches."³⁰ Witchcraft was thus an inversion of Puritan doctrine, in which adherents followed the devil instead of God but in which the primary means of initiation was the same. Just as Puritans believed that religion must be learned and experienced within the family, so witchcraft was viewed as being transmitted through the family, and especially from a witch mother to her closely-connected children.

Witchcraft accusations of young children at Salem thus serve to highlight the strength and focuses of Puritan belief. They are therefore perfectly explicable in these terms. In many ways, it is possible to view the Puritan conception of witch mothers and children as the natural result as well as the inversion of the ideal Puritan mother and child relationship. Accused children, like ideal children, were religiously precocious, but they babbled confessions instead of sermons and covenanted with the devil instead of with God. Accused mothers, like ideal mothers, imparted their religion to their children, thereby ensuring one destiny or another for their children's souls. The thin line between ideal Puritanism and virulent witchcraft is exemplified in one statement from the confession of Sarah Carrier, in which she describes how her mother directly forced her into being a witch. Although Sarah never suggests that a minister performed her baptism, taken out of context, the sentence could almost refer to either diabolical or divine practice: "She said her mother baptized her, and her mother said when she baptized her, thou are mine for ever and ever and amen."³¹ The witchcraft accusations of children in the witchcraft crisis of 1692 can thus serve to exemplify Puritan notions of witchcraft, religion, and family relations. These ideas, in turn, can be applied not only to the cases of children, but to developing an understanding of the crisis as a whole.

Examples of this occur in Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass, 1974) and in Bernard Rosenthal, *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (Cambridge, U.K. 1993). "Confessions of Dorothy Faulkner, Abigail Faulkner, Jr, Martha Tyler, Johanna Tyler, Sarah Wilson, Jr, and Joseph Draper", Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissembaum, eds., *The Salem Witchcraft Papers*. (New York 1977), accessed through etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft, 1: 335-7. In future notes this source will be referred to as SWP. After failing to find Nicholas Frost in the Manchester vital records -his residence is listed as Manchester in Boyer and Nissenbaum's *Salem Village Witchcraft* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 377 - I checked genealogical information at www.rootsweb.com and www.familysearch.org - the two sites listed a total of three different years of birth for this one individual. "Warrant for Arrest of Elizabeth Johnson, Sr. and Abigail Johnson", SWP, 2: 500. Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare* (New York 2002), 21. "Recognizance for Stephen Johnson, Abigail Johnson, and Sarah Carrier", SWP, 2:512. "Examination of Sarah Carrier" and "Examination of Thomas Carrier, Jr.", SWP, 1:203-4. "Examination of Sarah Carrier", SWP, 1:204. information on the Toothakers' place of residence from Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Village Witchcraft*, appendix, 378.

Margaret's name and age from Vital records of Billerica, Massachusetts to the year 1850 (Billerica, MA). information on Martha Emerson from Norton, 172. Quote from "Thomas Gage and [] Pickworth v. Roger Toothaker", SWP, 3:772. "Complaint v. Martha Carrier, Elizabeth Fosdick, Wilmott Reed, Sarah Rice, Elizabeth How, John Alden, William Proctor, John Flood, Mary Toothaker and daughter, and Arthur Abbott" and "Thomas Gage and [] Pickworth v Roger Toothaker", SWP, 3:183, 772. "Warrant for Arrest of Elizabeth Johnson, Sr. and Abigail Johnson", SWP, 2:499. "Recognizance for Stephen Johnson, Abigail Johnson, and Sarah Carrier", SWP, 2:512. "Examination of Elizabeth Johnson" and "Examination of Thomas Carrier, Jr.", SWP, 2:503 and 1:204. "Warrant for Arrest of Elizabeth Johnson, Sr. and Abigail Johnson", SWP, 2:499. Norton, In the Devil's Snare 255. "Confessions of Dorothy Faulkner, Abigail Faulkner, Jr., Martha Tyler, Johanna Tyler, Sarah Wilson, Jr., and Joesph Draper", "Recognizance for Dorothy Faulkner and Abigail Faulkner Jr.", and "Examination of Johanna Tyler", SWP, 1:335-337, 3:775. Johanna's mother's name is cited as "Mary" in Norton, In the Devil's Snare, 262, and this same woman is also cited in Norton as having explained her confession to Increase Mather. This woman's name, in the SWP, is erroneously cited as "Martha Tyler" based on an inaccurate eighteenth century transcription of the original document, which no longer exists. "Account of William Good -- Cases of Sarah Good and Dorcas Good" and "Examination of Sarah Carrier", SWP, 1:204 and 3:994. Norton, In the Devil's Snare, 182. "Warrant v. Dorcas Good" and "Summary of Evidence Against Sarah Good", SWP, 1:351 and 355. Norton, 228, 257-264. Cotton Mather quoted in Judith S. Graham, Puritan Family Life: The Diary of Samuel Sewall (Boston, 2000), 61. Originall from Mather, Small Offers Towards the Service of the Tabernacle in this Wilderness, Boston, 1689. Levin L. Schucking, The Puritan Family: A Social Study from the Literary Sources (London, 1969), 68-9. Graham, Puritan Family Life, 72. Rosenthal, Salem Story, 53. "Statement by the Rev. Francis Dane on the Andover Outbreak", SWP, 1:882. "Warrant v. Dorcas Good" and "Confessions of Dorothy Faulkner, Abigail Faulkner, Jr., Martha Tyler, Johanna Tyler, Sarah Wilson, Jr., and Joesph Draper", SWP, 1:351 and 1:335. Baxter quoted in Schucking, The Puritan Family, 56. Originally from Baxter, The Christian Directory, 1673, 514. *ibid.* "Examination of Sarah Carrier", "Confessions of Dorothy Faulkner, Abigail Faulkner, Jr, Martha Tyler, Johanna Tyler, Sarah Wilson, Jr, and Joseph Draper", and "Examination of Thomas Carrier, Jr.", SWP, 1:203-4, 335-7. Summary of Dorcas Good's confession in Norton, In the Devil's Snare, 64. "Examination of Sarah Carrier", SWP, 1:204.

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