

Summer 1928

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### Recommended Citation

William Renwick Riddell, *Witchcraft in Old New York*, 19 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 252 (1928-1929)

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## WITCHCRAFT IN OLD NEW YORK

WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL<sup>1</sup>

In a publication by the State of New York: *Minutes of the Executive Council of the Province of New York* . . . 1668, 1673, Albany, 1910, appears a case of alleged Witchcraft.

In the "Towne of West Chester" in 1670 lived a woman, Katharine Harrison, widow of John Harrison of Wethersfield, Connecticut, whose daughter, Rebeckah, had married Josiah Hunt, son of Thomas Hunt, Sr., a man of some importance in the Town: Mrs. Harrison lived with this daughter and son-in-law.

She had had an unfortunate history: born in England, she came to America about 1651 and settled in Wethersfield, where she married in 1653. On complaint made, she was arrested for Witchcraft in 1669 and after being in prison some twelve months she was placed on her trial for that offense at Hartford, Connecticut. She was found Guilty by the Jury; the Court did not agree with this finding; and, May 20, 1670, the following Order was made:

"Cort. of Assistants Harford, May 20th, 1670.

"This Cort. having considered ye Verdict of ye Jury respecting Katharine Harrison cannot concurre with them soe as to Sentence her to Death or to a longer Continuance in Restraint, but doe dissmisse her from her Imprisonmt., Shee paying her just ffes to ye Goaler; Willing her to minde ye performance of her Promise of removing from Weathersfield wch. is that, as will tend most to her own Safety and ye Contentmt. of the People who are her Neighbours.

"Daniell Garrad is allowed for Keeping Goodwife Harryson five pounds."<sup>2</sup>

She came to Westchester and lived with Josiah Hunt and his young, 16-year-old, wife, Rebeckah with whom she became involved in litigation over some property which the young woman claimed had been left her by her deceased father. It may be that this litigation had something to do with the charge made against her the same year.

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<sup>1</sup>Justice of Appeal, Ontario, Canada; Associate Editor of this Journal.

<sup>2</sup>About \$12.50. The order is "Extracted out of ye Records of ye Court" by "John Allen, Secr.," op. cit., vol. 1, p. 54. See also "*Records of Court of Assistants*," vol. 1, pp. 1-17; Taylor, "*Witchcraft Delusion in Connecticut, 1647-1697*," New York, 1908, pp. 47-61, 153.

However that may be, we find at "Ye Fort . . . Before the Governor," Colonel Francis Lovelace, a complaint made by "Thomas Hunt Senr. and Edward Waters on behalf of ye Towne of West Chester against a woman suspected for a Witch who they desire may not live in their Towne" came on for hearing. Mrs. Harrison appeared "with Capt. Ponton<sup>3</sup> to justify her selfe."

The Petition of Hunt and Waters was read "as also another from Jamaica against her settling there."

The story of her life and of her trial at Hartford was told<sup>4</sup> and an Order made by Lovelace:

"Whereas Complaint hath beene made unto me by ye Inhabitants of West Chester agt. Katherine Harrison, late of Weathersfeild in his Maties. Colony of Conecticott, widow. That contrary to ye consent & good liking of ye Towne she would settle amongst them, & she being reputed to be a person lyeing undr. ye Suspiccon of Witchcraft hath given some cause of apprehension to ye Inhabitants there, To ye end their Jealousyes & feares as to this perticuler may be removed, I have thought fitt to ordr. & appoint that ye Constable & Overzeers of ye Towne of West Chestr. do give warning to ye said Katherine Harrison to remove out of their princts. in some short tyme after notice given, & they are likewise to admonish her to retorne to ye place of her former abode, that they nor their neighbours may receive no furthr. disturbance by her, Given undr. my hand at ffort James in New Yorke this 7th day of July, 1670.

Francis Lovelace."<sup>5</sup>

Being duly notified, the widow refused to obey the order; and the Inhabitants of Westchester making complaint to the Governor, an order was made, August 20, 1670, for her and Captain Ponton to appear before Lovelace at "ffort James in New Yorke" on Wednesday, August 24, when "those of ye Towne that have ought to object agt. them doe likewise attend, where I shall endeavor a Composure of this difference betweene them."

On August 25, the Governor gave his decision in the form of an Order: he recited that several addresses had been made by "Inhabitants of West Chestr. on behalfe of ye rest desiring that" she should be ordered to remove "and not permitted to stay wthin. their jurisdiction upon an apprehension they have of her grounded upon some

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<sup>3</sup>Captain Richard Ponton or Panton of Westchester with whom she had gone to reside, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 53, note 1; vol. 2, p. 391.

<sup>4</sup>*Op. cit.*, pp. 52-54.

<sup>5</sup>*Op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 390, 391.

troubles she hath layne undr. at Wethersfeild upon suspition of Witchcraft."

From this it would appear that the widow had not been practising anything in the way of Witchcraft in New York: and it was only the bad repute she had brought from "Conecticott" that excited the apprehensions of the Westchesterians.

Lovelace goes on to say that the reasons for these apprehensions did not so clearly appear to him, "Yett notwithstanding to give as much satisfaction as may be to ye Complets. who prtend their feares to be of a publique Concerne, I have not thought fitt absolutely to determyne ye matr. at prsent, but do suspend it untill ye next Genril. Cort. of Assizes, when there will be a full meeting of ye Councell & Justices of ye peace to debate & conclude ye same, In ye meane tyme ye saide Katharine Harrison wth. her Children<sup>6</sup> may remaine in the Towne of West Chestr. . . . without disturbance or molestation, she having given sufficient security for her Civill carriage & good behaviour."<sup>7</sup>

While Lovelace was thus prudent in determining to leave the decision to a Court, he was equally prudent in looking after the interests of his master—if Mrs. Harrison should be found guilty of Witchcraft, that being a Felony, her goods would be forfeited to the Proprietor, the Duke of York, whose representative the Governor was and who owned the Colony. While the rule was that a felon might, *bonâ fide*, sell his chattels for the sustenance of himself and his family before conviction—in that respect differing from the rule as to real estate, the forfeiture of which on attainder had relation to the time of the act committed—still they were sometimes collusively and *malâ fide* parted with, in which case the law would reach them.<sup>8</sup>

It was then a wise precaution to have an inventory taken of her chattels: accordingly the Governor the same day gave an Order to "ye prsent Constable of West Chester . . . to take an Account of such Goods as have lately beene brought from out of his Maties. Colony of Conecticott unto Katharine Harrison & having taken a Note of ye Pticulers that you retorne ye Same unto me. . . ."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>"John and Katharine Harrison were married on May 4, 1653, and had three daughters of whom Rebekah, born February 10, 1654, was the eldest": *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 53, note 2. The children here referred to are the two younger daughters.

<sup>7</sup>*Op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 392, 393.

<sup>8</sup>For the whole delightful doctrine of Forfeiture for Crime, see Blackstone's "*Commentaries on the Law of England*," lib. iv, pp. 381-389: on the law in such a case as this, especially at pp. 387, 388.

<sup>9</sup>*Op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 391, 392.

The widow was bound over to appear before the General Court of Assizes held in the city of New York: she did so, and the Court, October 7, 1670, released her from her recognizances and gave her liberty "to remaine in the Towne of West Chester where shee now resides or any where else in the Governmt. dureing her pleasure," there being no other charge against her.

But her troubles were not over: Francis (or Robert) Yates<sup>10</sup> had possession of some of her papers entrusted to his care by her and refused to give them up, claiming to have a lien on them: she applied to the Governor, who, April 7, 1671, gave an Order to the Constable and Overseers to cause the delivery to her or her order of "all Papers or Writeings left by her in Trust with him or that hee hath otherwise contrived of hers into his Custody. . . . If ye said Robert Yates hath any prtences of Debt, Accot. or Damage against ye said Katherine Harryson ye due Course of ye Law ought to be prosecuted & noe person allowed to be Judge in his own Cause."<sup>11</sup>

Worse was to follow: her daughter's husband and his father, Hunt, had brought an action against her for the daughter's marriage portion: she wished to remove her goods from the inhospitable Town, but at the instance of the plaintiffs, the Constable of the Town "layd an Attachmt. upon her Goods as shee was about to remove them from yor. Towne as also upon ye Boate of Theophilus Ellsworth who was hired to Transport them; ye wch. is contrary to Law for any Constable without a Justices Warrant to Attach upon ye Accots. of Debt above ye value of ffive pounds. . . ." She applied to the Governor, denied that she had made "any Engagement to pay any Summe of Money to her Daughter in Marriage with her Husband," tendered "Security to make Answer to ye Suite of ye said Thomas Hunt and his Son": and the Governor made an Order, May 19, 1671, to the Constable to release goods and boat "takeing Mr. ffrench his Engagement that ye said Widdow Harryson by her selfe or Attorney shall make Answer to their Complaint at ye next Court of Sessions to be held at Jamaica for ye North-Rideing. . . ."<sup>12</sup>

Two months afterwards, July 17, 1671, she obtained an Order from the Governor addressed "To any of ye Constables or other

<sup>10</sup>He is in the Governor's Order called both "Francis" and "Robert."

<sup>11</sup>Op. cit., vol. 2, p. 393.

<sup>12</sup>Op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 393, 394. This seems to have been a different suit from that already referred to as brought by daughter and son-in-law for property said to have been left to the daughter by the deceased John Harrison: op. cit., vol. 1, p. 53, note 1; see *ante* in the Text.

Officers. upon Long Island or other parts within this Governmt." as follows:

"These are to require you to aid & Assist Katharine Harryson Widdow or whom shee shall employ in makeing Enquiry after & findeing out such Goods as belong to her; ye wch. (if found) you are to cause to be delivered into ye possession of or to whom shee shall appoint. . . .

ffras: Lovelace."<sup>13</sup>

No further documents are forthcoming in this case: the terrible effects of even a suspicion of Witchcraft appear here most clearly—every one seems to have thought that they might take her goods with impunity and that she was a mere outlaw, a *caput lupinum*.

There was a previous case of alleged Witchcraft: at the Assizes held October 2, 1665, Ralph Hall and his wife Mary, both of Brookhaven, were charged with causing by Witchcraft the death of George Wood and of an infant child of Ann Rogers, his widow.

The man was bound over "Body and Goods" in a recognizance for his wife's appearance "at the next Sessions and so on from Sessions to Sessions, as long as they stay wthin. this Government."<sup>14</sup> Apparently this was *in terrorem* and as a strong inducement to emigrate.

Somewhat later, an Indian is suspected of having been bewitched.

The Earl of Bellomont, reporting to the Lords of Trade (the Committee of the Privy Council dealing, *inter alia*, with Colonial matters), July 26, 1700, says:

"Aquendero, the Chief Sachem of the Onondage Nation, who was Prolocutor for all the Five Nations at the Conference I had two years ago at Albany, has been forc'd to fly from thence, and come and live on Coll. Schuyler's Land near Albany: Aquendero's son is poyson'd and languishes, and there is a sore broke out on one of his sides, out of which there comes handfulls of hair so that they reckon he has been bewitch'd as well as poyson'd."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 394, 395.

<sup>14</sup>Op. cit., vol. 1, p. 53, note 1; "Court of Assize," vol. 2, pp. 38-42.

<sup>15</sup>"Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York . . .," Albany, 1854, vol. iv, p. 689. He follows with a lurid story of Decannisore, an Onondaga Sachem who married a "praying Indian in Canada . . ." who had been "instructed by the Jesuits, . . . taught to poison as well as to pray. The Jesuits had furnish'd her with so subtil a poison and taught her a legerdmain in using it; so that whoever she had a mind to poison, she would drink to 'em a cup of water, and let drop the poison from under her nail (which are always very long, for the Indians never pare 'em) into the cup." She poisoned a multitude of the Five Nations well affected to the English. She came

With such symptoms verified, no one could quarrel with the diagnosis—and the prognosis was necessarily very dark.

The belief in Witchcraft persisted amongst the Indians of New York until well into the Nineteenth Century, if even it can be said to be quite extinct at the present time—it certainly is found widely prevalent among the Pagan Indians of the Grand River, Ontario.

Mary Jemison, the "White Woman of the Genessee," who was captured in 1758 at the age of 15, by the Senecas, and adopted into the tribe, successively married two Indians and remained one of the Senecas until her death in 1833, tells us:

"It was believed for a long time, by some of our people, that I was a great witch, but they were unable to prove my guilt, and consequently I escaped the certain doom of those who are convicted of that crime which, by the Indians, is considered as heinous as murder": *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison* . . . 22nd (and best) edition, New York, 1925, p. 143.

In the Appendix to this work by Dr. Seaver, published in 1824, he says of the Senecas: "In no instance is their credulity so conspicuous, as in their unalterable belief in witches. They believe there are many of these, and, that next to the author of evil, they are the greatest scourge to their people . . . to whom the evil deity has delegated power to inflict diseases, cause death, blast corn, bring bad weather and in short to cause almost every calamity. . . . Mrs. Jemison informed us that many who had been charged with being witches, had been executed in almost every year since she has lived in the Genessee." An Indian reported that he saw a squaw have fire in her mouth, and she was killed immediately. "Mrs. Jemison . . . was present at the execution. She also saw one other killed and thrown into the river. Col. Jeremiah Smith . . . saw an Indian killed by his five brothers . . . with their tomahawks: he was . . . fortunate enough when on a hunting party to kill a number of deer while his comrades failed of taking any," and so was a witch. "Col. Smith also saw a squaw who had been convicted of being a witch, killed by having small green whips burnt till they were red hot but not quite coaled, and thrust down her throat. From

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from Canada on a visit to New York Colony and poisoned many, among them a young "Protestant Mohack." A near relation of his seeing her in Albany, "cries out with great horror that there was that beastly woman that had poison'd so many of their friends and 'twas not fit she should live any longer in the world to do more mischief; and so made up to her and with a clubb beat out her brains."

And surely no one could say that it did not "serve her right."

. . . trifling causes thousands have lost their lives . . . the pagans will not suffer 'a witch to live': pp. 173-175.

In February, 1824, a celebrated Pagan chief Corn Planter died, and a Christian Indian, Prompt, a Tuscarora, was accused by some of the old-fashioned Indians of killing him by witchcraft—but he successfully defied them: p. 179.

About 1820, Soongiso or Tommy Jemmy put to death a squaw accused of witchcraft: he was arrested and put in gaol in Buffalo; the next morning an angry band of warriors gathered in the streets to release him but were persuaded to return to their homes and remain quiet until the appeal to the justice of the White Man should be found ineffectual. Tommy Jemmy was acquitted, which was considered a triumph for the Seneca Nation, of the unwritten decree of whose Council he had been the executioner: pp. 247, 248.

The delectable story is told of Buckinjahillish, a very old Indian warrior, who angered the Council by saying that only the ignorant made war but the wise men and the warriors did the fighting. He was accused of witchcraft for living so long, and "because he could not show some reason why he had not died before, he was sentenced to be tomahawked by a boy on the spot—which was accordingly done": p. 177.

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