

Martha Sparks - Chelmsford's Accused Witch

Certainly, there are many stories of injustice in Chelmsford's past but, the story of Martha Sparks seems to be particularly cruel. Thomas Barrett Jr. lived across the street from the Chelmsford Historical Society's Barrett-Byam Homestead at 40 Byam Road in Chelmsford on property he and his father purchased in 1663.

On July 10, 1676, Thomas's daughter Martha married Henry Sparks from Exeter, New Hampshire. Henry purchased 1 acre of land from Peter Talbot located just west of the "Gutt" in Westford. This is where Vine Brook crosses Littleton road, near the Westford Regency. To the west of his land, was the original Groton Road, which ran from Chelmsford center out to Forge Village (then Groton). He purchased an adjoining acre and a half a year later. This land is on the north side of Littleton Road where it intersects with Concord Road and Powers Road. Henry's son, Henry Sparks Jr., sold the family farm to Samuel Proctor in 1714.

In 1691, Martha was a young mother, caring for her small children alone while, her husband was fighting in King Williams War. He was in the "eastern parts" of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, fighting for the British crown, when he was killed in 1694.

While milking a cow one day, she was struck on the forehead by one of the horns of the cow. One of her neighbors saw the blood on her forehead and claimed "that while she was bleeding, a spectre of her likeness appeared ". This spectre is also known as a vision or ghost.

The neighbor claimed that Martha was a witch. Her reason was based upon the writings of Cotton Mather, a prominent Puritan minister in colonial Massachusetts. He was notably involved in the Salem witch trials, but his influence also extended to other witchcraft accusations in the region, including cases like Martha Sparks.

In one of his writings "Wonders of the Invisible World", he played a part in trying to uphold judicial proceedings based on evidence, although his definition of evidence included things like spectral testimony (testimony about visions or ghosts), which were problematic. His works contributed to the Puritan worldview that validated the existence of witches, thus influencing accusations like those against Martha Sparks.

Although Mather did not play a role in the Chelmsford case, his writings and sermons helped create an environment where witchcraft accusations were taken seriously, leading to events like the accusations against Martha Sparks.

On October 28, 1691, Deputy Governor Thomas Danforth took Martha to Boston and committed her to Boston Gaol for suspicion of witchcraft.

Thankfully, Chelmsford's minister, Reverend Thomas Clark came to Martha's defense. His influence upon the authorities helped them to verify this grave mistake. After spending a year in jail Martha's father went to Boston where he petitioned Governor Phipps and his governor's council to release her. No formal evidence was ever produced against Martha.

Martha was released from Boston Gaol on December 6, 1692. She returned to Chelmsford to care for her family. She died a little more than two years later February 28, 1697, leaving her two small children without parents.

Martha Sparks was the only person accused of witchcraft in Chelmsford.