

Did Chelmsford really have witches?

BY GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

As October comes to New England, thoughts turn to witches, ghosts, and other mysterious creatures that appear on Halloween—they are usually midget sized and carry a trick or treat bag, but in the 1690's the word witch had a quite different connotation. It referred to a woman whose neighbors accused of summoning evil spirits to do mischief, and consorting with the Devil. These accusations, based more on emotionalism than substantive evidence, resulted in harassment, incarceration and, in several cases in Salem in 1692, court ordered execution.

Chelmsford was not immune to this hysteria and had at least one alleged witch. She was Martha Sparks, the wife of Henry Sparks, a soldier on duty with the military at that time.

The Rev. Cotton Mather related the circumstances of a witchcraft case, believed to be that of Martha Sparks, in his "Magnalia Christi Americana" (1702):

"There was at Chelmsford an afflicted person, that in her fits cried out against a woman, a neighbor, which Mr. Clark, the minister of the Gospel there, could not believe to be guilty of such a crime, and it happened while the woman milked her cow, the cow struck her with one horn upon her forehead and fetched blood; and while she was thus bleeding a spectre in her likeness appeared to the party afflicted; who, pointing at the spectre, one struck at the place, and the afflicted said, 'you have made her forehead bleed;' hereupon some went unto the woman and found her forehead bloody and acquainted Mr. Clarke of it; who fortunate went to the woman and asked, 'how her forehead became bloody?' and she answered, 'by a blow of a cow horn,' as abovesaid; whereby he was satisfied, that it was the design of Satan to render an innocent person suspected."

The Mr. Clarke mentioned by Mather was the Rev. Thomas Clarke, the second minister in Chelmsford and great grandfather of the famous John Hancock, the first signer of the Declaration of Independence and the first Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Martha Sparks' maiden name was Barrett. She was born in Braintree, September 16, 1656, the daughter of Thomas Barrett who moved to Chelmsford with his family in the early 1660's. This was the Barrett family that lived in what is now the Barrett-Byam House, the museum of the Chelmsford Historical Society at 40 Byam Road. Martha married Henry Sparks of Exeter, N.H. July 10, 1676 and they had two children.

After being accused of being a witch, she was

confined in Boston Gaol on October 28, 1691 without, apparently, ever appearing in court. One year later her father, who had been caring for her children, petitioned the Governor and the Council of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for her release.

"To his Excy. Sr. William Phips, Knt. Capn Genll. and Governor in Chiefe of their Majties Province of the Massachusetts Bay in New England and to the Honed. Council thereof.

"The Humble Petition of Thomas Barrett of Chelmsford in New England, in behalf of his Daughter Martha Sparkes, wife of Henry Sparkes who is now a souldier in their Majties Service att the Easterne Parts, and soe hath beene for a Considerable Time, Humbly Showeth

That yor Petitioners Daughter hath Layne in Prison in Boston for the Space of Twelve months and Five days, being Committed by Thomas Danforth, Esq the Late Depty Governor, upon suspicion of Witchcraft, Since which noe Evidence hath appeared against her in any Such matter, neither hath any Given bond to prosecute her nor doth any one att this day accuse her of any such thing as yor Petitionr knows of. That Yor Petitionr hath ever since kept two of her children--the one of 5 years ye other of 2 years old, wch hath been a considerable Trouble and charge to him in his poore & meane Condition; besides yor Petitionr hath a Lame antient & sick wife, who for these 5 years & upwards past hath beene soe afflicted: as that shee is altogether rendred incapable of affording her self any help, wch much augments his Trouble.

Yor Poore Petitionr Earnestly and humbly Intreates Yor E'cy & honrs. to take this distressed condition into yor consideracon, And that you will please to order ye releasemt. of his Daught. from her confinement, Whereby she may returne home to her poore children to look after them, having nothing to pay the charge of her Confinemt.

"Any yor Petitionr as in duty bound shall ever pray, Nov. 1, 1692."

On December 8, 1692, after having been confined for 58 weeks, she was released to her father and returned to her father's house or to the one room cottage on the top of Robin Hill where she had lived previously. This cottage had been built by the Town as a lookout to warn of any approaching peril.

So, when you answer the door on Halloween this year and see what you think is a witch, remember the sad fate of Martha Sparks before you inform the authorities of your suspicions.