

Our Famous Accused Witch

*Rebecca Nurse
Yarmouth, England 1621
Salem, Massachusetts 1692*

*O Christian Martyr who for truth could die
When all around thee owned the hideous lie!
The world redeemed from Superstition's sway
Is breathing freer for thy sake today.*

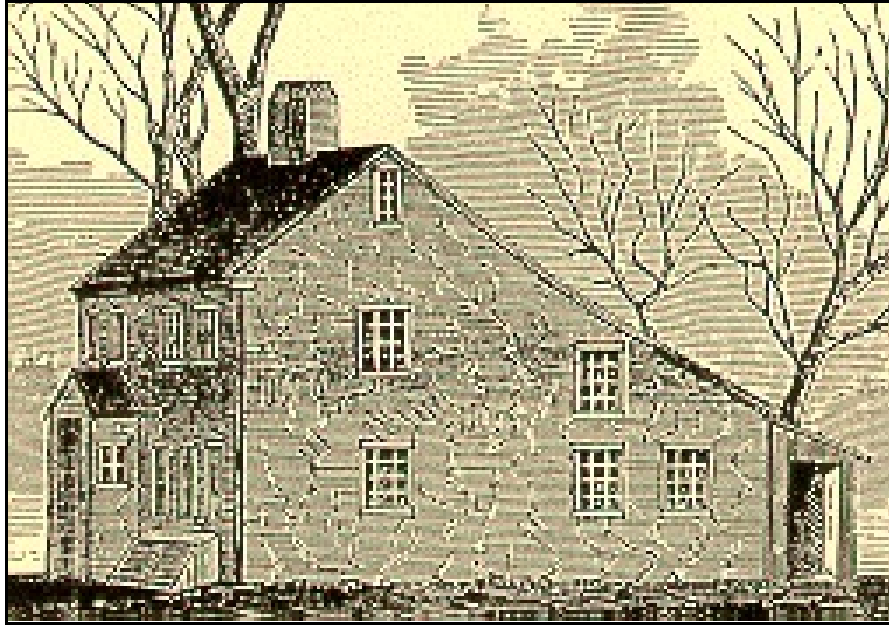
John Greenleaf Whittier

Rebecca Towne, my eighth-great-grandmother, was christened at Yarmouth, Norfolk, England in 1621. Her parents were William and Joanna Blessing Towne who emigrated to America about 1635.

At the age of 23 Rebecca married Francis Nurse. In addition to being a farmer, as were many during this period, he was also a “traymaker.” The making of articles for domestic use was an important talent in the remote countryside where they lived. Highly respected by his neighbors, he was often called to settle disputes. Rebecca and Francis Nurse were the parents of four sons and four daughters.

The Nurse family made their home at 149 Pine Street in what is now known as Danvers, Massachusetts. But Danvers at this time was known as Salem Village.

Francis Nurse was also very well known in the bordering town of Topsfield. For some time there was a dispute over land between Topsfield and Salem Village



The Nurse Homestead
Salem, Massachusetts

involving the Putnam family estate. Francis was most likely a participant in the settlement of this dispute. However, in a dispute there are always satisfied and unsatisfied participants.

Rebecca and Frances Nurse were members of the church in Salem Town. In this church Francis Nurse was an outspoken leader of the “anti-Parris” committee. This committee believed that the Reverend Parris was not hired properly and should be removed from the position of minister. The Putnam’s were the leaders of the pro-Parris committee.

The church community was polarized and this may very well have been the mood of both Salem and Topsfield Villages. People of this colonial period had strong

feelings and no doubt this was manifested in their daily communications.

In the midwinter of 1691 and 1692, several girls began to have fits, most likely acting a part suggested by others in the community. Their parents, feeling the fits were genuine, tried to discover what was causing their distress. By late February the village doctor concluded that witchcraft was the source of the problem. At the urging of their superstitious elders, the girls named three witches: Tituba, Sarah Good and Sarah Osburn.

Then on March 19, 1692, the girls named the frail 71-year-old matriarch, Rebecca Nurse, as one of their tormentors. When informed of her being accused of practicing witchcraft, Rebecca exclaimed, “As to this thing, I am as innocent as the child unborn, but surely what sin hath God found out in me unrepented of that He should lay such an affliction upon me in my old age?”

Several years earlier Rebecca’s mother had been accused of witchcraft, but was never brought to trial. Her two sisters were also accused. Local gossip during the trial suggested that the witchcraft was passed down from mother to daughters.

Rebecca was arrested in her bed chamber by constables three days after being accused and they took her away from her beloved homestead. Her trial took place in June with 40 of her neighbors signing a petition commending her exemplar character. She was at first found innocent by the jury, but they reversed their decision when the afflicted girls began to go into terrifying torments, and after the presiding justice asked them to reconsider some of the testimony – a practice common in those days.

The trial was a sham and mockery based on reports of ghosts in winding sheets demanding justice and accusing Rebecca Nurse of murdering them. Testimonials regarding her Christian behavior, care, and education of her children were also presented. At the first judgement was of her innocence; the girls again played their part and the verdict was changed. What caused the girls to falsely accuse Rebecca is not known, but the conscience of the girls in sending an innocent woman to the gallows should have caused them to question their own heavenly worthiness for years to come.

In July the Reverend Nicholas Noyes had Rebecca brought from her prison cell to the church. There the Reverend excommunicated her before the congregation. A deeply religious person, Rebecca was shattered.

A petition was drawn up and signed by most of the richest and most influential people in the community in May. No doubt they did not want the blood of this woman on their hands. The first one to sign the petition was Israel Porter. Daniel Andrews, and even John Putnam, Senior, and his wife, as well as thirty-five others signed the petition.

When sent to Governor Phipps, he responded with a temporary reprieve. Although her children continued to fight to save her life, the reprieve expired and Rebecca, along with four other ladies, were finally hanged on July 19, 1692. Eighteen others also lost their lives in the infamous Salem witch hysteria.

On the gallows, Rebecca was “a model of Christian behavior.” Putting her trust in the atonement of her Savior, and the great promise of the resurrection, she was resigned to her unjustified fate.

After the execution, Rebecca's children secretly removed their mother's body to her homestead and there buried it in an unmarked grave. There has probably been written more about her than any other victim.

From the date of her execution in 1692, seven years later the Nurse family was welcomed back into communion with the church. Fifteen years later the excommunication of Rebecca Town Nurse was revoked. Twenty years from when she was executed, in 1711, The Nurse family was compensated by the government for her wrongful death. No doubt the government felt responsible for allowing the witchcraft hysteria of Salem Village to reach the lives of their people.

The motives and power of several young girls to cause so many to be executed is questionable. If they were manipulated to make the witchcraft accusations, the guilty promoters of their actions have not been identified and their judgement day has not arrived.

We have learned much from this historical account of Salem Village. The intelligent, enlightened people of our present day would not practice this deception. But that is probably the same mind-set the people had when they crucified Jesus the Christ so many years ago.

The descent from this pious lady, Rebecca Towne Nurse to Frank Hales is on the next page.

