

To Hang a Witch: Religion and Paranoia in Seventeenth Century Hartford

by Aaron James Whiting

On January 20, 1663, Rebecca Greensmith was executed for the crime of witchcraft. Unlike the documents containing her indictment, her confession, and her conviction, there is no official record of her death. There are no surviving first-hand accounts of her execution. Thomas Hutchinson, writing a century later about the Greensmith execution, included a brief passage from William Goffe's unpublished diary: "January 20, 1663. Three witches were condemned at Hartford."¹ There is something more than a little ironic in the possibility that William Goffe, one of the judges who condemned Charles I to death and, in 1663, fleeing charges of regicide in Restoration England by hiding in Connecticut, was a witness to the death of Rebecca Greensmith. But he may not have even been there. Perhaps he simply heard of the execution while in a neighboring town and noted the event in his diary. Unfortunately, the answer will never be known; in 1765, Hutchinson's mansion was ransacked by a mob, incensed by the recently passed Stamp Act.² Like Rebecca Greensmith herself, Goffe's diary was destroyed by a group of men, fueled by anger and righteousness.

But even without any eyewitness testimony, the final moments of Rebecca Greensmith's life can be reasonably pieced together. She was most likely hanged on January 20, 1663. It was a Tuesday and the Particular Court of Connecticut met in Hartford that day, almost certainly ensuring a large crowd for the hanging.³ At some point on that day (most likely after the Court closed for the day), Rebecca Greensmith, along with her husband Nathaniel Greensmith, and a third victim, Mary Barnes, were taken from their cell in the village jail on the public square, loaded onto a cart, and carried to the place of execution.⁴ That rickety mortal journey began under the shadow of the imposing bell tower of the Hartford Church of Christ, the building which sat

¹ Thomas Hutchinson, *History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay* 2, (1764), (Cornhill: Thomas & John Fleet, 1767), 17n

² Sylvester Judd, *History of Hadley: Including the Early History of Hatfield, South Hadley, Amherst, and Grandby*, (Springfield: H.R. Hunting & Company, 1905), 207.

³ The probate record of Nathaniel Greensmith lists his date of death as January 25, a Sunday. As it was very unlikely that an execution took place on the Sabbath, Love argues that the date on the original probate record was incorrectly transcribed. See William DeLoss Love, *The Colonial History of Hartford, Gathered from the Original Records*, (Hartford, William DeLoss Love, 1914), 285n.

⁴ Without a primary source, much of the description of the Greensmith execution is based upon a template provided by other New England witchcraft executions. For a typical example, see the execution of George Burroughs in Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, (London: Robert Calef, 1700), 212-213.

securely in the hearts of both the public square and the people themselves.⁵ After securing the wrists of the condemned to the wagon, Daniel Garret, the town jailer, led the cart north along the snow-covered path toward Centinal Hill.

This fatal procession was almost certainly followed by dozens of local people; executions were always public entertainment, but the fact that these three were condemned for witchcraft added a religious fervor to the event. The God-fearing people of Hartford had spent the previous ten months terrorized by Satanic attacks. They had mourned the death of an eight-year-old girl who, in her last gasping moments, cried out the name of Goodwife Ayres, accusing the woman of her murder. They had been shocked when Goody Ayres and the other accused witches had somehow escaped Daniel Garret's jail and vanished into the dark forest surrounding the village. They had all been at the Wyllys mansion the evening of the prayer vigil for the poor possessed Ann Cole. They had all seen her body twist and contort as the praying faithful of Hartford and Satan battled for the poor girl's soul. And they had all heard the Cole girl name Rebecca Greensmith as a witch. After ten remarkable and disturbing months, justice would be done and the people of Hartford would not let frigid temperatures or snowy ground keep them from watching.

At the top of Centinal hill, the beaten path forked and Daniel Garret tugged the ox, pulling the cart to the left. The witches would be hanged in the cow pasture, northwest of the village. After less than ten minutes, Garret brought the wagon to a stop beneath the bare branches of an ancient elm tree. The crowd, well-wrapped in wool coats or blankets, poured off the road and shuffled onto the frozen mud of the pasture. They most likely formed a shivering, angry circle around the giant elm.⁶

Rebecca was probably executed first. This was not because she was a woman, but because, unlike Nathaniel and Mary Barnes, Rebecca had confessed and was granted a quick death. A rope was found and a noose tied. Someone tossed it over a limb and the cart was moved beneath the swinging noose. Rebecca was untied from the wagon, but her hands remained bound behind her back. She was moved to the back of the cart until the toes of her bare feet hung over the edge. The noose was shoved over her head and the knot yanked tight against the side of her neck. She stood, shivering from both cold and fear, her pulse beating against the rope knot wedged into her neck, and looked out at the good people of Hartford who had come to watch her die.

⁵ The location of both the village jail and the Church of Christ in Hartford in the public square comes from George Leon Walker, *History of the First Church in Hartford, 1633-1883*, (Hartford, Brown & Gross, 1884), 90-91. For a description of the bell tower of the Church of Christ, see Walker, *History of the First Church*, 89-90.

⁶ Local lore claims that Rebecca Greensmith was executed on Gallows Hill, west of Hartford. But Love argues that, based on a land deed dated in the early-eighteenth century, the ancient gallows were most likely located near an ancient elm tree at the edge of the cow pasture on the road to Symsbury. See Love, *Colonial History of Hartford*, 286.

Who did she see? A reverend would have been present to hear a confession, but Teacher Samuel Stone most likely did not attend. He was old and ill (in fact, he would be dead within a matter of months), so it was almost certainly Pastor John Whiting who stood amongst the good people of Hartford that day. Reverend Whiting had heard her confession, but his heart had not been moved; in his eyes, Rebecca Greensmith would always be a lewd and ignorant woman.⁷ Was Ann Cole there to witness the death of the woman she accused? The lost diary of William Goffe did note that “After one of the witches was hanged the maid was well.” Was Goffe referring to Ann Cole? Did the demonic fits which so enthralled and terrified Hartford come to an end the moment the twitching body of Rebecca Greensmith fell limp? The dramatist who craves the idea of Rebecca Greensmith, defiant in her final moments, coolly staring down Ann Cole must, in the end, give way to the historian: like Reverend Stone, Ann Cole was most likely too “ill” to attend the execution, and the addendum to Goffe’s diary is dated over a month later.⁸

We will never know who Rebecca Greensmith looked at in her final moments of life. It is unlikely she would have wanted to look at Nathaniel, even if she had been able. Her husband, a man she married out of desperation and who abused her, stood behind her, waiting his turn at the end of the cart. Reverend Whiting almost certainly looked up at her, but perhaps the righteous eyes of the good reverend held too much judgment for her soul. Perhaps she looked away from the crowd entirely, unable to look into the eyes of her neighbors of eight years who now, inexplicably, wanted her to die. Perhaps her eyes simply rose above the people of Hartford and looked with curiosity upon a column of rising smoke in the distance where a roaring bonfire was thawing the unmarked spot where her body would be buried.

Why was Rebecca Greensmith executed? Sadly, New England history is littered with far too many victims of witchcraft accusations. Greensmith does fit the common template of accused witches: she was female, she was middle-aged, and she did not act like a typical Puritan woman. But it appears that Greensmith was condemned for additional reasons beyond her gender, age, and character. She was accused and ultimately killed due to an intersection of history, politics, and religion that ignited a bitter ideological civil war within the community of Hartford. Rebecca Greensmith’s death was the last, tragic act of a community long in turmoil seeking resolution.

To understand the vicious community conflict at the heart of Greensmith’s death, it is necessary to explain the relationship between religion and history in Hartford. In

⁷ Almost twenty years after the Greensmith execution, John Whiting wrote a letter to Increase Mather detailing the Ann Cole affair. In the letter, Whiting referred to Greensmith as “a lewd, ignorant, considerably aged woman.” See John Whiting, John Whiting to Increase Mather, October 4, 1682, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 8, 4th Series, (Boston: Wiggin and Lunt, 1868), 466-469.

⁸ February 24, 1663 to be exact. See Hutchinson, *History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay* 2, 17n.

fact, religion and the history of Hartford are entwined; the very origins of the town were born out of religious conflict. Thomas Hooker, an itinerant lecturer and a staunch Puritan, found himself in the crosshairs of William Laud, the autocratic Bishop of London. Hooker and his fellow Puritan clergymen had spent the better part of the 1620s raising the sermon to a virtual artform and, in the process, weakened the power of “ceremonial” church. Laud considered the practitioners of church-lecturing “the most dangerous enemies of the state” and made it his goal to bring order back to the Church of England.⁹ In 1630, Laud had Hooker “silenced for nonconformity.” Despite having the written support of over forty fellow Puritan clergymen, Hooker was forced to step down from the pulpit.¹⁰ When Laud soon after summoned him to appear before the High Commission Court—Laud’s tool for correcting religious disorder—Hooker fled from England.¹¹

He was not the only Puritan to abandon England. With William Laud’s elevation to the Archbishop of Canterbury, strict Puritans found themselves unwelcome in their own church. In the face of persecution, hundreds of Puritan families abandoned their country and emigrated to the New World.¹² In 1632, a group of nearly one hundred Puritans, called the Braintree Company, established the community of Newtown, near present-day Cambridge. After building a meetinghouse, they “invited the Rev. Thomas Hooker, whose ministry they had occasionally enjoyed in England, to become their pastor.”¹³ Hooker accepted the calling and sailed to the New World in the summer of 1633. But when he arrived in Newtown he was not alone. On the long voyage across the Atlantic, Hooker had taken under his tutelage the young Reverend Samuel Stone. Stone had also fled England and Archbishop Laud, even though his form of Puritanism was much more “modest” than Hooker’s.¹⁴ Regardless of whatever doctrinal differences that may have separated Hooker and Stone, a rapport was obviously created. On October 11, 1633, the members of the Braintree Company formally organized the Newtown Church of Christ and ordained Hooker and Stone as Pastor and Teacher, respectively.¹⁵

The dual ministry of the primitive Puritan church was a curious and somewhat frustrating innovation. According to early documents, the role of the Pastor was to preach on the application of Christian beliefs upon daily life, while the Teacher delineated doctrine and faith. Technically, both men led the congregation, but the

⁹ Walker, *History of the First Church*, 37-38.

¹⁰ Joel Hawes, *Historical Sketches of the First Church in Hartford*, (Hartford: Hudson and Skinner, 1836), 7-8.

¹¹ Thomas Hooker sailed to Holland. He spent nearly three years preaching among fellow English exiles in Delft and Rotterdam. See Walker, *History of the First Church*, 41-43.

¹² Walker, *History of the First Church*, 3.

¹³ Hawes, *Historical Sketches*, 5.

¹⁴ Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans* 3, (London: James Black, 1813), 423

¹⁵ John Winthrop, “Winthrop’s Journal Vol. 1” in *Original Narratives of Early American History*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 111

Pastor stood in the role of shepherd and the Teacher as guide. Unfortunately, the surviving documents do not offer clear distinctions between the two offices; most likely because, for the most part, dual ministries did not extend beyond the first generation of church leadership.¹⁶ The Church in Hartford, however, was an exception. Associate Pastors would lead the church until 1679. In fact, the struggle to maintain a dual ministry in the church led to over a decade of internecine conflict.

Conflict of another sort may have played a role in Thomas Hooker's decision to uproot his congregation from Newtown and relocate his flock to the Connecticut River Valley. In church histories, Hooker's decision to abandon Newtown and move his congregation into the wilderness of Connecticut was due to a lack of land for his growing community and the belief that Newtown was geographically hemmed in by neighboring villages.¹⁷ But non-religious histories hint at a different motive for Hooker's decision. Newtown's nearness to Boston placed it under the spiritual umbrella of the eminent John Cotton, who stood first among equals amid the Boston clergy, and who Hooker may have envied.¹⁸ Furthermore, Hooker disdained of the inefficacy of the government of the Massachusetts Bay colony and bristled at the "tight control" Cotton and his fellow Boston clergymen wielded over the entire colony.¹⁹ On the whole, it would appear that placing such a large distance between his congregation and Boston had more to do with protecting his own authority over his congregation than a mere question of land availability. After all, five surrounding villages offered to adjust their borders to enlarge the land available to Newtown, but Hooker refused. Even the official history of the Church concedes, "Some cause deeper than any lack of ground...to pasture the cattle of a few settlers, in the third year of their arrival, must have impelled [Hooker's] restlessness."²⁰

On May 31, 1636, Hooker and his followers, like Moses and the Israelites, began their exodus to a new home. Only a mile or two west of Newtown, roads ended and the Newtown pilgrims marched along the Indian paths that wound through the forest. They climbed wooded hills and forded rushing streams, still cold from snow melts. At night they set blazing fires to keep wild animals at bay and kept guards to watch for unfriendly natives who they feared would steal the hundreds of cattle, goats, and pigs

¹⁶ Walker, *History of the First Church*, 63-64.

¹⁷ Benjamin Trumbull, *Complete History of Connecticut 1*, (New Haven: Maltby, Goldsmith and Co., 1818), 58.

¹⁸ William Hubbard believed a growing rivalry between Hooker and John Cotton was at the root of Hooker's decision to leave Newtown. He wrote, "Two such eminent stars, such as were Mr. Cotton and Mr. Hooker, both of the first magnitude, though of differing influence, could not well continue in one and the same orb." See William Hubbard, *A General History of New England*, (Boston: Little and Brown, 1848), 173.

¹⁹ Wesley Horton, *Connecticut State Constitution: A Reference Guide*, (Westport: Greenwood, 1993), 2.

²⁰ Walker, *History of the First Church*, 77.

which travelled with them.²¹ In the second week of June, Hooker's congregation arrived at their new home.

When Hooker's pilgrims arrived in the Connecticut River Valley, their source of authority was not clear. The territory had initially been under the control of Massachusetts Bay, but a claim was made upon the land by a group of wealthy Englishmen on the other side of the Atlantic. A compromise was temporarily put in place which allowed representatives from Hooker's community, as well as representatives from several other newly established villages, to elect magistrates, who administered the territory on behalf of the English landowners. This period of autonomy lasted until 1638 when Hooker declared in a fiery sermon that authority over their community should reside solely in the hands of those who resided upon the land. Within a year, Connecticut announced its practical, if not legal, independence from both their English landowners and Massachusetts Bay when, under Hooker's guidance, a constitutional government, entitled the Fundamental Orders, was written which recognized no authority other than God.²²

In this document and, more importantly, in their new community of Hartford, Hooker's congregation formed a bedrock for their beliefs in local authority and congregational freedom, as well as their fears of political or spiritual subjugation. Hartford was their Godly home. As a historian of the church later wrote of these first days in Hartford, "Here they lived and labored and prayed together. Here they enjoyed the special smiles of their covenant God and Saviour [sic]. Here they died; beneath and around us is the place of their sepulchers [sic]; and here, having seased [sic] from their labors on earth, they ascended to their reward in heaven."²³

But troubles were coming to the people of Hartford. In 1653, the Church of Hartford was "riven by one of the most vicious quarrels of the century."²⁴ The seed of the conflict which would lead to over fifteen years of ecclesiastical warfare and the eventual disunion of the Church of Hartford was planted by the death of Thomas Hooker. The majority of New England congregational churches that were founded with dual ministries evolved into a single minister after the death of one of the leaders.²⁵ This did not happen in Hartford, although the church appears to have attempted the innovation in the aftermath of Hooker's death in 1647. For the most part, Teacher Samuel Stone led the church on his own between 1647-1653.²⁶ In 1653, Michael

²¹ Walker, 84-85.

²² Horton, *Connecticut State Constitution*, 2-3.

²³ Hawes, *Historical Sketches*, 6.

²⁴ Perry Miller, *New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1953), 93.

²⁵ Walker, *History of the First Church*, 64.

²⁶ In 1649, Jonathan Mitchell, the future Pastor of the Church of Cambridge, was offered the position of Pastor in Hartford. He respectfully refused, returned to Cambridge, and later officiated John Whiting's marriage to Sybil Collins. See Walker, *History of the First Church*, 147.

Wigglesworth, a student of Stone, was brought before the church as a candidate for the pastorship. Wigglesworth did not impress the congregation but, before a vote could be held, Stone withdrew Wigglesworth's nomination. This act appears to have circumvented the covenant of the Hartford church: a candidate had been put forward for trial and the congregation was bound to vote. But Stone apparently did not want the stain of a failed vote on Wigglesworth's—or his own—reputation and forbade the congregation from voting.²⁷ This unilateral decision by Stone created a fracture within the congregation; most of the flock supported their Teacher, but a very vocal minority, including the Ruling Elder William Goodwin, openly questioned Stone's adherence to congregational beliefs.

Hartford fell deeper into conflict. In 1655, John Davis preached at Hartford and was considered "a young man of learning and promise" by the community.²⁸ But in the first few months of 1656 Davis left Hartford. Due to the lack of any church records before 1685, there is no official reason for Davis' dismissal from Hartford. But there are clues.

According to town records, Davis' salary was paid by six members of the church, four of whom were among the vocal minority which feared Stone's authoritarian manners. After Davis left, these same church members made sure that an unpaid balance still due him was paid by the town.²⁹ This suggests that the minority were pleased with Davis and, perhaps, hoped he would join the church. But that did not happen. We do not know the circumstances of Davis' exit from Hartford, but it is known that open warfare erupted between Stone and the minority immediately after Davis left town.

For many years, the origin of the conflict was believed to have been based on issues of baptism, a common source of discord in seventeenth-century Congregational churches. But a collection of primary documents related to the controversy, discovered in the middle of the nineteenth century, make clear that baptism was not an issue. Unfortunately, the documents, primarily transcriptions of letters, are incomplete and do not reveal the impetus of the conflict. But the first letters in the collection, written by the "minority" in the aftermath of Davis' departure, reveals anger at an unspecified betrayal, reluctance to recognize the authority of Teacher Stone, and calls for the assistance of a council of respected clergy to arbitrate the conflict.³⁰ The combination of the timing of the letters (immediately after Davis' removal), the tone of betrayal, and context provided by the Wigglesworth affair make it quite probable that Stone removed

²⁷ "Papers Related to the Controversy in the Church in Hartford, 1656-1659." In *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society 2*. Ed. by J. Hammond Trumbull., (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1870), 53-54.

²⁸ Walker, *History of the First Church*, 149.

²⁹ "Papers Related to the Controversy" in *Collections*, 54.

³⁰ "Papers Related to the Controversy" in *Collections*, 54-58.

Davis—a young man strongly supported by the minority—from the position of Pastor, without a church vote; yet again violating church laws.

The conflict in the church would rage on for years. Three councils were held over three years, each attempting to bring both parties together and each failing. The one thing made clear by the process was the growing religious divide between the Presbyterian-leaning Stone and the strictly Congregational minority. Stone had always been a moderate Puritan, certainly in comparison to the fiery congregationalist Hooker. But in Hooker's absence, Stone drifted away from the theological democracy of congregationalism—which placed ultimate authority for the running of the church into the hands of a voting congregation—and instead embraced the ordered authority of Presbyterianism—which handed control of the church to the ordained leadership. There was no clearer example of Stone's Presbyterianism than a letter he wrote in 1657, in the aftermath of yet another failed church council, in which he demanded the congregation bind themselves to him and his decisions, and allow him to choose Hooker's replacement.³¹ In most parts of New England, this step toward Presbyterianism would not have been radical. After all, Presbyterianism was the rising branch of Puritanism in the middle of the seventeenth century. But Hartford was different.

Thomas Hooker and his congregation had fled the religious authority of William Laud in England and, shortly thereafter, had fled the religious authority of John Cotton in Boston. Once established in Hartford, Hooker and his flock had spearheaded the creation of the Fundamental Orders, taking control of their own political destinies and establishing a constitutional democracy that claimed God as the only authority above man. Teacher Samuel Stone was a popular and beloved man, but his actions must have been seen by the most devout of Hooker's followers as an attack on their religious liberties.

Making matters even worse for the dissenting minority was an unfortunate confluence of ecclesiastic and civil law. As members of a covenant church, the dissenters were unable to join another church unless Teacher Stone granted them a dismissal, which he did not.³² Additionally, in 1658, the General Court of Connecticut attempted to settle the dispute once and for all by prohibiting the creation of any new churches in Connecticut and demanding the end of all public quarrels among church members.³³ This decision left the dissenting minority in a "hopeless predicament." Those dissenters who were able fled Hartford and established a new town and church in Hadley, Massachusetts.³⁴ Those dissenters who could not leave were forced to

³¹ "Papers Related to the Controversy" in *Collections*, 75-77.

³² Edwin Pond Parker, *History of the Second Church of Christ in Hartford*, (Hartford: Belknap & Warfield, 1892), 27.

³³ *Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut* 1 ed. J Hammond Trumbull, (Hartford, Brown & Parsons, 1850), 311-312

³⁴ Parker, *History of the Second Church*, 38.

silently submit to the will of Teacher Stone, but, in 1660, the silent minority found some satisfaction with the return of John Whiting to Hartford.

John Whiting was the son of William Whiting, one of the “civil and religious father[s] of Connecticut.” William Whiting served as a Magistrate for the town of Hartford, as well as a Treasurer of Connecticut Colony.³⁵ When he died in 1647, he left an estate valued at nearly £3,000. John Whiting had spent most of the decade of the 1650s in Massachusetts. He was a student at Harvard University between 1651-1655.³⁶ Whilst at Harvard, Whiting met and married Sybil Collins, the daughter of a deacon in the Cambridge church. After graduation, he apparently tarried in Cambridge, most likely assisting in the church.³⁷ While the Church of Hartford had been tearing itself apart, Whiting served as an associate to Reverend Edward Norris in the Salem church. Originally hired in 1657 to aid the elderly Norris, Whiting had seen his duties and pay increase the next year after Reverend Norris suffered a stroke and lost his ability to speak. In March of 1659, with Norris’ demise imminent, the selectmen of Salem asked Whiting to succeed Reverend Norris. He refused.³⁸

It is not known why John Whiting refused the call from the Salem church. He had spent over two years in service to the community and appears to have been well-liked. Additionally, Salem lay only fifteen miles from Cambridge, allowing his wife proximity to her parents. Hartford held no immediate family ties; his mother was remarried and living in Milford.³⁹ Few, if any, of his siblings remained in Hartford. But he did have an old friend in Hartford who may have asked for his return.

Samuel Wyllys, John’s childhood friend and Harvard classmate, had followed in his father’s footsteps to become the leading man of Hartford. He married well—Ruth Haynes was the daughter of Governor John Haynes—and at the age of twenty-eight, Samuel Wyllys was in his sixth year as Magistrate of the town of Hartford.⁴⁰ But he was an ambitious man. He was the son and son-in-law of former Governors and he hoped one day to hold the same position. But Hartford, his base of power, was collapsing under the weight of the ulcerous church controversy.

³⁵ Nathaniel Goodwin, *Genealogical Notes of Contributions to the Family History of Some of the First Settlers of Connecticut and Massachusetts*, (Hartford: F.A. Brown, 1856), 329.

³⁶ John Langdon Sibley, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University 1*, (Cambridge: Charles William Sever, 1873), 344.

³⁷ Official records of the Church of Cambridge list “John Whyting” & “Mrs. Sybil Whyting” among those members welcomed into the church in 1664. This date is certainly incorrect, most likely due to a transcription error. John and Sybil were well settled in Hartford in 1664. The correct date is most likely 1654. See *History of the First Church in Cambridge*, (Cambridge: First Church of Cambridge, 1872), 17.

³⁸ *Town Records of Salem Massachusetts 1, 1634-1659*, (Salem: Essex Institute, 1868), 203-204; 219; 224.

³⁹ Goodwin, *Genealogical Notes*, 329.

⁴⁰ Sibley, *Historical Sketches*, 323-325.

Wyllys's first attempt at snuffing out the controversy had failed. He had been one of the magistrates on the General Court who prohibited the creation of new churches and forbade public quarrels between church members. But it is difficult to mandate peace and legislate brotherhood. Half of the dissenters simply fled to Hadley and the other half were unhappy and resentful. The failed peace left Hartford economically and demographically weakened by the Hadley flight, and tensions in the town still simmered. An olive branch was needed if Hartford was to survive. The Hooker succession had dragged on for too long and the settlement of a new pastor could have been the key to bring the community back together. Perhaps John Whiting refused the call to Salem because he had already received word from an old friend that he was needed back home.

There are no surviving records for the Church of Hartford before 1685. As a result, the first mention of John Whiting's return to Hartford and employment as pastor comes from town records. In February of 1660, the town voted to pay "mr. whitting" £80 for "this year's labour" and an addition £10 to cover the cost of he and his family's transportation "from ye baye." In the same meeting, the town voted to add additional seating to the meetinghouse.⁴¹ Apparently, the town believed John Whiting's arrival would bring back some of those who had recused themselves from the church.

There was every reason for optimism. In 1655, John Davis had provided an example of how a popular but "minority approved" pastor could calm discord within the church. And John Whiting ticked both of those boxes. John was the son of a successful and well-remembered Hartford gentleman. The repeated efforts by the selectmen of Salem to convince Whiting to stay with them attest to his ability to win over a community. And Whiting's theology was strictly congregational; he would, like John Davis and (more importantly) Thomas Hooker before him, provide a balance to Teacher Stone's Presbyterianism.⁴²

For almost two years, the gamble worked. While dissenters were still legally forced to attend services led by Teacher Stone, the presence of John Whiting appears to have temporarily calmed the storm. After all, Stone was an old man and Whiting—a minority approved Pastor—stood as the apparent successor. After years of conflict, the minority needed only to be patient and wait. As a result, there are no records of religious discord in Hartford in 1660 and 1661. Granted, church records before 1685 do

⁴¹ The town voted to spend up to £23 to build a new gallery on the east side of the meeting house. See "Hartford Town Votes," in *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society* 6, (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1897), 133-134

⁴² Richard Ross, a former professor at Trinity College in Hartford, argues that Samuel Stone hired the "congregationalist" John Whiting to "quiet the dissenters," but he offers no proof to support the claim, (most likely due to the lack of church records). While Stone did demand the right to choose Hooker's replacement in his inflammatory 1657 letter, I believe it is equally likely that Wyllys, a long-time friend of Whiting and the defacto leader of the community, may have encouraged the idea and acted as a middleman between Stone and Whiting. See Ross, *Before Salem*, Ch. 12.

not exist, but civic records do not contain any legal actions regarding the church conflict. The lack of any letters dated after 1659 in the “Papers Related to the Controversy” also suggests a period of peace. Unfortunately, that peace would be shattered by two major global events.

In 1662, the people of Hartford were once again in a state of both spiritual and physical turmoil but, this time, the cause did not emanate from within the community. Beginning in March of 1662, a series of synods—or religious meetings—were held in Boston. Lasting the entire year, these synods were organized to settle a controversial question of baptism and church membership.⁴³ Under congregational law, only the children of church members could be baptized. By the middle of the seventeenth century however, a significant number of those children had children of their own but they had never formally joined the church, preventing these grandchildren of the founding generation from receiving baptism. The principle reason for their reluctance to join a church was the strenuous examination and public testimony required before the congregation voted on their membership. Quite simply, they did not want to have to testify to their faith and confess their most private sins in front of the judging eyes of their neighbors. Faced with the prospect of declining membership and loss of influence, some ministers began to allow baptism for the grandchildren of church members.⁴⁴ Conservative Puritans were outraged by the enlargement of the baptism. Aside from violating the very covenant law congregationalism was based upon, they feared the Half-Way Covenant (as it was called) opened the door for eventual open membership and a parish-style church, based upon residency rather than visible sainthood.

In the eyes of the conservative Puritans, the Boston Synod was undermining the very foundation of their faith. It is no coincidence that the very same year as the Boston synods, the jeremiad *God's Controversy with New England* was published, creating the theological foundation for the Puritan paranoia known as declension: the moral decline of God's people.⁴⁵ While Stone and the majority welcomed the possibility of enlarging the church, the dissenting minority must have been aghast.⁴⁶ They had already been silenced by the courts and legally prohibited from forming a separate church. Must they now be forced to worship alongside sinners?

The dissenting minority were not alone in their fear. All of Hartford was in a state of unease over the recent restoration of Charles II to the throne of Great Britain. During the interregnum, Connecticut had flourished under a form of salutary neglect by the Puritan government in London. With the return of the crown and the authority

⁴³ Miller, *New England Mind*, 94-95.

⁴⁴ Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1963), 129-133.

⁴⁵ Miller, *New England Mind*, 95.

⁴⁶ According to Williston Walker, Samuel Stone promoted a version of the half-way covenant as early as 1650. See Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, 254.

of the Church of England, there was a fear that the independence of the colonial churches would be threatened. Exacerbating that fear was the fact that Connecticut's government was not, strictly speaking, legitimate. Hooker's Fundamental Orders constitution had been a beneficiary of salutary neglect. The new king would be well within his rights to declare Connecticut's colony invalid and hand control of the entire territory over to Massachusetts. The current Governor of Connecticut, John Winthrop the Younger, chose the path of action. Bearing a letter penned by Winthrop, Teacher Stone, John Whiting, and a few others, the Governor sailed to London in 1661 and embarked on a year-long campaign of flattery. He hoped to secure a royal charter for the colony. But, by 1662, there was still no word from Winthrop. The fate of the colony's political independence was unknown.⁴⁷

Amid this atmosphere of religious paranoia and political turmoil, an eight-year old girl died. Elizabeth Kelly was the daughter of John Kelly and Bethia Wakeman. Their marriage must have raised more than a few eyebrows because Bethia was the sixteen-year-old daughter of one of Hartford's founders, while John Kelly was a fifty-two-year-old laborer with a drinking problem.⁴⁸ Elizabeth's age suggests that Bethia was most likely pregnant at the time of their marriage which may explain the unusual match.

According to John and Bethia's sworn testimony, Elizabeth's sickness began on Sunday, March 23, 1662, when she returned home from the meetinghouse in the company of a neighbor, Judith Ayres. Inside the Kelly home, Ayres performed a trick she apparently was known for: drinking broth from a boiling pot. Elizabeth, hoping to impress, did the same and immediately began to complain of pain in her stomach. John Kelly gave Elizabeth "a small dose of the powder of Angellica roote." Later that night, John Kelly claimed that Elizabeth woke up in the night, screaming "Goodwife Ayres is upon me" and claiming Ayres was choking her throat, kneeling upon her belly, and breaking her bowels. The poor girl's torment continued for three days, during which guests in the Kelly home witnessed Elizabeth cry out against Goody Ayres and even claim that Ayres had threatened her before bewitching her. Elizabeth Kelly's last gasping words before her death was "Goodwife Ayres choakes mee."⁴⁹ After Elizabeth's death, a formal inquest was held and, in an unusual step for seventeenth-century New England, an autopsy was ordered. The physician ruled Elizabeth Kelly's death was unusual and was probably the result of "preternaturall" reasons.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Much of this summary is based upon Morgan, but the information relating to Whiting's involvement in Winthrop's letter comes from the *Public Records*. See Morgan, *Connecticut as a Colony*, 247-248 and *Public Records*, 367-368.

⁴⁸ Ross, *Before Salem*, Ch. 12.

⁴⁹ *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England*, ed. David D. Hall, (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 152-154.

⁵⁰ *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England*, 154-155.

Almost immediately Goodwife Ayres, as well as three others, were arrested for witchcraft, but it is possible these arrests were more a response to public outcry than any legal desire to prosecute witches. After all, there were noticeable flaws in John Kelly's testimony before the court. The first was John Kelly's decision to give powdered Angelica root to his daughter. In the seventeenth century, Angelica root was used to ward off witchcraft.⁵¹ At that point, Elizabeth Kelly had no symptoms of bewitchment, merely stomach pain after swallowing a boiling liquid. Also, Elizabeth's first declaration of witchcraft—the night she woke up screaming—was, curiously, not witnessed by her mother who, according to the same testimony, was asleep beside Elizabeth. According to John Kelly, Elizabeth was in terrible pain, crying out multiple times against Goody Ayres, yet, Bethia Kelly slept through the entire episode. Another solution presents itself: John Kelly, a superstitious alcoholic, feared his daughter was bewitched, gave her a folk-magic potion to ward-off evil, and, after she woke up complaining of stomach pain, convinced his eight-year-old daughter that she was bewitched. It is not known if the court did or did not initially believe John Kelly, but those in jail for witchcraft were not well guarded; Goodwife Ayres and another accused witch were able to easily escape.⁵²

But by June things had changed. The public had been both enraged and terrified by the escape of two accused witches. The two remaining accused witches, Andrew and Mary Sanford, were quickly indicted by a grand jury. Andrew was acquitted but Mary was convicted. There is no documented connection between the Sanfords and Elizabeth Kelly. Unfortunately, their indictment fails to mention their accusers, but the wording of the indictment is very similar to others who were indicted due to fortune telling. This suggests that in the wake of the Kelly accusations, the spiritual and political tinderbox that was Hartford began to look for outsiders to condemn. And the spark ignited by the death of Elizabeth Kelly would grow to an inferno because of Ann Cole.

Ann Cole was the daughter of John Cole, a "prominent member of the conservative Congregationalist minority in the Hartford Church and an enemy of Samuel Stone's progressive policies." Ann most likely grew up in a home "beset by inordinate tensions" related to the controversy in the Church and likely heard discussions related to "the state of the church, Satan's influence in the Church, and gossip about neighbors who appeared to be successful yet led dissolute lives."⁵³ Exacerbating Ann's life was her apparent inability to find a husband. Her father, John Cole, was quite likely the illegitimate son of James Cole.⁵⁴ Due to his own probably

⁵¹ Ross, *Before Salem*, Ch. 12.

⁵² Charles J. Hoadley, "A Case of Witchcraft in Hartford," *Connecticut Magazine* 5, (1899), 557.

⁵³ Ross, *Before Salem*, Ch. 12.

⁵⁴ Some genealogists have assumed John was the son of James Cole, a prominent member of Hartford society. After all, John Cole and his daughter Ann did eventually take ownership of the James Cole property. But James Cole's will does not mention a son; he left his estate to his daughter, Abigail, who in

illegitimacy, John could not inherit his father's home and was forced to purchase from his half-sister what would otherwise have been his birthright. This background could explain the fervency with which he practiced his faith. John Cole would have demanded a devout congregationalist for his daughter's hand but, unfortunately, most of the eligible young male members of the minority fled to Hadley in 1659. In 1662, Ann was growing older and her prospects were dimming.

Ann began to have fits. She interrupted church services. Her body would move in "extremely violent bodily motions." Speaking in a strange accent, she accused multiple members of the community of being "familiar of the evil one" and contriving to afflict "her body, spoile her name, [&] hinder her marriage." Before long, two other women suffered from similar fits. A special day of fasting and prayer was held on Ann's behalf in the Wyllys mansion. In the middle of the ceremony, Ann fell into another fit, the "motion and noise" of her body "so terrible that a godly person fainted under the appearance of it." In front of the assembled community, Ann accused Rebecca Greensmith of witchcraft.⁵⁵

Rebecca Greensmith and her husband, Nathaniel, were neighbors of the Cole's (and John Whiting, as well) but they were not friends. The Greensmith's had few friends. Nathaniel was a successful petty businessman, but he was unpopular, coarse, and frequently in court.⁵⁶ Rebecca was even more of a social outcast. She was twice widowed, and, before her marriage to Nathaniel, she had been convicted of having relations with a man, possibly for money.⁵⁷ She was a heavy drinker and was known to gather with several other outcasts at night just outside of the town limits, to share bottles of "sack" and "make merry."⁵⁸ In short, Nathaniel and Rebecca were everything John Cole and the pious people of Hartford abhorred.

Rebecca was already in jail when Ann made her public accusation at the Wyllys mansion. There is no record of her arrest, but it is probable that she was detained during the public backlash after Goody Ayres escaped. After all, Rebecca was an obvious target for suspicion. Aside from her own character flaws, Rebecca was a friend

turn, sold the house and land to John Cole in 1655. I believe it is very likely that James and John Cole were related; in fact, the most convenient solution, (that no other historian that I'm aware of has made) is that John may have been the result of a youthful indiscretion. If so, James, living in such a religious community, may have chosen to bypass John in his will for moral purposes. After John had established himself in the eyes of the community as a loyal husband and pillar of religious orthodoxy, Abigail officially signed over ownership of the property to her elder half-brother. I believe this solution both sews together the confusing lines of ownership of the Cole property, while also laying the psychological foundation for young Ann Cole's future troubles. See Frank T. Cole, *Early Genealogies of the Cole Families in America*, (Columbus: Rann & Adair, 1887), 14-18.

⁵⁵ John Whiting, John Whiting to Increase Mather, 466-469.

⁵⁶ Greensmith was convicted of multiple counts of theft, as well as assault and appropriating public property for personal use. See *Records of the Particular Court*, 81;86;107-108.

⁵⁷ *Records of the Particular Court*, 118-119.

⁵⁸ *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England*, 357.

of Goody Ayres and her frequent “nocturnal gatherings” awakened suspicion among her neighbors.⁵⁹ When John Whiting, along with Samuel Hooker and Joseph Haynes, marched from the Wyllys mansion, crossed the small bridge over the Little River, and walked into the small jail on the public square to confront Rebecca with Ann’s accusation, Rebecca surprised them by confessing.

Rebecca’s confession was, in some ways, an act of defiance. She must have understood that the mood of the community had turned. People were afraid—of witchcraft, of changing religious practices, of the future of their homes and lands—and they demanded blood for some psychological form of satisfaction. Ann Cole’s remarkably public accusation merely provided the legal requirement necessary for her conviction and execution. But Rebecca did not confess because of fear. In fact, she may have been the only person in Hartford who was not acting out of fear. Rather, Rebecca confessed out of anger.

Shortly before John Whiting and his comrades arrived at Rebecca’s cell, her husband Nathaniel visited. Word of Ann’s demonic performance had already raced across town and Nathaniel Greensmith—ever the businessman, ever the louse—decided to force his wife to confess and wash his hands of her. Nathaniel confronted Rebecca and threatened her two children (from previous marriages), promising he would do them harm if she refused to confess.⁶⁰ He left minutes before John Whiting arrived. Within moments, Rebecca confessed...and named Nathaniel as the leader of the coven. In her confession she claimed that Nathaniel could summon demons in animal form and those demons gave him supernatural strength and knowledge. She denied that she had signed a covenant with the devil but confessed that Satan was expecting her to sign one on Christmas (a holiday banned in Puritan New England). She also named several others as witches, but all but one of the people on Rebecca’s list were already safely out of reach of the Hartford executioner.⁶¹ Rebecca confessed to familiarity with Satan, but she maintained the sanctity of her Christian covenant and ensured that Nathaniel Greensmith would never harm her children. In the face of fear, she found courage.

Nathaniel and Rebecca Greensmith were indicted and convicted of witchcraft on December 30, 1662.⁶² Their execution, alongside Farmington resident Mary Barnes, the following month marked the end of the Hartford Witch Hysteria of 1662.⁶³ Others, such as Elizabeth Seager, Elizabeth Clauson, and Mercy Disborough would face accusations

⁵⁹ Love, *Colonial History of Hartford*, 284.

⁶⁰ *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England*, 356.

⁶¹ *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England*, 356-357.

⁶² *Records of the Particular Court*, 257-258.

⁶³ Little is known of Mary Barnes. On January 6, 1663, she was convicted of witchcraft in Hartford but it is not known if Mary Barnes was accused by Ann Cole or by a separate accuser in Farmington. See *Records of the Particular Court*, 259.

and trials in the years and decades to follow, but Rebecca Greensmith, Nathaniel Greensmith, and Mary Barnes would be the last people executed for witchcraft in Connecticut.

John Whiting lived for another quarter-century. In 1670, he, John Cole, and Ann Cole's husband, Andrew Benton,⁶⁴ were among those who formed the Second Church of Christ in Hartford, formally ending the nearly fifteen-year conflict between the Presbyterian majority and the Congregational minority in Hartford.⁶⁵ Leaving the dual ministry example behind, John served as the sole Pastor of the Second Church until he died in 1689 at the age of fifty-four.⁶⁶ After his death, Cotton Mather wrote that he would "not be forgotten, till, Connecticut Colony, do forget itself, and all religion."⁶⁷ His role in the Hartford Witchcraft Hysteria was left unmentioned.

The lives of John Whiting, Rebecca Greensmith, Ann Cole, and even young Elizabeth Kelly, leave us with far more questions than answers. How did intelligent, rational men and women in Hartford in 1662 turn upon one another and watch their neighbors killed in cattle pastures? The answer is rooted in the religious history of Hartford. Thomas Hooker and his congregation fled the land of their birth, in search of religious freedom. Once in the New World, they chose to withdraw deeper inland, removing themselves and their church from possible spiritual contamination. After arriving in the Connecticut River Valley, Hooker and his pilgrims cast off any political allegiance to landowners in England or colonial governments in Boston. Hooker sowed the seeds of political and religious liberty in Hartford, but his death allowed the fruit to become corrupted.

Hooker left behind a politically active congregation, deeply devoted to spiritual independence and liberty, but Teacher Stone's growing Presbyterianism opened a rift within the church. For years, the community warred with one another, until the General Court enforced an imbalanced peace: granting Stone and his followers control of the house of God, while enslaving the beaten minority into forced worship under a Teacher they did not respect.

John Whiting's ordination as Pastor of the Hartford Church temporarily cooled the anger of the minority. His congregational beliefs and personal popularity won over the dissenters, and, as Teacher Stone's health deteriorated, a hope was born that

⁶⁴ In an interesting and, quite frankly, creepy historical turn, Andrew Benton purchased the Nathaniel Greensmith property from the colony in 1668. As it bordered Ann's father's property, the decision made sense. But Andrew and Ann moved into Greensmith home and Ann spent the rest of her life living in the house originally occupied by a woman she helped condemn to death. See *Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut* 2, 91.

⁶⁵ In 1669, the General Court granted Whiting and the dissenters formal permission to form a new church to finally end the long-simmering conflict in the religious heart of Hartford. See Parker, *History of the Second Church*, 45.

⁶⁶ Goodwin, *Genealogical Notes*, 330-331.

⁶⁷ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* 2, (1702), (Hartford: Silas Andrus, 1820), 118.

Whiting would eventually lead the church away from Stone's Presbyterian innovations. But that flickering hope was snuffed out in 1662.

In 1662, the colony of Connecticut was in despair. Connecticut's lack of royal charter led to fears of annexation into Massachusetts and the loss of the very political independence Hooker had instilled into his followers. Concurrently, the Boston synods stood on the verge of formally accepting the Half-Way Covenant, striking at the very heart of Congregationalism, and possibly opening the doors of the church to strangers. These twin threats to the political independence and religious liberties of Hooker's colony shocked the people of Hartford and laid the psychological foundation for the Hartford Witchcraft Hysteria.

John Kelly did not have political or religious motives when he convinced his dying eight-year old daughter that she was bewitched. He was simply a superstitious alcoholic, lashing out in anger at the loss of his child. But he lit the fuse. The anxious and disordered people of Hartford quickly turned upon one another, targeting social malcontents who represented the very strangers they were on the verge of being forced to politically and religiously join.

Ann Cole certainly had religious motives. Trapped within a strict religious family, socially incentivized to marry but constrained by the lack of eligible doctrinally correct young men, she suffered a break down. Either of her own volition or encouraged by her father, Ann targeted her neighbor, Rebecca Greensmith, the wife of an unpopular wealthy man and herself a lascivious, alcoholic woman who reveled in midnight dances with unsavory people. To John Cole and the Congregational dissenters, Rebecca Greensmith must have embodied the very stranger they feared the Half-Way Covenant would force them to welcome into their church and home. In their eyes, she must have been a witch; she and her sort had bewitched Teacher Stone, the Boston Synods, and were poised to infest their church.

Rebecca Greensmith was a morally questionable woman, but she was not a witch. She was a victim, like every other person condemned for witchcraft, but Rebecca was a victim of a unique confluence of events: the history of Hartford; political and religious ideologies sewn deep into the souls of its citizens; years of internecine warfare within the only church in the community; rapidly shifting political and religious realities; and the eternal and ever-present fear of the stranger. In 1662, these five strands wound together like the thread of a rope, swinging heavily beneath the branch of an ancient elm tree.