

# The Origins of Suspicion

Mary Bliss Parsons was born in England, probably in 1628, and her family moved to Hartford soon after her birth.

After the death of Thomas Bliss, Mary's mother, Margaret, moved the family to Springfield, where the family prospered despite the loss of the father. Her sons were successful in business, and court records indicate that Margaret herself was quite business minded and well able to defend her property in several legal disputes.

Mary Bliss met and married Cornet Joseph Parsons in Hartford in 1646, after which they moved to Springfield; the first Parsons child was born in 1647.

Bliss Parsons's troubles with witchcraft may have begun during this period, though in a rather unusual way. In May of 1649, another Mary Parsons, married to Hugh Parsons (and apparently no relation to the Northampton Mary Parsons) was the defendant in a slander trial brought by the widow Marshfield. William Pynchon heard the case, in which John Matthews and his wife testified that Mary Lewis Parsons had spread rumors about the widow being a witch; Mary denied them, but Pynchon found her guilty and sentenced her to be whipped or to pay three pounds to the widow Marshfield. But the troubles of Mary Lewis Parsons of Springfield were not to end here. In 1650, Lewis Parsons's infant child died. It was said that Lewis Parsons herself had killed the child, and she was accused of witchcraft. William Pynchon again presided over her case in Springfield, but as such an accusation was beyond his jurisdiction, he sent the case to Boston. The charges of witchcraft were dismissed, but Lewis Parsons was convicted of the murder of her child, for which she was sentenced to hang. Lewis Parsons probably died in jail before the sentence was carried out.

What effect might all this have had on another, younger, Mary (Bliss) Parsons, who was living in the same town and had the exact same name as an accused witch and a murderess? Testimony from later trials indicates that during the time of the Mary Lewis Parsons trial, Mary Bliss Parsons was known to have fits so severe that her husband locked her up to keep her from leaving the house. Such fits were apparently a common occurrence in young women during witchcraft times; the children of Reverend George Moxon experienced such fits during the same trial. But the fact that Mary Bliss Parsons was a grown woman made her look suspicious. In any case, many of those who

would testify in her trial knew her, or knew of her reputation, from the time she lived in Springfield, and she would never be able to dissociate herself from the connection with witchcraft.

### *The Feud: Bridgman v Parsons*

Perhaps more important than Mary's own psychological make-up was the issue of the apparent long-standing feud between the Bridgman and Parsons families.

The Parsonses moved to Northampton in 1654, where they were very successful. Cornet Joseph Parsons earned his title as a color-bearer in the Hampshire Troop of Horses, and held various positions of merit in the town. In his early career, he earned money and distinction working as a merchant and fur trader for the Pynchon family, and eventually kept the first house of entertainment in Northampton; the Parsonses would eventually become the wealthiest family in Northampton. Their wealth can also be measured in terms of their family size: Mary and Joseph had a total of eleven children, most of whom lived to adulthood.

The Parsonses and the Bridgmans' lives were certainly parallel in some ways, particularly in terms of their moves. Both families lived in Springfield during the same period, and presumably knew each other; both families moved to Northampton in 1654; however, their experiences in this new community were quite different. While Mary Parsons and her family seemed to enjoy constantly improving fortunes, Sarah Bridgman and her family repeatedly faced hardships.

The Parsons family would enjoy the honor of bearing the first child born in the new settlement, while the Bridgmans experienced the heartache and ill-omen of the first recorded death. Mary's fifth child, Ebenezer, was born in May of 1655, while Sarah's infant son died in 1656. Apparently after this family loss, Sarah began to speak ill of Mary Parsons, spreading gossip about her to their mutual neighbors. The talk came to the attention of Mary and her husband, and later that year, Joseph Parsons charged Sarah Bridgman with slander against his wife. For years, Mary would go on to have many healthy children (eleven in all), the majority of whom lived to adulthood and went on to have more children. The Parsons family grew larger and wealthier with each passing year in the new settlement. Meanwhile, many of Sarah's children died in infancy or were plagued with a variety of ailments, and the family was not succeeding financially.

Text courtesy of the Mary Bliss Parsons Project – from Historic Northampton and the Center for Educational Software Development