

# The Full Story of the Slander Trial

As Sarah Bridgman's gossip about Mary Bliss Parsons spread, Joseph Parsons decided to take decisive action to stop any further damage to the reputation of his wife and family. In 1656, during the month of August, testimony was presented before commissioners at Springfield in the case of *Parsons v Bridgman*, and in October the case was brought before the Magistrates' Court at Cambridge.

The testimony in the case involves various community members testifying on behalf of Mary Bliss Parsons that they had heard Sarah Bridgman abusing her character. On the other side of the case were the many individuals defending Sarah's accusations as not slander, but truth; these individuals cited various encounters with Mary that seemed to prove that she had caused them (or their property) harm.

It seems that Mary Bliss Parsons was believed to be the cause of a strange variety of problems for her neighbors. Chief among her offenses is the death of William Hannum's cow. Hannum testified that "Mary came to my house about the yarn that she missed and then we had a falling out about it and some discontented words passed on both sides: this was in an evening, and as I take it in March last and that evening all my Cattle were well for ought I could see by them, the next morning One cow lay in my yard, ready to die as I thought: which when I had considered I endeavored to get her up and at length got her to stand: but she languished away and died about a fortnight after, though I took great care night and day to save her, giving her wholesome drinks eggs etc. and this Cow being young was hefty before this very time." Such accusations, indicating that Mary was responsible for damage to livestock and property, appear frequently in the record, and were intended to "prove" that Mary was involved in witchcraft.

The focus of the case, however, was not Mary Bliss Parsons's guilt, but Sarah Bridgman's. Bridgman's own testimony is perhaps the most damaging, accusing Bliss Parsons of causing harm, not to her animals, but to her own child. Bridgman testified that "having my child in my lap, there was something that gave a great blow on the door, and at very instant as I apprehended my child changed : and I thought with myself and told my girl I was afraid my child would die. And I sent out the girl to look who it was at the door, but she could see nobody about the house : Presently after the girl came in, I looking towards the door thorough a hole by the door, I saw to my apprehension two

women pass by the door with white clothes on their heads, then I concluded my child would die indeed : and I sent out the girl to see who they were but she could see nobody : they made me think there is wickedness in the place."

As the case unfolded however, the many alliances within the community were uncovered, and it seems that some individuals who had first testified on Sarah's behalf later changed their stories. For instance, we learn that soon after testifying about Mary's curious behavior, John Mathews recanted, claiming that he "hath at present no grounds of jealousy for himself, of Mary Parsons the wife of Joseph Parsons, to be a witch, and that what he testified yesterday on oath was upon the earnest Importunity of James Bridgman and his Brother."

While the strange coincidences and incidents with livestock might be ignored by us today, members of her community, and perhaps even her own family firmly believed that Mary had supernatural powers. Curious stories of Mary had been circulating in the area for some time. For instance, William Branch of Springfield testified on oath that "when I lived at the long meadow and Joseph Parsons lived there, a certain time Joseph Parsons told me that wherever he lay the key his wife could find it : and would go out in the night and that when she went out a woman went out with her and came in with her but says Joseph Parsons God preserves his with his Angels: and further the said William Branch sayth that while they lived together in the Long Meddow; George Cotton told me that he following Mary Parsons in her fit, he followed her thorough the water where he was up to the knees and she was not wet : this thing I told to William Pynchon when he was here : who wondered at it but said he could not tell what to say to it."

But ultimately, what had to be proven was that Sarah had been spreading rumors maliciously. To this end, Mary's own mother, Margaret Bliss, "testifieth that Sarah Bridgman told her that she did hear that her daughter Parsons was suspected to be a witch." Hearing the recanting of some testimony, and finding other stories perhaps inexplicable or too wild it seemed clear that Sarah was guilty of slander.

The magistrates issued their decision in favor of the Parsonses, and ordered Sarah Bridgman to make public apology for her slander in both Northampton and Springfield, or to pay a fine. It appears that despite any financial hardship, Bridgman chose to pay the fine rather than submit to the public humiliation.

The court's decision did nothing to change the opinions held by Bridgman or her family. In 1668 Sarah Bridgman died at the age of about forty-seven, but

her family still held a grudge against the Parsons, and over time, the testimony from the slander case would be evidence in Mary's own trial for witchcraft.

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