

The Full Story of the Slander Trial

Life for the Parsons continued, with Mary bearing more children, and Joseph growing more successful in his business and civic life. But in August of 1674, Mary Bridgman Bartlett, wife of Samuel Bartlett and daughter of Sara and James Bridgman, died unexpectedly at a young age (probably about 22).

Mary Bliss Parsons was again suspected of witchcraft. At the urging of Mary Bridgman Bartlett's father, the widower Samuel Bartlett filed a complaint against Mary Parsons, and on September 29th, 1674, Hampshire County Court received the testimonies of family, friends, and neighbors. On January 5th, 1675, county magistrates conducted a hearing, at which Mary spoke for herself. Her body was searched for signs of "witch marks." The magistrates decided that this was beyond their jurisdiction, so they sent the case to the Court of Assistants in Boston.

On March 2nd, Mary Bliss Parsons was taken to Boston and "presented" at the Court of Assistants. She was then committed to prison until her trial, where she no doubt endured harsh conditions. While her family's money was probably able to buy her a larger cell and provide her with decent food and clean water, the situation was certainly unpleasant. On May 13th, Bliss Parsons was acquitted by a jury of twelve men from the Boston area. William Pyncheon sat on the case (along with other dignitaries). Again, Joseph's business dealings with Pyncheon may have helped his wife's case, and surely the money and prestige of the family worked in Bliss Parsons's favor.

After this, it appears that Mary and Joseph may have remained in Boston for some time, as Joseph had a warehouse in Boston and may have been engaged in some business. They still maintained their residence in Northampton for the next few years, but as Bliss Parsons's reputation in Northampton had not improved, they do not appear to have been eager to return.

When Bliss Parsons's son, Ebenezer was killed September of 1675 in battle with the Indians at Northfield, many felt that this was punishment for Mary's dealings with the devil. Local legend claims that they believed: "though human judges may be bought off, God's vengeance neither turns aside nor slumbers!"

Aftershocks and Outcome

In 1676, James Bridgman died; his estate probate inventory yielded a value of 114 pounds. While it might seem that with him, the grudge between the Parsons and Bridgmans would die out, this was not the case. Back in Northampton, on March 7th of 1678[/9], a man named John Stebbins died in mysterious circumstances. His wife was the sister of Samuel Bartlett, who was the widower of Mary Bridgman Bartlett. Believing that Stebbins had been killed by witches, Samuel Bartlett gathered evidence to send to Boston in 1679, although the court did not make any indictments. Unfortunately, Bartlett's evidence and the records of the case have disappeared; many suppose that Mary Parsons was suspected in the case, due to the involvement of Bartlett.

Mary and Joseph Parsons permanently left Northampton in 1679 or 1680, and returned to Springfield. Mary and Joseph Parsons' grandson, Nathaniel Parsons (1686 - 1736) probably raised the house that is known today as "The Parsons House."

Cornet Joseph Parsons died in Springfield on October 9th, 1683, leaving a large estate of over 2000 pounds to his wife and children. Bliss Parsons went on to live almost 30 years more, and appears to have made a considerable fortune with the money.

While it might seem that Mary Bliss Parsons' troubles were left behind once she removed from Northampton, her reputation as a witch apparently lived on for many years. In 1702, Mary was again the subject of neighborhood gossip. Hannah (Parsons) Glover's husband, Peletiah Glover complained in local court that a woman named Betty (who the court documents named as "Betty Negro" instead of printing her full name) struck their son (Peletiah junior) and told him that his grandmother (i.e., Mary Parsons) had killed several people, and that his mother (Hannah) was "half a witch." Both John Pynchon and Joseph Parsons Junior presided and sentenced Betty to lashes at the hand of Thomas Bliss.

If marriages can mend fences between such bitterly opposed families, perhaps there was eventually reconciliation. In 1711, Mary Parsons, granddaughter of Mary Bliss Parsons, married Ebenezer Bridgman, grandson of Sarah Bridgman. Mary Parsons herself was alive to witness the union, although no accounts survive to detail her reaction to it. The young couple removed to Belchertown and had three children, Joseph, Ebenezer, and Mary. That their children were named after both of Mary's parents perhaps might indicate that they were still on good terms with her side of the family.

Mary (Bliss) Parsons died in Springfield on January 29th, 1712. Five of her eleven children survived her (Joseph, John, Samuel, Hannah, and Esther).

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