

Book Review



Reviewed by Richard A. Forsten, Esquire

Enchanting: Salem Witch Judge, The Life and Repentance of Samuel Sewall

by Eve LaPlante (HarperOne, 2007)

Most of us probably know a little, but not much, about the Salem witch trial. During the fall of 1692, 19 men and women were hung and 1 man was pressed to death by heavy stones. More than another 150 were jailed and awaiting either execution or trial before the hysteria died down, the prisoners released, and the executions put to an end. Thereafter, people returned to their daily lives and tried to forget the trials. Of the nine judges who sat in judgment at the trials, only one ever publicly renounced his actions and sought forgiveness.

Author Eve LaPlante is a sixth great-granddaughter of Samuel Sewall and lives in New England on land once owned by her ancestor. In *Salem Witch Judge, The Life and Repentance of Samuel Sewall*, she tells the remarkable story of this remarkable man. Her book is more than just the story of the witch trials, and, indeed, the trials themselves comprise less than half the book. Rather, LaPlante's book is a complete biography of her subject, as well as a fascinating look at the world of seventeenth century New England—a time and place which will seem very foreign to those of us today.

Samuel Sewall was actually born in England in 1652 and emigrated to New England in 1661 with his family. He earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Harvard and became a wealthy and successful businessman. Sewall fathered fourteen children, seven of whom died within two years of birth. He would eventually outlive all but three of his children (birth rates and mortality rates were both much higher in the seventeenth century).

Sewall, like most New Englanders of his day, was an extremely pious and religious man. He was elected to the Massachusetts General Court, the colony's governing body, and served in a number of minor governmental posts. Later, following the witchcraft trials, Sewall was appointed a judge of the Superior Court of Judicature, the first independent judicial court in America.

It is the witchcraft trials with which Sewall is most famously associated. The trouble began in early 1692, when the Reverend for Salem noticed disturbing changes in the behavior of his nine-year-old daughter and eleven-year-old niece (whom he was also raising). They would not pray when they were supposed to. They would not do their chores. They had strange fits. The two girls, together with another playmate, would crawl under the table and bark like dogs or mew like cats. The minister was perplexed and sent for a doctor, who could find no physical ailment or cause. When asked by the doctor as to why they acted the way they did, the girls claimed that three local women came to them as spirits and asked them to sign the devil's book. When they refused, the women hurt the girls and caused them to act badly. The doctor confirmed that the girls were "under an evil hand."

Witchcraft and the devil were real to the people of the seventeenth century. Everyone knew the devil carried a book with the names of his followers written in blood. With the girls' accusations, the first three witches were named, and the witch hunt was on. Before long, more girls and young women were making more accusa-

tions against more people. All of this was carefully taken down, and within less than three months, scores of citizens (primarily women, but some men) had been jailed while awaiting trial.

All told, some 185 people were accused of witchcraft before the hysteria died down. Of these, 59 were tried and 31 convicted. Of the 31 convicted, 20 were ultimately executed. In addition, approximately 50 people confessed to witchcraft, many after some form of torture. Confessing to witchcraft was not as ill-rational as it might seem. Those who confessed would not be executed.

In September of 1692, the special court created by the Governor adjourned and never reconvened. Public sentiment began turning against the trials as more and more people (including more and more prominent people such as the Governor's wife) began to be accused of witchcraft. The people of New England sought to put the episode behind them. Court records from the trials were destroyed, and the usually detailed church records for Salem village omit any reference to the witchcraft trials.

Approximately four-and-a-half years later, on the morning of Thursday, January 14, 1697, Samuel Sewall was attending church with his wife, two sons, and three daughters. The men sat in the pews to the left of the center aisle, the women on the right, as was the custom. As the minister made his way up the aisle, Sewall handed him a note. The minister reached the pulpit and began the service with a prayer.

Sometime later during the service, while in the pulpit, the minister opened

the note and then looked at Sewall. Sewall rose, while the rest of the congregation, somewhat puzzled, remained seated and looked at Sewall. The minister then read the note, in which Sewall, in referring to the witch trials, wrote that he “desires to take the blame and shame of it, asking pardon of men, and especially desiring prayers that God, who has an unlimited authority, would pardon that sin.” With that act of contrition, Sewall became the only judge from the witch trials (and, indeed, it appears as though the only person connected to the trials at all) to admit to error and seek forgiveness. A mural of Sewall’s action now hangs in the Massachusetts State House beneath the golden dome and above the Speaker’s platform.

For this act alone, Sewall deserves remembrance. But, he was a man ahead of his times in several other ways as well. He believed in rights for Native Americans, and paid for several Indian youths to attend Harvard. He wrote a tract on the equality of sexes, arguing that women’s bodies would be resurrected in Heaven, just as men’s are. Finally, he also wrote the

first anti-slavery tract in the New World.

LaPlante’s book paints a complex and human portrait not only of Sewall, but of seventeenth century New England, a time and place largely ignored in most historical studies. Had Sewall been born a hundred years later, he might easily have been an important part of the founding generation; as it stands, his story and his remarkable courage in his public repentance are worthy of study and reflection. ☞

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