

Wife Sales

Wife sales were exactly what they sound like they would be: the sale of wives by husbands. The sales were not a part of any legal government provision or any particular religion but have occurred around the world for centuries. The sales were an informal practice started amongst the people, usually in open public areas such as the taverns or the market place. When a wife was auctioned, she was put into a halter, a rope or strapped device used for leading or restraining cattle, and stayed in that device throughout the sale. The use of the cattle implement was symbolic of the woman's position as property in the sale. Even if the wife agreed to the auction, it was all carried out within the husband's and buyer's power. The main reasons for the auctioning of wives were because of economic situations, adultery or the lack of compatibility of the husband and wife.

The majority of the wife sales in the United States trace back to England when divorces did exist but were practiced sparingly. Only middling and elite class people could afford divorces. Also, wife sales mainly took place in urban population. Once the printing of newspapers became common, it was easier for wife sales to be posted (and for historians to trace them). Samuel Pyeatt Menefee looked at nearly four hundred wife sales starting from the eleventh century to the 1970s. During the Industrial Revolution (1785 to 1845) wife selling was at its highest peak. For English society, the peak was also a result of the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars and the following aftermaths. The wars affected the economies, sometimes causing husbands to sell their wives in order to prevent the rest of the family from ending up in the poor houses. Divorces during this time became only possible for those in the upper levels of society.

The most famous wife sale in British history is found in the fiction piece, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy. While inebriated, the protagonist sells his wife and child for five guineas at a carnival. He then goes on to become mayor, but regrets his hasty decision regarding his family. Hardy's novel suggests the wife complied with the sale and does not particularly condemn the practice.

Wife sales also took place in the United States. According to both colonial and United States law when a woman married, she was legally became her husband's property. Called Coverture, or "femme covert," women belonged first to their fathers and later to their husbands and had few legal controls over most aspects of their lives. Given the principles of coverture, some husbands did sell their wives, though the practice lost favor in the later decades of the eighteenth-century. In 1878 one man sold his wife for two dollars and a dozen bowls of grogg. The sale likely intended to circumvent the state's divorce ban and illustrates how commoners both ignored the law and created their own legal customs.

Some, though not most, Native Americans also participated in wife sale, generally as part of a debt transaction, though some peoples used a kind of ritual sale in lieu of divorce and remarriage. In the lands that would become the United States there is a history of wife sales among some Native Americans as well as among the Japanese who populated the Hawaiian Islands before and after the annexation of 1898.

Lastly, it should be noted that in the 200 years of American slavery many wives were sold away from their husbands and children. Masters did not generally recognize slave marriages as legal unions and did break up families through sale. Some of these sales of women of African descent would have been part of the concubinage trade, or the purposeful sale of a woman to a man for sexual use. Light skinned slave women, like Thomas Jefferson's slave Sally

Hemings, were particularly prized for on the slave market, and many of those sold would have been women who considered themselves married to a fellow slave. These sales did not official end until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery in 1865.

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See Also: Coverture; Hemings, Sally

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Hibbins, Ann (d.1656)

Notable for being the woman upon whom Nathaniel Hawthorne based his 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Anne Hibbens was a wealthy widow at the time Puritan authorities executed her as a witch. Her case and many others pre-dates the Salem witchcraft cases of 1796, but nonetheless suggests much of the cultural motivation for Puritan persecution of women as witches was an attempt to maintain society's gender roles and even benefit financially from forfeit estates.

A belief in witchcraft was part of the ideology that the Puritans brought to New England from Europe. They believed in a spiritual warfare of sorts in which God and Satan competed for each human soul, and those who made a compact with Satan became a witch. Women made up the bulk of suspected witches, but Puritans accused men of witchcraft as well. A putative witch could be brought to trial by the church or by secular authorities, though in Puritan communities the line between those two authorities was not definite.

Ann Hibbins (sometimes spelled Hibbens) was twice married and widowed. She and her second husband William Hibbins were wealthy and prominent in Massachusetts, so her status should have placed her above suspicion, but in 1640 she hired a carpenter to repair their house.

Whether the carpenter and she had signed a contract is unclear, though it appears that a verbal agreement united them regarding what was to be repaired and its cost. Upon completion she judged the repairs inadequate and the price too high. She canvassed other carpenters, at least one of whom thought the rate double its true value. On these grounds, Hibbins apparently withheld payment.

Her actions troubled carpenter John Davis. All being members of the same church, Davis sought guidance from the Puritan churchelders, who examined both Mrs. and Mr. Hibbins in a church trial. At stake was whether the church would permit her to remain a congregant. The alternative was excommunication, or the removal of Hibbins from the church and thus her supposed removal from God's grace. The church elders, like Davis, found Hibbins problematic. She had apparently usurped the role of a man by negotiating a contract, written or verbal, with a man. Such action went beyond the scope of a woman's duties. She had in effect taken on the role of the husband, which was contrary to church teachings. Elders were, in fact, much more interested in Hibbins' active role in negotiations than in whether or not the carpenter's work had been inferior. Moreover, under examination she refused to admit she had done anything wrong, rather insisting that she had not usurped her husband's role because he had given her permission to negotiate with the carpenter. The church elders appear to have been most offended at her refusal to bend to their will and community standards about appropriate female behavior. In this context the church trial may have been a formality for the elders to excommunicate her.

Excommunication in Hibbins' world would have been a serious punishment. Church members would have been forbidden to talk to Hibbins or in any way acknowledge her. At this juncture it is unknown whether Hibbins joined another church. She would have been a pariah, in the community but not of the community. Her husband, however, remained popular and his presence appears to have protected his wife from further punishment.

His death in 1654 left Hibbins both more powerful and more vulnerable. Because he had no children, she inherited his estate, but his death left her at the mercy of church elders who did not like her. Just two years after her husband's death Hibbins stood trial for witchcraft before the Massachusetts General Court. Hibbins declared her innocence. Nonetheless, despite the absence of any evidence, the court convicted her. Because of her prominence, she knew a number of influential people, who asked the court to set aside her verdict. The court complied with this request and then tried Hibbins a second time. Again there was no evidence of witchcraft and again the court convicted her despite her declaration of innocence. Thereafter events moved swiftly. Massachusetts' governor John Endicott (1601-1665) ordered her execution by hanging. On June 19, 1656, less than two months after her conviction, Massachusetts executed Ann Hibbins for witchcraft. Her friend John Norton (1606-1663) later said that she was hanged for being smarter than her neighbors.

For some time historians were perplexed at Hibbins' execution, based on the notion that most women executed for witchcraft were people marginal to the community, like Sarah Good

(1653-1692) in Salem forty years later. In reality the witchcraft hysteria in Salem defies classification, lying outside the more general run of New England witchcraft cases. Historian Carol Karlsen, after an exhaustive examination of decades of witchcraft cases, found that almost 90% of all women executed as witches were women who stood to inherit because their husbands had no male heirs. In convicting and executing these women patriarchal church authorities rid themselves of potentially powerful women, while at the same time enriching church coffers by collecting executed women's estates.

In 1850 Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) published *The Scarlett Letter*, in which his main character Hester Prynne interacts with a Mistress Hibbins. Hawthorne's Hibbins attempts to sway Prynne into a contract with the devil. Hawthorne's novel, as a work of fiction, accepts the premise that witches did actually exist. In reality Hibbins and all the other women executed for witchcraft in American were victims of the worst sort of gendered oppression.

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See Also: Puritanism; Good, Sarah; Tituba; Witch Trials, Salem; Witchcraft, New England

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Witchcraft in New England

During the mid-1600s in colonial North America, strong religious beliefs caused many people to believe in the supernatural. Demons, devils, and witches seemed all too real to the colonists in New England, particularly Puritans. Increasing religious intolerance and fervor among some Puritans created a level of paranoia that led to what must have been false accusations of witchcraft. In the past few decades, American historians have offered many

reasons for colonial witchcraft beliefs, though not all have confronted the reality that most victims of witchcraft accusations were women.

Some historians speculate that accusations of witchcraft began as a way of explaining success in Puritan America. Puritans viewed prosperous individuals suspiciously and occasionally posited supernatural assistance to explain the economic differences between people. This theory does not take into account that women were more frequently accused of witchcraft than men, and thus were more often executed. According to the principles of coverture, women did not own anything and were themselves property of their fathers or husbands. Only widowed women could accrue property and be considered economically successful. Out of the women convicted, most were married or widowed. Most were middle-aged, between the ages of forty-one and sixty. There was also a large group of women under twenty years old who were also convicted. Few of these women could be considered successful, though historian Carol Karlson has noted that an overwhelming number of women convicted and executed of witchcraft either had or would inherit family property because they had no alternative male heirs. In executing these women, Puritan society rid itself of potentially powerful women and, if the women died without heirs, could convert their inheritances into church property.

Typically, younger girls accused middle-aged women of witchcraft. The young female accusers sometimes claimed that they had been bribed with money and clothes to renounce their Christian ideals and accept the devil. They also claimed to have been possessed by witches and forced to act out a number of inappropriate behaviors, some of them sexual in nature. Historians posit that as Puritan society matured, women lost status and power, a claim that can be substantiated by an examination of Puritan men's wills, and that younger women may have resented their loss of power. Given how dangerous it was in an intensely patriarchal society to take their resentment out on men, young women victimized older women who may have had opportunities to inherit that younger women no longer had. Moreover, in claiming to be the victim of an older female "witch," younger women won attention from the community and temporarily gained considerable power in witchcraft trials.

Puritans allowed boys and young men considerably more freedom and power and, as a result, it was rare for them to make claims of witch possession because they did not feel as much resentment. Although the type of people accused and the accusers followed a distinguishable trend, the types of witnesses did not. Witnesses and those who testified ranged in age from twenty to sixty years old, which implies the general belief in witchcraft spanned generations.

Women most likely to be accused of witchcraft were not only likely to inherit but also were the kind of women who did not fit into Puritan society for a variety of reasons. Anne Hibbens, for example, was a verbally forthright woman who failed time and again to enact appropriately passive behavior. When her community executed her as a witch, they not only rid themselves of woman they saw as troublesome, but they benefited from the redistribution of her estate. Some convicted witches had been excommunicated from the church, like Hibbens, and others were generally disliked by the townspeople. Anne Hutchinson, for example, irritated church authorities with her alternative theological views and narrowly escaped a witchcraft trial. Many accused women did not have sufficient evidence against them, but their notorious reputation or odd behavior made them vulnerable in communities that sought conformity above all else. Clearly these women were not guilty of being witches, and were often completely innocent of any crime.

The most well documented cases of witchcraft come from Massachusetts and Connecticut colonies. The first legal trial regarding witchcraft for which a record survives

occurred in Windsor, Connecticut, in 1647, but one of the more notable trials occurred in 1651. Hugh and Mary Parsons, a married couple from Springfield, Massachusetts, were both accused of witchcraft. They were considered middle class, and accusations against them came from people in both lower and middle classes, showing that people from all walks of life fell prey to the supernatural hysteria that had seized colonial New England. Hugh was not well liked and was accused of extortion and constant bickering in his business. He was found innocent. Mary Parsons, however, had been driven nearly insane by the community's attacks on her family. During her trial she convinced herself that she was guilty of infanticide—the murder of her own child. The mental instability Mary exhibited was a common symptom of those accused of witchcraft, though it is difficult to know if mental instability invited or resulted from witchcraft accusations.

The most famous witchcraft trials were in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. Young girls between eleven and twenty years old were accused of witchcraft and sentenced to death. Over 150 people were arrested, but a fraction of those was executed. Although considerably fewer men were accused of witchcraft than women, men had more terrible punishments. For example, one man was crushed with heavy stones until he died because he refused to confess he was a witch.

There are many theories regarding the cause of the mass accusations in Salem. Some historians theorize that the conservative religious views of colonial America led to mass hysteria regarding the supernatural. Disputes about cattle, land, debt, and more were common in colonial Massachusetts and led to a heightened sense of paranoia and mistrust. In some areas, tensions may have been high enough to cause witchcraft accusations. Fewer historians propose that those accused of witchcraft were victims of tainted, poor quality food—hallucinogens present in the food may have caused false visions that prompted the victims' odd behavior. This theory has the lure of science, but leaves much unexplained. Another theory holds that the accusation of witchcraft was a form of social control. Those accused of witchcraft were considered odd, eccentric, and often anti-social. People who engaged in activities or behaviors that their community disapproved of were likely to be accused of witchcraft. This prevented future odd behaviors by setting an example.

In Salem, Cotton Mather claimed possession was the main cause of the girls' afflictions. Some claimed it was because of contact with witches or because of antagonizing them. The girls verbally and physically attacked accusers, and they were prone to seizures and projections. Children who were considered possessed were not blamed. Puritans believed that the devil, working through a witch, caused the possessed to act against their families, neighbors, and clergy who were trying to help.

Most of the victims of possession exhibited aggressive and seemingly unexplainable behaviors. For example, Cotton Mather examined servant girl Mercy Short and theorized Mercy's problems were caused by spectral forces and prompted by the devil. In reality Mercy was probably suffering from a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder from being taken captive by Indians when she was a child and seeing her family murdered. Mather, who played a significant role in the Salem witchcraft hysteria, was a Puritan minister who saw evil forces everywhere and defended the trials even after most people began to see them for what they were—mass hysteria.

Many colonists believed that witches took the form of animals in order to further deceive and spy upon their victims. The witches were said to have ties to animal helpers, and it was said that they even suckled them. Eunice Cole, a girl from Salisbury, New Hampshire, was about to be whipped for witchcraft when her observers heard strange noises coming from under her shirt.

They claimed that in removing her shirt, they exposed imp-like creatures suckling from her breasts. This phenomenon was seen during the Salem trials as well. People saw what they wanted to see. Colonists also believed the witches held secret feasts where they shared beer or wine, bread, and meat with one another. Some reported that although the witches appeared to dance together, no sexual activity or nudity was reported.

During mass hysteria periods, many New England colonists chose to escape to neighboring colonies. Colonists Mary and Philip English and Nathaniel and Elizabeth Cary were accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch trials and fled to New York to escape execution. A Connecticut woman also escaped to New York in order to escape her false accusations and their resulting punishments. New York was eager to harbor the accused due to the state's poor relations with the other colonies. Historically, Dutch New Yorkers had a legacy of religious tolerance and looked askance at Puritan intolerance.

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See Also: Goode, Sarah; Hutchinson, Anne; Infanticide; Excommunication; Tituba; Witch Trials, Salem;

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