

# Witchcraft Accusations in Colonial New York

**Source:** E.B. O'Callaghan, ed. (1851). *The Documentary History of the State of New-York*. Albany, NY

**Introduction:** In September 1692, nineteen men and women were hung to death in Salem, Massachusetts after being convicted of witchcraft. Another man was crushed to death by heavy stones after he refused to submit to a trial. Hundreds were accused and dozens remained in jail for months until charges against them were dismissed.

Witchcraft accusations and trials were not restricted to Puritan Massachusetts. The following edited documents describe witchcraft accusations and trials in New York State in 1668 and 1670. Read the documents and answer questions 1 – 4.

## A. The Case of Ralph and Mary Hall for Suspicion of Witchcraft (1668)

**Charges:** The constable and overseers of the town of Seatalecott, in the East Riding of Yorkshire upon Long Island [probably the current town of Setauket in Suffolk County], do present for our sovereign Lord the King, that Ralph Hall of Seatalecott upon the 25th day of December, being Christmas day last, and several other days and times since that day, by some detestable and wicked arts, commonly called witchcraft and sorcery, did maliciously and feloniously, practice and exercise at the said town of Seatalecott on the person of George Wood, late of the same place by which wicked and detestable arts, the George Wood most dangerously and mortally sickened and languished. Not long after by the wicked and detestable arts, George Wood died.

**Decision:** Ralph Hall & Mary his wife are hereby released & acquitted from any & all recognizance, bonds of appearance or other obligations entered into by them or either of them for the peace or good behavior upon account of any accusation or indictment upon suspicion of witchcraft brought into the Court of Assizes against them in the year 1665. There have been no direct proofs nor further prosecution of them or either of them since.

## B. The Case of Katherine Harrison of Westchester (1670)

**Complaint:** Complaint has been made to me by the inhabitants of Westchester against Katherine Harrison, widow, late of Wethersfield in his Majesty's Colony of Connecticut. Contrary to the consent & good liking of the town, she settled amongst them & she being reputed to be a person lying under suspicion of witchcraft has given some cause of apprehension to the inhabitants there. I have thought fit to order the constable & overseers of the town of Westchester do give warning to Katherine Harrison to remove out of their precincts in some short time after notice is given.

**Subpoena:** Katherine Harrison, widow, does neglect or refuse to obey my late order concerning her removal out of the town. It is required that you give notice unto the said Katherine Harrison and Captain Richard Panton at whose house she resides, That they make their personal appearance before me in this place on Wednesday next.

**Appeal:** Because the reasons for charges of witchcraft do not so clearly appear to me, I have not thought fit absolutely to determine the matter at present, but do suspend it until the next General Court of Assizes [Criminal Court] when there will be a full meeting of the Council & Justices of peace to debate & conclude the same. In the meantime Katherine Harrison with her children may remain in the town of Westchester where she now is without disturbance or molestation, she having given sufficient security for her civil carriage & good behavior.

**Decision:** In the case of Katherine Harrison, widow, who was bound to the good behavior upon complaint of some of the

inhabitants of Westchester, it is ordered, that in regard there is nothing appears against her deserving the continuance of that obligation, she is to be released from it & has liberty to remain in the town of Westchester where she now resides, or anywhere else during her pleasure.

### **Questions**

1. What is the charge against Ralph and Mary Hall?
2. What is the charge against Katherine Harrison?
3. How were the cases resolved?
4. In your opinion, why were witchcraft accusations and trials common in colonial British North America?