

# How Witches Brought the Scots to Maine

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I've been thinking a lot about witches lately. No I'm not going over to the dark side, but the subject keeps popping up in front of me and the sources all seem to be interconnected with how so many Scots ended up here in Maine. My interest in the witch connection started with a trip to the Scottish Lowlands in 2008 and a deliberate look at the persecution of the Covenanters during "the killing time" of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is pretty fascinating stuff and it involves how the Protestant, Presbyterian converts got incredibly stubborn (as is their wont) and refused to acknowledge the Crown as head of the Church. Now the idea of separation of Church and State may be standard fare for Americans these days, but in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century the idea was tantamount to treasonous thinking and resulted in lots of good intended folks being hunted down, and often executed for their non-conforming views. Undoubtedly several hundred people were persecuted and killed by some pretty ingenious public displays of terrible cruelty.

Anyway, that's what I was looking into as my good wife and I enjoyed being in the Lowlands and Borders of Scotland. But wait, when I got back to the good ol' State of Maine and took up reading about southwestern

Scotland, I learned that while the Covenanters were being hunted down for their take on Christianity several thousand people in Scotland were tortured and executed for practicing witchcraft! When someone was accused of being a witch, there was nearly no likelihood of being able to prove they were not, and often the best way to avoid a lengthy torture was to admit guilt and be executed.



The timing of these tumultuous events coincides with, or overlaps, the time when tens of thousands of Lowland Scots took advantage of the opportunity to move to Ulster Plantation in the North of Ireland, just a few miles away to the west. Talk of better farmland and more lenient attitudes towards the Presbyterian Kirk undoubtedly contributed to the decision for many to move across the channel. Interestingly

enough, recent studies suggest that there was far less persecution of witches in Ulster as well.

Now then, as I was saying, the topic of witches keeps popping up lately. I've been reading through the various writings of my wife's grandfather Leon Maybury of Freeport, Maine. Leon was a pretty active local historian and one of his gifts was interviewing the older residents of the area. Many of his interviews took place close

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to a hundred years ago. Given the age of the folks he talked to and their recollection of stories "handed down" to them by their elders, we're reaching back quite a ways into local New England folk-lore. At any rate, one comment Leon made jumped off the page at me: *"In old times people believed implicitly in witches."* Leon then went on to give a couple of examples which will make fun reading for another time. Now my obvious thought at reading this was to wonder: *is there a connection between this former local belief in witches and the Scots that traveled to Maine by way of Northern Ireland?* The answer to that question turns out to be YES, but not at all in the way that I first thought.

It seems that this topic of belief in witches in New England has been pretty thoroughly studied in recent years. It wasn't the Scots that made a big to-do about witches in Maine, it was our upstanding Puritan fore-folk. This rather ugly stretch of history had an enormous impact on the District of Maine and contributed to the introduction of Scots from the North of Ireland to numerous settlements along Maine's coast. Not the least of which (no pun intended) were Brunswick, Topsham, Falmouth and Saco. The current thinking goes something like this:

Massachusetts-based merchants and land speculators gambled heavily on vast inexpensive land claims in the District of Maine during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The English system of wealth and class structure relied in large part on ownership of large tracts of land by the privileged few. Confusing and overlapping land titles, and recurring hostilities with the French and Indians, made land acquisition in nearby Maine relatively inexpensive, but very risky. If land titles held or claimed through land grants and Indian deeds could be secured through occupation and improvements by settlers under the direction of Massachusetts proprietors, rewards from increased property values and tenant rents might secure a family aristocracy in the New World. Such gambling on land titles was extensive among many of the most prominent families in Massachusetts and by the end of the seventeenth century several mill privileges and settlements were established between the Piscataqua and the Kennebec rivers, including the up and coming settlement at York. The stakes were enormous. Tensions were high.

In 1692 disaster struck western Maine and sent its ugly repercussions into the heart of Puritan Massachusetts society. On Candlemas, near the end of January 1692, Abenakis Indians and French officers attacked York killing nearly 100 people, including the Congregational minister Shubael Dummer. Another 80 or so were taken captive and marched overland to Canada, including Dummer's wife Lydia, who died during the ordeal, and their son. Many of the buildings North of the York River were burned.

Dr. Emerson "Tadd" Baker is a Professor of History at Salem State College. He has studied and written extensively on the witchcraft outbreaks from this time period and the relationship between the events in Maine and the Salem witch trials of 1692.

Dr. Emerson has observed that *"...the witchcraft outbreak really takes off within a few days of the attack on Candlemas at York...as the whole...frontier collapses, people in Massachusetts are afraid they'll be next. ...dozens of people involved in the Salem witch trials—afflicted girls, witnesses, most of the judges—have ties to Maine..."* Many (of the) refugees from Maine settled in Essex County in Salem. Most of the judges in the witchcraft trials (were) prominent Maine landowners." Of the 141 people indicted at Salem, 20 were executed.

So, you say, what lay at the bottom of all this witchcraft hysteria and what's it got to do with the Scots coming to Maine? I know I tend to ramble on, but bear with me. Fear of the French and Indians was obvious and understandable at this point. The near total collapse of property values within the vast Maine landholdings was undoubtedly a severe financial shock that might take generations for investors' families to recover from, if ever. The balance of good and evil was apparently shifting dramatically to the dark side and no telling what calamity and sudden loss of life and fortune was next. The Devil and his minions were obviously at work. Someone must be to blame for bringing the terrible forces of darkness to the doorsteps of Essex County. Something had to be done to restore the light and the blessings of God upon the people of Maine and Massachusetts. This was an old theme, of course, and at first it didn't seem hard to point blame, and perhaps settle old scores with accusations against those in league with the Devil himself. Two groups were easily identified, the "heathen" Indians and "Papist" French. It was also easy to imagine devilish connections with those who consorted with the Indians by bartering for Indian deeds and like transactions. Dr. Baker and James Kences in *Maine History, Vol. 40, number 3, Fall 2001* reports that Cotton Mather, leader of the Puritan Church, was able to point out the source of the problem: *"in the 'more Pagan [out-] skirts of New-England Satan terribly makes prey of you, and Leads you Captive to do his Will."* John Francis Sprague states in "Spragues

Journal of Maine" "... that strange and awful delusion led by Cotton Mather and his cruel and blood thirsty associates swept over Puritan New England, in the last days of the Seventeenth Century, known...as the 'Salem Witchcraft...'"

After the initial hysteria of the Salem witch trials subsided, there was still the problem of how to restart the economic engine of land settlement on the Eastern Frontier. Land claims in the District of Maine lay idle and the potential fortunes from future land sales and development of Maine's natural resources was at risk of being completely annexed to French control at Nova Scotia. The Nova Scotia claim already extended as far West as the Kennebec River and with English settlement west of the river virtually wiped out, the entire District was at risk of being completely lost to France.

Ironically, the Scots that had moved to Ulster Plantation during the peak period of religious intolerance and witch persecution now became the Puritan focus for confronting witches and demons in the Maine frontier. By 1718 the circumstances that had brought the Scots to Ulster had deteriorated. Rents had become unbearably high. Persecution of their Presbyterian Kirk had returned after the death of King William. Drought, crop failures, famine and small pox combined to create miserable conditions. English control of industrial exports depressed the Ulster economy. And further, the "Test Act" made Presbyterian marriage and funeral ceremonies illegal and attempted to silence Presbyterian ministers and outlaw the Kirk. Cotton Mather followed the course of these events in Ulster and saw a solution for the problems in Maine. The Presbyterian Scots of Ulster may have been "greatly obnoxious to the ruling party of New England..." (Reverend Jacob Bailey of Pownalboro, Maine would later write in his journals) but they were not "Papists or heathens." And, they had earned a strong reputation as fighters while defending their frontier territory in Ulster against the "heathen Irish." The Ulster Scots victory for the Protestant William of Orange at the Siege of Londonderry had been contemporaneous with some of the worst of the Indian troubles in Maine. Mather hoped an introduction of the Ulster Scots in Maine would assist in securing eventual English possession of the Eastern Frontier AND Nova Scotia. "On the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, 1706 Mather records: 'I write letters unto diverse persons of Honour in Scotland and in England; to procure settlements of good Scotch Colonies, to the Northward of us, this may be a thing of great consequence.'"

One particular area of great consequence to Massachusetts investors was the area surrounding the confluence of Kennebec and Androscoggin Rivers near the current towns extending from Brunswick to Augusta, Maine. Several large tracts of land held by Massachusetts proprietors connected and overlapped in this area, including the Kennebec Patent, the Pejepsot Patent and the Dummer Claim. It also included "Merrymeeting Bay" which was an important and historic summer meeting place for Wabanaki Indians. It's speculated that the name "merry meeting," was used because it was an English phrase for a meeting or coven of witches. The Kennebec River also marked the easterly limit of the area historically considered to be the District of Maine and the westerly limit of the area sometimes claimed as part of Nova Scotia.

It is not surprising then that Cotton Mather would set his sights on introducing "good Scotch" colonists into this area. Reverend James Woodside of Garvagh, Ulster Plantation, was the leader of one of several congregations of Presbyterian Kirks that accepted the challenge and brought his followers to New England early in the 18th century. Mather wrote to Woodside on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1718 extending his confidence in the new settlement at Brunswick near the confluence of the Androscoggin and the Kennebec: "The people who were formerly taking Root there (at the Pejepsot Patent) carried not ye ministry of ye Gospel with y<sup>m</sup>, and were once and again suddenly cursed by God. The Indians have never yett been permitted of Heaven to break up a Town that had a minister of ye gospel in it. It is a vast encouragement unto o' expectations of a smile from God on the plantation now going forward, that we see a Woodside...appearing there..." Apparently Mather chose to forget, or not mention, the destruction of York and the death of Reverend Dummer at the Candlemas Massacre of 1692.

The settlement at Brunswick did survive the near total destruction of the region during the subsequent Indian attacks of 1722. Rev. Woodside was not favorably impressed with the situation his congregation found themselves in. His congregation was not too fond of him either. Woodside returned to Ulster but the settlement he helped to start continued on. By the time of the American Revolutionary War over 30 communities of Ulster-Scots, termed Scotch-Irish by their American neighbors, (as well as many other descriptive labels) had settled along Maine's coast and rivers. Their settlements did indeed "prove to be a thing of great consequence." There was still a long trail of hardship ahead for the "good Scotch" (AKA obnoxious Presbyterians), the "heathen Indians" and "the Papist French." before the "District of Maine" would become officially separated from Massachusetts.

And that may be a story for another day.