

Annie Roman
Professor Norton
Hist. 2090
November 29, 2017

Sarah Vibber: The Accuser Who Managed to Stay on the Right Side of Wrong During
the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692

Introduction

The Salem witchcraft crisis began in January 1692 when two young girls named Abigail Williams and Betty Parris fell ill. Betty's father, the Reverend Samuel Parris, consulted the only doctor in Salem Village, who diagnosed the girls as being "under an Evil Hand."¹ Soon after that, Abigail and Betty accused Parris' slave of bewitching them, thus setting off a chain of accusations and arrests that would result in the deaths of twenty innocent people. Although most of the accusers were girls and teenagers, older women also claimed to be afflicted. Four married women, including Bathshua Pope, Ann Putnam, Sr., Margaret Goodale, and Sarah Vibber, joined the girls in claiming to be tormented by the apparitions of supposed witches. At thirty-six, Sarah Vibber was the oldest afflicted person who made formal legal complaints during the witchcraft crisis, and she was a crucial witness for the court.

Mary Beth Norton noted in *In the Devil's Snare* that adult men played a critical role in legitimizing the complaints of the afflicted girls and women. During the Salem witchcraft crisis, accusations made by afflicted women and children only resulted in legal action if adult male "gatekeepers" found those accusations credible. According to Norton, female accusers

¹ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*, (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 19.

confronted three levels of male gatekeepers (heads of households, examining magistrates, and judges and jurors) when seeking justice.² Bathshua Pope, for example, claimed to be afflicted during examinations, but made no depositions or statements. It is likely, then, that her husband Joseph Pope prevented her from giving formal testimony. The widow Margaret Goodale also made no formal legal complaints, perhaps because her male relatives objected to the proceedings as well. Unlike Goodale and Pope, Ann Putnam, Sr., made three depositions. However, she stopped giving testimony on June 2, 1692, while her husband Thomas Putnam continued making legal complaints into September. Thomas Putnam clearly thought some of his wife's allegations were valid, but he still felt the need to support her statements with his own, and may have prevented her from giving more formal testimony after June.

In contrast to these three married women, Sarah Vibber filed sixteen legal complaints accusing people of witchcraft. Her husband John Vibber did not prevent her from making formal complaints like Joseph Pope, and he did not attempt to support her statements with his own, as Thomas Putnam did. Sarah Vibber's husband clearly had no qualms about his wife's formal participation in court. As the crisis unfolded, examining magistrates, judges, and jurors also proved to be extremely sympathetic to Sarah Vibber's complaints, using nine of her statements as evidence to convict people at trial. Many, however, did not believe Vibber, and tried to convince the court that she was an unreliable witness. During the last week of June 1692, the family of the accused witch Rebecca Nurse presented five depositions questioning Sarah Vibber's credibility at trial, as part of their campaign to discredit afflicted accusers. The Nurse family collected more evidence against Sarah Vibber than they did against any other accuser, a fact which suggests that they fully understood the magnitude of the damage she was liable to

² Ibid., 72.

cause and the importance of stopping her. However, even though the Nurse family assembled a relatively large body of convincing evidence against Vibber, the court continued to rely on her testimony at trial. Despite the fact that she possessed many of the characteristics of a typical seventeenth-century witch, through a remarkable combination of circumstances, John Vibber, the Court of Oyer and Terminer, and the afflicted girls themselves all came to believe that Sarah Vibber was a bewitched person.

Sarah Vibber Before 1692

Sarah married John Vibber sometime before 1692. He was her second husband, and he likely emigrated from Sark in the Channel Islands.³ Apparently, the Vibbers did not own a house, but lived in the homes of several people who would later testify against Sarah during the witchcraft crisis. In one 1692 testimony, for example, Thomas and Mary Jacobs from Ipswich, Massachusetts, noted that Sarah Vibber “did for a time surgin [=sojourn] in our hou(s).”⁴ The Vibbers spent time in Wenham as well, living in the homes of the brickmaker Joseph Fowler and the farmer John Porter.⁵ Most likely, Sarah and John either worked as hired help in their neighbors’ houses or did various odd jobs around the village in return for food and lodging.

The Vibbers also had at least two children before 1692. One, a daughter, testified in April 1692 at the examination of the suspected wizard Giles Cory. Because that girl acted as a witness at Cory’s examination, she was likely fourteen or older, as English jurists in the 1690s believed that children under fourteen were not capable of testifying in court in capital felony cases.⁶ In addition, Sarah Vibber had a four-year-old child in 1692, whom she claimed was tormented by

³ Ibid., 342.

⁴ Bernard Rosenthal et al, *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 431. Hereafter *RSWH*.

⁵ Ibid., 947, 954.

⁶ Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*, 21.

the alleged witch Sarah Good.⁷ *History of Montville, Connecticut*, a comprehensive genealogical record published in 1896, lists information on a man named John Vibber who was born on October 25, 1689, spent time in Groton, and moved to New London North Parish after he married in 1711.⁸ That John Vibber would have been about the age of the child that Sarah Vibber said Sarah Good afflicted in April 1692.⁹ According to *History of Montville, Connecticut*, John Vibber, Jr., was an important member of the community; he was on the list of members who organized the first church in New London North Parish (later Montville) in 1722. The editor of *History of Montville, Connecticut*, in fact, called John Vibber, Jr., a farmer and landholder of “considerable note” who held offices of “honor and trust” in church and town.¹⁰ If John Vibber of Montville, Connecticut, was indeed the son of the John and Sarah Vibber who participated in the Salem witch trials, he certainly had a more stable living situation than his parents did.

John Vibber Jr.’s childhood could not have been a happy one. According to neighbors who testified in 1692, the Vibbers were embroiled in domestic conflict. John and Lydia Porter, for example, noted that Sarah and John “would often quarrel & in their quarrels, shee would call him, uery bad names.”¹¹ In addition, Thomas and Mary Jacobs revealed that they overheard Sarah Vibber wish that she had never saved one of her children from drowning.¹²

Sarah Vibber’s Court Testimony, from May to June 1692

As previously noted, Sarah Vibber filed sixteen depositions and statements, of which twelve were sworn before the grand jury and eleven were sworn in court. Out of the twenty

⁷ Rosenthal, *RSWH*, 410.

⁸ Henry A. Baker, *History of Montville, Connecticut, Formerly the North Parish of New London, from 1640-1896*, (Hartford: Press of the Case, Lockwood, and Brainard Company, 1896), 231.

⁹ Rosenthal, *RSWH*, 410.

¹⁰ Baker, *History of Montville, Connecticut*, 231.

¹¹ Rosenthal, *RSWH*, 433.

¹² *Ibid.*, 431.

people executed at Salem in 1692, Vibber testified against twelve, and her testimonies were used to convict nine of those twelve people. The minister Deodat Lawson recorded that Sarah Vibber first began suffering afflictions on March 20, 1692.¹³ However, Elizabeth Hubbard and Ann Putnam, Jr., identified Sarah Vibber as an afflicted person in depositions they gave on March 1.¹⁴ While Sarah Vibber made many informal accusations at examinations in March and April, she did not make her first deposition until May 2. Perhaps, then, there was some initial hesitation on the part of John Vibber to allow his wife to make formal accusations. In any case, once Sarah Vibber began issuing formal complaints in May 1692, she did not stop until January 1693. In May 1692, Vibber gave depositions against Susannah Martin, George Burroughs, and Elizabeth Howe, and on June 3, she testified against John Willard. Then, during the final week of June 1692, during the second session of the Court of Oyer and Terminer, the family of the accused witch Rebeca Nurse presented five incriminatory depositions against Sarah Vibber, four of which were solicited from Vibber's former neighbors. While the Nurse family did collect testimonies attacking other accusers, they assembled by far the most evidence against Sarah Vibber.¹⁵

Challenges to Sarah Vibber's Credibility and Accusations of Fraud

In *In the Devil's Snare*, Norton noted that many of the afflicted walked a fine line between garnering sympathy and bringing accusations of witchcraft upon themselves.¹⁶ Out of all the afflicted accusers, Sarah Vibber was perhaps most vulnerable to attacks on her credibility as a bewitched person. In addition to being married, Vibber was female, often involved in

¹³ Deodat Lawson, *A brief and true narrative*, (Boston: Benjamin Harris, 1692), 3.

¹⁴ Rosenthal, *RSWH*, 137-138.

¹⁵ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 217-219. The Nurses collected one testimony each against Betty Hubbard, Abigail Williams, Mercy Lewis, and Susannah Sheldon.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

conflict with her husband and children, of relatively low social position, and aggressive in manner.¹⁷ In short, she fit the stereotype of a typical seventeenth-century witch in four important ways.

Sarah Vibber's former neighbors tried to make that connection explicit in the depositions they made on behalf of Rebecca Nurse. In suggesting that Vibber was far more likely to be a witch than to be bewitched, they turned accusations she made against others around on her. During Giles Cory's examination, for example, Sarah Vibber used the fact that Cory called her husband a "damn'd, devilish rogue" as evidence that Giles was a wizard.¹⁸ By bringing up this fact in court, Vibber referenced the common notion that witches possessed a bad temper, or a "froward discontented frame of spirit," as a minister from New Haven Colony put it decades before Salem.¹⁹ According to many people, however, Sarah Vibber possessed an angry disposition herself. Joseph Fowler testified that Sarah called her husband "bad names" and was a woman of "turbulent unruly spirit."²⁰

Sarah Vibber also used Giles Cory's suicidal tendencies as evidence against him. At examination, she and her husband testified that Giles had temptations to "make away with himself." The magistrate then asked: "How doth this agree with what you [Giles Cory] said, that you had no temptations?" Cory replied: "I meant temptations to witchcraft." "If you can give

¹⁷ John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 93. On this page, Demos defines the nine key characteristics of a typical seventeenth-century witch. Besides the four mentioned above (which on Demos' list are numbers 1, 2, 5, 8, and 9, respectively), I believe Vibber may have fit one more characteristic. Demos observed that the typical witch was likely "to have professed and practiced a medical vocation, i.e. 'doctoring' on a local, informal basis." During the examination of Giles Cory, the magistrate noted that Giles' wife Martha had an ointment in her possession when she was arrested. Giles suggested that Sarah Vibber either gave this ointment to Martha or directed her to make it. However, Vibber denied this, replying "It is not like *that* ointment" (that presumably she made). Perhaps, then, Sarah Vibber made some type of medicinal ointment and exchanged it for food.

¹⁸ Rosenthal, *RSWH*, 188.

¹⁹ David Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 62.

²⁰ Rosenthal, *RSWH*, 431.

way to self murder,” the magistrate concluded, “that will make way to temptation to witchcraft.”²¹ Clearly, then, suicidal thoughts and actions could render a person suspicious. Thomas and Mary Jacobs, however, noted that Vibber expressed the same kind of thoughts herself. Sarah Vibber, the Jacobs stated, “yous to wich ill wichches [wishes] to horselife and hor children and allso to others.”²² Finally, by bringing up the domestic conflict previously mentioned, Sarah Vibber’s former neighbors provided some of the most convincing evidence for identifying Sarah Vibber as a witch. As John Demos noted in *Entertaining Satan*, harmony in domestic relations was a “touchstone of value” for seventeenth-century New Englanders.²³ Conflict between husbands and wives, or parents and children, was therefore very suspicious.

In addition to collecting testimonies suggesting that Vibber was a witch herself, the Nurses also accused her of fraud. On June 29, Rebecca Nurse’s daughter Sarah stated that she saw Vibber “pull o[Lost] [=out?] pins out of her Close and held them betwene h[Lost] [=her] fingers and Clapst her hands round her knese and then she Cryed out and said goody Nurs prict her.”²⁴ The judges, however, did not have to take Sarah Nurse at her word; one day before, they witnessed Vibber committing a fraudulent act firsthand. As Norton noted, Vibber claimed that Sarah Good’s apparition stabbed her with a knife at Good’s trial on June 28.²⁵ An official found part of a knife blade on her person, and a young man identified it as one he had broken and thrown away before. But despite this obvious case of fraud, the court simply told her not to lie, and proceeded with the trial as if nothing had happened. If the court was not willing to dismiss Sarah Vibber when she committed fraud directly before them, they certainly were not willing to stop listening to her on the basis of testimonies presented by the Nurse family.

²¹ Ibid., 188.

²² Ibid., 431.

²³ Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 75.

²⁴ Rosenthal, *RSWH*, 432.

²⁵ Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*, 220.

Gaining the Trust of the Court

Clearly, the men serving on the Court of Oyer and Terminer wanted to proceed with the trials at all costs. As Norton argued in *In the Devil's Snare*, the judges allowed the witchcraft crisis to take on the magnitude that it did in order to absolve themselves of responsibility for their failure to defend the northeastern frontier.²⁶ Because the judges had personal motives for prolonging the trials, they were not eager to dismiss or discredit witnesses, especially one who was thirty-six years of age. Although girls older than fourteen could acceptably testify in court, and twelve-year-old Ann Putnam, Jr., filed many formal complaints, older women were the most valuable witnesses. Therefore, despite the Nurse family's efforts to discredit Sarah Vibber, the court continued to rely on her, and her depositions were used to convict Rebecca Nurse and eight other people later in 1692.

Gaining the Trust of the Afflicted Girls

The court could not have used Sarah Vibber as a witness, however, if she did not have the trust and support of the afflicted girls themselves. The afflicted girls were a diverse group that consisted of eleven-year-old Abigail Williams, nine-year-old Betty Parris, twelve-year-old Ann Putnam, Jr., and a group of teenagers including Elizabeth Hubbard, Mercy Lewis, Mary Walcott, Mary Warren, and Susannah Sheldon.

Ann Putnam, Jr., and Elizabeth Hubbard were the first two girls to mention Sarah Vibber. On March 1, just seven days after they experienced their own initial fits, Ann and Elizabeth testified that they had seen the apparition of Sarah Good afflicting the body of Sarah Vibber. Because the girls did not identify Vibber as a witch, it is possible that she arrived in Salem shortly before the witchcraft crisis began. As a result, her bad temperament and history of family

²⁶ Ibid., 299-300.

conflicts were not yet common knowledge. Nevertheless, Sarah Vibber was probably still conspicuous due to a behavioral quirk. In June 1692, John and Lydia Porter stated that Vibber “would often fall into strange fitts.”²⁷ Elizabeth Hubbard and Ann Putnam, Jr., probably witnessed this odd behavior, and identified Vibber as an afflicted person.

In a sense, the girls admitted Vibber into the ranks of the afflicted. Vibber, then, had a choice whether to work with or against the girls, and she clearly chose the former option. Vibber showed a willingness to follow the cues of the afflicted girls, and only accused people that the girls had already complained against. In fact, at least according to the legal record, she often did not know suspected witches until she met them at their examinations. At most of those examinations, Vibber quickly adopted the behavior of the girls toward people she did not necessarily know, fear, or resent before.

Mercy Lewis and Ann Putnam, Jr., for example, both claimed to have seen the specter of Susannah Martin in April 1692. Vibber, however, did not accuse Martin of afflicting her until Martin’s examination on May 2. In his transcript of the examination, the reverend Samuel Parris wrote: “Some [of the afflicted] cried out there was the black man with her [Martin], & Goody Bibber who had not accused her before confirmed it.”²⁸ Similarly, Samuel Parris noted that Sarah Vibber had never seen the apparition of Sarah Wilds before Wilds’ examination. In court, surrounded by afflicted girls crying out that Wild’s specter was “upon the beam,” Vibber suddenly saw it too, and fell into a fit.²⁹ The afflicted girls knew George Burroughs as well before his examination. Vibber, by contrast, saw the “apperishtion of a little man like a minister

²⁷ Rosenthal, *RSWH*, 433.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

with a black coat” on the morning of May 9th, which she could not identify until she saw Burroughs at his examination later that day.³⁰

Vibber also made a point of referencing the afflictions of at least one of the girls in nearly every testimony she made. The girls, by contrast, mainly mentioned themselves and other girls in their depositions. After March 1, out of all the depositions of the afflicted girls, only two made by Ann Putnam, Jr., mentioned Vibber.³¹ By claiming to have witnessed the afflictions of the girls in nearly every deposition she made, Vibber kept their trust and prevented them from accusing her.

Conclusion

Sarah Vibber is an important figure to study because she illustrates how someone who could have been condemned as a witch ended up becoming one of the most critical accusers during the Salem witchcraft crisis. Because Vibber had most likely just arrived in Salem in 1692, she had no established reputation, and the girls identified her as a bewitched person rather than as a witch. By taking careful direction from the girls and attesting to their afflictions in her testimonies, Sarah Vibber kept their trust. Sarah Vibber is also a rare example of a woman who completely convinced three levels of male gatekeepers of the validity of her afflictions. Because the court wanted to proceed with the trials at all costs, they were unwilling to dismiss their oldest witness. The Nurse family fully understood the dangerous consequences of the court’s reliance on Sarah Vibber, and worked to stop her, collecting more evidence against her than they did against any other afflicted accuser. That the relatively large amount of convincing evidence the Nurses assembled failed to discredit Sarah Vibber is a testament to the judges’ vested interest in prolonging the trials and their judicial negligence.

³⁰ Ibid., 242.

³¹ Ibid., 457, 619.

Appendix 1. Timeline of the events in which Sarah Vibber was involved.

This chronology assumes that the dates Sarah Vibber gave for certain events in retrospective depositions were accurate. Vibber would probably have been able to remember these dates better than the girls and adult observers may have taken careful notes on her behavior which she could reference.³² All page numbers are from *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* by Bernard Rosenthal.

March 1, 1692. Sarah Good examination. Vibber is not present at this examination.

March 1, 1692. Elizabeth Hubbard and Ann Putnam, Jr., testify that they have seen the apparition of Sarah Good afflicting the body of Sarah Vibber (pp. 137-138).

March 20, 1692. Starting date of Sarah Vibber's afflictions, according to Deodat Lawson.

March 21, 1692. Martha Cory examination. Sarah Vibber is present, according to Deodat Lawson's *A brief and true narrative*.

March 24, 1692. Rebecca Nurse examination. I do not think Vibber was present, based on her testimony.

April 11, 1692. Examination of Sarah Cloyce and Elizabeth Proctor. Abigail Williams cries out that the apparition of John Proctor is going to hurt Sarah Vibber and Vibber falls into a fit (p. 174).

April 11, 1692. Examination of John Proctor.

April 11, 1692. Vibber sees the apparition of Sarah Good torture Mercy Lewis and John Indian at Salem (p. 410).

April 19, 1692. Giles Cory examination. John and Sarah Vibber are major presences in this examination, giving detailed testimony against him.

April 22, 1692. Examinations of Sarah Wilds and William Hobbs. Vibber has not seen Wilds' apparition before this examination; she sees her now "upon the beam," and falls into a fit. Many of the afflicted say that William Hobbs hurt them, but Vibber says he did not hurt her (p. 214).

April 22, 1692. Mary Easty examination. Sarah Vibber is probably present. Sarah Vibber said on Aug. 3 that since this date, Easty "some times" afflicted her (p. 509).

April 26, 1692. The apparition of Sarah Good comes to Sarah Vibber's bedside and causes her four-year-old child to have a fit (p. 410).

May 2, 1692. Susannah Martin examination. First time Vibber accuses Martin (p. 229). "Seuerall times sence" this date the apparition of Susannah Martin afflicted her (p. 232).

³² Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 56-57.

May 2, 1692. Sarah Vibber and her child are afflicted at home by the apparition of Sarah Good. Also, Vibber said she was afflicted by the apparition of Sarah Good several times since this date (p. 410).

May 2, 1692. Sarah Vibber sees the apparition of Rebecca Nurse afflict Mary Walcott, Mercy Lewis, and Abigail Williams (p. 427).

May 2, 1692. Dorcas Hoar examination. Goody Vibber, “free from fits hitherto,” says there is a black man with her and fell into a fit (p. 226). Sarah Vibber said in deposition that Hoar tortured her since she went to prison (p. 456).

May 9, 1692. George Burroughs examination. First time Vibber is afflicted by him. She is introduced to Burroughs at the examination, while the girls already knew and were afflicted by him. Vibber said that the apparition of Burroughs tortured her several times since this date (p. 242).

May 18, 1692. John Willard examination. Vibber is afflicted by his apparition for the first time on the day before, May 17, 1692 (p. 385).

May 31, 1692. Elizabeth Howe examination. First time Vibber is afflicted by Howe’s apparition. (pp. 339-340).

June 3, 1692. John Proctor’s apparition comes to Sarah Vibber and tortures her, urging her to “drink as Red as blood.” She sees Proctor torture Susannah Sheldon on the same day. Since that day, Proctor tortured Vibber many times. (p. 447).

June 10, 1692. Sarah Vibber sees George Jacobs beating Mary Walcott with his staff at the gallows when Goody Oliver (Bridget Bishop) is executed. (p. 522).

June 27, 1692. Rebecca Nurse first afflicts Sarah Vibber (p. 427).

June 29, 1692. Statements attacking Sarah Vibber’s credibility as a bewitched person and accusing her of fraud are presented at Rebecca Nurse’s trial. These statements were made by Joseph Fowler, John and Lydia Porter, Thomas and Mary Jacobs, Richard Walker, and Sarah Nurse.

July 2, 1692. Ann Pudeator examination. Sarah Vibber is asked if she ever saw Pudeator before this examination. She answers no.

July 2, 1692. Mary Bradbury examination. Vibber knew her and was afflicted by her before the examination; she was afflicted by her at the examination and “senc that time allso” (p. 614).

August 14, 1692. Giles Cory begins afflicting Vibber by beating her, whipping her, and cutting her with his knife. He continued to afflict her after this date (p. 618).

September 7, 1692. Sarah Vibber affirms to the grand jury that Pudeator has afflicted her (p. 591).

September 7, 1692. Sarah Vibber affirms to the grand jury that Alice Parker has afflicted her (p. 601).

January 4, 1693. Mary Witheridge is indicted for practicing witchcraft on Sarah Vibber on, before, and after May 18, 1692 (p. 746).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Niall Chithelen, Claire Walton, and especially Professor Norton for your invaluable help on this paper. I would also like to thank Margo Burns for providing me with the link to the Salem Witch List at rootsweb.com. This website helped me to learn more about Sarah Vibber initially and pointed me in the right direction.

Works Cited

Baker, Henry, ed. *History of Montville, Connecticut, Formerly the North Parish of New London, from 1640-1896*. Hartford: Press of the Case, Lockwood, and Brainard Company, 1896.

Demos, John. *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Hall, David. *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991.

Lawson, Deodat. *A brief and true narrative of some remarkable passages relating to sundry persons afflicted by witchcraft, at Salem Village*. Boston: Benjamin Harris, 1692.

Norton, Mary Beth. *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

Rosenthal, Bernard, et al, eds. *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.