The Witch of Salem, New York

Salem, New York, located north of Albany between the Hudson River and the Vermont border, is not known as the home of witches or witch trials. But a witch trial, of a sort, was indeed held there in 1777, more than eighty years after the more famous (or infamous) witch trials of Salem, Massachusetts.

If not known for witches, the New York Salem did have controversies early in its history. It was for good reason that Gallows Hill at the north village limit was so named. Public executions before crowds of picnickers were held there until 1808. Contentiousness was present even at its inception in 1764 by a patent owned by a company of New England settlers, or at least by 1765, when half of the 25,000 acres in the patent was sold to the Rev. Dr. Thomas Clark, who led a congregation of Presbyterians who were seeking a home in the new land. The lots owned by each half were mixed together, often on alternate farms. This led both to a rapid settlement of the town and to great rivalries. Residents couldn't even agree on the town's name. Salem only became the name of the town as a compromise in 1786 (so it wasn't called Salem at the time of the witchcraft accusation). Until then, members of the congregation of Presbyterians insisted on calling it New Perth; the New Englanders used the name White Creek. It is either ironic or a sign that the two sides were able finally to come together in harmony, that Salem, taken from the Hebrew word, "Shalom" (Peace), was chosen as the town's name.

Rev. Dr. Thomas Clark

The Rev. Dr. Thomas Clark played a crucial role in the witch investigation. To set the stage, let me tell you a bit about him. He was a remarkable individual who in several ways was unique among Presbyterian ministers who came to America. Born in Scotland in 1720, he was educated at the University of Glasgow, first earning a degree as Doctor of Medicine in 1744 and then completing his ministerial studies in 1748. In between degrees Clark served a soldier who battled against Bonny Prince Charlie (1745-46). As a minister, he was beloved and commanded great loyalty, but he was not adverse to controversy and, apparently, wielded great divisive power. First of all, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Clark was a member of a minority sect of a minority sect of Presbyterians. He was a Presbyterian, a Seceder, and a Burgher. Seceders, also known as Associate Presbyterians, split from the Church of Scotland on a church-and-state issue of patronage. Burghers and Anti-Burghers then split on the issue of citizens swearing the Burgess oath before holding public office, since it included a statement about upholding the "true religion." Burghers saw no trouble with citizens swearing the oath since nowhere was the "true religion" defined.

In the spring of 1748, shortly after he completed his ministerial studies, Clark was licensed by the Associate Burgher Presbytery of Glasgow. By the summer of 1748 he accepted a call to Ballybay, County Monaghain, Northern Ireland, where he he preached to about 200 members from several congregations, not as an ordained preacher, but as a missionary. After serving a probationary period, he was ordained and installed as the church's pastor in 1751. Presbytery records indicate the name of the congregation as Ballybay New Erection. With the various splits among the Presbyterians, there may have been more than a few competing churches and congregations in the Ballybay area. Clark was not associated with the official Irish Presbyterian Church in the Tullycorbet parish of Derryvalley, but he simultaneously served congregations in Monaghain, Ballybay, and Derryvalley.

Clark remained in Ballybay for thirteen years. "Those thirteen years were years of trial and persecution," claimed the Rev. W. A. Mackenzie a century later in a biographical sermon about Clark. In January of 1754 Clark was jailed for refusing to take the Oath of Abjuration. Since he was a Seceder and vocal critic of the established Irish Presbyterian Church, the Synod of Ulster was likely behind Clark's trouble with the civil authorities. Since Burghers were the group that did not object to civil servants taking oaths, it might seem ironic that Clark was so adamant against taking an oath himself. But his objection appears not to have been so much with the oath, but in the manner of taking it, "kissing the Bible." Once arrested, he stayed in jail ten weeks awaiting trial, only to have the judge find the warrant defective. Clark was released. Less than a month later, however, he was re-jailed after a new writ was obtained. When or how he was released the second time is not recorded, but he was in jail at least for several months. Clark proudly proclaimed that while he was in prison he never missed a Sunday service. Members of his congregations gathered outside the window of his prison cell to hear him preach.

Beginnings in the New World

It is not clear whether economic, civil, religious, or personal motives weighed more heavily in the Rev. Dr. Clark's decision to emigrate to the New World. His arrest might better be called intimidation than persecution, if one considers that during the "Killing Time" in the previous century Presbyterian ministers were summarily executed for acts similar to Clark's. If it was while he was in prison that Clark began to think about coming to the New World, nine years passed before he took any action. In 1762 Thomas Clark's wife and a son died, and this tragedy may have led to his final decision to emigrate. By 1763, Clark had made inquiries and received a letter and a call from two congregations, one in Rhode Island and the other near Albany, New York. He laid the papers before his presbytery, and they appointed him to labor one year in America. When he announced that he would be leaving, members of the New Erection congregation announced they would follow. Clark seems then to have changed plans and made new arrangements. In addition to serving as their minister, in the New World, Clark would become their landlord. His congregation left with Clark aboard the ship "John" from the port of Newry, Ireland, on May 10, 1764, and arrived in New York on July 28. The ship's arrival was reported in the *New York Gazette*, August 6, 1764:

> 'Last week in the Ship John, from Newry, Ireland, Luke Kiersted, master, there arrived about three hundred passengers, a hundred and forty of whom, together with the Rev. Clarke, embarked on the 30th ult., with their stores, farming and manufacturing utensils, in two sloops, for Albany, from whence they are to proceed to the lands near Lake George, which were lately surveyed for their accommodation, as their principal view is to carry on the linen and hempen manufacture to which they were all brought up.'

As the newspaper account indicated, they traveled up the Hudson. Their first settlement was in Stillwater, just north of Albany. While in Stillwater or earlier while the congregation was still in New York City, yet another controversy broke out, and the disharmonious Presbyterians split up again. The New York Gazette reports that although 300 arrived on the John, only 140 embarked with Clark for Albany, and in late 1767, 140 men, women, and children established themselves in New Perth. The 160 who did not travel with Clark left for Abbeville County, South Carolina, eventually forming three churches: Little Run, Long Cane, and Cedar Creek. The emigration was the first instance of an entire Presbyterian congregation making the journey to the New World as a unit. Although there were a few other en masse migrations later on, the Ballybay exodus was the only one in which a church in its entirety, pastor, ruling elders, and communicants successful did so with no break in its worship services. It was not like the Rev. Dr. Clark to miss a Sunday service. In what wa an important distinction for him, he refused to be formally installed as the pastor of the Salem, New York congregation on the grounds that he had already been installed as the church's pastor in 1751 at Ballibay, and that the relationship had not been severed, but was ongoing. As another first, when Clark established his church in what is now Salem, New York, he became the only Burgher minister in America.

In the spring of 1765, seeking a permanent home for his congregation, Clark bought half of a 25,000-acre tract of land in what is now Salem, New York. This patent was divided up into 308 lots, plus a large pine lot reserved for the common benefit and three lots set apart for the use of the preacher and a schoolmaster. They traveled up the Hudson and settled first in Stillwater, just north of Albany, where they lived for two years under primitive conditions while engaging in desperately hard work to clear land in the new frontier. They built houses, but first they constructed a church.

One sign that Clark's congregation could be argumentative and disharmonious (as many Presbyterians throughout America were depicted by their fellow colonists) was that the congregation split in two before the new settlement was completed, and almost a hundred households moved to Abbeville County, South Carolina. Five years later, the congregation was greatly enhanced by five boatloads of Covenanter Presbyterians who were organized by Reverend Willam Martin to leave their homes in Kellswater in central county Antrim to settle in Abbeville County. The relationship between Clark and Martin while they were in Ireland is unclear to me, but since both were connected to the same church in South Carolina, and since both Clark and Martin brought hundreds of congregants with them to America, they may have had a connection.

Clark's congregational emigration has become known as the "Cahans Exodus." That seems odd to me since it was only after Clark departed that the church where the congregation worshipped became known as Cahans. And if it is true that the entire congregation emigrated with him, a Cahans congregation would have been unrelated to Clark. The other possibility is that the church did not migration in its entirety, but first had yet another schism.

A Few Comparisons

Salem, New York, was not Salem, Massachusetts; 1775 was not 1692; and the Rev. Dr. Thomas Clark was not Cotton Mather. But some similarities exist. Both Salems, in their time, stood at the edge of the frontier, where they lived in certain fear of "Indian savages." In addition Salem, New York, suffered the additional fears of a war on its doorstep. Both communities were young and still striving to define their town, religiously and politically. Both communities were experiencing an unusual amount of tension and social turmoil. They ranged from petty squabbles among neighbors to more hostile activities. The church was intricately involved in much more than the religious life of both communities -- Salem, Massachusetts, for reasons of theocracy; Salem, New York, because so many of the church members had immigrated as a single unit and were tenants of the preacher. Theologically, the Presbyterians, like the Puritans, were Calvinists, and their religious observances were austere. Among Presbyterians, Seceders were known for doctrinal rigidity and conservative theology. The multiple schisms is one indication that Clark's congregation could be uncompromising. Another is that many Presbyterians from outside Clark's original congregation after joining the Clark congregation, found the Seceders "too exclusive" and so within two years of the first Presbyterian church's founding organized their own church, affiliating themselves with the main body of Presbyterians in America (The New England Presbyterians' first house of worship, however, was not built until 1774.). After all those negative things said about them, I should conclude these comparisons by saying that the Presbyterians were not known for witch-hunting.

Margaret Tilford and George Telford

The accused witch of Salem, New York, was a member of Clark's congregation named Margaret Tilford. She and her husband George were not among the original members of Clark's congregation, so to a certain extent they might have been viewed as outsiders. There are some unanswerable questions about her name, both first and last. Although her name was Margaret, in Robert Blake's account of the witch accusation, he calls her Betty. Perhaps she was known as Betty; or perhaps Robert Blake, telling the story seventy years later, confused the names of the mother and her daughter, Elizabeth or, as is common in our family, mis-spoke the one thinking the other. To the befuddlement of genealogists, their surname is spelled both "Telford" and "Tilford" in various documents, and both Tilfords and Telfords are found among their descendants. Whether or not it is an indication of his literacy, George made a mark rather than signing his name when he made out his will late in his life. What seems quite unique to me, even as they lie side-by-side in Salem's Revolutionary Cemetery, "Telford" is engraved on the husband's gravestone, but "Tilford" is engraved on the wife's.

The Telfords joined the congregation about seven years after its founding. Since they chose Clark's congregation over the "New England" Presbyterian church, there is a strong possibilty that they were Seceders before joining the church. Margaret Tilford was born in 1725. Her husband, George, was three years younger. Both were born in the Scottish border region. In late May of 1772, with their young family of five children, they emigrated from the rural parish of Castletown, in Liddesdale (the valley around Liddle Water) in the shire of Roxburgh. They departed with neighboring families, the Bells and Blakes. Every article they wished to take with them had to be carried or, perhaps, put on horseback. They must have traveled along river beds or rough pathways, because nothing fit to be called a road then existed in that part of Scotland. It was thirty or more years after the Telfords emigrated that the first person (Sir Walter Scott) took a wheeled vehicle into any part of Liddesdale. What affection the families had for the land they were leaving is not recorded. The land could be described either as one of stark beauty or bleak desolation, romantic or melancholic. The land is tangled with high moors, craggy hills, and foreboding hollows, and none of it good for any type of agriculture beyond grazing sheep and cattle. There may be more trees there now than there were in the 18th century, and the land even then was filled with ruined castles and gaunt fortifications wasted by centuries of border clashes, barbarous feuds, and the plundering by the reivers during previous centuries.

It is likely that the families were recruited by an agent for Clark to settle in the Salem valley. When a large part of his congregation removed themselves to South Carolina, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Clark needed additional tenants for his part of the patent. It is only speculation when or how the Telfords would have been recruited, but after they arrived at the port of New York City with their Liddesdale neighbors, the Blakes and Bells, the families immediately traveled up the Hudson. They stopped for a few days rest at a few places, once to bury a neighbor's wife and later to bury an infant son of the Telfords, before arriving in August in what is now Salem. On arrival the Telfords and some of the Blakes moved into an empty house not far from Fitch's Point. In that same year, 1772, both George and Margaret were listed on the roll of Clark's church. The Telfords remained members of the church, but at some point moved into, or built, a house near East Greenwich, about four miles southwest of Salem (which, in the records of the time, was in the town of Cambridge, Albany County).

George Telford was extremely dutiful in following his faith and, as not unusual for a Presbyterian, a strict Sabbatarian. For example, one Saturday, late in the day, he took his grain to the mill to be ground. The miller told him there would be a long wait and suggested he leave it to pick up later. George left his grain and went home. The next day, being the Sabbath, George drove his family in his wagon and passed the mill to church. While George was at church, the miller must have recognized the wagon and decided to do George a favor by placing the ground grist into the Telford wagon. George didn't discover it until he was home. Scrupulous in observing the Sabbath day, George took the grist back to the miller the first thing Monday morning. Knowing that hauling the grist home, even if he had done it unknowingly, was a violation of the fourth commandment, George Telford wanted no part of the Sabbath-violating grist.

On another occasion, George Telford observed a resident of the town come out of his house on a Sunday, take up an ax, split a log in two pieces, and return with one piece of the log to the house. George made the observation while on his way to church. He became so incensed that the following Monday he swore a warrant against the man before the local magistrate for desecration of the Sabbath. The magistrate dismissed the case.

The Revolutionary War

What kinds of ill-will was created by George's action is not recorded, but once the Revolutionary War broke out, tensions in the community, apparently, ran even higher. The settlements around present-day Salem lay near the path of Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne's march from Canada to Saratoga, and in the summer of 1777, the area was the scene of a war atrocity. An Iroquois scouting party led by a chief called Le Loup (the wolf) was allied to Burgoyne. After claiming some injury, Le Loup vowed revenge on the town. In Argyle, the Allen family was attacked in their home, and seven people, including women, children, and slaves, were killed. In another incident, near Fort Edward, Jane McCrea was attacked and killed. As word of the massacres spread, residents fled for their lives. Many went to the only safe place in the area -- Burgoyne's camp in Fort Edward. Unfortunately, many of those who fled to the stronghold of the British were branded afterward as traitors or loyalists. The Telfords and Blakes were among those who sought shelter at Fort Edward, and they had to pay a price for seeking shelter. The following year, on April 17, 1778, George Telford, William Blake, and two other men were summoned before the Albany County Board of Commissioners for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies "for going to the Enemy." The other family that had had traveled with the Telfords and Blakes, the Bells, proved themselves to be loyalists by moving to Canada. Fortunately for the Telfords and Blakes, an officer from the militia who knew them, Cap't John McKellop, was willing to provide information on behalf of the accused. They each had to post a hundred pound bond, and the captain paid their bail of another hundred pound. For several reasons, including "that their only inducement to go was to save their Families from being Scalped by the Indians," they were permitted to return home, but not before "their entering into Recognizance with security for their future good behavior as good and faithful Subjects and monthly appearance before any one of the Commissioners." Again on February 16, 1781, George Telford was ordered to appear before the board and post a hundred pound bond for his good behavior, even though in the intervening years he had served in the New York Militia as a private in Cap't Cornelius Doty's company of Col. Lewis Van Woert's Sixteenth Regiment of Albany County Militia. There is no history of the regiment, but it served primarily as frontier guards. A letter of grievance from Van Woert to New York Governor George Clinton indicates that the regiment was poorly armed and unable to acquire ammuntion.

Witchcraft hysteria

An accusation that they were Tories was only one of the Telfords' troubles in the memorable year of 1777. "It was the same year (I think) in which Burgoyne's invasion took place, that a most foolish and deplorable superstition took place," reported Salem native and eyewitness, Robert Blake, in November 5, 1847. If he remembered correctly, then it was in 1777, while the horrors of war were surrounding them, that the residents of Salem suffered their own witchcraft hysteria.

It began when Archy Livingston's cows began producing cream that couldn't be churned into butter. Archy Livingston was a neighbor of the Telfords, both their friend and fellow church member. Like the Telfords, Livingston was not an original member of the church. Archy, bemused by his cows, went to see a peculiar individual named Joel Dibble. Dibble also lived nearby; in fact he had moved into an abandoned house that had once been inhabited as temporary shelter by the Telfords. Dibble had been a veteran of the old French War, but was known by most as a worthless Yankee. He was not a member of Clark's congregation. Among other nefarious activities, Dibble told people's fortunes by cutting cards. When Archy Livingston asked for his help, Dibble shuffled the cards. Archy cut them. Dibble pondered the cards and then told Archy that the milk or the cows were bewitched. And Dibble then proceeded to tell Archy who the witch was -- a short, thick, black-haired woman who had a red-haired daughter.

Margaret Tilford accused

This description could only apply to one woman, Margaret Tilford. Archy accepted the word of the fortune-teller and announced to the community that his neighbor was a witch. As the word spread, the whole community, already terrorized by the war, was thrown into further ferment. Livingston's father-in-law supported the Telfords and censured Archy for going to a "malevolent designing scoundrel." However, others began to shun the Telfords. Some parents forbade their children to associate with the Telford children. The local magistrate refused to get involved. Or perhaps he was not asked -- the Presbyterians might have thought that would have violated the separation of church and state. Because both families were members of Dr. Clark's church, they agreed that the church was the proper authority to decide the matter.

Although it was not a trial, a formal investigation was instituted by Clark. Witnesses were called. Several church members testified that Margaret Tilford was an upstanding Christian woman and her moral character was exemplary. Clark then agreed to examine Joel Dibble. He did so with some reluctance, since Dibble was not a church member. During the examination, Dibble said he had learned his art in French Canada, and had paid good money for his lessons. He defended the art of cutting of cards on the grounds that, like any other art or trade, it had rules. He said he wasn't naming any names. He just followed the rules of the cards and, through them, learned indications. With that, Clark cut off the examination, saying there was "nothing tangible here for the church to take hold of." In Robert Blake's account, he indicates simply that "the matter was still before the Church and undecided when Dr. Clark moved away."

What Blake omitted was the detail that the congregation had a vote whether or not to retain the Rev. Dr. Clark as its minister. There is no indication that the vote was at all related to the witch trial, but a new spirit of divisiveness could easily have sprung or been enhanced by the controversy. Although Clark survived the vote by a very slim majority, perhaps only a single vote, he realized his tenure in Salem was insecure, and in 1782 he requested to be released from his pastoral charge. He then visited his former congregants in South Carolina and remained there for about a year. Clark had kept in touch with his former congregants, having visting them by order of the Presbytery in 1779, and perhaps once before in 1771. Although he is listed in the church records as preaching at the congregations of Long Cane, Little Run, and Cedar Springs (formerly Cedar Creek), he was not formally called as their pastor. Sometime during the summer of 1783, he left South Carolina and began serving as a missionary for the newly established Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, largely traveling in the northern states. His peregrinations ended in 1789, when he accepted a petition of the united congregations of Little Run, Long Cane, and Cedar Creek, to return as their paster. He accepted the call, once again refusing to be formally installed most likely on the grounds that he was simply continuing an uninterrupted church ministry begun in Ireland forty years before. The Rev. Dr. Clark preached his last sermon on Christmas Day, 1791, at the Long Cane Meeting House. He died the following day.

The matter dropped

Unfortunately, the Rev. Dr. Clark never made an official ruling or declaration in regard to Margaret Tilford, so, to use a modern phrase, the matter had no closure. After the war's end, in 1782, said Robert Blake, "the subject was prudently dropped." Perhaps there was nothing Clark or his successor could have done to improve the situation for the Telfords. Neither superstitious notions nor hard feelings easily disappear. Even after "the excitement died away," Margaret continued to suffer from having been accused of being a witch. Many neighbors made life difficult for the family. The young Telford folks were shunned from many parties and merry-makings. When George and Margaret 's son John became engaged to Sarah Rowan, many of her friends and relatives opposed the match. George and Margaret, however, were hearty souls and endured all the offensives and humiliation, thus proving even further the depth of their faith and strength of their character. They lived to an old age in or near Salem. Although they may have moved to Hebron and Argyle, it could not have been to flee the unpleasant situation, since both are nearby, not far enough away to escape rumors and gossip. George and Margaret are buried in the "Old Cemetery" in Salem, so they must have remained members in good standing of the church that the Rev. Dr. Clark founded. Margaret died on September 15, 1807 in her 76th year. George outlived her; he died on July 23 (or 25), 1813, in his 84th year.

Acknowledgments

I first learned about the witch of Salem, NY, from Robert Cree Duncan. He credits Ernest H. Tilford for uncovering the story and communicating the details of it to him sometime in the early 1960s. Ernest Tilford praises Asa Fitch in a letter to the the New York Historical Association's journal for showing "1) from what part of Scotland and when my father's ancestors came, 2) who comprised the family and with what neighbors they migrated, 3) that they first settled in Fitch's Point, 4) that in 1777 the wife of the emigrant was accused of witchcraft and 5) the strict sabbatarianism of these Scottish people." Fitch's source, in 1847, was Robert Blake, then aged 85 years old. Blake had come over with his family and the Telfords when he and one of the Telford boys, John, were 10 years old. He would have been about 15 years old when the witch accusation was made. I have only seen excerpts of Blake's account as they were transcribed in Bob Duncan's "The Telford Family" chapter in Joseph R. Henderson and Robert Cree Duncan's privately printed *Henderson Family History*, 1986. Blake's account was originally recorded in Asa Fitch in 1847 as part of his historical and genealogical masterwork "Notes for a History of Washington County, New York." The account was published in an article in volume 73 of the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* (1942). Bob Duncan's transcription has been corroborated by the Fitch Gazetteer of Washington County, New York by Kenneth A. Perry (1999), which summarizes the story that originally appeared in article 59 of Fitch's unfinished seven volume manuscript history.

An earlier version of this story also appeared in August 21 and 28, 1998, issues of *The Salem Press*. Thanks to Al Cormier, Salem Town Historian, for showing an interest in the tale and making the arrangements for having it published in the paper. Ernest H. Tilford saw the article in the paper and sent a letter to the editor concerning it. The letter was published September 17, 1998, and I have reproduced on this Web site with permission of the author, who was given permission by the *Salem Press*. Since my essay appeared in the *Salem Press*, I have had exchanged several letters with my new-found many-times-removed cousin. My thanks to him for his suggestions and criticism. They have been invaluable in helping me improve upon the story.

Photograph of the Salem Revolutionary Cemetery, at the top of this page, is used by permission of Al Cormier, Salem Town Historian.

Family Search, a genealogical web site maintained by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, provides family and pedigree information for both George and Margaret Telford.

I visited the Revolutionary Cemetery in Salem, New York, on October 11, 1998, and confirmed with my own eyes that the grave markers of husband and wife have different spellings of their last name. An online list of those buried in the cemeteries in the Salem area is now available. Instead of having vertical grave markers like those adorning the other graves in the old cemetery, both George and Margaret's graves are covered by large horizontal grave slabs, which I have been told by an expert in gravestone architecture, is quite rare for that time and place. More mysteries! Because they are horizontal, unfortunately, some of the writing is now worn away. But the Telford and Tilford spellings can still be seen. The historical society, which now has a restoration project underway and welcomes contributions, has placed a guide to all the cemetery listings at the entrance to the cemetery. The guide indicates the original inscriptions:

George Telford, d. July 23, 1813, in 85 y.

Margaret Tilford, w of George Tilford, d. Sept 15, 1807, in 76 y.

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