

Elizabeth Morse, First Witch of Newbury

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In the seventeenth century, witches were believed to make a compact with the Devil to torment the godly. As agents of the Devil, they caused dissention in a town, a church or between neighbors, and in some cases witches were believed to cause sickness or death in people or their livestock. It is no coincidence that Elizabeth Morse was a midwife, and a successful one at that.

When the enchanted happenings began occurring at **William and Elizabeth's home, a transient sailor, Caleb Powell, was first accused of bewitching the Morses. Powell blamed the enchantment on the Morses' grandson, John Stiles; the sailor was convinced that the haunting was orchestrated by him. However, after the sailor's acquittal an air of suspicion began to surround Elizabeth Morse as the people of Newbury continued to seek the person responsible for instigating the Devil against William Morse and his grandson.**

Over the years, Elizabeth had had her share of disagreements with others in town and apparently her past indiscretions were now being whispered about. **In Elizabeth's case, it is interesting to note that although her husband, grandson and house had been attacked she did not suffer from any assaults herself. Not helping the matter was the fact that two of Elizabeth's daughters had had children out of wedlock, creating even more talk about Elizabeth's child-rearing practices. It was for these reasons that suspicions fell upon her.**

Today we know that none of those accused of witchcraft in early New England were actual witches. What we know is that these women shared similar characteristics. They were either outspoken women or widows with land and wealth or they were midwives or perhaps women in old age with questionable child rearing practices. Unfortunately for Elizabeth Morse, she fit 3 of the 4 categories.

Researching Elizabeth's witchcraft case brought new clarity to the story of the Morse's struggle against Elizabeth's witchcraft accusations. For nearly 30

years, leading up to Elizabeth's witchcraft accusation, Newbury was divided over the administration of church government. Reverend Thomas Parker, founder and minister of Newbury's church, believed that the leadership of church government should remain in the hand of the ministers (himself and Reverend Noyes), whereas others in Newbury believed that the brethren should administer church government. Those who sided with Reverend Parker became known as Parker's group and those who opposed him were known as Mr. Woodman's group, named in honor of their leader, Mr. Edward Woodman, Jr.

In the divisions, William Morse and his son Jonathan chose to side with Reverend Parker's group, **although William's brother Anthony joined Mr. Woodman's group. In analyzing those who accused Elizabeth of witchcraft, it became clear that the witchcraft accusations lodged against Elizabeth Morse resulted from community factionalism. Newbury divided politically, socially and religiously into two very distinct factions, and those who belonged to Mr. Woodman's group made Elizabeth Morse the scapegoat for Rev. Parker's group.**

Out of the 15 accusations made against Elizabeth, **8 came from Mr. Woodman's group, while 6 were from family or friends of Woodman group members and only one accusation came from Reverend Parker's group. The bitter 30-year battle over church leadership ended before the haunting of the Morse home; however, John Stiles' behavior was a catalyst. Coupled with William's inclusion in Reverend Parker's group, it served a purpose for those in Newbury who were still looking to place blame on someone for their community's religious division.**

By accusing Elizabeth Morse of witchcraft, her community could hold her responsible for Newbury's suffering and purge itself of the contentious element that had brought evil into it. Over ten years before the dramatic events in Salem, Newbury demonstrated how community tension over

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religion and economy could lead to a witchcraft accusation. **Elizabeth's story is the key that unlocks the mystery of Salem's Witchcraft Hysteria. Researching Elizabeth's tragic case revealed the true identity of Anne Putnam, wife of Thomas Putnam of Salem. Anne Putnam was actually Anne Carr of Salisbury.**

Anne grew up during the divisions in Newbury and eventually married Thomas Putnam of Salem. Anne knew about the factionalism in Newbury, the **enchantment of the Morse home, and of John Stiles' bewitchment** as the reason why Elizabeth was not executed. Anne used this information to add to the divisions in Salem and accuse others of witchcraft, just as Elizabeth had been 12 years earlier. **The difference in Salem was Anne's prior knowledge of Elizabeth's plight, which demonstrated how to secure the executions of the alleged witches of Salem.** Using this knowledge, Anne scapegoated those she believed were her enemies in Salem and successfully secured their hangings.

Elizabeth was victimized by her community, and although she suffered wrongly she held her head high, never wavering on her innocence. In May of 1681, when she was released from prison, her husband brought her back to their home and requested that some neighboring ministers come to his home and meet together with her to discuss her release. One of those who did, Reverend John Hale, preserved their words. He stated that at the **meeting, Elizabeth's "discourse was very Christian among us, and still pleaded her innocence..."** At that time, **"...we did not esteem it prudence for us to pass any definitive Sentence upon one under her circumstances, yet we inclined to the more charitable side."**

Later, Reverend Hale was called to meet with Elizabeth once more, only this time would be the last for it was 1690 and Elizabeth lay sickly, awaiting her death. Again, Reverend Hale preserved **Elizabeth's final words and the emotional toll of her witchcraft conviction.**

"In her last Sickness she was in much darkness and trouble of Spirit, which occasioned a Judicious friend

to examine her strictly, Whether she had been guilty of Witchcraft, but she said No: But the grounds of her trouble was some impatient and passionate Speeches and Actions of hers while in Prison, upon the account of her suffering wrongfully; whereby she had provoked the Lord, by putting some contempt upon his word. And in time, she sought her pardon and comfort from God in Christ, and dyed as far as I understood, praying to **and resting upon God in Christ for Salvation."**

Elizabeth died a convicted witch and was denied a Christian burial. There is no record of her death and she is not listed as mother to any of her **children in the town's vital statistics. It is as if she never existed.** To this day, other than local folklore which says she was buried next to a lilac bush, even the location of her grave is unknown.

Ed. Note: Wendy West lives in a Newbury, MA home that was built by James Ordway, a first settler and accuser of Elizabeth Morse at her witchcraft trial. Wendy received her Master's Degree from Salem State on May 20th 2010, the 330th anniversary of Elizabeth Morse's Witchcraft Trial. This is an excerpt from Wendy's thesis.



In October 2010, The Morse Society placed and dedicated a stone in memory of Elizabeth Morse and her husband, William Morse, in the Burying Ground of the First Settlers, Newbury, MA