

1692. Ann Foster and the Salem Witch Trial

Ann was forty years younger than her husband Andrew when they left England in 1635 for a new life in America. They settled in Andover, Massachusetts. Andrew did live to a remarkable 106 years of age. But when he eventually died in 1685, she was 65 years old and her life began to fall apart. Four years later, her daughter Hannah was slain by her husband during a drunken rage (for which crime he was hanged). Around the same time, an avaricious neighbor, Joseph Ballard, had designs on her land and helped implicate her in witchcraft.

In 1692, when Joseph Ballard's wife, Elizabeth, came down with a fever that baffled doctors, witchcraft was suspected and a search for the responsible witch began. Two afflicted girls of Salem village, Ann Putnam and Mary Walcott, were taken to Andover to seek out the witch, and, at the sight of Ann Foster, the girls fell into fits. Ann, then 72, was subsequently arrested and taken to Salem prison.

A careful reading of the trial transcripts reveals that Ann resisted confessing to the 'crimes' she was accused of having committed, despite being "put to the question" (i.e. tortured) multiple times over a period of days. However, her resolve broke when her daughter, similarly accused of witchcraft, accused her own mother of the crime in order to save herself and her child. The transcripts reveal the anguish of a mother attempting to shield her child and grandchild by taking the burden of guilt upon herself. Convicted, Ann died in jail in the winter of 1693 before the trials were discredited and ended.