

The Fairfield County Witch Persecution of 1792

Everyone has heard of the Salem, Massachusetts witch mania of 1692 which resulted in the deaths and persecutions of innocent people victimized by the malicious antics of some bored teenagers and the ensuing mass hysteria. Just 100 years later in 1792, a similar fate befell three old persons over 80 years of age who had aroused the suspicions of neighbors in the backwoods area southwest of the small village of Winnsboro. Yes, Virginia, there were witches here... according to the beliefs then of some early Fairfield settlers!

On the 10th of November 1792, the South Carolina Gazette published an account of the grim court case being heard on behalf of Mary Ingleman. Mary Ingleman was seeking legal redress for the barbarous injuries inflicted on her by a number of Fairfield County neighbors in the Monticello area, now known as Dawkins. She and two others had been served by a lynch mob trial, convicted of practicing witchcraft, and tortured by flogging and having the soles of their feet burned off.

Mary and old man Hending (probably Harding or Harden) and his wife Sally Smith had been accused of lying evil hands on Rosy Henley and her sister and having caused damage to the livestock in the outlying farming settlements in the county. In another incident, Joe Fairs was said to have levitated the daughters of Drury Walker to the ceiling of the house. A bench of so-called witch doctors had called for an illegal mob trial at Thomas Hill's barn 5 miles from the county courthouse town. Adam Free, a grown son of Lawrence Free, testified against his widowed mother Mary Ingleman who had remarried local miller Jacob Ingleman. Jacob Free, grandson of Mary Ingleman, also testified against her, saying that she had turned him into a horse and ridden him 6 miles to Major Pearson's apple orchard on Broad River. Martha Holly Willingham [Willingham?] testified that Mrs. Ingleman had greatly afflicted her by levitating her into the air and causing her to spit up balls of hair with pins sticking out. Isaac Collins testified that she had turned him into a horse and ridden him to a coven gathering where Mary had conversed with the devil about that "splendid horse, Isaac Collins."

Mr. Yongue was the Fairfield County magistrate who granted her a warrant. The warrant was issued against John Crossland who was convicted in the county court and fined 10 Pounds Sterling and costs. Crossland left "for the far west", probably without paying his fines. Truth of the matter, I found out only a few years ago, is that John Crossland went as far west, across the Broad River, settling in the nearby county of Lexington. A Crossland descendant of this man told me the family stories of why his ancestor came to Lexington County to escape prosecution. Travel in that day and time likely presented enough difficulties to allow John Crossland to cover his tracks well enough.

She also prosecuted Joshua Durham who was found not guilty. The jury in this case was Hugh Gamble, Peter Curry, William Coggin, John Cubit, Andrew McDowell, Samuel Craig, Benjamin Halsey, James Aiken, Thomas Hill, John Hollis, William Bonner, and Dudley Curry. The index for the court records are cited in a publication by Brent Holcombe on a shelf in the genealogy research room at the Fairfield County Museum.

Philip Edward Pearson, the son of Revolutionary General John Pearson, wrote about this incident and trial in 1837 in a letter to Dr. Thomas Cooper at the SC College (now USC). As a neighbor, he wrote about Mrs. Ingleman's high Christian character. He remembered in his boyhood seeing the marks of the cow skin whip on her bare arms.

A number of the families in the Free-Ingleman neighborhood of southwestern Fairfield were of Swiss German origins and active in the German Seventh-Day Baptist Brethren religious movement. They were called Tunkers (in German) or Dunkers because they preached baptism by complete immersion. A common practice of hands-on faith healing may have attributed to the attitudes of other non-German neighbors that there were elements of "magic" being practiced by those backwoods settlers. Mary may have also had a German accent considered

“foreign” by the standards of a largely English-Welsh and Scots Irish community. Perhaps she had a wart on her nose and cultivated healing herbs too! Anything out of the ordinary, and considered “different” from the community’s accepted life ways and practices could have contributed to the neighbors’ suspicions. Others accused of witchcraft were John Eric, Benjamin Owens, Hezekiah Hunt, and his wife Mourning. Mr. Pearson said that tales of witchcraft pretty well died off in Fairfield after the incident at Mr. Hill's.

There were some cases of witchcraft in York County. Mr. Rainey believed himself to be bewitched. Balsey Fox, a noted witch, lived in the "Black Jacks" of that area. Lancaster County continued a witch stronghold down to a later period. In 1825, Barbara Powers was accused of turning a girl into a horse and riding her to Cheraw. This case went on appeal and became well-known. The case of Mary Ingleman was settled in the lower court and is less well-known. Possibly the last trial for witchcraft in America was the one involving Barbara Powers held in Lancaster County, South Carolina.

According to Dutch Fork traditionalist Lee Gandee, after the “scare” of 1792, “...a wise Baptist minister of Fairfield, Rev. William Woodward, is said to have preached a sermon on witchcraft which was supposed to have attracted a large audience. The crowd was keyed to a high pitch of expectancy and the preacher began by admitting that sorcery and magic did exist. However, he declared with mock seriousness, people should not imagine that old or ugly women were witches. What woman with supernatural powers would use them to make herself ugly or old? Rather, he said, suspect beautiful young girls of witchcraft, since with a look and a few words murmured in a certain way, they can draw boys away from their families, turn them first into lackeys and at last into lifelong toilers...”

“The tension broke. The crowd laughed, and the Fairfield witch hunt was over... Witchcraft and laughter cannot coexist.” Gandee, a native of the Dutch Fork area of Lexington County documented and wrote about the lifeways and beliefs of the Swiss and German communities just across the river from lower western Fairfield.

When we consider our impressions of our hometown and county history, we must remember the diverse cultural traits that have been handed down from early times. Fairfield County would have been characterized as the wilds of the dense unsettled backwoods during the mid- to last decades of the eighteenth century. Many settlers would not have seen churches or other community establishments in their geographic environs until the later part of the century. Perhaps the light of reason accompanied the eventual growth of communities, and collective belief in the existence of the “Old Ways” withered away...or is there an element that still exists in the vast wooded acres of our largely rural county?

The accompanying photo shows an early Dawkins area log home which no longer exists in Fairfield County. I believe that it may have been the home of Mary and Lawrence Free.

