

# Samuel Willard: Savior of the Salem Witches



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*It is approximately the first week of August, 1692. He cannot place the exact date, only that it had been roughly nine weeks since his capture on May 30<sup>th</sup>. Since then he has lost all track of time, even with the extra daytime freedoms that his wealth and social status allow him. "Such things did not prevent an accusation," he mused, "as I am yet a prisoner by eventide, shackles or no, denounced as a witch of all things, by mere children! No matter, the appointed hour has almost arrived. I only pray Mary is prepared...Hark, the signal! It must be the minsters."*

*"Ye be Phillip English?" a coarse but welcome voice inquires through the bars, through the darkness; its master bears no candle.*

*"Indeed Reverend."*

*"Then make haste! The guards are paid off, your wife is waiting. Go now! And 'if they persecute you in one city, flee to another.'"<sup>2</sup>*

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Purportedly aiding Philip English in his flight from a Boston prison is only one instance of the Reverend Samuel Willard's substantial personal involvement in the 1692-1693 incidents which American historical tradition has collectively adopted as "The Salem Witch Trials." Although his participation in numerous areas of the trial proceedings has been definitively confirmed, Willard's anti-trial "activism" and its consequences still leave curious contemporaries with several questions, the answers to which are necessary for a truly complete understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Vintage Books 2003) 238.

<sup>2</sup> William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D., Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts* (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), 2:24-25), as quoted in Norton, *Devil's Snare*, 237.

what exactly happened in Salem. Among the more notable inquiries: Did Willard exercise any considerable influence over the three judges of the Court of Oyer and Terminer who were members of his congregation, particularly Samuel Sewall? What impact, if any, did his more targeted sermons have on the trial proceedings, besides garnering himself a witchcraft accusation? Then there is the over-arching notion that this research attempts to prove: that Samuel Willard's efforts against the trial proceedings in Essex County were indeed integral to bringing them to a halt, and that Samuel Willard can indeed be counted among the select ranks of saviors of the Salem witches.

To understand the motivational and ideological roots of Samuel Willard's involvement in Salem, a firm grasp of this man's origins is necessary. He was born on January 31, 1640, on the frontier town of Concord, newly organized in a collaborative effort by his father, Simon Willard.<sup>3</sup> The elder Willard was a man at the pinnacle of New England society, thanks to his status as a local "founding father," his vast landholding, and his substantial wealth. Because of this, Simon was granted leadership positions in a wide variety of fields throughout the settlement, from Lieutenant Commander of the Concord militia to a Justice of the Peace to Assistant to the supreme judiciary of Massachusetts Bay. Due to the nature of his father's numerous occupations, Samuel was exposed to the finer political, military, and religious workings of the colonies from a very early age.<sup>4</sup> Young Samuel was never destined for a life of passivity if his father was to have anything to say about it.

The roots of his religious leadership also stem from paternal example. Simon Willard happened to be one of the few individuals brave enough to have pursued evangelism in his

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<sup>3</sup> Seymour Van Dyken, *Samuel Willard: Preacher of Orthodoxy in an Era of Change* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

economic dealings with the Native Americans.<sup>5</sup> Simon traded his thoughts on the Christian God and his relationship to man just as often as he traded furs.

Willard entered grammar school at the age of eight. The early years of his journey down the path of intellectual enlightenment culminated on July 17, 1655, when he entered Harvard College at the age of fifteen.<sup>6</sup> While at Harvard, Willard successfully mastered all aspects of the college's classical curriculum. Particularly crucial to his later success as a minister were his extensive grammatical studies. He was instructed on proper rhetorical and oratory techniques<sup>7</sup>. He graduated from Harvard in 1659, and by age twenty-three in the year 1663, he was preaching at the remote town of Groton. He immediately made such a favorable impression among the inhabitants that, when their current minister, John Miller, fell ill and died, Willard was entreated by the congregation to remain permanently as the town's minister. The date of his ordination is recorded as July 13, 1664.<sup>8</sup>

Such was the course of The Willard's life prior to 1671, a year that was to be major turning point in his mortal life. For in mid-October 1671 the Willard family's domestic servant, sixteen year old Elizabeth Knapp, appeared to have become possessed by the evil one himself.

The tragedy began to unfold upon Monday, October 30, 1671...she was in a strange frame, sometimes weeping, sometimes laughing, and [making] many foolish and apish gestures...she would shriek suddenly thrown down into the midst of the floor with violence and taken with a violent fit...and with much ado she was kept out of the fire from destroying herself...a dark resemblance of hellish torments.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 18, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Willard, *Brief Account*, as reprinted in Increase Mather's *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* as reprinted in David D. Hall's *Witch Hunting in Seventeenth Century New England: A Documentary History 1638-1693* (Boston: Northeastern University Press), 197.

Knapp's affliction lasted from October to mid-January 1672, a total of three months of "hell." Early on in her affliction, Willard took several steps to prevent an outbreak of hysteria within the close knit community of Groton. He did not make her spectacle more public than it needed to be, certainly no easy task when Knapp did a fine job of making a public spectacle of herself, for as he later wrote she is observed always to fall into her fits when any strangers go to visit her, and the more go the more violent are her fits."<sup>10</sup> Most significant was the way in which he quelled any chaos that might have resulted from the witchcraft accusations Knapp delivered against two of her neighbors, claiming a human source of her affliction. Willard did not deem her first accusation immediately viable, for the accused was "a person of sincere uprightness before God."<sup>11</sup> Even when this woman "failed" the "touch test"<sup>12</sup> administered by Willard, he still remained unconvinced by Knapp's "methodical" ways. His caution paid off, for shortly after Knapp identified this woman's touch "from any other, though no voices were uttered, though her eyes were sealed up,"<sup>13</sup> she actually retracted her initial claim. Willard noted, "God was pleased to justify the innocent...for after she [Knapp] had gone to prayer...[she] confessed that she believed Satan had deluded her, and hath never since complained of any such apparition or disturbance from the person"<sup>14</sup> who she had only a short time ago charged with a crime that would have condemned the accused to death.

Knapp was not done pointing fingers, however. A few short weeks after she declared herself mistaken in her first attempt at identifying her bewitcher, she demanded "if the party [i.e.-

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>12</sup> Norton, *Devil's Snare*, 166-167, points out that the touch test was one of several methods employed during the 17<sup>th</sup> century to identify someone as a witch. It was used extensively in Salem.

<sup>13</sup> Willard, as reprinted in Hall, *Witch Hunting*, 199.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

the new woman who was supposedly causing her afflictions] was sent for, she should forthwith be well, but never till then.”<sup>15</sup> The “party” in question was sent for on December 7<sup>th</sup>. Her arrival provoked fits of monstrous proportions from Knapp, who managed again to recognize her “afflicter’s” presence, even “though her eyes were fast closed.”<sup>16</sup> However, Willard, “having experience of such former *actings*,”<sup>17</sup> made just as little of this accusation as the last one. Instead, he sought a solution to Knapp’s “possession” through prayer. Again he achieved the desired results, “for by two evident and clear mistakes she [the accused] was cleared, and then all prejudices ceased and she [Elizabeth] never more to this day impeached her of any apparition.”<sup>18</sup> So it was 1672 when Willard was first confronted with the critical issue of whether or not the devil can appear in the specter of an innocent person, since Knapp proclaimed that specters were the primary sources of his distress. Note how Willard found both of these women *innocent* in the face of Knapp’s “spectral evidence.” Throughout that trying winter of 1672-73 Willard’s cautiousness paid off. No innocent blood was spilled as a result of a girl whose condition was analogous to that of the girls twenty years later at Salem and Andover. Such experiences prepared him to an unmatched degree for the even greater intellectual and spiritual “trial” he was soon to face.<sup>19</sup>

His personal responses throughout Knapp’s affliction indicate a man who could remain calm, cautious, and skeptical, even when the “devil” “spoke” to him directly through Knapp. He/she denounced him as “a great black rogue...a liar, a deceiver.”<sup>20</sup> Willard, like almost all New Englanders at the time, believed in the existence of witchcraft, the supernatural, and the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, introduction, in *ibid.*, 197.

<sup>20</sup> Willard, as reprinted in Hall, *Witch Hunting*, 208.

devil. Therefore, skepticism of Knapp herself aside, he would have believed to a degree that he was quite literally engaged in a confrontation with Satan incarnate. Therefore, for him to have remained so collected and to have ignored the devil's "direct" challenge to his authority, instead simply "desiring the company to join in prayer,"<sup>21</sup> was a powerful testament to his ability to resist impulse and analyze situations from a logical perspective. Not once did he jump to the immediate conclusion that Knapp's distemper was in fact diabolical. Even the physician he called in to examine her initially "judged the main part of her distemper to be natural."<sup>22</sup> He was still questioning the true origins of Knapp's condition to the very end, eventually leaving the entire matter up to "those that are more learned, aged, and judicious."<sup>23</sup> He never sought a judicial solution to her ordeal. Instead, he dutifully took up his mantle as a mouthpiece and soldier of God<sup>24</sup>, and ended the distemper through prayer, the confession of sin, and fasting.

Willard's ministerial methods of routing witchcraft were rewarded with success, for by 1674, Elizabeth had married. Over the next twenty-five years, she produced six children and never again occupied a place of demonically inspired prominence.<sup>25</sup> That was not all, for by the conclusion of this calamity Willard had acquired a reputation as one who had confronted the devil directly and emerged untainted, unscathed, and victorious through pure piety.

Willard's prominence and authority not only as a respected theologian but as a man who had conquered the devil would have become widespread among the close knit communities of New England by the time of the outbreak of "witchcraft" in Salem in 1692. His notoriety

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>24</sup> John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 109.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 114.

certainly would not have escaped the residents of Essex County, the very people who believed themselves to be on the front lines of a “battle” with the devil. It is no surprise then that rumors of Willard’s “expertise” prompted continued entreaties for assistance or guidance. It is in his responses to their inquiries, when taken in addition to the content of his sermons and his actions during the period in question, that Samuel Willard’s status as the “witches” savior and an integral ender of the loosely legal proceedings can at last be affirmed.

All ends of the Salem spectrum, from the judges themselves to the accused agents of Satan, beseeched him for guidance, assistance, or for him to sign off on some written work of their own. The documents he drafted or supported indicate a man extremely dissatisfied with what was going on in Essex County. Willard was amongst a group of clergymen who signed a preface endorsing a sermon delivered by the Reverend Deodat Lawson, the infamous Reverend Samuel Parris’ predecessor to the Salem Village pulpit.<sup>26</sup> As for the content of the sermon itself:

Satan is subordinate in every way to God. He is only able to unleash his evil upon humanity only to enact whatever purpose The Lord himself may have in mind. When given Divine permission, the devil could enter into the psyche of his victims, creating “strange and frightful Representations to the Fancy, or the Imagination, and by the violent tortures of the body, often threatening to extinguish life,”<sup>27</sup> as he appeared to be doing to the afflicted girls of Salem. The mortals who both unleashed and took the brunt of his fury were simply Satan’s agents in God’s grander scheme. By the nature of their mortality, all human beings were unable

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<sup>26</sup> Norton, *Devil’s Snare* 66.

<sup>27</sup> Deodat Lawson, *Christ’s Fidelity the Only Shield Against Satan’s Malignity* as reprinted in Richard B. Trask, ed., “*The Devil hath been raised*”: *A Documentary History of the Salem Village Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692*, rev. ed. (Danvers, Mass., 1997), 66-67, as quoted in Norton, *Devil’s Snare*, 66-68.

“to comprehend his [God’s] aims in visiting such afflictions on them”<sup>28</sup>. With this reasoning in mind, Lawson cautioned his audience against the “Rash Censuring of others”<sup>29</sup> lest humans interfere presumptuously in God’s plan for them all.

Willard more than likely interpreted Lawson’s words according to his own personal doctrine and content of past sermons he himself had delivered. On Wednesday June 24, 1692, Willard preached “He that knows and does not his master’s will, shall be beaten with many stripes;”<sup>30</sup> Along similar lines, on February 24, 1686, Willard sermonized on Acts 1:7, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons.”<sup>31</sup> To interpret: there exists an obvious consensus between Willard and Lawson’s sermons in that it is truly impossible to know God’s will or purpose, and to attempt to learn of His design will only bring about more pain and suffering. Because “to know his masters will” meant remaining ignorant of that will since it is ultimately incomprehensible, the Salem trials were by their very nature far too much mortal intervention in God’s plan. By attempting to ferret out the sources of Satan’s devices, the judges were indirectly but no less sinfully attempting to determine God’s plan for them to a greater degree than their mortality entitled them too. It is God’s plan to punish the wicked of his own accord, without the often mistaken and misguided legal systems of humanity. Therefore Willard’s personal ideology contradicted the architects of the courts in Salem simply because of the fact that such a court existed.

On January 21, 1686, the crux of Willard’s sermon was as follows: “Man must have a care of being cheated, our natures inclined to falsehood. Must not take great men rulers for our

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 66-68.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 66-68.

<sup>30</sup> Mel Yazawa, ed., *The Diary and Life of Samuel Sewall* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 79.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 108.

rule, but the written word of God. Must have no man's person in admiration."<sup>32</sup> It appeared in Willard's eyes that the judges were taking on a godlike role in deciding the fate of individuals who were meant to be at the mercy of only God's greater designs. Also, that Satan was a highly deceptive entity, easily capable of leading people astray with his nefarious arts. So *caution* was the appropriate method of dealing with the supposed cases of satanic intervention in mortal affairs put before the magistrates. Instead of caution however, the judges continually resorted to, as Lawson put it, the "rash censuring of others." Willard seemed to have found the principles Lawson expressed in "Christ's Fidelity..." in fair enough accordance with his own beliefs, hence the reason for his endorsement of the sermon in the first place.

Willard also participated in the drafting of a lengthy document entitled the "Return of Several Ministers." It was written on June 15, 1692 at the behest of four judges who sought guidance in this affair which seemed to be increasingly spreading and spiraling out of control, as well as clarification on certain issues. "Return" made very clear the major ideological difference between the men on the bench and the men at the pulpits in regards to whether or not the devil could appear in the shape of an innocent person. For if he could, that would render all testimony based on spectral evidence invalid, since the appearance of a specter could no longer be taken as an immediate indication of guilt. The ministers thoroughly believed that the devil was capable of doing so, that "a demon may, by God's permission, appear, even to ill purposes, in the shape of an innocent, yea, a virtuous man."<sup>33</sup> The magistrates did not concur.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the ministers warned the magistrates to be highly cautious when dealing with Satan's wiles, for "too much

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 214.

‘credulity’ could lead to ‘a long train of miserable consequences.’<sup>35</sup> The magistrates only needed to look to Willard’s dealings with Knapp for a successful example of the benefits of cautiousness.

The ministers also advised against the use of touch tests as a means of ascertaining guilt, rather, “only tests of undoubted ‘lawfulness’ should be employed to uncover witches.”<sup>36</sup> Again, Willard’s skeptical responses to the “positive” results of the touch tests he administered to Knapp were a highly viable precedent. Finally, they warned against initially questioning the accused in “noice [the cries of the afflicted], company [literally the entire Village of Salem and any curious soul in Essex County and beyond], and openness [such as when the examinations took place in the public town meeting house].”<sup>37</sup> To paraphrase Willard’s own words, the witnesses were to be questioned only in circumstances which can guarantee that they are giving answers in their right mind.

Anyone who read the “Return” would have known of the “famous” Boston minister’s opinions and therefore his discontent. Ill will on the part of a man of such standing, socially and religiously, could not have reflected well upon those men engineering the cycles of arrest, confession, conviction, and execution in Essex County. It did not bode well for the Court to have a “distant” but powerful figure stroking the public mind against their favor in such a way.

Willard did not have to wait to be called upon by others to render his thoughts on Essex County. He wrote of his own accord *Some Miscellany Observations On Our Present Debates Respecting Witchcrafts, In A Dialogue Between S & B*. The dialogue occurs between Salem (S),

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 214.

and Boston (B), with Willard of course representing his own opinion through the Boston side. He based “Salem’s” opinion on the principles he believed were the guiding forces behind what he was taking issue with. Via “Boston,” Willard affirmed the traditional belief that witches, once undoubtedly discovered, should indeed be punished as God himself demanded in the Holy Scriptures. However, to condemn witches based on spectral evidence, presumption of guilt, and testimony gathered when the testifier was not in his or her “right mind,”<sup>38</sup> was a crime in itself. According to “Boston,” these were exactly the conditions the accused witches were being unjustly convicted in. By this line of reasoning, those who were executed in Salem could not have been true witches in Willard’s eyes, since they had not been properly proven as such.<sup>39</sup> And as always, “Boston” made clear once more that spectral evidence should not be considered a legitimate form of testimony due to the devil’s God given ability to impersonate innocent people in spectral form.<sup>40</sup>

“Boston” made one more additional point about spectral evidence that “Salem” is not able to counter.

The persons confessing are Witches by their own confession; and have therefore abjured God and Christ, and given themselves up to the Devil, the Father of Lies; and what Credit is to be given to the Testimony of such against the Lives of others.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> A mental state in which one is neither, as Willard says, “distracted nor discontented.” Willard was taking issue with the spectacle of bringing the accused witch before his or her accusers, who would erupt into violent displays and scream at specters while the entire town looked on. It was under such stressful conditions that the Essex County witches either were condemned or forced to confess.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Willard, *Some Miscellany Observations On Our Present Debates Respecting Witchcrafts, In A Dialogue Between S. & B. By P.E. and J.A.* (Philadelphia: Printed by William Bradford 1692) as reprinted on [www.17thc.us/docs/willard.shtml](http://www.17thc.us/docs/willard.shtml)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

So, Willard wonders, why had the magistrates acquitted these “liars,” rather than they who refuse to confess and maintain their innocence? Also, testimony from the afflicted girls themselves had to be considered just as untrustworthy, for the accused were sent for based on whoever’s specter the girls said was attacking them. This means that the specter itself was the Court’s informer of the guilty party. Specters originated from the devil, thus spectral evidence was “the Devil turned informer.”<sup>42</sup> So then was the devil’s testimony legitimate? Willard asks, for it had been treated as such so far. “Salem” could not muster an adequate reply.

Willard denounced Salem not only with quill and ink but also from his lofty Boston<sup>43</sup> pulpit. Throughout that fateful summer of 1692, Willard preached almost exclusively from two sections of the Bible: the Book of Job, and Peter 5:8. Sermons based on the former focus primarily on wisdom, the abstract nature of this virtue, its divine origins and what it truly means to be wise. He tells his congregation that “it is a gr[eat] point of wisdom to be able to discern and distinguish ends,”<sup>44</sup> namely, it is extremely worthwhile to be able to deduce and comprehend what ultimate goal one’s fellow man is striving for with the “means” available to him in his life. However, he cautions, to attempt to distinguish Divine ends is a most grave sin, and this seemed to be the “end” desired by those heavily involved in the Salem trials. For by trying to discover the origins of the devil’s malice, that is technically attempting to do the same for God’s plan for humanity, as the devil is a substantial part of that plan. And anyway, according to Willard, there are very few men in the world actually endowed with *true wisdom*, the wisdom to fear God and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Harold Wrotherly’s records of Boston congregations fill in the details about Willard’s relocation: he had been installed as the minister of the South Church of Boston in 1678, having fled Groton after the outbreak of King Philip’s War. He remained at South Church until his death in 1707.

<sup>44</sup> Mark A Peterson, “Transcription of the Edward Bromfield Sermon Notebook,” (unpub. typescript, Mass. Historical Society, 1992), 7.

completely trust in his judgment.<sup>45</sup> It would have been highly unlikely then, that within the panel of judges comprising the Court of Oyer and Terminer, even one of those men would have been truly wise. Without this wisdom, they had no right to be condemning their equally unwise brethren to death.<sup>46</sup> For as God himself decreed, the wisdom of the mortal world, “of ye world,” is “ffolishnes” and “folly.”<sup>47</sup>

The primary themes of Willard’s Peter 5:8 sermons were that mankind’s adversary is the devil, who walks among them as a roaring lion, as well as the seemingly endless variety of ways in which Satan is capable of deceiving or harming humanity. One such example: “4 he dos all je cane to setle ym upon falce opinions of gods mercy, & Justice,”<sup>48</sup> and “by hurring ym to a falce presumption.”<sup>49</sup> There is a great possibility then, at least from Willard’s perspective, that the Salem trials did indeed constitute such an instance of false justice and presumption, for the devil is incredibly wily, his true intentions incredibly difficult to discern; he can only be appropriately dealt with through *caution*. As made clear in the “Return of Several Ministers,” the magistrates were not being particularly cautious. In short, the judges were almost certainly being misled by the devil.

His outrage was most notably evident in his June 19, 1692 sermon, from the Peter 5:8 cycle, entitled “The Spectres of God’s Wrathful Lion.”<sup>50</sup> It reflected greater skepticism about the

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

<sup>46</sup> Willard’s train of thought in this sermon cycle seems to indicate a clergymen’s inherent distrust of men in any sort of judiciary position; i.e.-men should seek relief of there afflictions through God, not through a mortal jury.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>50</sup> Bernard Rosenthal states in *Salem Story* that Bridget Bishop, the first Salem “witch” to be executed, was sent to the gallows on June 10, 1692. This was a mere nine days prior to Willard’s delivery of the “Lion” sermon on June 19th. This leads one to wonder whether or not her

witchcraft prosecutions than any of his prior sermons to this date from the start of the prosecutions.<sup>51</sup> In his discourse, he cautioned his congregation against believing every report about an individual's "guilt" coming from Salem, for the manner in which that guilt was ascertained may be illegitimate. It was better that they "remain charitable to their brethren" and "to show compassion" to them. He himself had done just that in 1671 with Elizabeth Knapp, whom he treated as an object of pity rather than an instrument of Satan.<sup>52</sup> Willard again advises the utmost caution, for "ye world is full of thes roaring Lions, take heed how you take every step."<sup>53</sup> He was chastising his congregation to behave in the way the judges were not. The devil, Willard said, had very particular methods: "by cruell e scndelus Aspertions, to defame...all...he strikes at the names of Gods peo[ple], e here he is wont to make use of men...whose native malignity dos carry [him] forth<sup>54</sup>". Therefore no one was safe from Satan's attacks, even the *innocent*, for all men have been flawed with that "native malignity" since original sin.

Most importantly, Stephen L. Robbins reiterates, "Willard reaffirms his position...that God permits Satan to act and use specters."<sup>55</sup> Willard asserted that "2 yd devil does not need ye Consent of ye party in thus representing it."<sup>56</sup> So if the devil can appear in the shape of an innocent person without his or her consent, the court should not frighten itself "into hasty actions" when confronted with spectral afflictions. The presence of a specter does not necessarily

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hanging prompted the delivery of this fiery exposition, since he would have been well aware that three of the men who had sent Bishop to the hangman's noose would be sitting in his audience. In addition, those same men had just jailed a fellow member of Willard's congregation, Captain John Alden.

<sup>51</sup> Norton, *Devil's Snare* 215.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen L. Robbins, "Samuel Willard and the Spectres of God's Wrathful Lion," *New England Quarterly* 60 (1987): 596-603.

<sup>53</sup> Willard, *Spectres of God's Wrathful Lion*, as quoted in Robbins, 599.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 599.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 600.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

indicate that the one appearing in spectral form has engaged in the truly incriminating act of covenanting with the devil. Such a covenant, Willard reminded his audience, *would* serve as proper grounds for conviction. However, the formation of such a covenant cannot be proven strictly through spectral evidence. With this sermon, Willard was striking at the very foundation of all of the accusations of witchcraft coming out of Essex County, the vast majority of which hinged on spectral evidence to provide legitimacy to the charges affliction being made.<sup>57</sup>

Shortly after he took such direct issue with the legitimacy of spectral evidence and the credibility of the accusers, Willard himself was accused of witchcraft by one of the girls whose believability he was calling into question. It was reported by Boston cloth merchant Robert Calef that during the trial of the “witch” Rebecca Nurse, “one of the accusers cried out publicly of Mr. *Willard* Minister in *Boston* as afflicting her.”<sup>58</sup> However, the magistrates immediately dismissed the accusation, for Willard’s accuser was “sent out of the Court and it was told about that she was mistaken in the person.”<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps it was Willard’s direct relationship with several of the judges that protected him from legal and lethal consequences following his being accused of witchcraft. Three of the judges who sat on the Court of Oyer and Terminer, Samuel Sewall, Wait Winthrop, and Peter Sergeant, were members of Willard’s congregation at South Church. The nature of this pastor-church member relationship may indeed have been crucial to bringing about the end of the trials, at the very least instilling doubt about their morality. If the three of them are first considered collectively, it becomes evident that the concern Willard expressed in regards to whether or not

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 601.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World* as reprinted by George Lincoln Burr in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706* (UVA Electronic Library) 3:37.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:37.

the devil can appear in the shape of innocent person during his June 19<sup>th</sup> sermon became their concern since they were direct witnesses to his tirade on the pulpit. For only a month later, the court began to ask that very same question posed by Willard of those on trial.<sup>60</sup>

Samuel Sewall's connections to Willard go far deeper and therefore deserve far more scrutiny. Sewall was a very pious man and active member of the church. Sewall seemed to have known Willard very well, for he frequently asked him for advice on personal issues, "I went to Mr. Willard to ask whether had best keep him [Sam Jr.-one of Sewall's sons] home today."<sup>61</sup> Willard also baptized Sewall's son Henry<sup>62</sup> and continually prayed with and for the child, who was "very ill," and attended to his ailing daughter Hannah after she gave birth to her twelfth child.<sup>63</sup> Sewall by his generally warm and just<sup>64</sup> nature would have been dissatisfied at proceedings.<sup>65</sup> He was a kind man who seemed to have gotten swept up in the systematic madness of 1692, and could find no way out without risking his own life and the lives of his sizeable family. Sewall considered Willard a highly skilled preacher, almost always citing his sermons and prayers as "excellent."<sup>66</sup> It also appeared that Sewall, on more than one occasion, felt as though the Sabbath's lectures were delivered at him personally.<sup>67</sup> Certainly Willard's June 19<sup>th</sup> sermon would have been no exception. Perhaps the most powerful testament to Willard's sway over Sewall is the fact that he was the only judge who ever seemed to regret what he had

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<sup>60</sup> Norton, *Devil's Snare*, 225.

<sup>61</sup> Sewall, *Diary*, 144.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>64</sup> According to Mel Yazawa, he was the author of one of the earliest anti-slavery tracts in British America.

<sup>65</sup> For example, he reacted with the utmost disgust and shock at the "horrid progress of the persecution [of Protestants] in France" (*Diary*, 114). This was not a man who was prone to or enjoyed violence.

<sup>66</sup> Sewall, *Diary*, 69.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

done and that the trials had in fact put innocent people to death<sup>68</sup>. On January 14, 1696/7, Norton tells us that Sewall “publically apologized for his role on the Court of Oyer and Terminer”<sup>69</sup> and acknowledged “the Anger of God against Massachusetts for the witchcraft trials.”<sup>70</sup> To whom did Sewall repent? To none other than his pastor, Samuel Willard, who read Sewall’s request for a pardon and announced his desire “to take the Blame and Shame”<sup>71</sup> of what he had done to the entire congregation of South Church.

Not only was Samuel Willard denouncing the trials through written means and exercising whatever influence he had over the judges as their pastor to achieve the ends he desired, he appeared to have engaged in “underground” activities as well. The best evidence to be had in this matter comes from a quote in an October 9, 1692 manuscript written by a prominent Boston merchant, Thomas Brattle. Brattle was himself one of the most vocal trial critics, and a member of Willard’s congregation. The “Rev’d” referred to continually throughout the letter, and to whom the entire letter is addressed is generally believed to have been Willard. He fits the description of the “Rev’d” described below and was by then well known to be firmly in the camp of those who were against the trials. The substance of the relevant text is as follows:

In particular I cannot but think very honourably of the endeavors of a Rev’d person in Boston, whose good affection to his countrey in general, and spiritual relation to three judges in particular, has made him very solicitious and industrious in this matter.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Norton, *Devil’s Snare*, 312.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>70</sup> M. Halsey Thomas, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729* (New York, 1973), as quoted in Norton, *Devil’s Snare*, 311.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Brattle, *Letter of Thomas Brattle, F. R. S., 1692* as reprinted in George Lincoln Burr’s *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706* (UVA Electronic Library) 186-187.

No further details about what these “industrious endeavors” were provided. One can speculate that they would be analogous to the Philip English escape. How many times Willard acted in this secretive manner is also unknown. Yet the sheer fact that he would engage in “espionage,” risking life and reputation, is a testament to just how disturbed Willard was with Salem. No one else is reputed to have resorted to such “extreme” measures, making his undercover engagements even more critical to bringing about an end to the trials.

Very few elements of the witchcraft catastrophe that burst forth in Essex County in 1692 were truly definitive; Samuel Willard himself was in fact one of the few “conclusive” figures involved. His actions and words thoroughly demonstrate that he never deviated from his stance, made very clear in his initial encounter with the devil in the form of Elizabeth Knapp, that Satan would be conquered spiritually, rather than judicially. Willard was involved to a great enough degree and in a great enough variety of anti-trial engagements to be considered an integral factor which eventually helped to prevent the spilling of any more innocent blood on Gallows Hill. He was indeed a savior of the Salem witches.

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