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“Pale Blewish Lights” and a Dead Man’s Groan: Tales of the Supernatural from Eighteenth-Century Plymouth, Massachusetts

Douglas L. Winiarski

TESTIFYING before the Massachusetts Bay Superior Court of Judicature, Isaac Lothrop, Jr., politely described an altercation that occurred at his home in December 1733. Josiah Cotton and John Clark, he recalled, “had some discourse Together” regarding the house that Clark “had Latly Dwelt in.” Cotton angrily informed his delinquent tenant that “unless he made up With him he might Expect to be Sued” for the unpaid portion of his lease. In Lothrop’s words, “Clarke Reply’d that if he Saw the devil he Would tell of itt.”¹

A year and a half earlier, on May 22, 1732, Clark had agreed to lease several rooms in a Plymouth, Massachusetts, mansion belonging to the estate of Cotton’s deceased son-in-law, a merchant sea captain named Thompson Phillips. Remodeling the garret and cellar into a joinery shop, Clark lived and worked at the house for a year. In June 1733 he presented Cotton with ten pounds of credit at a local merchant shop in partial payment for the following year’s rent. A month later, however, Clark abruptly disavowed the agreement and moved out; the remaining tenants—including the families of Clark’s business associates Thomas Savery and Samuel Holmes, several

Douglas L. Winiarski, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, presented a version of this article at the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture Annual Conference, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, June 1997. I thank James Ackerman, Roark Atkinson, J. D. Bowers, Jon Butler, Catharine Cookson, John Demos, Kit Dodgson, David Hall, Mark McGarvey, J. Samuel Preus, Stephen Stein, Will Van Arragon, and Michael Winship for their careful criticism of earlier drafts. Jeremy Bangs kindly shared his broad knowledge of local architecture and Thomas J. Whyte, current owner of the Thompson Phillips house, graciously allowed me to examine its interior. Tom Santiago, The Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the Lilly Library, Indiana University, furnished photographs; The Massachusetts Archives, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Pilgrim Hall, the Plymouth (Mass.) County Commissioners, and the Massachusetts Historical Society kindly allowed me to quote from manuscript sources.

¹ Superior Court of Judicature, Suffolk Court Files: 37011, 37145, Massachusetts Archives, Boston (hereafter cited as SCJ). In quoting from original manuscripts, I have generally adopted the guidelines recently suggested by Michael Hunter, who urges editors to reproduce the meaning of a text rather than its physical appearance in “How to Edit a Seventeenth-Century Manuscript: Principles and Practice,” *The Seventeenth Century*, 10 (1995), 277–303.

apprentices, and a spinster named Ann Palmer—all followed suit. At the time of the argument at Isaac Lothrop's house, the Phillips mansion had been vacant for nearly two months.²

Clark's outburst was not the only occasion on which he had spoken openly about his encounters with the forces of evil. As several Plymouth residents would later testify in court, the joiner frequently had asserted that the dwelling was haunted by the specter of Thompson Phillips and other "evil spirits." Isaac Robinson, for example, recalled an incident in which Clark spied a preternatural light—"plain as the light of a Candle"—in the "front alley's upper window." In a conversation with minister Nathaniel Leonard, Clark described "a great noise like the banging of a door too & fro," which, he maintained, confirmed his suspicion "that there was Something Extraordinary" going on in the house. Timothy Holloway, too, related a similar encounter in which Clark told him "that he could not live no longer in Mr. Phillips house." When asked to explain, Clark allegedly asserted that "because of such unusuall noise in the house . . . he nor no body allse could live in it because it was haunted with evill spirits."³

This incident was not the first time, of course, that New Englanders had complained of poltergeists wreaking havoc in a local dwelling, and it certainly would not be the last.⁴ Cotton's response to the disturbances, however, suggests a break with older traditions of Puritan wonder lore.⁵ While previous owners of bewitched houses fasted and prayed for divine assistance, consulted cunning folk, and hung horseshoes over the front door to ward off evil spirits, Cotton, by contrast, flatly denied the local rumors, vilified his neighbors, and, eventually, filed a defamation suit against Clark and his confederates in February of 1734. To the plaintiff, the lawsuit must have seemed a logical course of action, for Cotton was, himself, an inferior court judge (see Figure I). Grandson of John Cotton, the eminent Boston divine, Josiah

² Plymouth County Inferior Court of Common Pleas, Recordbook (1733–1736), Plymouth County Commissioner's Office, Plymouth, Massachusetts, 92 (hereafter cited as PCICCP, Recordbook); SCJ, 36637, 37011; Josiah Cotton, "The Cotton Diaries, 1733–74," The Cotton Families Collection, The Pilgrim Society, Pilgrim Hall, Plymouth, Massachusetts, 10, 12.

³ SCJ, 36760, 36980, 37011.

⁴ For examples of haunted houses in 17th-century England and New England see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), 587–614; David D. Hall, ed., *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History, 1638–1692* (Boston, 1991), 230–59; Richard Chamberlain, *Lithobolia, or, the Stone-Throwing Devil* (1698), in George Lincoln Burr, ed., *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648–1706* (New York, 1914), 53–77; and Increase Mather, *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1684) (Delmar, N. Y., 1977), 142–67. For later examples of New England ghost stories, see John Greenleaf Whittier, *The Supernaturalism of New England*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (Norman, Okla., 1969); Richard M. Dorson, *Jonathan Draws the Long Bow* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946); John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York, 1994), 67–71; and Erik R. Seeman, "Laity, Clergy, and the Shaping of Popular Religious Culture in New England, 1700–1775" (Ph. D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1995), 193–95.

⁵ On the "lore of wonders" in early New England see David D. Hall, "A World of Wonders: The Mentality of the Supernatural in Seventeenth-Century New England," in Hall and David Grayson Allen, eds., *Seventeenth-Century New England*, Colonial Society of Massachusetts, *Collections*, 63 (Boston, 1984), 256; and Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989), 71–116.

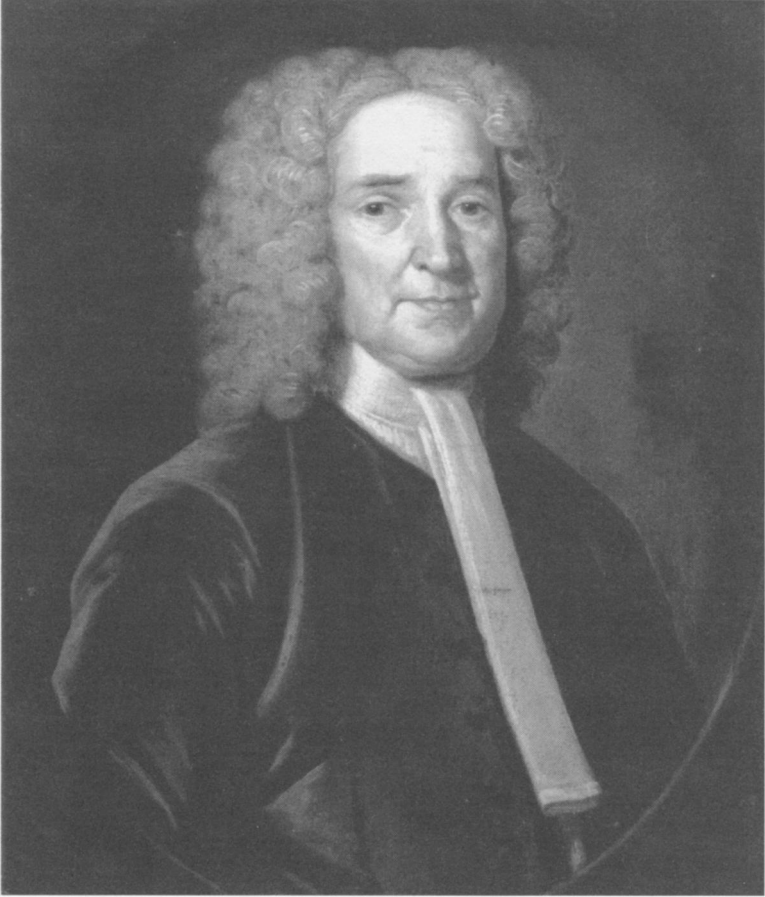


FIGURE I

Unidentified Man (Josiah Cotton ?), by John Smibert, oil on canvas, circa 1736–1737. Photograph courtesy of the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Originally identified as the eminent Boston divine John Cotton and later associated with the Newton, Massachusetts, clergyman of the same name, the subject of this portrait remains a mystery. Based on the provenance of the painting and the subject's apparent age and secular garb, the figure may be Josiah Cotton. Moreover, Cotton began to wear a wig in 1709, when his "hair grew so thin that [he] was Afraid and Ashamed to forbear a Wig any longer" (Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 155–16). For discussion of the Smibert painting see Richard H. Saunders, *John Smibert: Colonial America's First Portrait Painter* (New Haven, 1995), 194; Henry Wilder Foote, *John Smibert: Painter* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), 147–49; and Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, *American Scene*, 2 (1959), 2–3.

graduated from Harvard College in 1698 and began a promising civil service career that included various positions as register of probate and deeds, representative to the colonial legislature, and lay preacher to local Wampanoag Indian families.⁶

Arguably Plymouth's most prominent citizen, Cotton had every reason to expect that his opinions would carry weight in the community. He firmly believed that a court victory would curb the rabid superstitions of his neighbors and restore reason to a town beset by supernatural speculation. To further this end, therefore, he began work on an essay decrying the dangers of popular wonder literature, the legal excesses of the notorious Salem witch-hunt, and the widespread "Damage . . . done to Mens Estates & Names & Lives" by the erroneous beliefs of ordinary folk. Drafted in December 1733 at the height of his protracted conflict with his tenants, the essay, entitled "Some Observations Concerning Witches, Spirits, & Apparitions," was never completed. Nevertheless, it was a crucial component in what fast became a sweeping campaign to discipline the loose-tongued slanderers of the Phillips mansion.⁷ Thus, although the drama of the Plymouth "witch cause" unfolded in a secular courthouse, Cotton's private writings reveal how, in the plaintiff's mind, purging society of superstition had become a sacred rather than a civil cause.⁸

Unaware of the larger social and legal context in which the essay was drafted, several historians of early American witchcraft have connected Cotton's writings to the decline of an "Elizabethan worldview."⁹ Most students of the supernatural in early modern England and America endorse Keith Thomas's classic argument that the "invisible world" of Satan, signs, and spirits rapidly receded during the middle decades of the eighteenth century as the tide of early Enlightenment rationality crested in the Atlantic world. Intellectuals such as Cotton publicly exposed supernatural "impostures"; civil magistrates refused to prosecute individuals once suspected of preternatural foul play; and old women accused of witchcraft were more likely to sue their accusers than to die at the gallows. During the century, learned men on both sides of the Atlantic withdrew from what had once been a shared culture, as English standards of "polite" discourse no longer tolerated discussions of wonders and prodigies.¹⁰

⁶ For biographical data see "Josiah Cotton," in Clifford K. Shipton, ed., *Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College in the Classes of 1690-1700, with Bibliographical and Other Notes*, vol. 4 of *Sibley's Harvard Graduates* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), 398-402 (hereafter cited as *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*).

⁷ Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family, 1727-1755," MS AM 1165, 246, in Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; Cotton, "Some Observations Concerning Witches, Spirits, & Apparitions, Collected From Divers Authors," *ibid.*, 444ff.

⁸ SCJ, 37145.

⁹ References to Cotton's essay appear in Herbert Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York, 1976), 121; John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York, 1982), 286, 387; and Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York, 1992), 226 n. 15, 228 n. 25.

¹⁰ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. For a useful summary of Thomas's thesis see Lawrence Stone, "The Disenchantment of the World," *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 2, 1971),

While historians continue to study the diffusion of Enlightenment ideas in learned circles, few address the extent to which this new intellectual climate penetrated the local world of ordinary men and women.¹¹ Several scholars, to be sure, have tracked the tenacious persistence of various supernatural traditions—witchcraft accusations, occult sciences, and religious sectarianism—into the early nineteenth century.¹² Virtually all these studies restrict the valence of this later “world of wonders” to intellectually marginal social groups—poor and uneducated frontier families, Jack Tars, Native Americans, and African slaves.¹³ Banishing supernatural beliefs to the

18–25. Although scholars stress various causal factors, most studies of early modern “magic” published in the two decades following Thomas’s book posit a radical cultural shift occurring sometime during the first quarter of the 18th century. See, for example, H. R. Trevor-Roper, “The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Religion, the Reformation, and Social Change* (New York, 1968), 180–82; Jon Butler, “Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600–1760,” *American Historical Review*, 84 (1979), 339–46; Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 387–400; Hall, “World of Wonders,” 274; Joseph Klaitis, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), 159–76; Carol F. Karslen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1987), 44–45; Robert S. Ellwood, “Occult Movements in America,” in Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements* (New York, 1988), 713–14; Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York, 1995), 57–89; and Michael P. Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 1996).

¹¹ Henry May, for example, admits that “most forms of the Enlightenment developed among the middle and upper classes of European cities, spread mainly among similar groups in America, and failed to reach the agrarian majority,” in *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), xviii.

¹² Discussions of persisting supernatural traditions in 18th-century America increasingly dominate the field. Reviewing Thomas’s monumental study, E. P. Thompson, for example, playfully suggested that magical beliefs “may . . . have been more vigorous in 1750 than in 1650” in “Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context,” *Midland History*, 1, No. 3 (1972), 54. In the past two decades, Jon Butler and David Hall, in particular, have accelerated the shift away from Thomas’s declension thesis. Compare their early works in note 10 above with Butler, “The People’s Faith, in Europe and America: Four Centuries in Review,” *Journal of Social History*, 12 (1978–1979), 164–65; Butler, “The Dark Ages of American Occultism, 1760–1848,” in Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow, eds., *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives* (Urbana, Ill., 1983), 67–68; Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 83–97, 225–56; Butler, “Historiographical Heresy: Catholicism as a Model for American Religious History,” in Thomas Kselman, ed., *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1991), 299–300; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, 108–10; and Hall, “Introduction and Commentary,” in Peter Benes, ed., *Wonders of the Invisible World: 1600–1900*, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 1992 (Boston, 1995), 11–16.

¹³ Butler argues that “colonial magic and occultism did not so much disappear everywhere as they disappeared among certain social classes and became confined to poorer, more marginal segments of early American society” in *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 83. Studies stressing the centrality of supernatural beliefs among socially marginal groups in 18th-century America include Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment*; Alan Taylor, “The Early Republic’s Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780–1830,” *American Quarterly*, 38 (1986), 6–34; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (New York, 1987), 179–86; Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, 1987), 75–85, 95–99; Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and*

periphery of colonial society, these historians cleave eighteenth-century culture into a dominant core of rational skeptics and a superstitious underclass comprising those whom poet John Greenleaf Whittier once called “the Rip Van Winkles of a progressive and restless population.”¹⁴

Situated somewhere between an eighteenth-century intellectual revolution and a timeless tradition of premodern wonder lore, the untold story of Cotton’s haunted house sheds new light on the complexities of local supernatural traditions in late colonial New England. Court depositions from his slander suit, coupled with Cotton’s family memoirs, correspondence, and account books, illuminate a unique and complex ghost story that is freighted with both enlightened ideas and naked self-interest. It is, in part, about Cotton’s fascination with transatlantic intellectual currents; it is also about how he enlisted the works of learned Europeans in a bitter legal action against his neighbors. This story is, therefore, an example of an enlightened intellectual attempting to reform a culture that he considered superstitious and irrational, yet the broad spectrum of shifting supernatural beliefs expressed by the Plymouth townsfolk in their legal depositions precludes any simple division into polar categories of elite and popular.¹⁵ In fact, heated courtroom exchanges over the nature of a “reasonable” interpretation of the unusual sights and sounds at the mansion make this a story of cultural politics and of the struggle to define the shared values of the community; yet the actions of the jurors who acquitted the Clarks and the Saverys on two separate occasions suggest that the sources of cultural power in Plymouth were, at best, diffuse. This is, in short, a peculiar tale of wonders seemingly out of place in an “enlightened” era.

Inaccurate barometers of a dominant intellectual climate, Cotton’s essay and the story behind its creation measure instead the fractious diversity of contending supernatural traditions in eighteenth-century New England. They gauge, too, the author’s nagging fear that his learned opinions carried little weight in a society that continued to debate the existence of witches, spirits, and apparitions.

Emigrating from Jamaica to Plymouth in the early 1720s, Captain Thompson Phillips must have been singularly disappointed by the town’s shabby waterfront. Its scraggly wharves, docks, and piers were sparsely dotted with a few warehouses, shops, and outbuildings and backed by a steep embankment—known locally as “Cole’s Hill”—on which sat a series of drab houses (see Figure II). During the early decades of the eighteenth century Plymouth failed to keep pace with other northern seaports such as Marblehead and Salem; its economic sluggishness was, in part, the result of

Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815 (New York, 1991), 331–32; Godbeer, *Devil’s Dominion*, 223–33; Benes, “Fortunetellers, Wise-Men, and Magical Healers in New England, 1644–1850,” in Benes, ed., *Wonders of the Invisible World*, 127–48; and Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York, 1997), 28–76.

¹⁴ Whittier, *Supernaturalism of New England*, 40.

¹⁵ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), 207–43.

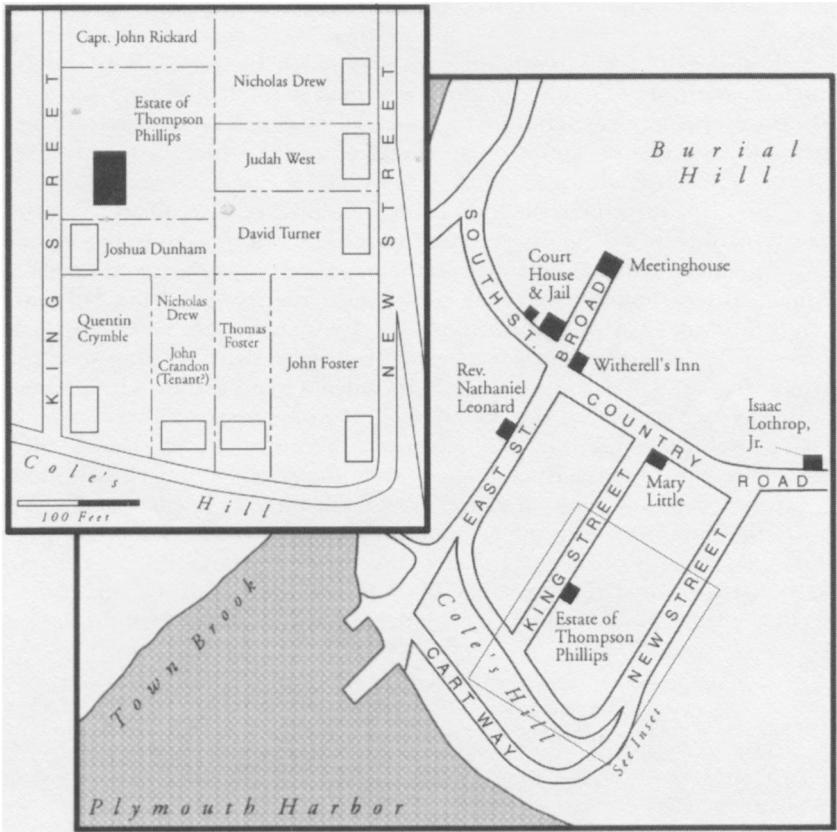


FIGURE II

Plan of Plymouth Center and the Cole's Hill Neighborhood, circa 1733. Street names and building locations have been adapted from William T. Davis, *Ancient Landmarks of Plymouth* (Boston, 1883); property boundaries shown in the inset were reconstructed based on various deeds at the Plymouth County Registry of Probate and Deeds, Plymouth, Massachusetts.

a treacherously shallow harbor that, in Cotton's opinion, "Stinted Its Growth." Still, as he noted in 1727, the town "Subsists chiefly by Fishing, though of late Its trade beyond Sea has very much Increas'd." The region's fledgling maritime economy, in turn, provided modest incentives for overseas immigrants and neighboring villagers, who slowly gravitated to Plymouth in search of employment in seafaring industries such as fishing, shipping, and shipbuilding.¹⁶

A participant in the immigrant influx, Phillips—a descendant of a prosperous Middletown, Connecticut, merchant family—married Josiah Cotton's eldest daughter, Hannah, in 1725. One year later, he purchased a sizable 190-foot house on King Street, near the top of Cole's Hill, and there built what Cotton later called "the finest house in Town on Some Accounts."¹⁷ The two-story Georgian dwelling—still standing today in Plymouth (see Figure III)—originally included a central stairwell, a parlor, and separate chambers for the captain and his wife, guests, and servants. The twenty-seven chairs listed in Phillips's estate inventory attest to the captain's keen interest in formal entertainment, while foot warmers for church meetings, calico bedding, looking glasses, and a Japanese-style chest of drawers signify the trappings of an upper-middle-class merchant. Although not opulent by eighteenth-century standards, the Phillips compound, when compared with other dwellings on Cole's Hill, radiated an air of refined gentility, the by-product of an eighteenth-century consumer revolution.¹⁸

¹⁶ Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 124. To date, no single monograph addresses the social development of Plymouth after 1686, but for general discussions of New England seaport life in the 18th century see Daniel Vickers, *Farmers and Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630-1850* (Chapel Hill, 1994), 85-203; Heytman, *Commerce and Culture: The Maritime Communities of Colonial Massachusetts, 1690-1750* (New York, 1984); Douglas Lamar Jones, *Village and Seaport: Migration and Society in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts* (Hanover, N. H., 1981); and Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*, abridged ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

¹⁷ Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 246. Phillips was born sometime before 1690, the year in which his father, George—a shipwright who migrated from Barbados to Middletown in the 1670s—died. Shortly thereafter, his mother remarried a mariner named John Thompson. Designated administrator of George Phillips's estate, Thompson was both a family friend and the man for whom Thompson Phillips was named. With a history of family seafaring behind them, Phillips and his older brother George began careers in maritime trade. At the time of his marriage to Hannah Cotton, Phillips was listed as living in Jamaica, where he owned property on "Handwas Bay." Aged sixteen at the time of her marriage in 1725, Hannah was nearly two decades younger than her future husband. See Ruth Wilder Shuman, ed., and Lee D. van Antwerp, comp., *Vital Records of Plymouth, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (Camden, Me., 1993); Plymouth County Probate Records (microfilm), 6:155, Mass. Arch. (hereafter cited as PCPR); Plymouth Deeds, 20:182, Plymouth County Registry of Probate and Deeds, Plymouth, Massachusetts (hereafter cited as PD); Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 246; Charles William Manwaring, comp., *A Digest of the Early Connecticut Probate Records*, 3 vols. (Hartford, 1904-1906), 1:496; and Edwin Stearns, comp., "Phillips Family, Middletown, Connecticut," *Genealogical Manuscripts*, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford. I thank Martha H. Smart for directing my attention to these last two documents.

¹⁸ PCPR, 6:155. For a general discussion of architecture and material culture in southeastern New England see Robert Blair St. George, "A Retreat from the Wilderness: Pattern in the Domestic Environments of Southeastern New England, 1630-1730" (Ph. D. diss., University of



FIGURE III

Thompson Phillips house, Plymouth, Massachusetts, built circa 1725. Photograph by Tom Santiago.

Between eight and nine o'clock on the evening of October 1, 1733, Jane Crandon noticed an unusual light emanating from the second floor chamber once leased by Ann Palmer. Knowing that Palmer had recently abandoned the house, Crandon concluded that the light was "some what more than Ordinary," and she "went with all Speed out of my house, as far as the End of Joshua Dunham's to See if any was in . . . Phillips's house." When Crandon got to the house, it was empty and the light had vanished. Other neighbors as well as tenants claimed to have witnessed supernatural lights and noises coming from the second floor bedrooms and the garret workshop.

Phillips continued to sail his schooners back and forth to Jamaica during the late 1720s, trading in fish, raw materials, finished goods, and, occasionally, West Indian slaves. Then, on December 6, 1729, the captain was “washt off the Deck with his Spanish Indian Servant . . . at Sea in the Night & never heard of nor seen more.”¹⁹ Following the captain’s death, his young widow remarried a second mariner named William Dyre and moved to Boston with her young daughter—the only child of her first marriage. One year later, tragedy struck again. In the span of a single week Hannah contracted small-pox and died. The sudden passing of his daughter greatly distressed Cotton, who missed her burial while traveling in Maine. “A Sad and gloomy day!” he lamented, “When a Person so Young Strong & amiable was so soon & suddenly taken away. . . . The Other (6) Children that I have lost made Some Impression on Me, but Nothing like this.” Following Hannah Dyre’s death, the care of her “Stately Daughter”—four-year-old Hannah Phillips—devolved on Cotton. He brought his orphaned granddaughter back to Plymouth and presented her for baptism on December 26, 1731.²⁰

Mounting financial concerns exacerbated the emotional trauma of his eldest daughter’s premature death. Cotton had always been preoccupied with issues of money, and he filled the pages of his memoirs with harsh commentaries on various paper currency schemes. In the years preceding the haunted house episode, moreover, Cotton’s financial fortunes took a decided turn for the worse. He was dismissed temporarily from his post as register of deeds in 1728; that same year he lamented the “many Losses Our son in Law Mr. Phillips Met with at Sea.” As his financial investments soured, his salary shriveled, and his personal debts skyrocketed, Cotton was forced to mortgage his own future, selling a portion of his farm to finance his eldest son’s education at Harvard College. In addition, Cotton incurred numerous expenses in the care of his granddaughter, the orphan “left Young & Unfettered in the World by Father & Mother.” The late 1720s and early 1730s, in short, were tight times for Cotton and his family, and he prayed fervently in his memoirs that “frugality . . . may so Abound among Us, as that We may be able to pay Our Debts & live off[f] the rest.”²¹

To make matters worse, creditors advanced substantial claims against Phillips’s legacy. With the captain’s estate teetering on the brink of insolvency, Cotton petitioned the Massachusetts Bay General Court in

Pennsylvania, 1982). On the “refinement” of popular tastes in the 18th century see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992).

¹⁹ Cotton, “Account of the Cotton Family,” 217–18. Phillips’s cargo included a teenage slave named Euro. Before departing, the captain signed a “covenant agreement” with Isaac Lothrop, Sr., transferring a one-legged slave named Johnno to Lothrop in return for a half share in the sale of Euro. The business partners agreed that Phillips would use the profits to purchase “Such Commodities as he may Think may be most To said Lothrops Advantage.” See Isaac Lothrop, “Agreement Regarding Sale of Negroes, 1729,” Lothrop Family Papers, Pilgrim Society.

²⁰ Cotton, “Account of the Cotton Family,” 225–29; *Plymouth Church Records, 1620–1859*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1920–1923), 1:242.

²¹ Cotton, “Account of the Cotton Family,” 206–07, 221; Cotton, “Cotton Diaries,” 10–12.

December 1732 for permission to sell the King Street mansion on behalf of the mariner's orphaned daughter. In the petition, Cotton acknowledged that the dwelling, "which is going to decay," would "rent but for Little but will Sell to good Advantage." The court ordered Cotton and estate executor John Cushing to sell the premises to "any person that Shall bid most"; the profits were to be applied to Phillips's outstanding debts. Unfortunately, the house failed to attract a suitable buyer, forcing Cotton to continue renting its rooms to the families of John Clark, Samuel Holmes, and Ann Palmer.²²

As Cotton's tenants and neighbors later testified in court, the bizarre events began in the first months of 1733. They described inexplicable groans that sounded like a person in a "Dying Posture," unseen canes that rattled against the wall, doors and furniture drawers that flew open unexpectedly, and strange glowing lights radiating from locked and unoccupied rooms. Neighbor Mary Little's testimony was typical. Lying awake late one night, she spied a "Grate Light up in the Garrett of the House which belonged to Capt. Tomson Philips." Fearing that the house was burning, Mary awakened her mother, who, still half asleep, advised her to "See wether It was a Fire or Not." For almost half an hour she studied the "Pale Blewish Light" before it finally dissipated. The next day, Little confronted John Clark's wife, Rebecca, and asked her why she permitted the apprentices to have candles up in the garret so late at night. "No Body was up in the Garrett after Nine a Clock," Clark replied, "Nither Did any Body Loged there." Based on this eerie experience, Mary judged the house to be haunted. She was not alone. By midsummer, the "Grate part of the Town" had gathered about the mansion in the hope of spying "Wonders" and hearing "Unusual Noises."²³

²² Cotton's involvement in the administration of Phillips's estate requires some explanation. In the mariner's original will, dated Oct. 7, 1725, Phillips appointed both his wife and his father-in-law to serve as joint executors. When the will was proved on Oct. 31, 1731, however, Probate Judge Isaac Winslow named Hannah as the sole executrix, "Her father Josiah Cotton . . . having Refused the Same." It is not clear from the surviving records why Cotton declined to serve as executor, yet events soon conspired to reverse his initial decision. By the time Winslow ordered an inventory of the estate, Hannah had died in Boston; as a result, the probate judge charged her brother-in-law, John Cushing, Jr., to serve as administrator "de bonis." Still, while Cushing supervised the estate in an official capacity, Cotton appears to have managed the day-to-day decisions. In his role as guardian, he drew money from the estate to pay for the upkeep of Phillips's orphaned daughter. According to his account book, moreover, Cotton supervised various estate-related financial transactions; he reconciled debts with local merchants, disbursed fees related to the administration of the estate, and received rental payments from the mansion tenants. In addition, he drafted the 1732 petition to the General Court and was actively involved in the two slander suits brought against the Clarks and Saverys on behalf of Phillips's estate. Despite his initial refusal to serve as administrator, therefore, Cotton worked together with Cushing to settle the mariner's affairs until 1748, when Hannah Phillips married. For general information regarding Thompson Phillips's estate, see PCPR, 6:88, 126, 155, and Hannah Phillips's accounts in Cotton, "Cotton Diaries," 10-13, 24, 38. Cotton's 1732 petition to the General Court is reprinted in *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay . . .*, vol. 11 (Boston, 1903), 691-92; according to Cotton's son, John Cushing, Jr., came "to Town about Phillips Estate" on Jan. 20, 1732; see John Cotton, "Interleaved Almanac, 1732," Cotton Families Coll., Pilgrim Hall.

²³ SCJ, 36743, 36760, 36890, 36980, 36981, 37011, 37145; PCICCP, Recordbook, 92; Cotton and Cushing's case is abstracted in David Thomas König, ed., *Plymouth Court Records, 1686-1859*, vol. 5 (Wilmington, Del., 1979), 482.

Cotton could scarcely contain his rage. In his opinion, John Clark had instigated the mischief by deliberately twisting local superstitions to his own advantage. In a written deposition, Cotton linked the rumors to an earlier argument with Clark. Meeting the joiner on the Plymouth docks in April 1733, Cotton informed his tenant that Captain John Pulsifer (another of Cotton's sons-in-law) would be moving into the Phillips mansion. Clark and Pulsifer would need to negotiate the spatial arrangements, he asserted, "only I Thought Pulcifer must have the bedroom which was one Room that Clark hired." Angered by the meddling landlord, Clark expressed his desire to continue living with business partner Thomas Savery, and he threatened to divulge rumors about the Phillips house if his demands were ignored. "In my talk with . . . Clark at the water Side in Aprill last," Cotton maintained,

he then Intimated to me (Severall people I think being within hearing) that there was a Story of Noises or Some uncomfortable things in Said house, which had So frightened his wife that he Shoud not Stay there very long though the place Suited his business well. . . and [Clark] Signified as I then took it by his Expressions, that Some of his Family thought the house was haunted, in the worst Sence of the word, for I remember it made me (with Some uneasiness) reply that It was a Mallicious Story or to that purpose, and this was the first hint that ever I had of any Such thing.

Clark had concocted the stories of evil spirits, Cotton believed, to blackmail the landlord into allowing him to live with Savery.²⁴

Several months after this first disagreement—on July 23, 1733—Clark and Savery abandoned the house. One by one, Cotton's remaining tenants followed their example. Samuel Holmes and his family moved out on September 6; Ann Palmer left on October 1. Cotton tried to recover his financial losses by renting the house to others, but, with "great Companies" of people gathered about the house "to See & observe the lights," potential tenants were few. Several people had expressed an interest in renting the house but withdrew their offers "after the uproar was made about it." John Crandon, a neighbor who had recently sold his own dwelling, scoffed at Cotton's suggestion that he rent the Phillips house; as soon as his children retired to bed, Crandon explained, they "Covered their heads ready to Stifle themselves" for fear of the evil spirits down the street. In August, Cotton posted two separate rental advertisements on the porch of Thomas Witherell's ordinary, only to have them torn down by an unknown vandal. Clark's "Mallicious" stories, he concluded, had poisoned the entire community.²⁵

Relations with his former tenants deteriorated steadily in the months following their departure. Cotton threatened to sue Clark, warning the joiner that "unless he woud go in [to the Phillips house] again or pay the

²⁴ SCJ, 370II; PCICCP, Recordbook, 92.

²⁵ SCJ, 370II.

rent till Some body else did I woud bring a large action upon him.” When they met again at Isaac Lothrop, Jr.’s house in December, Clark obstinately maintained that he had seen the devil and, therefore, would not curb his tongue. Reconsidering his options several weeks later, Cotton offered to submit their differences to arbitration—a traditional, extralegal mode of conflict resolution. In a written statement drafted February 12, 1734, the two men bound themselves (under penalty of ten pounds) to abide by the decision of three local men of good repute: Stephen Churchill, Captain Ebenezer Doggett, and Judah West. The details of these deliberations are unknown, but, judging by Clark’s reaction to the triumvirate’s decision, Cotton won a favorable decision. The joiner “Seemed much to Slight [the judgment],” he noted in his deposition, “& refused it with Some Indignation.”²⁶

Two days later, Cotton and Phillips’s estate executor, John Cushing, Jr., initiated legal proceedings against the families of John Clark and Thomas Savery. For the plaintiffs, the story was simple: Clark and Savery “had done us [financial] damage by telling Stories there was no just reason for.” They demanded £200 in compensation for their losses.²⁷

On his fifty-fourth birthday—January 8, 1734—Cotton summarized the remarkable events of the previous months in his family memoirs. He recalled renting the mansion to a group of “Tenants” who had “Suck’t in some improbable Suspicions” about Phillips’s “Awfull Death.” He described spending three nights in the house with his wife; all they discovered was “the Folly & Madness” of local superstition. Unable to lease or sell the house, Cotton resolved to transform public opinion through the printed word. “This Damage done to an Orphan without Father or Mother,” he wrote,

put Me more than ever upon Considering the Foundation of Such Notions. . . . And at the Same time also Considering How much Damage has been done to Mens Estates & Names & Lives Not only by these but by the Vulgar Notions of Witchcraft; I have been Writing a Small Book of 6 or 7 sheets, With Some Design of Publishing, in order to Confute, at least to bear my Testimony, against the Common Notions; Which have heretofore & even at this day do by far too much prevail.

Cotton’s memoir, in other words, illuminates his authorial motive: to disprove the local rumors involving the Phillips mansion. Consistent with his legal initiatives, the witchcraft essay constituted one plank in a larger pro-

²⁶ SCJ, 36636, 37011, 37145; Cotton, “Cotton Diaries,” 19.

²⁷ SCJ, 37011; Superior Court of Judicature, Recordbook (1733–1736), Mass. Arch., 46; PCICCP, Recordbook, 92–93. Cotton and Cushing did not file charges against Samuel Holmes and Ann Palmer, the other principal residents of the house. Evidently, these two tenants paid the bulk of their yearly rent. Cotton’s account book includes an entry for £2.10.0 “per Anne Palmers Rent to Oct. 2: 1733 [the day after she moved out of the mansion],” and an Apr. 17, 1734, entry for “16 Gallons of malasses towards House Rent Phillips House” paid by Holmes. See Cotton, “Cotton Diaries,” 11–12.

gram designed to strengthen Phillips's estate, restore the family's reputation, and prove once and for all the irrationality of popular wonder lore. To Cotton, publicly refuting Clark and Savery's malicious stories would serve the general interests of society as well as the author's personal financial needs.²⁸

Intellectually, Cotton was well prepared to confront his superstitious adversaries in the arena of New England print culture. He had been studying the history of witchcraft for years prior to the haunted house incident, sharing his findings with notable intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1729, for example, Cotton wrote to Francis Hutchinson in England, praising the Anglican bishop for his "Pains" in publishing *An Historical Essay concerning Witchcraft*, a lengthy treatise that roundly criticized previous witchcraft trials, most notably the Salem executions of 1692. The letter reveals the evolution of Cotton's thinking about witchcraft as well as the contemporary intellectual climate in New England on the subject. The bishop's book, he wrote, had confirmed his belief that the "Common People have imbibed . . . monstrously Absurd Incredible & Impossible" notions of witchcraft. Admittedly, he, too, had ingested such superstitions "with my Mothers Milk," yet Cotton explained how a chance encounter "many years ago" with New England clergyman John Hale's account of the Salem proceedings (*A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*) had "opened my Eyes to See the Wretched Folly & Vanity of the recieved Opinions."²⁹

In the decades following the Salem witch-hunt, Cotton, like many New England intellectuals, began to question the legal procedures for proving demonic malevolence and various other "remarkable" manifestations of the invisible world. Attuned to the changing literary tastes of an emergent English polite society that demonstrated increasing hostility to traditional Puritan wonder lore, he worried about New England's intellectual reputation in the empire: "I hope the Salem Tragedy won't be Revived," he wrote to Hutchinson, "Having already marred so exceedingly for Our Credulity." Still, there remained a dearth of reliable scholarship on witchcraft in the colony, according to Cotton's letter, even as late as 1729. After all, it had taken him more than eleven years to discover Hutchinson's 1718 treatise, and he knew of "but one or two" existing copies. While books by the learned Hale and Hutchinson remained "very Scarce in New-England," however, "Idle Stories concerning Witches" circulated endlessly throughout insular communities such as Plymouth.³⁰

Training his sights on the neighborhood rumor mill in 1733, Cotton once again turned to the transatlantic scholarly community for examples of supernatural fraud and deceit. On December 1, 1733—just days before his altercation with John Clark at Isaac Lothrop's house—Cotton wrote to Harvard tutor Nathan Prince for advice. "I have lately been thinking what

²⁸ Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 245–46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 214–15; Francis Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay concerning Witchcraft* . . . , 2d ed. (London, 1720); John Hale, *A Modest Enquiry Into the Nature of Witchcraft* . . . (Boston, 1702).

³⁰ *Ibid.* On the relationship between changing literary tastes in English polite society and the decline of wonder lore see Winship, *Seers of God*, 124–37.

We should Do to put an End to the horrible Devastations made in the World by the Mistaken Notions of Heresy & Witchcraft," he lamented without referring directly to his continuing dispute with his former tenants. Cotton then asked Prince for his "Thoughts & Observations on those Heads" and, specifically, for evidence regarding any "Impostures lately discovered under the latter of the two." Closing the letter, Cotton expressed his hope that Prince would send what information he could in the "Utmost Hurry." Time was critical. Cotton needed to quash the local rumors immediately to prevent further damage to the financial estate of the orphaned Hannah Phillips.³¹

In addition to his correspondence with Prince, Cotton undoubtedly solicited the help of numerous New England intellectuals during the fall of 1733. Though no additional letters survive, the substance of the essay bears the marks of accumulated scholarship, both European and American. Although the body of the fifty-six-page essay has been lost and presumably destroyed, leaving only Cotton's preface and conclusion, we know from his memoirs that the essay included "Quotations from Authors & Some Modern Relations of divers Impostures." The "Quotations" consisted of excerpts culled from the writings of prominent European and colonial skeptics, including Hutchinson's *Historical Essay*, Hale's *Modest Enquiry*, Joseph Addison's popular London newspaper, *The Spectator*, the *Memoirs* of French magistrate Count Rochefort, and passages from the works of an unidentified writer named "the Humanist." Cotton also packed his manuscript with stories of notable supernatural forgeries, including the bizarre story of a young Medford, Massachusetts, woman who confessed to minister Ebenezer Turell that she and her two sisters had feigned demonic possession and falsely accused an innocent neighbor of witchcraft in 1720.³²

Along with the material quoted, Cotton offered some "Sunstrokes" of his own in the surviving preface and conclusion. He begins the essay arguing that the "World is Full of Error, & so apt to take Appearances for Realities, that We had need be very Cautious in giving Our Assent to Stories told with the greatest Confidence & Plausibility." In point of fact, nothing is more absurd than believing in witches, ghosts, or apparitions, which all too often "recieve a ready Entertainment from unthinking People." Ordinary men and women "have been once & again, & it may be a thousand times over deceived" and "are yet ready to give place to the next Imposture." These

³¹ Cotton to Nathan Prince, Dec. 1, 1733, Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, 1728-1733, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

³² Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 246-47. For the sources of Cotton's essay see Hutchinson, *Historical Essay concerning Witchcraft*; Hale, *Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*; Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 117 (July 14, 1711), ed. Donald F. Bond, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1965), 479-82; and [Gatien de Courtitz, trans.], *The Memoirs of the Count De Rochefort . . .* (London, 1696), 306-08. For the story behind the "notorious Imposture in the County of Middlesex, in New England" mentioned on the title page of the essay see Turell, "Detection of Witchcraft," MHS, *Collections*, 2d Ser., 10 (1843), 6-22.

“Common People” imbibe the “Wildest Errors” and the “Grossest Notions”: shape shifting, night travels to the West Indies, carnal copulation with the Devil, spectral familiars, and magical charms. Such superstitions foment the persecution of the innocent, as was the case at Salem in 1692 when so many upright citizens were duped in “Matters of Blood.”³³

At the heart of the problem, Cotton maintains, is popular literature. “Books replete” with stories of witches, ghosts, and apparitions, “are greedily sought after, & quickly bought up,” while the “Excellent Performances of Mr. Hale & Dr. Hutchinson . . . shall proceed no further than the first Edition, & ly by the Walls Neglected for thirty or forty Years together.” Chief among the collections of “remarkables” censured by Cotton was Joseph Glanvill’s *Saducismus Triumphatus* (see Figure IV). This 600-page compendium of English supernatural folklore contained, in Cotton’s opinion, “so Many Stories of Witches, Apparitions, & haunted Houses . . . that it is enough to haunt & infect a whole Town or Countrey.” Uncritical of the sources from which he derived his reports, Glanvill had failed to acknowledge the countless individuals who purposely devise “ridiculous & incredible Tales” for their own “Sinister End.”³⁴

On one level, then, Cotton’s witchcraft essay constituted an extension of his evolving skeptical attitude toward witchcraft—an intellectual trajectory stretching back decades before the haunted house incident. In fact, many of the issues detailed in his preface—the evils of wonder literature, the credulity of “Common People,” and the mistakes of the Salem trials—figure prominently in his 1729 letter to Francis Hutchinson. Yet Cotton was more than a mere disinterested intellectual offering value-free “observations” on occult phenomena. He was a prominent town official, a patriarch with a family reputation to maintain, and, most of all, a respectable landlord saddled with a house suspected by many to be infested with evil spirits. As his family memoirs suggest, he began working on the treatise to combat those very rumors. A closer inspection of the essay, therefore, reveals that Cotton’s wide-ranging critique of the transatlantic book trade, coupled with his more narrow condemnation of Glanvill’s work, was actually a scathing indictment of the Phillips mansion tenants. Seen from this angle, the “town” that has

³³ Cotton, “Some Observations,” [ii-iv], 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, [iii-v]; Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus: or, Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions*, 4th ed. (London, 1726). A sprawling work, expanded and republished 4 times between 1682 and 1726, *Saducismus Triumphatus* contained two scholarly essays documenting the authenticity of apparitions and witches, followed by several hundred pages of authentic “relations”—accounts of famous English supernatural manifestations such as the “Dæmon of Tedworth” and the “Ghost of Guilford”—purportedly transcribed from Glanvill’s personal correspondence. A cornucopia of witch lore and ghost stories, *Saducismus Triumphatus* catered to the tastes of a wide audience, from the learned to the “vulgar.” For additional information on Glanvill see Moody E. Prior, “Joseph Glanvill, Witchcraft, and Seventeenth-Century Science,” *Modern Philology*, 30 (1932), 167–93; Coleman O. Parsons, “Introduction,” *Saducismus Triumphatus: or, Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions* (Gainesville, Fla., 1966), vii–xxiii; Thomas Harmon Jobe, “The Devil in Restoration Science: The Glanvill-Webster Witchcraft Debate,” *Isis*, 72 (1981), 342–56; and Winship, *Seers of God*, 120–21.



FIGURE IV

Frontispiece, Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, 4th ed. (London, 1726), depicting six famous English witchcraft events.

Joseph Glanvill was among the vanguard of Restoration Anglican clergymen and intellectuals who attempted to outline an objective basis for believing in spirits and witches. By the time the fourth edition was published, the book had fallen out of favor among educated Britons, although it remained popular with consumers of traditional wonder literature. In Cotton's opinion, the book "Contains so Many Stories of Witches, Apparitions, haunted Houses with Such Subtil arguments & Solutions to Confirm them, that it is enough to haunt & infect a whole Town or Countrey"; Cotton, "Some Observations Concerning Witches, Spirits, & Apparitions," [iv]; Michael Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 1996), 120–21.

been “haunted & infected” by the stories related in books like *Saducismus Triumphatus* is, in fact, Plymouth; the impostor who tells “incredible Tales” for his own “Sinister End” is none other than John Clark.

Reading Cotton’s preface in this light might seem speculative were it not for the final paragraphs of the preface in which his argument shifts from witchcraft folklore to the “Common Notions concerning the Transactions of Spirits.” Attributing unusual natural phenomena to the acts of spirits, Cotton argues, “is rather a drawing a Picture of Our Selves, than defining their Nature & Actions.” Only a person “troubled with a Strong Weakness” would believe that specters returned from the dead to recover their debts, reveal buried treasure, or “take up their Residence in Houses.” His argument growing more specific with each sentence, Cotton scoffs at those who believe that spirits appear only to “Amuse & Amaze People with Lights & Noises, Flying & flirting about to open or shut a Door, to pull out or put in the Drawers of a Chest, to Scratch upon a Bed or a Wall or the like.” Such stories are patently “absurd and irrational,” not to mention unscriptural. The Bible yields no accounts of spirits “doing ludicrous Tricks or Haunting . . . Houses.”³⁵

Then comes the crucial passage of the treatise. Copied directly into Cotton’s family memoirs, the penultimate paragraph of the preface constitutes the heart of his essay project:

But indeed many of the Sights perceived, are but the Fumes of Intemperance, the Twinkling of the Moon & Stars, & the Reflection of Light from one House to Another. And the Noises heard are Many times the Motion of Some Inferior Creatures, the Whistling or Effects of the Wind, Unfaithfullness or Forgetfullness in Fastening Windows & Doors &c. Or wickedly & waggishly done on purpose to terrify People, as has been often discovered: And Yet how Many Thousands have thought Some Witch or Dæmon the Author thereof, & have been, & continued to be terribly Alarm’d, & almost frighted out of their Wits by Such Sounds & Appearances? A Weakness incident (but scandalous) to Humane Nature & extremely hurtfull to Many Mens Interests & Estates.³⁶

Point by point, line by line, Cotton drew each of these examples from the common pool of rumors circulating through Plymouth. John Clark, Rebecca Clark, and Ann Palmer, for example, all claimed to have heard noises that sounded like banging doors and moving furniture. Specifically, it was Thomas Savery’s wife, Priscilla, who associated the unusual noises with a “Chest of drawers . . . pulling out & putting in all night”; it was carpentry apprentice Isaac Robinson who confused what Clark identified as a preternatural light with the light of the moon; and it was neighbor Bethia West who maintained that the eerie light that she had spied in the kitchen of the

³⁵ Cotton, “Some Observation,” [viii-ix].

³⁶ *Ibid.*, [x]; Cotton, “Account of the Cotton Family,” 246–47.

mansion was, in reality, merely the reflection of a candle from her own house. In Cotton's essay, the "Motion of Some Inferior Creatures" coincided with the testimony of Captain William Dyre who, while passing the house late one night, was "Surprized" by an unusual noise that turned out to be the "Noise of Cats & Nothing else." Finally, it was Clark (in Cotton's opinion) who had "wickedly & waggishly" spread rumors throughout the town to blackmail the landlord into allowing him to live with Thomas Savery. Without question, Cotton maintained, these stories had proven "extreamly hurtfull" to the "Interests & Estates" *of his own family*.³⁷

Covertly embedded in the text of Cotton's preface, the local rumors surrounding the Phillips house unlock the secret of his witchcraft essay. They explain both the timing of its composition in December 1733 as well as its content. To scholars unaware of the conflict between Cotton and his neighbors, the essay appears to be crammed with the detritus of a decaying Elizabethan worldview—allusions to disgruntled women bewitching oxcarts, oppressing men in nightmares, transforming themselves into cats, and riding through the air; spirits haunting dark lanes and churchyards; fairies pronouncing a "Curse to the third or fourth Generation"; and cunning folk conjuring spirits, confining them to magic circles or bottles, and dismissing them by reading magical books backward. Yet in eighteenth-century Plymouth these stories were no mere old wives' fables. They were the talk of the town, the rumors that Cotton overheard in taverns, on the street, and even, perhaps, in his own parlor.³⁸

"Ridiculous, Strange, & Endless are the Stories about Dæmons & Goblins or Fairies, & yet the Simple believe every Word," he laments in the final pages of his essay. "Alas! What Miserable Creatures are Men left to their own Delusion." As he considered the "Miserable Destruction & terrible Desolations made in the World through Mistaken Notions of Witchcraft," Cotton could "think no Pains too much to Discover these Mistakes, & to prevent their dreadfull Effects." Someone had to teach these "vulgar" Plymouth folk a lesson.³⁹

There are "but few Towns if any," Cotton noted sarcastically toward the end of his witchcraft essay, "but at one time or other have had One or more in Suspicion for Witchcraft, as if the Place were not compleat in its Inhabitants, without Some well vers'd in that Occupation." Once again, local events tintured his argument. In his family memoir for 1733, Cotton lamented his neighbors' penchant for consulting "a Certain Diviner among Us" to locate lost possessions or discover their fortunes. That very year, in fact, "One out of Order among Us" had bottled and boiled his own urine in an attempt to discover the identity of an afflicting witch; beguiled by alcohol, the unnamed Plymouth resident accused a "Sober vertuous modest" neighbor of witchcraft. In addition, Cotton complained, the recent collapse

³⁷ SCJ, 36743, 36760, 36890, 37011.

³⁸ Cotton, "Some Observations," 49–52.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

of a structurally unsound house frame had sent local townfolk scurrying in search of supernatural explanations. Indeed, "More Houses than One" in town had been "left as late under a Notion of being haunted."⁴⁰

The evil spirits lurking in the Phillips mansion, in other words, were not the only supernatural entities terrorizing eighteenth-century Plymouth. As one historian recently has suggested, southeastern New England stood at the crossroads of various popular wonder traditions, ranging from cunning magic to radical sectarianism. Ministers and lay people alike described frequent encounters with the devil and cases of demonic possession; one rather irreverent Plymouth resident even claimed to have witnessed the appearance of Satan in an enchanted kitchen pot. Towns throughout the region harbored an impressive array of cunning folk—both English and Indian—who divined fortunes, fashioned protective charms, and searched for buried treasure. In addition, gossip circulating throughout the seaport community included the exotic tales of merchant sailors, who returned from the high seas bearing remarkable accounts of sea monsters, St. Elmo's Fire, and shipboard apparitions. In short, Cotton noted ominously in his memoirs, the "Common Notions about Such things are as rife hereabouts as they were in the Countrey before the Salem Tragedy."⁴¹

Tales of the bizarre, the miraculous, and the fantastic were legion in Plymouth and surrounding villages, yet Cotton's florid prose deftly masked the local origins of his witchcraft essay. Through the medium of the written word, he covertly forged transatlantic intellectual currents into a political weapon designed specifically to cut through the superstitious rumormongering of his neighbors. In so doing, Cotton flattened his unnamed local adversaries into one-dimensional "Common People"—uniformly simple, ignorant, vulgar, and overly credulous when it came to matters of the invisible world. But although the author may have thought rather poorly of the Plymouth townfolk, his text should not be taken for a dispassionate description of either a dominant eighteenth-century intellectual climate or a folklorized tradition of popular wonder lore. Rather, the life histories of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49; Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 247.

⁴¹ Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 247; Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 44–53; Brooke, "The True Spiritual Seed: Sectarian Religion and the Persistence of the Occult in Eighteenth-Century New England," in Benes, ed., *Wonders of the Invisible World*, 107–26. Abundant examples of an 18th-century "lore of wonders" may be found in C. Edwin Barrows, ed., "The Diary of John Comer," Rhode Island Historical Society, *Collections*, 8 (1893). John Cotton, *Interleaved Almanac for the Year 1731*, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts; J. M. Bumsted, ed., "Emotion in Colonial America: Some Relations of Conversion Experience in Freetown, Massachusetts, 1749–1770," *New England Quarterly*, 49 (1976), 102; Isaac Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, ed. William G. McLoughlin, 3 vols. (Providence, R. I., 1979), 3:1275; McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630–1883: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 2:772–73; *New England Courant*, Feb. 1–8, 1725; Dorson, *Jonathan Draws the Long Bow*, 31; [Ezra Stiles], *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D.*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter, 3 vols. (New York, 1901), 1:385–86; Taylor, "Early Republic's Supernatural Economy," 26; and William S. Simmons, *Spirit of the New England Tribes: Indian History and Folklore, 1620–1984* (Hanover, N. H., 1986). For general discussions of the seafaring yarns circulating throughout seaport communities like Plymouth see Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 179–86, and Heyrman, *Commerce and Culture*, 193–94.

Cotton's neighbors reveal a sharp discontinuity between his literary polemic and social reality.

Cotton's tenants were typically single men and women with limited economic resources and kinship ties in the community or young families struggling to make ends meet in a competitive maritime economy. Yet these individuals and families were not necessarily rootless outsiders, living economically tenuous lives on the margins of Plymouth society.⁴² Timothy Holloway, for example, never married and lived in at least five separate towns before gravitating to Plymouth; yet even this fifty-six-year-old drifter had, at one time or another, owned various parcels of property throughout Bristol County, partially financed an ironworks facility, and served as town constable in a neighboring village. Although it is unclear what brought Holloway to the Phillips mansion, several of the other tenants belonged to a larger social network of Middleborough, Massachusetts, families and probably knew one another before moving into the house.⁴³

As newcomers to the community, these Cole's Hill residents labored in Plymouth's maritime economy as seamen, sail makers, ship carpenters, and artisans, slowly accumulating a modest savings that would allow their families to purchase a small parcel of land and, with luck, a more comfortable yeoman subsistence. An urban corollary to agrarian land tenancy, renting a residence such as the Phillips house constituted an early stage in a family's lifelong quest to achieve economic competency.⁴⁴ Eventually, a few of the neighborhood families achieved this modicum of prosperity. John Crandon—the sail maker whose children covered their heads each night in fear of the evil spirits—migrated from England to Plymouth with his wife Jane in the early 1720s. Several years before the town allotted to him a small piece of property at the foot of Cole's Hill, Crandon purchased a parcel of meadow along the Eel River, where he supplemented his maritime income by raising sheep. The family history of Judah West, one of the three arbitrators, is perhaps more typical. Although the shipwright and his wife, Bethia, never achieved yeoman competency, they managed to purchase their own house lot directly behind the Phillips mansion in 1725.⁴⁵

⁴² Several of the Phillips mansion tenants, to be sure, were part of the economic underclass most often associated with the lore of wonders in 18th-century New England. Samuel Holmes, for example, died prematurely in 1738, leaving his wife and young daughter virtually penniless; when Ann Palmer died in 1744, unmarried and intestate, the only relative located by the Plymouth judge of probate was her brother Thomas, a rigger then living in Portsmouth, R. I. See Eugene A. Stratton, "Descendants of Mr. John Holmes, Messenger of the Plymouth Court," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 74 (1986), 93, 205, and PCPR, 9:367–68.

⁴³ Samuel Holmes's father, John, bought a sizable tract of land in Middleborough, Mass., from Ichabod Paddock for £250 in 1727. Presumably, he moved his family (including his unmarried son Samuel) to the new property shortly before he died in 1728. Paddock was the father of Priscilla Savery, whose husband, Thomas, was John Clark's business partner. See Stratton, "Descendants of Mr. John Holmes," 92.

⁴⁴ On economic competency, land tenancy, and the family life course, see Vickers, *Farmers and Fishermen*, 14–23, 68–69, 77–82, 198–99.

⁴⁵ William T. Davis et al., eds., *Records of the Town of Plymouth*, 3 vols. (Plymouth, Mass., 1892–1905), 2:309–10; PD, 26:9, 19:157.

In addition, many of the men and women who claimed to have spied strange lights and heard unusual noises in the house participated vigorously in the life of the community. The town chose John Crandon to serve as hog reeve and juror at the Inferior Court of Common Pleas. Though their sympathies lay on opposite sides of Cotton's defamation suit, Judah West and defendant Thomas Savery worked together as tithingmen in 1731. Savery, in particular, eventually became a diligent community servant, progressing from hog reeve, to petit juror at the Inferior Court of General Sessions, and, finally, to measurer of timber planks and boards.⁴⁶ A number of Cotton's tenants and neighbors, moreover, joined local churches as full members. Inventoried shortly after her premature death in 1735, Priscilla Holmes's estate included a few meager possessions as well as "her Part in a Pew" in the Middleborough church. Ann Palmer joined the Plymouth congregation in 1722; Rebecca Clark was propounded to full membership shortly after the birth of her first daughter in 1734; and Priscilla Savery joined in 1736. The Wests and Crandons—along with Josiah Cotton himself—were among the founding members of Plymouth's Third Church, an Old Light congregation that separated from the original parish during the Great Awakening revivals.⁴⁷

The Plymouth townfolk, moreover, were deeply divided in their commitment to an occult explanation for the strange events at the mansion. These "simple" folk demonstrated remarkable selectivity in ascribing what they saw and heard to a supernatural source. After watching the "Pale Blewish Light" for nearly thirty minutes, Mary Little was still uncertain of its origin; only after speaking with Rebecca Clark the next day did she associate the strange lights with a paranormal presence. Similarly, when John Clark pointed to an eerie light in the garret window, Isaac Robinson initially mistook it for "the light of the moon." Nathaniel Churchill, by contrast, was quite precise in his deposition, asserting that the glow that he perceived in the abandoned house varied in intensity as if someone "was blowing a fire." Observing a light "Some what more than Ordinary" in the room once occupied by Ann Palmer, Jane Crandon decided to investigate; "I went with all Speed out of my house," she recalled, charging up King Street "as far as the End of Joshua Dunham's" only to find that the light had dissipated. Bethia West was surprised to see a light coming from the kitchen of the abandoned

⁴⁶ For information on the civic duties of John Crandon, Judah West, and Thomas Savery see Davis et al., eds., *Records of the Town of Plymouth*, 2:16, 216, 243, 249, 273, 276, 286, 304, 311, 312, 315, 319, 320, 323-25, 330, 338, 342, 350, 3:5, 52, 57, 83, 92, 107, 108, 112, 118, 125, 135, 139, 143, 159, 174, 187, 198, 209, 220, 230, 236, 249, 267, 273. For general information on the Crandon, West, and Savery families see Shuman, ed., and van Antwerp, comp., *Vital Records of Plymouth*, 65, 91, 76, 114; William Thomas Davis, *Ancient Landmarks of Plymouth* (Boston, 1883), 74, 279; Carlton P. West, "A Survey of the Descendants of Francis West of Duxbury," 1987 typescript, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Mass.; A. W. Savary, "The Savery Families of America," *New-England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 41 (1887), 369-88; and Robert J. Curfman, "The Paddock Genealogy: Descendants of Robert Paddock of Plymouth Colony, Blacksmith and Constable, 1646," 1977 typescript, NEHGS.

⁴⁷ PCPR, 7:154; Plymouth Church Records, 1:207, 209, 211-12, 220, 221-21, 223, 228-29, 232, 234, 236, 240, 241, 412, 416, 430, 439, 470, 2:523, 634, 637; "Records and Papers of the (Formerly) 3rd Church in Plymouth," Pilgrim Society.

Phillips house as she worked in her garden, “being sensible that no body lived there”; after discussing the matter with her husband, Judah, she “moved the Candle off] our Kitchen Shelfe” and “perceived plainly” that the light “was nothing else but the reflection of our Candle over to Philips’s house.”⁴⁸ These testimonies suggest a range of popular responses to wonder—some excited, others critical and probing, others dismissive.

The depositions of Mary and Priscilla Holmes, in particular, illustrate both the range and malleability of explanatory schemes. In 1733, nineteen-year-old Priscilla lived in the Phillips house with her brother Samuel, his wife Mary, their daughter Sarah, and a newborn baby. Sometime in January 1733, “as I sat by the fire of the Upper Room with the Child in my Armes about Nine a Clock in the Night,” she heard an unusual noise in the closet that sounded “as though some body had been in a Dying Posture.” The noise frightened Priscilla so badly that she abandoned both the baby and her sister-in-law and fled down the stairs to Priscilla Savery’s room. Savery initially “Seemed to make light” of Holmes’s story, “saying it was only a Notion of me.” Later that night, however, the two Priscillas met again; this time it was Savery who was “much Afrighted,” telling Holmes that she had heard a similar noise “Severall times.”⁴⁹ That Priscilla Savery initially poked fun at her upstairs neighbor indicates something of the range of supernatural beliefs circulating throughout the community; that she was transformed from scoffer to advocate underscores the fluidity of the categories of belief and skepticism.

Reflecting on the strange events later that year, Priscilla Holmes’s sister-in-law, Mary, testified that she

lived in the house with Mr. John Clarke for the Space of above half a Year without the least Dread, Fear, or Terror of it’s being haunted with any Ghostly or Unusuall Occurrances: Notwithstanding Imediety after that my Sister in Law Priscilla Holmes who lived with me told me she saw a light in our Chamber one night & Enquired who was there, but I well knowing the Door to be Loct & the key with me made light of her talke at the first time which she in like manner with no small Concern told me the again same was true, & it being Speedily after the Death of my Child I became some what affected therewith[.]⁵⁰

Mary Holmes, like Priscilla Savery, changed her mind about her sister-in-law’s stories when experiences from her own life warranted a supernatural explanation. More important, her deposition points to a fundamental conti-

⁴⁸ SCJ, 36760, 36948. On the selectivity of ordinary people responding to wondrous events see Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, 106.

⁴⁹ SCJ, 36890.

⁵⁰ SCJ, 36981. On the relationship between personal misfortune and supernatural beliefs see Godbeer, *Devil’s Dominion*, 85–121; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, 284 n. 103; and Karlsen, *Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 117–52.

nity between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century wonder lore. In a deposition that could just as easily have been used as evidence during the Salem witch-hunt, Holmes connected the unusual events at the Phillips mansion with personal misfortune. Initially skeptical, she inferred that the house was haunted by evil spirits only after the death of her infant sometime in the spring of 1733.

For his part, Josiah Cotton undoubtedly would have denounced Mary's hesitant conclusion that her child's death was related to the Phillips mansion's haunting. Ascribing her misfortune to the evil spirits, Holmes both deflected the cause of her suffering away from her own sinful nature and raised troubling questions about the sovereignty of God, thereby violating the two key precepts of Cotton's rigid providential theology. For Cotton, human depravity was the sole root of all divine "affliction." Tainted by Adam's original sin, human beings should expect nothing but misery in what he often called this "Vale of Tears." All mercies and misfortunes, therefore, constituted judgments imposed by God, who was always and everywhere at work in the world. No event occurred randomly or without divine sanction. Thus when several buildings caught fire during successive church meetings in December 1742, Cotton interpreted them as portents of the eternal punishment that would result from the "contention" raging in Plymouth's First Church over the spiritual "enthusiasm" of the Great Awakening revivals. God sent the Great Earthquake of 1727 to demand the collective repentance of a degenerate people. Positive outcomes in childbirth, personal travel, merchant sea ventures, public elections, or military campaigns signaled, not divine favor, but unearned "mercies" in which God has "punished Us far less than Our Iniquities do deserve."⁵¹

Cotton believed that "God alone is the author of the Evil that We Suffer, as well as the Good that We Enjoy"; the will of a sovereign and omnipotent deity, moreover, could not be subverted by denizens of the invisible world. Thus, he vigorously condemned the Manichean sects of antiquity and their doctrine of equal and opposing supernatural principles of Good and Evil; he dismissed the common belief that the noise of cannon fire would frighten away the airy demons responsible for smallpox epidemics; and he relished the task of disproving the conventional wisdom that

⁵¹ Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 257, 327, 444. The ambiguous relationship between Puritan providential theology and popular belief in alternative sources of supernatural power is discussed in Godbeer, *Devil's Dominion*, 85–121. On the reformed tradition of divine providence see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 78–112; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, 77–78; and, especially, Winship, *Seers of God*. Despite the transformation of providential theology during the late-17th and early 18th centuries, Cotton's mental world remained strikingly similar to that of earlier Puritans. Compare Hall, "The Mental World of Samuel Sewall," in Hall, John M. Murrin, and Thad W. Tate, eds., *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays in Early American History* (New York, 1984), 75–95; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, 213–38; Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, 1985), 45–66; and Alan Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin, A Seventeenth-Century Clergyman: An Essay in Historical Anthropology* (Cambridge, 1970), 163–96.

the last three days of October provided clues to the impending severity of winter weather, or that a cloudy Candlemas Day (February 2) presaged a moderate finish to that season. For Cotton, the world remained full of signs and omens, but these were wonders of a particular kind. When the rationale behind providential exegesis was based on discerning God's punishment of human sin, Cotton steadfastly believed; when others, such as Mary Holmes, advanced interpretations that questioned the absolute sovereignty of God, he invariably branded such notions "vulgar."⁵²

Even Cotton occasionally succumbed to "superstition," however. He knew that the comet appearing in the heavens in 1744 was "created in the Beginning" of time, yet he wondered if its appearance might "Portend" some ill fortune for New England, and he hoped that "Such unusual Phenomena" might stimulate acts of repentance among the faithful. Astrology and pagan mythology permeated his consciousness to such a degree that he often lapsed into using the Norse names for the days of the week (though he knew better and chastised himself for it) and he once ascribed his good fortune to the fortuitous alignment of "an Unlucky planet." With little at stake in such matters, Cotton could afford to be ambivalent. Combating the tenants of the Phillips's mansion, however, demanded theological coherence.⁵³

The wide range of supernatural traditions embraced by both Cotton and his fellow Plymouth residents blurs beyond recognition the rigid boundaries segregating religion from magic, belief from skepticism, delusive superstition from divine providence. Cotton, to be sure, would have disagreed vehemently with this conclusion, asserting instead that he could discriminate between scriptural witchcraft and the Salem "delusion," between humoral cures and boiling urine, between godly judgments and divination rituals such as forecasting the weather on Candlemas. His public campaign to rid Plymouth of what he considered false superstitions depended on a clear separation between the two. But the distinctions that Cotton drew between authentic and unauthentic supernatural manifestations were not the same boundaries constructed by his neighbors, nor did Plymouth residents themselves agree on those boundaries. For this reason, it would be inappropriate—even condescending—to conclude that such people as John Clark, Mary Little, and Priscilla Holmes were socially marginal, intellectually unsophisticated, overly credulous, or easily duped. To do so means measuring them against an artificial intellectual climate that privileges Cotton's own opinion.

Echoing Cotton's stereotypical portrayal of his anonymous neighbors, traditional scholarly arguments regarding the marginalization and folklorization of the lore of wonders in the eighteenth century simply do not hold for Plymouth in 1733. In general, most of Cotton's tenants and neighbors came from typical middling families—young and unestablished, perhaps, yet virtually indistinguishable from others of their generation, including the families of Cotton's own children. People throughout the community claimed to

⁵² Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 169–70, 301, 373.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 165, 281, 348–49.

have seen the lights and heard the noises at the Phillips mansion. Surviving depositions include the testimonies of old drifters such as Timothy Holloway as well as those of young women such as Mary Little, the youngest daughter of Plymouth's leading physician and wealthiest landholder. Indeed, Mary's experience suggests how deeply the lore of wonders had penetrated the Plymouth social order.⁵⁴

Rather than choose among models of eighteenth-century decline, persistence, or folklorization, it is better to speak of a fluid spectrum of shifting supernatural beliefs operating throughout the early modern period.⁵⁵ Eighteenth-century wonder lore was open-ended, flexible, and accommodating. Cotton's neighbors were capable of teasing their friends and relatives about the rumors; not everyone in town believed the house was haunted. Some, such as Mary Holmes, quickly changed their opinions and embraced the rumors when events from their own lives demanded explanation, while others, such as Bethia West, discovered empirical evidence disproving their initial hypotheses. Above all, the Plymouth townsfolk labored diligently to provide explanations for the bizarre sights and sounds at the Phillips mansion. No theme is more evident in surviving courtroom testimonies than their repeated efforts to test, analyze, debate, and draw inferences about the things they had seen and heard.

Despite Cotton's polemical caricature, his Plymouth neighbors were not backwater provincials who obstinately defied the rising tide of Enlightenment rationalism. In a world where many continued to believe—on various levels and for a variety of reasons—in witches, spirits, and haunted houses, unseen causal forces were plausible, even rational, explanations for paranormal phenomena. The jurymen in Cotton's 1734 slander suit agreed.

On the appointed day, March 5, 1734, John Cushing, Jr., plaintiff, confronted John and Rebecca Clark and Thomas and Priscilla Savery, defendants, in the Plymouth County Inferior Court of Common Pleas. Amid the clamor of the crowded courtroom, the defendants appeared before the judges, entered a plea of not guilty, and put themselves "upon the Country." Suffering from a bad cold, Josiah Cotton did not attend the trial. He did, however, dictate his own testimony (under oath and the watchful eyes of John Clark and his lawyer) to Justice of the Peace Nicholas Sever. He undoubtedly prayed for victory—and vindication. There was more at stake in this trial than simply maintaining Phillips's financial estate, ensuring the security of his orphaned granddaughter, or restoring his family's tarnished reputation. Cotton believed that his "large action" would help protect others from the excesses of vulgar superstition. "A Main Intent in . . . Endeavouring to Vindicate it [the 'Slandered . . . Orphans House']," he

⁵⁴ Dr. Thomas Little owned virtually all of Cole's Hill in 1701. His estate inventory (valued at £1,383 before debt reconciliation) included surgical instruments, Indian servants, and investments in merchant ventures; PCPR, 3:243; Davis, *Ancient Landmarks of Plymouth*, 180–81.

⁵⁵ For a similar argument see W. B. Carnochan, "Witch-Hunting and Belief in 1751: The Case of Thomas Colley and Ruth Osborne," *J. Soc. Hist.*, 4 (1971), 389–403.

wrote in his yearly memoir, was "to Prevent the Damage that might be done to Others by Entertaining & Divulging Such false & ridiculous Stories." In Cotton's mind, popular wonder lore itself stood trial in Plymouth that spring.⁵⁶

As men of considerable social status, Cotton and Cushing could expect to receive a great deal of respect and latitude in the courts.⁵⁷ The case would be argued, after all, in Cotton's own courtroom, before local judges whom he considered social equals and, more important, friends. Cushing, moreover, was an experienced lawyer, a man familiar with the Plymouth courtroom and one who would, in the years following the haunted house incident, preside over both the Plymouth County probate and inferior courts as well as the provincial superior court. In addition, Cushing was advised by two prominent Plymouth County lawyers, Elkanah Leonard and Elisha Bisbee. For these reasons alone, then, the plaintiffs had reason to be confident of victory.⁵⁸

Cotton's actions before the trial, however, betray his own anxieties regarding the impending suit. Plymouth residents as a whole had become unusually litigious by the 1730s. As local commerce faltered and the prevailing credit system contracted, many of the town's leading citizens turned to the courts to enforce their financial obligations.⁵⁹ But Cotton pursued virtually all extralegal means at his disposal before going to court to settle the score with his tenants. Exasperated after nearly seven months of pleading, badgering, and threatening, he and Cushing reluctantly filed the appropriate writ with the county court just two days after community arbitration had failed.⁶⁰

Despite their advantages, the plaintiffs knew that they would be fighting an uphill battle. For one thing, Clark and Savery had violated only a verbal agreement to rent the house, not a written contract; convictions in cases of a broken "Lease Parrol" were less common than those based on written promissory notes or account book entries. Rather than suing for breach of contract, therefore, the plaintiffs elected to prosecute the suit as a case of defamation—literally, a slander on the good name of the house. Typical of such cases, the charges filed by the plaintiffs emphasized the financial distress created by Clark's malicious stories.⁶¹ The official record of the Inferior

⁵⁶ SCJ, 37011; Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 249–50.

⁵⁷ Peter Charles Hoffer, *Law and People in Colonial America* (Baltimore, 1992), 54–58. For general discussion of legal proceedings in colonial New England see Konig, *Law and Society in Puritan Massachusetts, Essex County, 1629–1692* (Chapel Hill, 1979); Murrin, "Magistrates, Sinners, and a Precarious Liberty: Trial by Jury in Seventeenth-Century New England," in Hall, Murrin, and Tate, eds., *Saints and Revolutionaries, 152–206*; Daniel R. Coquillette et al., eds., *Law in Colonial Massachusetts, 1630–1800*, Col. Soc. Mass., *Collections*, 62 (Boston, 1984); Bruce H. Mann, *Neighbors and Strangers: Law and Community in Early Connecticut* (Chapel Hill, 1987); and Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639–1789* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

⁵⁸ SCJ, 36918; Cotton, "Cotton Diaries," 19.

⁵⁹ William E. Nelson, *Dispute and Conflict Resolution in Plymouth County, Massachusetts, 1725–1825* (Chapel Hill, 1981), 63–68; Hoffer, *Law and People in Colonial America*, 50–53.

⁶⁰ SCJ, 36636.

⁶¹ PCICCP, Recordbook, 92; Helena M. Wall, *Fierce Communion: Family and Community in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 37–38.

Court of Common Pleas, therefore, reflected Cotton's blackmail allegations. "Taking Disgust" at the landlord's request to make room for John Pulsifer, the Clarks and Saverys "Did Falcely & Wickedly Declare and Insinuate that the . . . Dwelling House was Haunted (meaning by Sperrits)." In addition, the plaintiffs were required to demonstrate that in uttering such "Malicious & Scandalous Words & Insinuations" the defendants had "Unjustly & Unreasonably" intended "to Injure the Sale or Letting" of the mansion; as a result, the dwelling "could not be Hiered or Sold by Reason thereof."⁶²

The difficulty of establishing the defendants' intentions explains Cotton's reluctance to pursue legal means of satisfaction. With so many reports of supernatural manifestations swirling about the community, Cotton and Cushing knew that it would be virtually impossible to prove that the Clarks and Saverys, alone, had fabricated their stories with the malicious intention of slandering the house and, by extension, causing financial damage to Phillips's estate. They knew, too, that as soon as they questioned the authenticity of the defendants' stories, defense attorney John Otis would produce corroborating testimonies from various Cole's Hill residents. And this is just what happened. During the inferior court proceedings, the defense lawyer made no effort at all to deny the rumors; rather, he called seven witnesses to the stand. Each validated the alleged preternatural phenomena. Mary Little recalled watching the "Pale Blewish Lights" for nearly half an hour; Ann Palmer described a "Striking [noise] Over head . . . , and alsoe ajarring in the wall"; Jane Crandon reported hurrying down the street to see the lights at close range; Nathaniel Churchill characterized the flickering lights as if "a person was blowing a fire"; Isaac Robinson remembered initially mistaking the eerie lights for the reflection of the moon; Priscilla Holmes told of an "Unusuall Noyse . . . as though some body had been in a Dying Posture"; and Mary Holmes explained how her opinions about the house had changed after the death of her infant.⁶³

What began as a slander suit focusing on the intentions of the defendants thus quickly devolved into a trial over the reasonableness of wonder lore itself. Realizing that the trial would not turn on the issue of whether the Clarks and Saverys had fabricated their stories, Cotton and Cushing decided to discredit the rumors themselves. Their argument for malicious intent would make sense only to a jury already convinced that the defendants' wondrous tales were patently absurd and irrational. Unfortunately for the plaintiffs, inferior court juries typically were composed of a broad cross section of the community—ordinary men drawn from families like the tenants of the

⁶² PCICCP, Recordbook, 92. On the technical meanings of defamation see Konig, *Plymouth Court Records*, 1:153–58. It is not clear from the surviving records why Cushing and Cotton did not sue Clark for breaking the arbitration agreement. By the early 1700s, however, arbitration had lost much of its effectiveness as an informal mode of conflict resolution. On the decline of traditional arbitration settlements see Konig, *Law and Society in Puritan Massachusetts*, 108; Nelson, *Dispute and Conflict Resolution*, 13–14; Mann, *Neighbors and Strangers*, 111; Wall, *Fierce Communion*, 27, 146–47; and Hoffer, *Law and People in Colonial America*, 48–49.

⁶³ SCJ, 36743, 36760, 36890, 36921, 36948, 36981.

Phillips mansion and their Cole's Hill neighbors.⁶⁴ To Cushing, therefore, fell the unenviable task of proving the "unreasonableness" of the local rumors to a panel of men who were eclectic in their beliefs regarding the invisible world. For many, spirits and other supernatural forces were perfectly "reasonable" causal agents; though some were skeptical and others might be persuaded to change their minds, a significant proportion of the community, at least, believed in the possible existence of evil spirits.

Cotton and Cushing undoubtedly anticipated an argument based on credulity. Indeed, they had been preparing to discredit the defendants' stories for months. From the very moment that the Clarks and Saverys had deserted the mansion, Cotton began to amass evidence that might convince a volatile jury of the obvious unreasonableness of the rumors. He lodged in the house "all alone" just three days after Clark and Savery had moved out and, to his relief, witnessed "nothing at all that was the least frightfull or Extraordinary . . . but the Squeeling and roaring of Some Catts." Learning that Captain William Dyre had heard the same disturbance and fearful that the mariner would be unavailable for courtroom testimony, Cotton requested a written statement. Dated August 27, 1733, and signed by Cotton and his son Theophilus, the captain's deposition suggests that the plaintiffs had been gathering witness testimonies for nearly six months prior to the inferior court trial.⁶⁵

Composed in the late fall and winter of 1733 as his patience was wearing thin, Cotton's unpublished witchcraft essay, too, must be seen as part of his preliminary efforts to lay the foundation for a potential civil suit. Once an issue of intellectual curiosity, Cotton's interest in skeptical European literature took a decidedly practical turn. Compiling evidence from books and through correspondence with prominent New England intellectuals, he attempted to situate the events at the Phillips mansion in a larger history of notorious witchcraft forgeries and bogus demonic possessions—a history stretching back several centuries and carrying forward to the recent "imposture" at Littleton, Massachusetts. In addition to this historical material, the very facts that eventually were contested in court just three months later appear in the final paragraphs of Cotton's introduction. Stories subsequently voiced by defense witnesses during the trial are presented and then dispatched by the author of the essay: the "Pale Blewish Lights" unmasked as the light of the moon or the reflection of a candle from a neighboring house; strange noises exposed as the squeals of alley cats. It was as if Cotton had divined his opponents' legal strategies in advance and was moving to destroy the credibility of the defense witnesses before they had even taken the stand.

Though the essay was never printed, its *raison d'être* explains why prosecuting attorney John Cushing poured so much energy into debunking the

⁶⁴ Nelson, *Dispute and Conflict Resolution in Plymouth County*, 24–25, maintains that Plymouth County inferior court juries represented "a fair cross-section of the voting population." During the 18th century, approximately 28% of all adult males in the county served on juries at least once.

⁶⁵ SCJ, 36890, 37011.

defendants' supernatural stories, rather than focusing on their malicious intentions. Only two of the plaintiff's witnesses provided direct evidence supporting Cotton's and Cushing's contention that the Clarks and Saverys had fabricated the frightful rumors to malign the reputation of the Phillips mansion. Timothy Holloway provided the most damaging testimony, recalling how Clark instructed him to leave the house because of the evil spirits; the only other corroborating evidence was supplied by Josiah Cotton himself—his written deposition portrayed Clark as an opportunistic blackmailer. All of the remaining testimonies, by contrast, attacked the truth content of the neighborhood rumors. Captain Dyre's statement linked the strange noises with disorderly alley cats; Isaac Lothrop, Jr., described the December 1733 altercation during which Clark had boasted freely of his encounters with the devil; and Bethia West declared that her own opinion had changed from belief to skepticism after she realized that the unnatural lights came from a candle in her own kitchen.⁶⁶

In the end, Cushing's arguments failed to convince the jury. As Cotton feared, the Clarks and Saverys were acquitted. The plaintiffs immediately appealed the case to the Massachusetts Bay Superior Court of Judicature, contesting factual evidence and reiterating their central argument.⁶⁷ In the written appeal, Cotton once again insisted that the superstitious rumors alone proved their case. By their very words and actions, he maintained, the defendants testified to their own guilt; the "very Witnesses that they bring in the Cause testify against them," the plaintiff asserted in a written statement, for what was the "Occasion for Such Witnesses Except the Appealees had Said there were Extraordinary Sights & Noises . . . & their fore the house haunted." The defense witnesses, moreover, had failed to prove that the house was possessed by evil spirits; their purported evidence of supernatural activity was based on spurious observations. Once again borrowing freely from the penultimate paragraph of his witchcraft essay, Cotton argued that "it is as common as the night & the Day, to Observe the Reflection of light from one house to another, or from the Moon & Stars, when at the Same time it Appears like a Candle in the house, where there is really none: & what more common in a great house than Noises of Doors and Windows?"⁶⁸ In filing their appeal with the superior court, the plaintiffs stuck to their original strategy; the same evidence that Cotton had written into his essay, they believed, would eventually win their appellate suit.

Rebutting the plaintiffs' appeal, defense attorney John Otis continued to prey on local sentiments by suggesting that the tales his clients told were reasonable interpretations of what they had seen and heard. In his opinion, "it Dont appear that Ever [the Clarks and Saverys] Spoke the words . . . with a

⁶⁶ SCJ, 36760, 36890, 36980, 37011.

⁶⁷ Defeated plaintiffs willing to incur additional court costs were allowed to appeal an inferior court suit to the provincial superior court. For general discussions of this process see Hoffer, *Law and People in Colonial America*, 35–37, and David H. Flaherty, "Criminal Practice in Provincial Massachusetts," in Coquillette et al., eds., *Law in Colonial Massachusetts*, 212–14.

⁶⁸ PCICCP, Recordbook, 92–93; SCJ, 36980, 36918, 37011.

Malitious Intent.” The shrewd lawyer realized that neither trial was about the truth of the stories. It did not matter that the Clarks and Saverys had spread superstitious rumors. He needed only to prove that the defendants had not told their stories with the malicious intention of causing financial ruin. Because the neighborhood rumors seemed plausible to most ordinary people, therefore, the various testimonies of the defense witnesses played right into the lawyer’s hands. After all, what was more genuine than a mother’s grief over her dead infant, or a nosy neighbor walking down the street to investigate a local disturbance, or a frightened young woman waking her mother in the middle of the night to report a fire? Was it possible that they all had conspired against Cotton and planned their stories? No, the actions of each witness bespoke a genuine belief in the existence of supernatural forces. In and of themselves, Otis concluded, the defendants’ stories had not “hurt” the plaintiffs’ chances of renting the property.⁶⁹

The superior court jury concurred, upholding the initial verdict in April 1734 and awarding the Clarks and Saverys additional court costs in excess of sixteen pounds.⁷⁰ Cotton was furious. Scribbling in his memoirs later that year, he recalled how several jurors—whom he likened to “snakes hiding in the grass” (*latets Anguis in Herba*)—had conspired against him and Cushing. Not even the “Strict Charge” of the presiding superior court judges—Benjamin Lynde, Paul Dudley, and Edmund Quincy—influenced the outcome of the case, though, in Cotton’s opinion, “the Matter of Fact charged upon [the jury] was notoriously known & publick.”⁷¹

Cotton’s greatest fears were realized in the two verdicts. He had hoped to make an example of his tenants, yet he knew that it would be difficult to convince any jury composed of men no different from his adversaries that the local rumors were unreasonable. With great reluctance, he turned to the court system as a weapon with which he planned to reform popular culture. For Cotton, the matter was clear, but the same cannot be said for the men who sat and listened to his lawsuit. Indeed, the jurors, like the Cole’s Hill residents, struggled to define the scope and limits of wonder lore; they struggled to comprehend divine and demonic immanence as New England Puritans had done for generations. What was so remarkable about the two verdicts, in short, was not that the jury members unanimously believed the stories about the Phillips mansion to be true; rather, they affirmed the plausibility of such beliefs as legitimate explanations for the inexplicable. In defeat, Cotton finally realized that the law could not be used to advance his personal crusade against superstition. More important, he realized that his

⁶⁹ SCJ, 36921.

⁷⁰ SCJ, 39361; PCICCP, Recordbook, 92–93; Superior Court of Judicature, Recordbook (1733–1736), 46.

⁷¹ Cotton, “Account of the Cotton Family,” 250. It is difficult to reconstruct the judges’ opinions from surviving documentation. Unfortunately, Chief Justice Lynde’s surviving diary mentions attending the court sessions in Plymouth but makes no mention of this highly unusual case; Lynde, *The Diaries of Benjamin Lynde and of Benjamin Lynde, Jr., with an Appendix* (Boston, 1880), 51.

word was not the law in Plymouth—that his was a minority opinion in the community.

Following his initial setback in the Plymouth Inferior Court of Common Pleas, Cotton decided to move his own family into the vacant Phillips mansion on March 29, 1734. Given the dilapidated condition of the dwelling, the move proved costly. His account book details the expenses incurred “to prevent the Ruine of it”: boards from “Mr. Browne,” shingles from “Mr. Lathrop,” hinges for the closet door, “Nails at Pulsifers,” “Plank at Kemptons,” carpentry work by John Waterman, “Playstering” by Elkanah Totman, and “victuals” for the “Work Men.” Altogether, the renovations cost Cotton more than eight pounds; moving expenses totaled an additional five. Further humiliation followed several weeks later, when James Warren, high sheriff of Plymouth County, appeared at the house on behalf of the Clarks and Saverys and collected £16.11.3 from Phillips’s estate as “cost of suit.”⁷²

The financial outlays must have galled Cotton and stiffened his resolve to reform public opinion, for sometime in 1735 he attempted to have “ten Pounds worth” of Hale’s *Modest Enquiry* distributed gratis as “a Service acceptable to God & profitable to future Generations.” Although Boston bookseller Benjamin Eliot failed to prepare the requested copies, Cotton periodically expressed interest in the project over the next few years. As late as August 1739, Peter Thacher recalled conversing with Cotton “about witches.” In a letter written to Nathan Prince at Cotton’s behest, Thacher described Cotton’s hope that the Harvard tutor “would . . . stir up the generosity of some . . . rich friends” and raise sufficient money to distribute “Mr. Hales Excellent discourses . . . lying unbound in Mr. Eliots shop.” Apparently, numerous first edition copies of the famous 1702 treatise still languished in a Boston warehouse—“Neglected for thirty or forty Years together,” as Cotton had previously noted in his 1733 witchcraft essay.⁷³

⁷² Cotton, “Cotton Diaries,” 19; SCJ, 39361.

⁷³ Cotton, “Account of the Cotton Family,” 261; Peter Thacher to Nathan Prince, Aug. 23, 1739, Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, MHS; Shipton, ed., *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, 10:246; Cotton, “Some Observations,” [iv]. Thacher’s letter provides tantalizing clues regarding the fate of Hale’s book. That the majority of printed copies were never bound and distributed by Benjamin Eliot helps to explain the paucity of extant copies. Furthermore, its checkered production history also implies that *A Modest Enquiry* did not enjoy widespread popularity. It is interesting to note, moreover, that several of the most prominent 18th-century skeptical treatises on the supernatural did not reach their intended audiences. Hale’s book was printed, yet only a limited number of copies was bound and distributed, while manuscript essays by Ebenezer Turell and Josiah Cotton—cited frequently in modern historiography—never made it to the press. If Thacher and Cotton can be trusted, in other words, historians may need to reassess the role played by Hale’s book in speeding the decline of witch-hunting. For various discussions of Hale’s book and his role in the Salem witch-hunt see Godbeer, *Devil’s Dominion*, 223–25; Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 392–93; Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem* (New York, 1969), 200–02; and Richard Trask, Introduction to Hale, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, facsimile ed. (Bainbridge, N. Y., 1973), iv.

Hale's *Modest Enquiry* had dropped stillborn from the press, and Cotton's own essay lapsed into similar obscurity. He abandoned the project in 1735, several months after Eliot rejected his initial request to complete the publication and distribution of Hale's book. "As to my Collections concerning Witches Apparitions &c," he wrote in his memoirs, "I shall leave it to my Friends & my Posterity to do as their Capacity & Inclination shall direct."⁷⁴ His grand and godly plan to reform popular culture lay in ruins.

Denied satisfaction in court or through print, Cotton retreated into his Calvinist faith, praying that God would strengthen his family against temptation, deliver them from evil, and, most important, preserve them from "Our Enemies, that no Weapon formed against Us may prosper." As the years rolled by, family fortunes improved. In 1737, the county probate judge dismissed the claims advanced by several of Thompson Phillips's creditors and declared the estate solvent; Cotton even managed to rent the mansion to Thomas Witherell, Jr., the innkeeper's son, who promptly paid him £40 in hogs and bushels of wheat and corn. Yet Cotton remained depressed by the entire episode. "God knows whether I shall live to See the [new tenant's] term Expired," he lamented pathetically in his memoirs, "probably I shan't." He could only hope "that I may be duely prepared for an House not made with Hands Eternal in the Heavens, where the Term shall never Expire."⁷⁵ In the end, Cotton rationalized his own failure as yet one more affliction, one more trial, one more providential judgment imposed on a deserving sinner by a just God.

Finally, on November 8, 1739, Cotton moved his family out of the King Street mansion and returned to his farm north of town, "having been absent therefrom 5 Years 7 Months & 10 Days."⁷⁶ The precision with which he recorded the move in both his account book and his family memoirs once again testifies to the bitterness with which he viewed his failed attempt to reform local superstitions. In all that time, Cotton and his family had never heard or seen the bizarre preternatural phenomena of which the Clarks and Saverys so boisterously complained. Still, Cotton realized that the climate of local opinion was against him, and he remained fearful of the mischief that might still be instigated by his vulgar neighbors. Several months before the move, Peter Thacher reported to Nathan Prince that the "good Gentleman" seemed "very much concern'd . . . least his wife or Daughters, or Female descendants from his body, should (in ages to come) be hang'd for so execrable a nonentity" as witchcraft.⁷⁷ The bitter lessons that he had learned in court haunted his mind.

As for the house itself, the orphan Hannah Phillips and her future husband sold the property to Cole's Hill resident Thomas Foster shortly before their marriage in May 1748. Foster was a former blacksmith who dabbled in commercial ventures, often relying on the credit of more prosperous mer-

⁷⁴ Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 261.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 261, 271-72; Cotton, "Cotton Diaries," 24, 47.

⁷⁶ Cotton, "Account of the Cotton Family," 292; Cotton, "Cotton Diaries," 46-47.

⁷⁷ Thacher to Prince, Aug. 23, 1739.

chants. In 1764 he borrowed £173 from an aspiring Boston trader named John Hancock. The promissory note stipulated that Foster would repay the principal (with “lawful interest”) after a term of three months, but he defaulted on the loan and was taken to court by Hancock. Saddled with debts and court costs in excess of £260, he surrendered the Phillips mansion to his Boston creditor on March 27, 1767. In a strange twist of fate, Isaac Lothrop, Jr., served as Hancock’s legal counsel, and John Cotton—Josiah’s eldest son, who followed in his father’s footsteps as register of deeds—recorded the property transfer in the official county record book.⁷⁸

So it was that a future signer of the Declaration of Independence took possession of the once-haunted mansion on King Street. In time, its occult history was forgotten by Plymouth’s residents and, surprisingly, ignored by the Romantic novelists and antiquarian historians of the nineteenth century who reveled in such gothic tales. Today, the unmarked house stands in its original location, unnoticed by the many tourists who flock to nearby Plymouth Rock. Josiah Cotton would have been satisfied with such anonymity.

⁷⁸ Hannah Phillips married her first cousin, George Phillips of Middletown, Conn., with her grandfather’s blessing; Cotton, “Account of the Cotton Family,” 383, 385. On the legal proceedings between Foster and Hancock see PD 39:137, 53:155; SCJ, 100987; entry for Oct. 26, 1766, Docket Book #25 (1766–1767), Suffolk County Inferior Court of Common Pleas, Mass. Arch.; Superior Court of Judicature, Recordbook (1766–1767), Mass. Arch., 204; and Davis, *Ancient Landmarks of Plymouth*, 185.