# Sarah Good's first death warrant resurfaces, or we thought

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**Abstract**

Kent Library of Southeast Missouri State University received an historic document in 1979. This document appeared to be a death warrant for Sarah Good from 1692. Sarah Good was executed for practicing witchcraft in Salem. After closer examination, the document was declared to be a forgery, with similar documents distributed during the 1930s. This article examines the history of this document, explains why the document was declared a forgery, further examines features that are often found in forgeries, and gives suggestions that libraries can use to identify forgeries.

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The summer of 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts, was a disturbing time in American history. This was a time when any woman, man, or child could easily have been accused of being a witch. Many were accused and many were executed. This period of early American history still holds a great fascination for modern readers. One such trial included the defendants of Sarah Good, Rebecca Nurse, Susannah Martin, Elizabeth How, and Sarah Wilds.

The verbatim transcripts of their trial are easily found in many libraries and even on the Internet. According to the transcripts, these five women were tried on June 29, 1692, found guilty of the charge of witchcraft, and were sentenced to hang on July 19, 1692. Furthermore, the transcripts identify William Stoughton as the judge and George Corwin as the sheriff. Many of the women accused of witchcraft in 1692 were "poor and defenseless" (Boyer and Nissenbaum, 1977). One of those women, Sarah Good, was considered by many in the community to be a beggar and a general nuisance as well as "shrewish, idle, and above all slovenly" (Starkey, 1949).

Kent Library at Southeast Missouri State University, received a death warrant for Sarah Good, in 1979, as a gift from a retired administrator. The document measures 9.25 inches in width and 13.25 inches in length. It was written on heavy paper with faded brown ink and appears to have been written with a writing instrument that distributed ink unevenly. There are stains on the document that appear to be that of water. King Phillip's wax seal appears in the lower left-hand side of the document. The warrant came with a note of authenticity from the South Carolina Historical Society, claiming that the Massachusetts Historical Society found the document to have "great historical value".

The document was added to the Rare Book Room and was never closely evaluated. The warrant was occasionally exhibited to students and faculty coming to view the collection; however, in an effort to illustrate the variety of materials housed in the library's Rare Book Room, to an untrained and unsuspecting eye the document appears authentic. Since the document came from a respected member of the university administration, who was also a collector of letters from famous individuals, no

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one questioned the document's authenticity, including the donor. Documentary evidence accompanying the warrant seemed also to support its legitimacy.

During the 1930s, forgeries of witchcraft documents – usually death warrants – appeared throughout the American midwest, south, and southwest. These death warrants bore around 12 signatures, including the signatures of individuals such as Cotton Mather, Increase Mather, William Stoughton, and John Winthrop. Today, there may be other libraries or museums with such documents thinking their documents are authentic.

A death warrant for Rebecca Nurse surfaced in Macon, Missouri, in 1932, and is part of the Peabody Essex Museum collection in Salem, Massachusetts. Another similar death warrant, this one for Susannah Martin, is reproduced in Charles Hamilton's book *Great Forgers and Famous Forgeries*. Hamilton states that these:

> . . . forgeries may easily be recognized because they are on thick, heavy paper and are stained with coffee, which lies in ripples over the page.

Furthermore, Hamilton notes, one similar document:

> . . . was offered by the world's biggest auction house but was withdrawn when its authenticity was questioned (Hamilton, 1996).

The Sarah Good death warrant dates from June 10, 1692 (not the June 29 date which was the date of her actual trial). Written to George Corwin, Sheriff, by Jonathan Corwin, Judge, the warrant bears the signatures of 13 additional individuals and carries King Phillip's seal in wax. To the trained eye, the expert sees the coffee stains that the forger used to simulate water stains; he sees signatures of individuals with no judicial standing; and he recognizes that King Philip had been dead for 16 years in 1692, when this document was to have been written.

Also significantly, the June 10 date of the death warrant is approximately three weeks earlier than the actual date of Sarah Good's trial (June 29). The earlier date coincides with the date that Bridget Bishop was hanged in Salem. History has ascribed Bridget Bishop as the first Salem woman to be officially executed for witchcraft. Had this document been authentic, it might have provided a better description of the Salem community on June 10, 1692; on a day that would have been difficult to have received a fair trial for the crime of witchcraft. One expert noted that the forger did not even take the time to research the correct date of Sarah Good's trial. The forger may have selected a more interesting date, the date of Bridget Bishop's execution. The Salem community was split on whether further trials and executions should go forward after Bishop's execution. Some in the community were energized to completely stamp out witchcraft in Salem after that execution. Had the document been authentic, it would have appeared that Sarah Good was tried twice with the same outcome at both trials. Also, interestingly, the forger names Jonathan Corwin the judge rather than William Stoughton. Jonathan Corwin was an associate judge for Salem, and his brother was the sheriff. With the Corwin brothers as judge and sheriff, it appears that the trial could have taken place on the date, considering the hysteria that took place after Bridget Bishop's execution that same day.

When attempting to authenticate such a document, one might think to first test the paper and ink to see if they are consistent with paper and ink used at the time from which time the document purports to date. Often this is not a good use of time and resources, especially when one considers the $50-100 per hour charged to authenticate documents. Experts are quick to point out that unused paper from the 1690s is obtainable and one can easily make a small batch of the type of ink used at the time. When authenticating documents, experts base their conclusions on style of handwriting, sentence structure, and the factual information contained in the document. To my knowledge, there are no specialists in New England historical documents living in the southeast Missouri region for me to call or visit, and the *Antiques Road Show* is not an option. Instead I did my own research and found knowledgeable individuals through the Internet who were generous with their time.

Through my research, I have learned that comparing signatures is often the simplest way to authenticate documents. Another indication of a forgery is often shaky handwriting within the document, which indicates that the writer was concentrating more on the formation of letters than on the entire word or sentence (Hamilton, 1996). Finally, one will find it

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helpful to do some research into the history of the period to see if the facts within the document correspond with what is known about the period.

As a result of this discovery, Kent Library is now more carefully examining items found in its Rare Book Room. While Kent Library does not have a budget to hire experts to examine the items, librarians in the building have examined signatures more carefully, and thereby determined that an Abraham Lincoln letter found in the collection is also a forgery. This has been a very good lesson – not to be so trusting when someone donates an item to the library.

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