

John Winthrop: His Impact on the Connecticut Witch Trials

Cast:

Edith: Haneen
Abuteen

Betty: Madina
Saleh

Anne Winthrop:(Wait Winthrop's daughter) Haneen
Abuteen

Margaret Lechmere: (Anne Winthrop's granddaughter) Madina
Saleh

Donald Trinks (mayor of Windsor in 2017): Madina
Saleh

David Williams (council member): Haneen
Abuteen

Scene 1

Madina: the year is 1679 in Hartford, Connecticut, and two friends, Edith and Betty are reminiscing about old times.

Edith: Betty!

Betty: Edith!

Edith: How are Howard and the kids? It's already almost 1680, this year has gone by so fast

Betty: Oh the usual. Now that I think about it, this *decade* has gone by fast. I can't believe it's already been a whole 10 years since John Winthrop Jr made that law about the witch trials.

Edith: Oh yes! That law required more than one witness for witchcraft. Remember before the law was made, when people who were accused were executed almost half the time? Of the 30 people tried before the law, 11 were executed. And poor things, you would assume that their family would support them at least, but husbands testified against wives, wives

testified against husbands, and children testified against parents! John Winthrop Jr. made his law and this basically stopped the trials, preventing more innocent people from being executed. This broke a barrier that most people were afraid to approach at the time. There have been no executions since 1663.

Betty: Well, the Bible does say. “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” and “A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them,” which means that killing witches is a law of God that we must obey.

Edith: Betty, you know as well as I do that many of the accused and executed were innocent and were only brought to court because of a grudge or a feud, or someone wanting to kill a poor woman with no children so she doesn't inherit her husband's land, and it goes to the community instead. Fortunately, John Winthrop Jr. studied alchemy in Europe and studied folk magic for much of his life, so he was well informed and knew how difficult practicing natural magic was, which was why he questioned the flimsy evidence presented in most trials. As a result of his work, the law about witches, the Connecticut Colony's Grounds for the Examination of a Witch, now says, “Ye authors, warn jurors, etc. to not condemn suspected persons on bare presumptions without good and sufficient proofs. But if convicted of that horrid crime, to be put to death.” Actual witches should be executed, just like it says in the Bible, however, it should be based on proof.

Betty: Witches have the power to destroy crops, animals, and people! Although one or two people may have been innocent, in the end, it was all for the greater good. Also, how is the evidence “flimsy”? The witches were seen muttering and talking to themselves, most likely trying to curse others! The very first accusation in New England was in 1647 when a young girl suddenly died! Her parents accused Alse Young of cursing their once-healthy daughter. Alse was hanged. Three years later in 1650, Mary Johnson was accused of theft and she *admitted* to familiarity with the devil. Despite it being illegal, there were water tests done. People were thrown into the water and if they were witches, they would float because the pure water, which is used for baptism rejects evil. Every person that was thrown in floated!

Scene 2

Madina: the year is 1728 in Boston, Massachusetts and John Winthrop the Younger's granddaughter, Anne Winthrop, is getting *her* daughter, Margaret, ready for bed.

Anne: Ok Margaret, it's time for bed

Margaret: Mother! You promised you'd tell me about my great grandfather John Winthrop the Younger and the Connecticut Witch Trials!

Anne: Alright, alright, but you better go to bed after this. Well, it began in 1647 when Alse Young was accused of killing a young girl through witchcraft. After Alse was hanged, hysteria spread all over Connecticut and about 30 people were tried and 11 were executed at least. They say there were more, but many court records were lost. A witch trial would begin with someone accusing another person of witchcraft to the magistrate, who would issue a warrant for the accused person, and if they were believed to be guilty they were held until the grand jury decided. Then the sheriff scheduled the guilty ones to be hanged.

Margret: What did my great grandfather have to do with this?

Anne: Your great grandfather, John Winthrop Jr. knew a lot about natural and diabolical magic. He had studied alchemy as a young law student in London and used his knowledge to help Puritans in New England. He saw science and nature as powerful forces that people overestimated and feared and believed magic and witchcraft were viewed the same. After he saw how many seemingly innocent people were executed, he decided to take action. He attended courtrooms and dismissed witchcraft charges. The trials which took place when he was out of the country were the ones where most people were sentenced to death. Your great grandfather was the governor of Connecticut in 1669, so he changed the law so that at least two witnesses were required for witchcraft. After this, the accusations decreased and executions totally stopped. After the Hartford Panic in 1662, Winthrop believed that only pacts or sealed contracts made with the devil made someone a witch and that things like crop failures or sudden deaths didn't necessarily mean witchcraft was involved.

Margaret: He was a hero! But why did people even accuse each other?

Anne: There were many reasons. European settlers arrived in 1620 in the Massachusetts Bay and it was settled completely by 1650. They were Puritans and most were very religious. Puritans also settled in Connecticut, but they struggled with harsh winters, violence with the natives, famines, and epidemics. They looked for someone or something to blame and witchcraft or Satan was what they usually turned to. Witchcraft was considered as bad as murder, theft, and adultery. Witch trials had been common in Europe but this was the first trial in the colonies.

Margret: Why didn't anyone else try to stop these executions?

Anne: Many people agreed with the punishment given to the witches. An accused witch faced humiliating invasions of privacy, psychological pressure, and physical and mental pain. They were strict Puritans who justified killing these people with biblical verses. People became paranoid. John Winthrop Jr. broke through many barriers and played a huge part in ending the trials. He stood up for what he knew was right and what many other people didn't realize or were too afraid to stand up for. He was elected Governor of the Connecticut Colony and was very respected because of his father's reputation as the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. People trusted his judgment because his law didn't simply ban executions, instead, he just asked for more witnesses for an accusation to be valid. He knew that innocent people wouldn't be accused if more witnesses were required. He used his position as governor to take initiative and stop the executions.

Margret: But how did the trials actually end?

Anne: In 1663, he became involved in trials. He would personally defend the accused people and convince the judge because he had a lot of power as Governor of the Connecticut Colony. He made sure people who were accused were not executed. Then after 1669, when he made the law, the trials reduced and there were no more executions. Even though there were more accusations after this, right up to 1724, none of them went to trial. The people who were acquitted were compensated. Now it's late and you have school tomorrow. Time for bed. Goodnight Margret.

Margret: Goodnight Mother

Scene 3:

Madina: the year is 2017 in Windsor, Connecticut, and Mayor Donald S. Trinks and a member of the Windsor council, David Williams are discussing the Connecticut Witch Trials.

Williams: Good morning, Mayor Trinks

Trinks: Good morning, Mr. Williams

Williams: So Alse Young and Lydia Gilbert, who were both executed for witchcraft, finally had their names cleared this year.

Trinks: Yes, and after almost four centuries. The Connecticut Witch Trials were the first Witch trials in New England, and they were followed by the famous Salem Witch Trials. However, there had been many earlier witch trials in Europe such as the Trier, the Fulda, the Basque, the Wuzberg, and the Bamburg trials. The Malleus Maleficarum in 1486 was the best-known treatise on witchcraft. It documented beliefs about witches, listed ways to identify them, and encouraged their extermination.

Williams: And the alleged witches of Connecticut were barely given a fair trial! It's hard to prove witchcraft, so they relied on biased witnesses, interrogations, float tests, and occasionally confessions - all of which are problematic. The witnesses who were brought to court were rarely on the witches' sides and the accused people's closest friends turned on them in fear of witchcraft. Interrogations were very harsh and if the accused person claimed innocence, it was assumed they were lying. The float test was inaccurate because all humans naturally float in water, so everyone floated and was told the water rejected them because they were evil! Everyone who was found guilty was hanged.

Trinks: Witchcraft accusations are still going on today in Africa and Asia, where the accusations trigger serious forms of violence, such as murder, just like the Connecticut Witch Trials. An example is in India, where women are usually accused by men who want their property and force them to abandon their lives. However, in the western world, witches today are generally treated with more respect.

Williams: There are several memorial services being arranged for the victims of the Witch Trials in June this year, 2017.

Trinks: The law John Winthrop Jr. enforced was effective here in Connecticut. The Salem Witch Trials took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, so John Winthrop Jr's law didn't affect them. Whoever got accused there, even if it was by just one witness, went to trial.

Williams: The Salem Witch Trials began in 1692, 29 years after the last recorded Connecticut witch execution in 1663. They were possibly caused by boredom or just a very strong belief in witchcraft and were fueled by Tituba's sensational accounts of her dealings with the devil. They got out of hand without a voice of reason like that of John Winthrop Jr.

Trinks: Because of John Winthrop Jr's law, the Connecticut Witch trials came to an end. It saved many innocent people from execution. This is what broke a huge barrier, and there were no more hangings here in Connecticut after his law. I am relieved that all the witches' names are finally cleared, and their deaths are being honored at last.