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‘A Great or Notorious Liar’: Katherine Harrison and her Neighbours, Wethersfield, Connecticut, 1668 – 1670

**Liam Connell
(University of Melbourne)**

Abstract: *Katherine Harrison could not have personally known anyone as feared and hated in their own home town as she was in Wethersfield. This article aims to explain how and why this was so. Although documentation is scarce for many witch trials, there are some for which much crucial information has survived, and we can reconstruct reasonably detailed accounts of what went on. The trial of Katherine Harrison of Wethersfield, Connecticut, at the end of the 1660s is one such case. An array of factors coalesced at the right time in Wethersfield for Katherine to be accused. Her self-proclaimed magical abilities, her socio-economic background, and most of all, the inter-personal and legal conflicts that she sustained with her neighbours all combined to propel this woman into a very public discussion about witchcraft in 1668-1670. The trial of Katherine Harrison was a vital moment in the development of the legal and theological responses to witchcraft in colonial New England. The outcome was the result of a lengthy process jointly negotiated between legal and religious authorities. This was the earliest documented case in which New England magistrates trying witchcraft sought and received explicit instruction from Puritan ministers on the validity of spectral evidence and the interface between folk magic and witchcraft – implications that still resonated at the more recognised Salem witch trials almost twenty-five years later. The case also reveals the social dynamics that caused much ambiguity and confusion in this early modern village about an acceptable use of the occult. Finally, it is a striking example of an early modern accused witch whose circumstances coincided with many of the culpable aspects of the witch stereotype – female, widowed, financially ambiguous, socially arbitrary, and self-assured to the point of combative – who was not convicted, but who survived, due in no small part to a clergy and magistrate that intervened to effectively save her life.*