
Corey the Martyr

Giles Corey was a prosperous, uneducated, eighty-year-old farmer and full member of the church. He and his wife Martha lived on a farm in the southwest corner of Salem village. Martha Corey, his wife, made a mistake of questioning if the girls' accusations were sincere. The girls learned of this and accused her of witchcraft. They said that she summoned a yellow bird flying around. Martha was sent to jail to await her hanging. Giles Corey, certain of his wife's innocence, spoke out against the girls who sent his wife to jail. Unsurprisingly, the girls countered with accusations of witchcraft against Giles in April 1692.

Ann Putnam claimed that on April 13 the specter of Giles Corey visited her and asked her to write in the Devil's book. Later, Putnam was to claim that a ghost appeared before her to announce that it had been murdered by Corey. Other girls were to describe Corey as "a dreadful wizard" and recount stories of assaults by his specter. Corey was examined by magistrates on April 18, then left to languish with his wife in prison for five months awaiting trial.

When Corey's case finally went before the grand jury in September, nearly a dozen witnesses came forward with damning evidence such as testimony by Elizabeth and Alice Booth that Corey served bread and wine at a sacrament attended by over fifty witches. Both Ann Putnam and Mercy Lewis described Corey as "a dreadful wizard." Corey knew he faced conviction and execution, so he chose to refuse to stand for trial. By avoiding conviction, it became more likely that his farm, which Corey recently deeded to his two sons-in-law, would not become property of the state upon his death.

The penalty for refusing to stand for trial was death by pressing under heavy stones. It was a punishment never before seen--or ever again inflicted--in the colony of Massachusetts. On Monday, September 19, Corey was stripped naked, a board placed upon his chest, and then--while his neighbors watched--heavy stones and rocks were piled on the board. Corey pleaded to have more weight added, so that his death might come quickly.

Samuel Sewall reported Corey's death: "About noon, at Salem, Giles Corey was press'd to death for standing mute." Robert Calef, in his report of the event, added a gruesome detail: Giles's "tongue being prest out of his mouth, the Sheriff with his cane forced it in again, when he was dying." Judge Jonathan Corwin ordered Corey buried in an unmarked grave on Gallows Hill.

Corey is often seen as a martyr who "gave back fortitude and courage rather than spite and bewilderment." His very public death played a role in building public opposition to the witchcraft

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