



**Debra Avery and her 14-year old daughter Addie, of Washington, CT. Photo by Nick Lacy.**

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**From Washington, a Witch's Tale**

By: Rebecca Ransom

Thirteen-year-old Addie Avery never imagined her independent study project would land her on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, nor that shortly thereafter BBC radio would call. And The Hartford Courant. And Paramount Pictures.

“We weren't going to launch this right now, but I guess we've been launched,” joked her mother, Debra Avery, who is working with her daughter on the project. Their objective? To exonerate the 11 people executed for witchcraft in 17th-century Connecticut, one of whom is the direct ancestor of Mrs. Avery and Addie. Mrs. Avery knew little about her great-grandmother from eight generations back, other than her name was Mary Sanford and she was tried for witchcraft in Hartford in 1662.

Then last year, around Halloween, Mrs. Avery and Addie attended a lecture by state historian and University of Connecticut professor Walter Woodward on the Hartford witch hunt of the 1660s. To their surprise, their ancestor was highlighted in the presentation. After the lecture was over, Mrs. Avery asked the professor if anything had ever been done to exonerate the names of those wrongly killed. “No,” was his response. Inspired to right the wrong done so long ago, Mrs. Avery and Addie, who is homeschooled, developed the idea to make the effort into an independent study project.

“I did a lot of research just to find out who she really was,” Addie said while sitting at the dining room table,

heaped with piles of books and file folders, at their New Preston home. The witch hysteria in Hartford began with an 8-year-old girl. Delirious with fever, the girl cried out from her bed that a neighborhood woman was magically tormenting her. The girl later died from what now is believed to be a case of pneumonia.

One of the women implicated during the hysteria was Rebecca Greensmith. Before being hanged for witchcraft, along with her husband, Nathaniel, Mrs. Greensmith confessed, and in doing so named names. One of the women she named was Mary Sanford, who, Mrs. Greensmith claimed, she met under a tree on the town green, where they danced and drank a bottle of sack (liquor).

Both Mrs. Sanford and her husband, Andrew, were indicted for witchcraft. For some reason, Mr. Sanford got off. Mrs. Sanford, however, wasn't so fortunate. Though there is no record of Mrs. Sanford's execution, only of her conviction June 13, 1662 for "familiarity with Satan," most historians agree that she was probably executed. It is likely she was hanged on Gallows Hill, a "rocky bluff north of Trinity College's campus."

At the time of her death, Mrs. Sanford was believed to be around 39 years of age, and had five children, ranging in age from 5 to 19 years old. Records indicate that Mr. Sanford later moved to Milford, remarried and had more children. "I can relate to her," said Mrs. Avery, a mother of three, as she looked across the table at Addie. "Mary was probably going through many of the same things I go through as a mother. ... I try and put myself in her shoes." On occasion, married couples who were accused of witchcraft would strike a deal—one takes the rap for both in an effort to ensure the children were cared for. "Is that what she was doing?" Mrs. Avery wondered.

Mrs. Avery and Addie don't have answers concerning why Mrs. Sanford died, but they have developed theories. One explanation might be political retribution. Mr. Sanford was the "chimney viewer," a role similar to contemporary building inspectors. Perhaps Mr. Sanford denied the wrong person's chimney.

Overall, women were accused of witchcraft four times more often than men, which is the topic of Addie's research portion of the project. When asked why she believes women were singled out, Addie referred to the beginnings of Christianity. "Women were thought to have a weaker body, and therefore a weaker soul, so they were more likely to succumb to the devil," she explained, noting the connection to the Adam and Eve story. This also might be the reason women often confessed to, and colorfully embellished, their witchcraft connections. "Were they brainwashed [into thinking they were evil]?" she wondered. Another explanation for the 4-to-1 ratio could be a classic case of greed-widows who inherited their husband's fortune were also common targets. In fact, Mrs. Greensmith was twice widowed before marrying her third and final husband, Nathaniel.

After Addie finishes her research this semester, she is planning to lobby for official exoneration for the people executed. This goal has led to a flurry of national and international publicity. It all started when a reporter for the Wall Street Journal was working on a story about exonerations and, by chance, was given the Averys' name. Since then, the phone calls haven't stopped.

Most of the feedback the Averys have received has been positive, including correspondence from fellow descendants of accused witches. But some people have criticized them for not having anything better to do than try and pardon people who have been dead for 350 years.

"It does personally affect me," Addie said confidently. "I don't feel it's right, and if a wrong has been done it should be righted. What will it make me think of our country if we can't admit to, and fix, our mistakes?"

"Naming people as witches is the kind of thing we do today as a matter of fact," said Lucy Averill, the Averys' neighbor and, coincidentally, a descendant of an accused witch. Mrs. Averill's late husband was a direct descendant of Sarah Averill Wilde, one of the accused witches executed during the notorious Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

Mrs. Averill, who thinks the Averys' effort is a great idea, sees parallels between the witch hunts of yesteryear and current events. "What are we doing today that would fall into the same category? We haven't changed. There will always be witches, whatever we call them, the people who dare to defy the current powers that be. That's why I think Debra's doing this with Addie, because she wants her to know she is the descendant of women who were not afraid."

On Halloween in 2001, the governor of Massachusetts signed an act approved by the legislature exonerating those executed during the Salem Witch Trials, which took the lives of 20 people. This year, the governor of Virginia also exonerated an accused witch who was executed in 1706.

In Connecticut, the governor does not have authority over pardons. They are handled by the Board of Pardons. When asked if the Averys' request is possible, the chairman of the board, Gregory Everett simply said, "We do not do posthumous pardons." He added he wasn't even sure if the board has the legal authority to issue exoneration to the accused witches, considering "there was no state or even United States in 1662."

The Averys aren't backing down, though. "Maybe we should be talking to the Queen [of England]," Mrs. Avery said, only half in jest. "Who knows?" They are also looking into a legislative act to clear the victims names. "We are still in the fact gathering stage," Addie said.

Mr. Woodward believes the Averys' efforts are a good idea, but he is careful to note exoneration shouldn't be taken as a vilification of 17th-century Puritans. "What I worry about as a historian, is [it] may reinforce the stereotype that 17th-century Puritans were mindless meanspirited people. In fact they were not like that."

The fear of witchcraft was a very real fear for 17th century people, he said, despite how easy it is for modern day folks to dismiss it as nonsense. Witch hunts, despite how barbaric and cruel they might seem today, were held with the genuine intent of protecting the community. "If exoneration happens, I would like it to be in the context of a cultural understanding that says the people of the 17th century were acting the best way they knew how in the interest of the community. It's just we now believe they were wrong and a terrible injustice happened and it is time to recognize and correct that," he said. Whether the Averys achieve their goal or not, he emphasized, "I can't think of a better history and civics lesson for Addie to experience than this."

Perhaps most importantly, exonerating those wrongly killed is about family for Addie and her mother. "She is part of the line and the line is who we are," said Mrs. Avery. "Without her we wouldn't be sitting here right now."

"The fact that they even want to do this speaks to the tie of family, even over hundreds of years," said Mr. Woodward. There is no record of where, or if, Mrs. Sanford's body was buried. Though convicted witches were prohibited from burial in a Christian cemetery, she could have been secretly buried at the ancient Center Cemetery in Hartford, where many Sanford family members lie. Center Cemetery is currently undergoing renovations, and Mrs. Avery bought a brick in her ancestor's name. Inscribed in the brick, "Mary Sanford, June 13, 1662, Our Grandmother."