

2021

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Brandon; Wimberly, Bobbie Jo; and McDonald, Courtney (2021) "Barbara Powers: Witch or Myth? The Last Case of Witchcraft in South Carolina," *University of South Carolina Upstate Student Research Journal*: Vol. 14, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/uscusrj/vol14/iss1/5>

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Barbara Powers: Witch or Myth? The Last Case of Witchcraft in South Carolina

ABSTRACT. Was an elderly woman from the upstate of South Carolina the last to be accused of and put on trial for witchcraft in the United States? In this paper, we investigate claims from an old letter sent to the president of South Carolina College to determine whether or not Barbara Powers was truly accused of witchcraft during a criminal trial. After thoroughly investigating census data, court records, marriage records, and other historical data in the named counties and those surrounding them, we were unable to determine conclusively if the trial was real or fabricated. Despite not knowing if the case occurred or not, we explored the historical context of the United States and specifically upstate South Carolina in and around 1813. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that may have prompted a witchcraft trial and to analyze moral panics including the causes and ramifications of historical and contemporary moral panics. Ultimately, we concluded that moral panics, such as those that lead to accusations of witchcraft, continue to shape our perceptions of the world.

BRANDON SMITH

I initially got involved in faculty-mentored research over a year ago. When I was registering for classes for the spring 2021 semester, I came across a class taught by one of my favorite professors. The only thing I knew about the class was that it revolved around witchcraft in South Carolina, a fascinating topic which I wanted to learn more about. The course ended up revolving around researching the alleged story of a witchcraft trial that occurred in the Upstate region of South Carolina decades after the witchcraft trials ended. We ultimately were unable to complete the research paper during the course of the semester because the professor who was originally leading the course was moving to a different university at the end of the semester. So, he reached out to Professor McDonald, who agreed to oversee the research the following semester. Another student and I wanted to complete the research so we both continued to work on it over the next semester until it was complete. This project was unique because of the weird nature of the story which started it all (a story that I will not spoil here). My favorite part of working on this project was being able to work largely independently while



investigating the story. My future plan is to go into law enforcement, either at the local or federal level. I would also like to continue to conduct individual research in both criminology and psychology/sociology. Some advice that I would offer to other students interested in conducting research is to find a topic that you are passionate about or find deeply interesting.

BOBBIE JO WIMBERLY

I stumbled across this faculty-mentored research project by chance when I was picking my classes for the semester. My major is Criminal Justice so I was browsing through all the courses offered by the department when I reached the last page that held only one course, "Witchcraft in South Carolina". The unusual name immediately piqued my interest, so I registered for the course. Everything about this project is unique. Beginning with the main topic, which is an investigation to discover whether a witchcraft trial truly happened in South Carolina in the 1800's to the argument that witchcraft trials are a form of moral panic, which are still evident today. In modern times, moral panics and witchcraft are not topics that you typically see explored together because the moral panic surrounding witchcraft ended when the trials were outlawed over a hundred years ago. On the contrary, it is precisely these



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unusual elements that make our project intriguing, refreshing, and one of a kind. My favorite part of this research experience would have to be the investigation aspect of trying to find out whether this witchcraft trial truly happened or not. As an avid reader of mystery novels, scouring through countless databases and records trying to find out the truth felt as if I was a detective in my own mystery novel, making the experience that much more enjoyable. If I could give a piece of advice to students interested in conducting research, do it. Do not hesitate, do it. Conducting your own research and putting it together with other students who are just as passionate about the topic as you, is an unforgettable gratifying college experience you do not want to miss out on.

**COURTNEY McDONALD**

I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of California-Santa Cruz, and received my Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Colorado-Boulder and Master of Science in Criminal Justice from the University of North Georgia. I joined the USC Upstate faculty in 2016 and teach Criminal Justice courses, particularly those relating to victimology and gender-based violence. My primary research interests include issues of family violence and violence against women and sexual minorities and I am now focusing on sibling abuse and the career perspectives of Criminal Justice students. My research has appeared in journals such as the *Journal of Family Violence*, *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, and *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*. I have greatly enjoyed working with Brandon and Bobbie Jo on this project. They did thorough historical research on moral panics and this very peculiar case of alleged witchcraft.

Introduction

Around the middle of the 19th century, an unusual article was published in a local Pickens County newspaper called the *Keowee Courier*. This particular edition of the weekly newspaper came out on July 30, 1859, and in it was a letter about the ever-elusive topic of witchcraft. This letter was sent to Dr. Thomas Cooper in April of 1837, who four years prior was the President of South Carolina College (currently the University of South Carolina). The author was Philip Edward Pearson, a lawyer who had been in correspondence with Cooper. Due to the contents of the letter, it is clear that the pair had been discussing witchcraft trials and laws relating to them in prior letters. In 1833, Cooper stepped down from his position as President and became a professor again, only to resign from the college in 1834. He spent the last five years of his life preparing and completing different volumes of the Statutes at Large of South Carolina before passing away in 1839. It was through this last work that he researched various laws and statutes of the state and it can be inferred that it was this work that led him to research laws and statutes about witchcraft. This letter between Cooper and Pearson was actually found in the notes section appended to Volume II of the Statutes at Large of South Carolina, which was written and edited by Dr. Thomas Cooper [1].

In the letter in question, Pearson described a peculiar case from about 20 years prior in Lancaster, SC. The case involved a trial that was held in 1813 or 1814 wherein a lawyer, Stephen D. Miller, represented seven to eight men who were indicted on charges of assault, battery, and false imprisonment. The victim, Barbara Powers, was an elderly woman who lived alone in Chesterfield, SC. However, there are no records that indicate her race. The defendants claimed Powers mistreated a young girl who later asked them for help. Powers was alleged to have used 'diabolical arts' against the girl [1].

According to the letter, the young girl (of unknown age) was called to testify by Judge David Johnson, who presided over the trial. Henceforth is a summary of the girl's testimony: the girl testified that after being fatigued one evening, she laid down to rest. Powers then appeared, sat upon her, and violently choked her. Powers proceeded to turn her into a horse and ride her into the town of Lancaster. Once there, Powers stole 'goods of great value' from several shops by shrinking herself down and passing through the keyholes. Powers next rode the girl back to Chesterfield and then to Cheraw. Once in Cheraw, she stole more goods. Powers finally rode the girl back to the girl's residence in Lancaster (and presumably transformed her from a horse to a person again). The young girl claimed that when she woke up the next morning, she asked the group of men for help. This is when the group of men, according to their testimony, went in search of Powers. Upon locating Powers in Chesterfield, they 'gently' laid their hands on her and brought her back to Lancaster. They told Powers to 'heal' the girl by touching her and saying, "God Bless You!". The girl claimed her health and strength greatly declined due to the hardships she suffered during the night of service she did for the 'witch'. She also stated that once Powers said those three words to her, she instantly recovered. Apparently, upon hearing her wild claims, Judge Johnson halted her testimony and may have ended the trial (though this is impossible to ascertain due to a lack of historical records [1]).

In his letter, Pearson said nothing else of this specific trial and went on to describe other, prior witchcraft trials that were held in Winnsboro, SC. Thus, it can only be inferred that Barbara Powers was not charged with witchcraft during her trial, since Pearson said the judge cut off all further testimony and because there was no mention of a verdict. However, it is clearly a case in which South Carolinian residents claimed witchcraft as a defense against physical assault [1].

The controversy surrounding this trial is that if true, it would be a historical breakthrough. If true, the trial of Barbara Powers would be the most recent witchcraft trial in the United States, which is contrary to what historians and history say. However, with only a letter published in a weekly newspaper as evidence, it is difficult to determine if this trial really happened and if the accusations against Powers were actually made. Therefore, only research into the people involved in the trial and letter will give us clues. Through county census records, newspaper articles, and online databases there is no record of anyone by the name of 'Barbara Powers' or 'Powers' that lived during that time. Thomas Cooper, Philip Pearson, and Judge David Johnson were real people. However, the timing of this trial involving witchcraft and the time that Johnson was sworn in as a Judge do not match. According to the Encyclopedia of South Carolina, Johnson was elected as the solicitor of the middle circuit in 1811 and was not elected as a judge until 1815 [2]. Therefore, at the time of the Powers case, he was a District Attorney, not a judge. So, was this really the last witchcraft trial in the United States? Though this question may now be unanswerable due to the lack of historical records, there is no doubt that witchcraft was a topic of discussion for elite, white men in South Carolina.

The last witch trials in Europe ended around 1750 and the infamous Salem witch trials in colonial Massachusetts ended in 1693. However, the case of Barbara Powers reportedly took place in 1813 or 1814. Why were witches and even the thought of accusing someone of being a witch still happening over 50 years after the trials ended in Europe and over a century after the Salem witch trials ended? The social context of South Carolina and the United States at the beginning of the 19th century provides some answers.

Literature Review

Around the time of the Barbara Powers case, there was a major historical conflict happening. The climate in the country was tense around 1813 because a year prior the War of 1812 broke out between the United States and Great Britain. However, before the war broke out, there was

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a war going on in Europe between France and Great Britain. The United States held a stance of neutrality in this war but was trading with France because of the help received from them in the Revolutionary War [3]. Britain, unhappy about this, implemented trade restrictions to stop American trade with France [3]. Britain also allied with the Native Americans in an effort to,

halt US westward expansion and protect British interests in Canada by creating a Native American buffer state between US territory and British Canada. Thus, the seizure of American ships and sailors, combined with the British support of Tecumseh's uprising, led to strident calls in Congress for war against Great Britain [3].

A Series of battles ensued, both on land and at sea, between the British and Americans. Most of the war was fought in the Northern part of the United States since it was near Canada (a British colony), though, the war did move south to New Orleans and Florida (occupied by Spain at the time). Though hectic, the war only lasted for two years until the two countries signed the treaty of Ghent in 1814 in Great Britain [3].

In addition to the war, religious conflicts and revivals were happening in South Carolina as well. The highly mobile nature of the upstate population “undoubtedly helped create a social context favorable to a religious awakening. In an era when people were moving about frequently in search of a home, evangelical Christianity offered social as well as moral moorings both to those who had just arrived and to those left behind” [4]. While religious revivals could bring people together, they also had the power to ostracize those who did not want to be a part of them. Most immigrants came to the U.S. to escape religious persecution and be able to freely practice their religious freedom, yet religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants quickly arose [5]:

The religious conflict that stands out in this period involves tensions between Catholics and Protestants, culminating in violence directed at Irish Catholic immigrants. The surge in immigration from Europe during the 19th Century coincided with an influx of Catholics and the rise of activist Protestantism in the U.S. As strong Protestant values permeated the country, immigrants who were Catholic also became viewed as outsiders and undemocratic. These views are separate from, but on top of, the harsh anti-Irish sentiment that also spread during the period [5].

At the beginning of the 19th century, the United States was mainly an agricultural and trade-based economy. In the South, the plantation economy that soared off the backs of enslaved peoples grew even more with the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 [6]. As a result, cotton farming became very lucrative for planters in the 1800s. Planters would put all the money they made off of cotton into buying additional land and enslaved peoples, which allowed medium-sized farms to develop into plantations in just a couple of years [6]. While cotton was the most lucrative and popular crop to grow on plantations, they also grew rice and tobacco [6]. As plantations grew to supply the need for more crops, the demand for enslaved peoples kept growing as well. Thus, the slave trade and slave market grew tremendously during this time [6].

While the economy mostly depended on enslaved peoples, the political scene was influenced by slavery as well. Starting before the 1800s and almost until the mid-1800s, “there was a persistent struggle between the planters of the coast (who controlled the wealth of the region) and the free farmers of the interior” [7]. The plantations of the coastal regions had been established for generations, whereas the free farmers of the interior had recently moved and settled into the backcountry of the state. These farmers relied on themselves for labor, rather than using enslaved

peoples. The differences quickly transformed into a power struggle for control over South Carolina:

The tide-water counties retained the political power which they already possessed before this tide of settlement flowed in the backcountry. Refusing to reapportion the legislature on the basis of numbers, they protected their slaves and their wealth against the dangers of a democracy that was interested in internal improvements and capable of imposing a tax upon slave property [7].

Eventually, slavery began to spread inland to the interior of the state [7]. As a means of resolving the political conflict, South Carolina's seat of the House of Representatives and the Senate was split, with each side getting one [7]. A political struggle such as this one, if not resolved, could have been the beginning stages of a moral panic. The free farmers of the interior feared being left with no representation due to the monopoly the coastal planters had on the political scene in the state. On the contrary, the coastal planters feared the free farmers because of the possibility that they might try to propose putting a tax on enslaved peoples. Thus if either side acted on their fear by spreading their fear to others, this state-contained political struggle could have turned into a state-wide moral panic.

While it is evident that the tensions in both the United States and South Carolina were high, none of these incidents are plausible causes of the witchcraft trial of Barbara Powers. The religious conflicts, the War of 1812, and the dispute between the coastal planters vs. interior farmers could arguably cause a moral panic. However, none could plausibly cause a witchcraft trial. On the contrary, it can be argued that the tension, uneasiness, and uncertainty felt due to these incidents, caused people to be more susceptible to accusations of witchcraft than normal.

Race and Gender

Since the race of Barbara Powers is not mentioned in any records, it is imperative to analyze the gender roles and previous witchcraft accusations of both enslaved women and white women as she could have been either. Witchcraft scares can be largely linked to religious beliefs and sexual and racial prejudices of the time. In early-modern Europe, women were widely believed to be more susceptible to the influence of the devil, even being seen as the embodiment of Satan's temptation. Any violation of social norms could be interpreted as the result of Satan's influence (e.g., witchcraft) [8]. Similarly, women in the United States were particularly vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. North Carolina's Phoebe Ward, a suspected witch, exemplifies the treatment of nonconforming women at that time [9]. Phoebe Ward was an elderly vagrant, who slept where she could and begged people for money. Not much was known about Ward besides that she was labeled as being a woman of bad morals [9]. Ward was believed to be a witch, and as such, people were afraid to refuse her request for money, fearing that she would use witchcraft against them. Community members began using methods to keep her away, such as burning red pepper (a common folk remedy for repelling witches) [9]. She is just one example of the many women who were believed to be a witch for no other reason than not conforming to the societal norms of how women were to behave.

The gender roles of women 200 years ago were drastically different. In the early 1800s, the wealthy and middle-class white women's roles were to raise children, support their husbands in every way, and take care of all domestic duties [10]. Essentially, women were meant to be good homemakers, while the husbands were the breadwinners:

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The southern lady became a cultural icon, placed on a pedestal where she would not soil her hands with hard labor. She was described by the scholar Anne Firor Scott as “a submissive wife whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children, and to manage his household” [10].

In these times, a woman’s identity was always tethered to either her father’s or husband’s identity. Any woman who was unwed (excluding widows) was expected to eventually find a husband and bear children [10]. Thus, many women who defied this norm and instead chose to support themselves and live alone were ostracized.

Enslaved persons were another common target of witchcraft accusations. When enslaved peoples were captured and brought to the United States, they brought with them their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. South Carolina in particular had a large population of enslaved peoples due to the agricultural-based economy. By 1720, the population of enslaved peoples in South Carolina had grown by 70%, continuing to grow until almost half of the state’s population was made up of enslaved persons in 1810 [11]. The late 1700s and early 1800s saw several large slave rebellions both inside and outside of the United States, prompting fear and increased feelings of hostility among white slave owners [11].

Practitioners of African religions were believed to heal people and make them almost invincible before a rebellion. The belief in these slave “conjurers” was so widespread that it was believed every large plantation had at least one. It was also believed that conjurers were able to use charms to protect fellow enslaved peoples from punishment or to poison people. White farmers feared that enslaved peoples with magical conjuring powers were invincible. In some cases, these conjurers would have more direct power over enslaved peoples than the slave owners did. “Their command of esoteric forces and other-worldly knowledge allowed them to gain influence over slaves, which resulted in conjurers playing central roles in various acts of slave resistance” [11].

Theoretical Implications

This section will explore moral panics both historic and modern. It is important to discuss moral panics because witchcraft scares are an example of moral panics. Although in modern society and the western world there are no longer any witchcraft scares, there are still moral panics. Exploring past moral panics allows for a better understanding of the phenomenon and a better understanding of future moral panics. At its most simple form, a moral panic can be caused by a person, group, event, or belief that society deems to be a threat, leading to widespread fears which can be short-lived or last for an extended period. Although moral panics can differ broadly in subject, there are common features typically seen in moral panics: a person, group of people, thing, or event causes widespread fear and panics. Following this concern, the person or thing in question is deemed to be evil. The next commonality is that there is a widespread agreement that the person(s) or thing(s) are evil, with most of society reacting negatively. Also, often with moral panics, the seriousness of the topic is overblown. The final common factor in moral panics is for the topic to be extremely volatile, often emerging quickly but also disappearing rapidly [12] [13].

Moral panics can start in a variety of ways, from the general populace or powerful actors such as politicians, special interest groups, the media, or well-known individual(s). Moral panics often start from similar conditions such as: having a widespread and accessible form of communication, media focusing on exciting and shocking stories. Other conditions include a newly reported or discovered form of deviance and/or the preexistence of a group of “outsiders” in society. Most

notably, moral panics often emerge from a society that is going through a period of change or social turmoil [12] [13].

Often, the mass media plays a major role in the beginning stages of moral panics. The first action the media takes in creating a moral panic is exaggerating the topic. The media will then make predictions of what consequences might occur if actions are not taken. The media is not necessarily trying to create a panic; however, news outlets often focus on sensationalized disruptive stories. Once the media begins to report on it, “moral entrepreneurs” or individual people or groups of individuals start to rally for change, which drives those with power such as politicians and courts to examine the phenomena in question; feeding back into and expanding the panic as the media continue reporting on the story. There have been many moral panics in the past century, covering a range of topics such as the spread of communism, immigration, HIV/AIDS, drug use, school shootings, and missing kids (following the kidnapping and murder of Adam Walsh). Many of these scares have repeated themselves, particularly those revolving around immigration, drug use, gun violence, and school shootings [14].

Witchcraft scares are another example of a moral panic. The belief in witchcraft has existed throughout history; for most of that time, people believed that witches could be good or evil. However, due to religious views, that perception changed during the European witchcraft scare [13]. Beginning in the 1300s, people began to believe that so-called “witches” made deals with the devil and received the ability to practice witchcraft for evil. During a 300-year period ending in the 1600s, tens of thousands of people were accused of and executed for supposedly practicing witchcraft. In the United States, the most infamous witchcraft scare was the Salem witch trials. This craze began when three young girls started acting strangely and a doctor said their behavior was due to supernatural elements [15]. The three girls blamed three women for their condition. These three women were brought before the courts where two claimed innocence, but the third confessed to signing the devil’s book and promising to serve him. Her confession was likely an attempt at receiving a lesser punishment. All three women were imprisoned [15]. The woman who admitted to working with the devil said that there were other witches, leading to a panic which over the course of a year saw over 200 people being accused of practicing witchcraft and 20 executions. A year after the panic began, all of those imprisoned for witchcraft were pardoned by the governor of Massachusetts [15].

Today, we continue to see moral panics just as we have in the past. Modern technology makes it easier than ever for a moral panic to begin. We live in an age where people learn about events as they are unfolding, often leading to incomplete information or misinformation as the internet spreads the news. This can cause the formation of beliefs that in many cases are never corrected, even when the full or correct information is presented [16]. Given that it is not the main topic of this paper, we will leave the topic of current and future moral panics to further research to analyze and expand upon the topic.

Conclusions

Given the lack of evidence, we are inclined to believe that the case never truly occurred, however, we will likely never be able to definitively prove if Barbara Powers was accused of witchcraft in 1813 or not. What we do know is that allegations of witchcraft were serious enough to the elite men of South Carolina to be discussed at length in a published letter two decades later. As this paper has demonstrated, the political, social, and historical context of South Carolina at that time provided a space for such claims to be made. International wars, religious movements, slave revolts, and rigid gender roles, coupled with political struggles within South Carolina, created an environment that fostered general and widespread fear. It is reasonable to believe that this fear might have (among other things) culminated into a witchcraft accusation, but we

cannot say for sure whether or not the case was real. Understanding the political and social factors that led to witchcraft scares can help give a better understanding of modern-day “witch hunts” and moral panics. While the last witchcraft trial in the United States may have occurred in upstate South Carolina, it is certainly not the last moral panic to affect the population.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dr. Alex Tepperman for his guidance on this paper.

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