



Salem Witch Judge: The Life and Repentance of Samuel Sewall

By Eve LaPlante

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In 1692 Puritan Samuel Sewall sent twenty people to their deaths on trumped-up witchcraft charges. The nefarious witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts represent a low point of American history, made famous in works by Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne (himself a descendant of one of the judges), and Arthur Miller. The trials might have doomed Sewall to infamy except for a courageous act of contrition now commemorated in a mural that hangs beneath the golden dome of the Massachusetts State House picturing Sewall's public repentance. He was the only Salem witch judge to make amends.

But, remarkably, the judge's story didn't end there. Once he realized his error, Sewall turned his attention to other pressing social issues. Struck by the injustice of the New England slave trade, a commerce in which his own relatives and neighbors were engaged, he authored "The Selling of Joseph," America's first antislavery tract. While his peers viewed Native Americans as savages, Sewall advocated for their essential rights and encouraged their education, even paying for several Indian youths to attend Harvard College. Finally, at a time when women were universally considered inferior to *men*, Sewall published an essay affirming the fundamental equality of the sexes. The text of that essay, composed at the deathbed of his daughter Hannah, is republished here for the first time.

In *Salem Witch Judge*, acclaimed biographer Eve LaPlante, Sewall's great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter, draws on family lore, her ancestor's personal diaries, and archival documents to open a window onto life in colonial America, painting a portrait of a man traditionally vilified, but who was in fact an innovator and forefather who came to represent the best of the American spirit.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In 1692, Salem magistrate Samuel Sewall (1652–1730), along with several others, presided over the conviction and execution of 20 people accused of witchcraft. Five years and much soul-searching later, Sewall publicly repented of his part in the witch trials. Much as she did in *American Jezebel*, the marvelous biography of her 12th-generation ancestor Anne Hutchinson, LaPlante, who counts Sewall as her sixth-great-grandfather, richly narrates his life in its cultural and religious setting. Drawing on Sewall's diaries and stories told by her Aunt Charlotte, LaPlante sketches a compelling portrait of a committed family man, a dedicated magistrate and a deeply religious Puritan confronting his own shortcomings and questioning the doctrines of his religion. After his public repentance, Sewall reconsidered many Puritan teachings and wrote controversial treatises arguing for the equality of Native Americans, women and slaves. LaPlante's splendid biography brings a personal touch to Sewall's story (also recently recounted by historian Richard Francis in *Judge Sewall's Apology*, 2005) and his efforts to take the difficult but righteous path. (*Oct. 1*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Sewall (1652–1730) was an English-born American jurist who presided over the 1692 witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts. Nineteen innocent men and women were hanged, and one man was pressed to death with large stones, the result of trumped-up charges of witchcraft. Some suspects were strangers to Sewall, but others were his friends. For several years, he struggled with a growing sense of shame and remorse and later assumed in public the blame for the executions. He spent much of the remainder of his life trying to restore himself in the eyes of God. Sewall wrote prodigiously and left behind extensive diaries, poems, essays, books, annotated almanacs, ledgers, and letters. His diary, covering the years from 1672 to 1729, was first published in the nineteenth century and is still in print. LaPlante also chronicles the man's later life—Sewall became the author of America's first antislavery tract and published an essay affirming the equality of the sexes. A fascinating account of the man and of daily life in colonial America. Cohen, George

Review

LaPlante's touching biography seems hauntingly timely. Beneath the sensational title is a figure more familiar than we realize. (New York Times Book Review)

An intriguing journey into a world as far away as colonial America - and yet as close as the human heart. (Christian Science Monitor)

"LaPlante's splendid biography brings a personal touch to Sewall's story and his efforts to take the difficult but righteous path." (Publishers Weekly)

"Insightful...a reformative, assenting spin on Salem's hellfire and brimstone history." (Kirkus Reviews)

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