



Killed Strangely: The Death of Rebecca Cornell

Elaine Forman Crane

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"It was Rebecca's son, Thomas, who first realized the victim's identity. His eyes were drawn to the victim's head, and aided by the flickering light of a candle, he 'clapt his hands and cryed out, Oh Lord, it is my mother.' James Moills, a servant of Cornell . . . described Rebecca 'lying on the floore, with fire about Her, from her Lower parts neare to the Arme pits.' He recognized her only 'by her shoes.'"—from *Killed Strangely*

On a winter's evening in 1673, tragedy descended on the respectable Rhode Island household of Thomas Cornell. His 73-year-old mother, Rebecca, was found close to her bedroom's large fireplace, dead and badly burned. The legal owner of the Cornells' hundred acres along Narragansett Bay, Rebecca shared her home with Thomas and his family, a servant, and a lodger. A coroner's panel initially declared her death "an Unhappie Accident," but before summer arrived, a dark web of events—rumors of domestic abuse, allusions to witchcraft, even the testimony of Rebecca's ghost through her brother—resulted in Thomas's trial for matricide.

Such were the ambiguities of the case that others would be tried for the murder as well. Rebecca is a direct ancestor of Cornell University's founder, Ezra Cornell. Elaine Forman Crane tells the compelling story of Rebecca's death and its aftermath, vividly depicting the world in which she lived. That world included a legal system where jurors were expected to be familiar with the defendant and case before the trial even began. Rebecca's strange death was an event of cataclysmic proportions, affecting not only her own community, but neighboring towns as well.

The documents from Thomas's trial provide a rare glimpse into seventeenth-century life. Crane writes, "Instead of the harmony and respect that sermon literature, laws, and a hierarchical/patriarchal society attempted to impose, evidence illustrates filial insolence, generational conflict, disrespect toward the elderly, power plays between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, [and] adult dependence on (and resentment of) aging parents who clung to purse strings." Yet even at a distance of more than three hundred years, Rebecca Cornell's story is poignantly familiar. Her complaints of domestic abuse, Crane says, went largely unheeded by friends and neighbors until, at last, their complacency was shattered by her terrible death.

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