

A WITCH TRIAL IN NYACK (1816)

Dr. Abraham Cornelison, who practiced in West Nyack for many years in the early 19th century, was described as “portly” — in fact, he weighed more than 300 pounds. According to local legend, when he was called to make a house call, he first would fortify himself with a glass of whiskey. Who could blame him? After all, the exhausting life of a country doctor was not for the faint of heart and the challenges often weren’t what had been taught in medical school — consider that in 1816 Dr. Cornelison was asked to participate in a “witch trial.”

Jane Kaniff, known to the locals as “Naut”, was the widow of a Scottish physician and in her later years treated her neighbors with herbs and other folk remedies that she’d learned from her husband. Naut was considered to be eccentric, perhaps because she had a black cat and a talking parrot. A historian writing in 1886 (Green) recalled —

She was odd in dress, preferring colors of wondrous diversity, queer in fashion of arranging her hair. She was unsocial in a neighborhood where every one knew each other, and morose or erratic when forced to meet people...From her deceased husband she had gathered a smattering of medicine, and now, when placed where she could get at the herbs known to her materia medica, she made wondrous decoctions with which she treated such as came to her for aid, and with most excellent results.

Naut lived with her son Tobias, who, like his mother, was eccentric and reticent. The two occupied a small wooden, unpainted building just above the burial ground that adjoined the old Dutch meeting house church on Germonds Road. Some regarded old Naut as being insane – but others said that she was a witch who was influenced by the devil. When strange things began to happen – things such as a cow suddenly producing no milk -- it was decided to put the matter to a test. At a secret meeting, some favored binding her head and foot and then throwing her into the mill pond to see whether or not she floated. If she drowned, it would prove that she was *not* a witch!

But cooler heads said that this was too drastic and also was illegal. So instead she was taken to a nearby grist mill and placed on one side of the great flour weighing scale while an iron-bound, wood-covered family Bible was put on the balancing side. The idea was that if Naut was outweighed by the good book, it would seal her fate as a witch. Perhaps Dr. Cornelison, who may have been disturbed that he was losing potential patients to the witch doctor and her “wondrous decoctions,” agreed to serve as a perhaps not so impartial judge. But Naut easily outweighed the Bible and was exonerated — it’s a good thing that they didn’t put the doctor on the other side — and it was reported that she was “allowed to return to the companionship of her cat and parrot.”

Naut, however, may have had her revenge. Shortly after the trial, a son of the owner of the mill, where the secret meeting was held, was crushed at the mill by a large wooden hammer and some attributed this to Naut for the brutal treatment she had received from her Christian neighbors. The event in West Nyack was the last witch trial in New York State and one of the last held in the country. (The last was the Salem Witch Trial of 1878 — not the one that you’ve heard about which occurred in 1692, but a second Salem trial that involved a complaint of “malicious mesmerism” made by Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, against one of her competitors.)