

The original canvas painting of *The Examination of a Witch* by Tompkins Harrison Matteson, an American portrait artist, hangs in the Portrait Gallery of the Darwin R. Barker Museum. The only other version Matteson painted hangs in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. As such, this painting is a very special part of our museum's collection.

Matteson depicts the story of Mary Fisher, a young girl on trial for witchcraft in 1692 during the height of witch-hunting mania in Salem, Massachusetts. At the painting's first exhibition in 1848, Matteson quoted a part of John Greenleaf Whittier's book on *New England Supernaturalism* as the inspiration for the painting, "Mary Fisher, a young girl, was seized upon by Deputy Governor Bellingham in the absence of Governor Endicott, and shamefully stripped for the purpose of ascertaining whether she was a witch, with the Devil's mark upon her." As a Quaker, Mary Fisher was not welcomed by the Puritans of Massachusetts when her ship landed on their shore. Mary and a fellow Quaker, Ann Austin, were arrested, jailed, refused food, stripped and searched for signs of witchcraft, and deprived of contact with the outside world. No incriminating evidence was found on the women's ship or their body and after five weeks they were released and sent back to England.

Mary and Ann's experiences in Massachusetts were similar to those of other women accused of witchcraft. The Court of Oyer and Terminer was a special court established to try the accused and women who were found guilty were taken to Gallows Hill in Salem Town and hung for their crimes. Confessions of their guilt were solicited by harsh treatment and conditions. The accused were held in cold, damp, crowded cells. Interrogated relentlessly for hours on end, visitors were forbidden, prisoners were kept in chains, stripped searched in a humiliating manner so authorities could look for a witches mark (loosely defined as an unusual blemish on the skin), and at times subjected to physical torture. Many of the accused did not fully know what charges they were confessing to and many if not all confessions were not genuine.

In Puritan New England, there was no room for a woman to elevate her status. Women were commonly described as the "daughters of Eve" for being sexually depraved, moral and intellectual inferiors of men. This attitude towards women made them an easy scapegoat during the witch hunts. Women accused of being witches were typically smart, successful women who had managed to breach the boundaries of their gender. Women have always threatened male authority, and in Puritan New England, many women paid the price for disrupting the social order with their lives.

The museum acquired the painting in 1928, and its catalog number of 120 reveals it as one of our earliest acquisitions. It resides in our collection due to several local connections. First, it was commissioned by William White, the eldest son of the village's first physician and early settler, Squire White. Another Fredonia connection can be traced through the artist's brief tutelage under local painter Alvah Bradish. Matteson's piece is displayed prominently alongside Bradish's portraits of local residents including Squire White, highlighting its financial and artistic origins in Fredonia and ultimately demonstrating the furthest extent of local art's legacy.

On a personal note, I found this painting to be of great interest minutes after entering the museum for the first time. I was first introduced to the history of Witchcraft Trials last Fall in my History Capstone at SUNY Fredonia. I learned not just about the Witch Trials in Salem, MA but also the ones in Europe that pre-dated events in Salem, MA. Although I chose to study King James VI & I and his avid pursuit to eliminate witchcraft in Scotland and England, I later researched the Salem Witchcraft Trials for an oral presentation at the Women's Club of Erie. Needless to say, it has recently become an area of history I am particularly interested in.