

Samuel Sewall

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Although described as a "generous, compassionate. . . man of conscience," the late-seventeenth-century New England Puritan Samuel Sewall sat on the court of judges who condemned nineteen innocent men and women to be hanged as witches during the **Salem witchcraft trials** of 1692. Both Sewall's private diary and the books he published during his lifetime depict his agony over the decisions and his lingering personal distress. Fearful of God's judgment upon himself and his family, he eventually proclaimed his humiliation to God and the Colony in a confession of guilt read before the congregation of South Church in Boston.

Born in England in 1652, Sewall immigrated to Newberry, Massachusetts in 1667. At the age of fifteen, he began theological studies at **Harvard** to obtain a Bachelors degree and he then continued to achieve a Masters degree. The pursuit of a Masters degree for most people meant a calling to the ministry. However, instead of preaching, in 1675 Sewall married Hannah Hull, the daughter of John Hull, a wealthy mint master in Boston, Massachusetts. With this marriage, Sewall inherited business responsibilities, and thus he began the life, which he would continue until his death, as a merchant in Boston. The choice of ministry or merchandise troubled Sewall, but in reality, his decision to become an active apprentice with Hull was inevitable. During this time period, gradually power was moving away from the pulpit and into the hands of the wealthy: the merchants.

With wealth and power came the opportunity, or rather commitment, to public service. Sewall did not shy away from these duties, but rather embraced them. In 1677 he became of member of the South Church in Boston which enabled him to become a freeman [a voting member] of the colony in 1678. In 1684, Sewall was elected to the Court of Assistants (the legislative body of the Massachusetts Bay Colony), and in May of 1692, Governor Sir William Phips appointed Sewall as a commissioner (judge) in the **Oyer and Terminer Court**, a [special] court established to bring to trial those accused of witchcraft. Eventually Sewall would culminate his public life with a seat on the governor's council and an appointment as a justice for the Superior Court of Massachusetts in 1698.

During this era, the colony relied mostly on Biblical authority; thus a judge needed to be instructed in the word of God over that of common law. Hence when Governor Phips appointed he judges for the Court of Oyer and Terminer, Sewall was an ideal choice. He had a strong theological background and the contemporary belief in the devil and witches. As the trials progressed during 1692,

Sewall joined with the other judges (Richards, Gedney, Winthrop, Sargent, Corwin, Stoughton) and condemned nineteen people to death. Yet, an unanswered question remains. Did Sewall feel remorse at the time for these decisions, or did he truly believe that he was acting correctly and in line with Puritan and biblical values? The answer remains unknown since Sewall's diary entries during the trials primarily tell the facts, if even any of those, rather than his thoughts and opinions.

Yet, Sewall's thoughts after the trials are known because of both his diary and public voice. During the five years following the trials, two daughters, Jane and Sarah, died, as did his beloved mother-in-law. In combination with a stillborn child and the public humiliation he sustained from the trials, Sewall experienced constant distress. He truly believed that the witchcraft accusations and trials "the wrath of God visited upon him" as he was a sinner and had not repented (Lovejoy, 358). At this same time, New Englanders recognized the need for reckoning with God. Thus, on January 14, 1697, all parties, including ministers and government officials, agreed to a colony-wide "Day of Prayer and Fasting." On this famous day, the Reverend Willard read to his Boston congregation a confession of guilt written by Sewall himself:

"...as to the Guilt contracted, upon the opening of the late Commission of Oyer and Terminer at Salem (to which the order for this Day relates) he is, upon many accounts, more concerned that any that he knows of, Desires to take the Blame and Shame of it, Asking pardon of Men, And especially desiring prayers that God, who has an Unlimited Authority, would pardon that Sin and all other his Sins; personal and Relative: And according to his infinite Benignity, and Sovereignty, Not Visit the Sin of him, or of any other, upon himself or any of his, nor upon the Land. . . "

In his own words, Sewall begged God for forgiveness and asked that that God "cease visiting his sins upon him, his family, and upon the land" (Lovejoy 360).

Sewall confessed because he believed he had made a "grave error in condemning those tried in the Salem proceedings" and that his belief in the covenant with God would save him (Graham 45). In the covenant, one enters into a bond with God, he sins, is afflicted, repents, is forgiven, and enters back into the covenant (Miller 197). Sewall recognized his sins in condemning innocent people to the gallows. Part of the community's hope with the "Day of Pray and Fasting" was that others, too, would recognize their sins throughout the trials and then repent for their actions. If the whole community asked for forgiveness, perhaps God would shed peace on the fragmented community that had faced crop failure, losses at sea,

epidemics, Indian raids, and the threat of the French. In the end, no other judge offered a confession, but the Salem jurors and several ministers did so throughout the year.

Although Samuel Sewall's name rarely appears in the actual court documents, he was a prominent figure in the Salem witchcraft trials. Not only do Sewall's diary entries recount the events and provide vital information for scholars studying the trials, but his confession plays a significant role since it is one few. **He alone stood before society and proclaimed that society had done wrong. He took responsibility for his actions and thus his outstanding moral character does not diminish because of his mistakes during 1692.**

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From: <http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/people/sewall.html>

The Works of Samuel Sewall

The Diary of Samuel Sewall

For fifty-six years (1674–1729) Samuel Sewall diligently kept a diary that scholars and historians value for its details about colonial culture, including entries about the weather, births, marriages, arrivals, departures, legal proceedings, and deaths in Sewall's Boston community. As a chronicler of his times, Sewall also provided insight into the psychology of Puritan thought, reading the physical world for its spiritual messages. For example:

- Nov. 11 [1675]. Morning proper fair, the weather exceedingly benign, but (to me) metaphoric, dismal, dark and portentous, some prodigies appearing in every corner of the skies.
- June 27th [1685]. It pleaseth God to send Rain on the weary dusty Earth.
- July 15 [1685]. Very dark, and great Thunder and Lightning.
- July, 1 [1707]. A Rainbow is seen just before night, which comforts us against our Distresses.

For Puritans like Sewall, natural events conveyed divine meaning. Thunder and lightning portended the awful power of Providence; rainbows brought reassurance. This duality was both Platonic and biblical, suggesting an ideal world mirrored below and rising a method

called **typology**, where events from the Old Testament foreshadowed those in the present.

As a Puritan, Sewall held to the Doctrine of Preparation and believed he might be called to God at any moment. In order to "prepare," he needed to be in a constant state of self-examination, an onerous and stressful task. David D. Hall points out that although Sewall's notations "represent a mental world very different from our own," the diary also reopens "a world of wonders," as Sewall scanned the skies for divine messages and sincerely tried to reconcile discrepancies.

The Selling of Joseph

In 1700, Sewall wrote an anti-slavery tract, *The Selling of Joseph*, that condemned the slave trade on two main points:

1. that blacks and whites are all descended from Adam and Eve and therefore slavery is anti-doctrinal, and
2. that indentured servitude with the promise of release was a preferable system.

Although there is much to praise about Sewall's pamphlet, ...[his] anti-slavery stand was not necessarily a call for racial equality. Still, the document predated the abolitionist movement by a hundred years and reminds us that the debate began long before the Civil War. In 1721, Sewall wrote *A Memorial Relating to the Kennebeck Indians*, arguing for humane treatment of Indians.

He remained actively involved in his community and entered detailed accounts in his diary to the end. On January 1, 1730, Samuel Sewall died in Boston at the age of seventy-seven.

From:

https://college.cengage.com/english/lauter/heath/4e/students/author_pages/colonial/sewall_sa.html

The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial

*"Caveat Emptor!": The First Anti-Slavery Pamphlet
Published in New England*

Samuel Sewall, a prominent minister and magistrate, published this tract in Boston in 1700, responding to a public controversy over the status of Adam, an enslaved servant held by another magistrate, John Saffin. Saffin had promised Adam his freedom and then reneged on his pledge. Adam contested Saffin's actions in court, and the dispute went on for three years. Adam and his wife finally became free in 1703.

" 'Tis pity there should be more Caution used in buying a Horse, or a little lifeless dust, than there is in purchasing Men and Women: Whereas they are the Offspring of GOD," Sewall writes, extending some fellow feeling to enslaved Africans in New England.

Sewall refutes common contemporary arguments for slavery — "the Africans have Wars with one another: our Ships bring lawful Captives taken in those Wars"; Africans are "brought out of a Pagan Country, into places where the Gospel is Preached" — providing us with a handy list of the ways New Englanders defended enslavement at the time.

Giving with one hand, Sewall takes away with another, making racist secular arguments for the ill effects of slavery on the colony. Even if enslaved Africans were to become free, Sewall writes, "they can seldom use their freedom well," and, he argues, they were obviously not able to integrate—to fight for the colony, or to marry into the general population. Free black people, he writes, would "remain in our Body Politick as a kind of extravasat Blood"—an undesirable and unharmonious presence.

Sewall's pamphlet followed Pennsylvania Quaker George Keith's *An Exhortation and Caution to Friends Buying and Selling Negroes* (1693), becoming the first American anti-slavery tract aimed at a general audience of non-Friends. Only one copy of the Sewall tract survives, in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

SAMUEL SEWALL

*The Selling of Joseph. A Memorial*¹

_____ Boston: 1700 [excerpts] _____

*FORASMUCH as Liberty is in real value next unto Life: None ought to part with it themselves, or deprive others of it, but upon most mature Consideration.*³

The Numerousness of Slaves at this day in the Province [Massachusetts Bay], and the Uneasiness of them under their Slavery, hath put many upon thinking whether the Foundation of it be firmly and well laid; so as to sustain the Vast Weight that is built upon it. It is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of Adam, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life. *GOD hath given the Earth* (with all its Commodities) *unto the Sons of Adam, Psal 115:16.*⁴ *And hath made of One Blood, all Nations of Men, for to dwell on all the face of the Earth; and hath determined the Times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation: That they should seek the Lord. Forasmuch then as we are the Offspring of GOD &c. [etc.] Act 17: 26-29. . . .*

. . . Joseph was rightfully no more a Slave to his Brethren than they were to him: and they had no more Authority to Sell him, than they had to Slay him. And if they had nothing to do to Sell him; the Ishmaelites bargaining with them, and paying down Twenty pieces of Silver, could not make a Title. Neither could Potiphar have any better Interest in him than the Ishmaelites had. Gen. 37: 20, 27, 28. For he that shall in this case plead Alteration of Property, seems to have forfeited a great part of his own claim to Humanity. There is no proportion between Twenty Pieces of Silver and LIBERTY. . . 'Tis pity there should be more Caution used in buying a Horse, or a little lifeless dust, than there is in purchasing Men and Women: Whereas they are the Offspring of GOD, and their Liberty is,

*— Auro pretiosior Omni.*⁴

⁴ ". . . and their Liberty is, — Auro pretiosior Omni" [Latin], i.e., Liberty is more precious than all the gold in the world.

And seeing GOD hath said, *He that Stealeth a Man and Selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to Death.* Exod. 21:16. This Law being of Everlasting Equity, wherein Man Stealing is ranked amongst the most atrocious of Capital Crimes: What louder Cry can there be made of the Celebrated Warning,

*Caveat Emptor!*⁵

And all things considered, it would conduce more to the Welfare of the Province, to have White Servants for a Term of Years than to have Slaves for Life. Few can endure to hear of a Negro's being made free; and indeed they can seldom use their freedom well; yet their continual aspiring after their forbidden Liberty renders them Unwilling Servants. And there is such a disparity in their Conditions, Color & Hair, that they can never embody with us, and grow up into orderly Families, to the

in our Body *Fontick* as a kind of extravasat Blood.⁶ . . . Moreover it is too well known Fines. . . It is likewise most lamentable to think, how in taking Negroes out of *Africa* and Selling of them here, That which GOD has joined together men do boldly rend asunder; Men from their Country, Husbands from their Wives, Parents from their Children. How horrible is the Unclean-ness, Mortality, if not Murder, that the Ships are guilty of that bring great Crowds of these miserable Men and Women. . . . And it may be a question whether all the Benefit received by *Negro* Slaves, will balance the Account of Cash laid out upon them

Obj. 1.⁷ *These Blackamores are of the Posterity of Cham [i.e., Ham], and therefore are under the Curse of Slavery.* Gen. 9:25-27.

Ans. . . . the Blackmores are not descended of *Canaan*, but of *Cush*. Psal. 68:31. *Princes shall come out of Egypt (Mizraim) Ethiopia (Cush) shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.* Under which Names, all *Africa* may be comprehended; and the Promised Conversion ought to be prayed for. *Jer.* 13:23. *Can the Ethiopian change his skin?* This shows that Black Men are the Posterity of *Cush*: Who time out of mind have been distinguished by their Colour. . . .

Obj. 2. *The Nigers⁸ are brought out of a Pagan Country, into places where the Gospel is Preached.*

Ans. Evil must not be done, that good may come of it. The extraordinary and comprehensive Benefit accruing to the Church of God, and to *Joseph* personally, did not rectify his brethren's Sale of him.

Obj. 3. *The Africans have Wars one with another: our Ships bring lawful Captives taken in those Wars.*

Ans. For ought is known, their Wars are much such as were between *Jacob's* Sons and their Brother *Joseph*. If they be between Town and Town, Provincial or National: Every War is upon one side Unjust. An Unlawful War can't make lawful Captives. And by Receiving, we are in danger to promote and partake in their Barbarous Cruelties. I am sure, if some Gentlemen should go down to the *Brewsters* to take the Air and Fish: And a stronger party from *Hull* should Surprise them, and Sell them for Slaves to a Ship outward bound: they would think themselves unjustly dealt with, both by Sellers and Buyers. And yet 'tis to be feared, we have no other kind of Title to our *Nigers*. *Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the Law and the Prophets.* Matt. 7:12.

⁵ Caveat Emptor [Latin]: "Let the buyer beware."

⁶ Extravasat blood, i.e., blood from a ruptured artery or vein filling the body cavity [archaic medical term].

⁷ Sewall presents and rebuts four possible scriptural objections to his anti-slavery position. Objection/Answer #1 deals with the "Curse of Ham," the now-rejected interpretation that the descendants of Canaan (a son of Ham), who had been cursed by Noah for the sin of drunkenness, would suffer enslavement as punishment. (Genesis 9:25: *Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.*) Because dark skin was considered part of the curse, black Africans were deemed to be under the "Curse of Ham," thus justifying their enslavement. Sewall argues that black Africans are not descended from Canaan but from Cush (another son of Ham) whose dark-skinned — and uncursed — descendants, he continues, had populated all Africa.

⁸ Nigers, i.e., black Africans; term related to the west African region of Niger.