

# Witches on Trial

by [George Linkletter](#) on Wednesday, March 28, 2012 at 4:14pm ·

*The Danbury Historical Society hosts a one-woman show humanizing the plight of five women accused of witchcraft*

More than 30 years before the infamous witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, a lesser-known witch hunt occurred in the colony of Connecticut. Approximately 40 women and men were accused and tried of practicing witchcraft. At least 10 were found guilty and executed by hanging.

Intrigued by the phenomena that occurred here between 1642 and 1693, **Virginia Wolf**, an accomplished amateur actress, researched the circumstances and personalities in several of those cases. She is now interpreting the stories through the eyes of five of the accused women. Her show is called *Panic in Connecticut: Accused Witches Have Their Say*.

The result is an enthralling one-woman theatrical performance that describes the various events contributing to the accusations, the flimsy and ambiguous evidence relied on to convict the women, and the near hopelessness of the accused in rebutting the charges.

The **Danbury Historical Society**, as part of its observance of Women's History Month, hosted the 50-minute performance at its museum on Main Street this past weekend.

Dressed in 17th century costume and aided only by a few simple props – a cane, a scarf, a short piece of rope, a ring – Ms. Wolf portrayed the five women in sequence. They ranged from the elderly, to the angry and outspoken, to the young and fearful. In the process she entranced a SRO crowd of 125 as she brought to life the painful stories of Mary Staples, Lydia Gilbert, Judith Varlet, Mary Barnes, and Mercy Disborough.

The first to speak was Mary Staples, a woman in her 70s who helped the audience understand the context of the time. She commented on the harsh life of Puritan New England, the prominent role of religion in everyday life, the distrust of strangers and virtually anything that was out of the ordinary, as well as the settlers' need to explain how God's will was at work, even when accidents or the inexplicable occurred.

Lydia Gilbert emerged next. She had the misfortune to be nearby when a series of unrelated misfortunes occurred – a cow dies, butter spoils, a child becomes ill, a man is accidentally shot. Lydia is accused of being a witch simply because of her proximity with all those misfortunes.

Judith Varlet's real crime seems to be that she was just different from the mainstream. She was of Dutch descent, spoke her mind and dressed in a different fashion than the others. She apparently attracted accusations of witchcraft largely because of her intellect, self-confidence and personal wealth. She was incensed that such jealous, unproven claims could be taken seriously. She marshaled support from prominent friends and successfully defended herself against the charges.

Mary Barnes was accused of adultery. She appeared helpless and even seemed to succumb to the mass hysteria. Lacking self-confidence, she seemed to acquiesce to the charges. Her reasoning? If so many people believe the charges, then they must be true.

If anything, Mercy Disborough was guilty only of being sharp-tongued and perhaps haughty. But that was enough to attract the resentment of others and the false accusation of the teenage daughter of a servant.

*Panic in Connecticut* can be appreciated on several levels. It is a realistic glimpse into daily life during a little understood part of our history. It is a superb theatrical performance by Ms. Wolf. And it is a cautionary tale -- still valid today -- about the importance of tolerance and the danger of gossip.

Information on future performances is available from Ms. Wolf at 860-550-0936 or [vwolfvoa@gmail.com](mailto:vwolfvoa@gmail.com).

