

Beyond the Mayflower: History, Culture, and Encounter in Plimoth Colony

Class 4: Women of Plimoth: Roles, Realities, and Resilience

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The Murder of Martha Clarke, court record of the crime and sentencing with modern spelling.

1648, August 1

At a Court of Assistants held at New Plymouth on August 1, 1648, before Governor William Bradford, Captain Myles Standish, and Gentlemen Assistants William Collier and William Thomas.

These show that on July 22nd, 1648, we, whose names are underwritten, were sworn by Mr. Bradford, Governor, to make inquiry of the death of the child of Alice Bishop, the wife of Richard Bishop.

We declare, that coming into the house of the said Richard Bishop, we saw at the foot of a ladder which leads into an upper chamber, much blood; and going up, all of us, into the chamber, we found a woman child of about four years of age lying in her shift upon her left cheek with her throat cut with diverse gashes cross ways, the wind pipe cut and stuck into the throat downward, and a bloody knife lying by the side of the child, with which knife all of us judged, and the said Alice confessed to five of us at one time, that she murdered the child with the said knife.

John Howland, James Cole, James Hurst, Gyles Rickard, Robert Lee, Richard Sparrow, John Shawe, Thomas Pope, Francis Cooke, Francis Billington, John Cooke, and William Nelson

Rachel, the wife of Joseph Ramsden, aged about 23 years, being examined, said that coming to the house of Richard Bishop upon an errand, the wife of said Richard Bishop requested her to go fetch her some buttermilk at Goodwife Winslow's, and gave her a kettle for that purpose, and she went and did it; and before she went, she saw the child lying abed asleep, to the best of her discerning, and the woman was as well as she had known her at any time; but when she came [back] she found her [Alice Bishop] sad and dumpish; she asked her what blood was that she saw at the ladder's foot; she [Alice] pointed into the chamber, and bid her look, but she [Rachel Ramsden] perceived she [Alice] had killed her child, and being afraid, she refused, and ran and told her father and mother. Moreover, she [Rachel] said the reason that moved her to think she [Alice] had killed her child was that when she saw the blood she looked on the bed, and the child was not there.

Taken upon oath by me, William Bradford, the day and year above written.

At a Court of Assistants held at New Plymouth, the first of August, 1648, before Mr. Bradford, Governor, Mr. Collier, Capt. Myles Standish, and Mr. William Thomas, Gentlemen, Assistants, the said Alice, being examined, confessed she did commit the aforesaid murder, and is sorry for it.

1648, October 4

At the General Court of our Sovereign Lord the King, held at Plymouth aforesaid, the 4th of October, 1648, before Mr. Bradford, Governor, Mr. Timothy Hatherly, Mr. Thomas Prence, Mr. William Thomas, and Captain Myles Standish, Gentlemen, Assistants.

At this Court, Alice Bishop, the wife of Richard Bishop, of New Plymouth, was indicted for felonious murder by her committed upon Martha Clarke, her own child, the fruit of her own body.

The names of the grand inquest that went on trial of the aforesaid bill of indictment, were these: John Dunham, Sr., John Barker, Isaac Weels (Wheels?), Joseph Colman, Mr. Thomas Burne, John Allen, Robert Finney, Thomas Boardman, Henry Wood, James Bursell, Ephraim Hickes, Joseph Tory, James Walker, Michael Blackwell, James Wyatt, Daniel Cole, and Love Brewster.

These found the bill a true bill.

The petty jury's names that went upon her trial were these: Josiah Winslow, Sr., Gyles Rickard, Thomas Shillingsworth, John Shaw, Sr., Anthony Snow, Steven Wood, Richard Sparrow, William Merrick, Gabriel Fallowell, William Brett, Joshua Pratt, and John Willis

These found the said Alice Bishop guilty of the said felonious murdering of Martha Clarke aforesaid; and so she had the sentence of death pronounced against her, that is, to be taken from the place where she was to the place from whence she came, and thence to the place of execution, and there to be hanged by the neck until her body is dead, which accordingly was executed.

Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England. (Commonly referred to as PCR.) Edited by Nathaniel B. Shurtleff. 12 vols. Boston: William White, 1855.