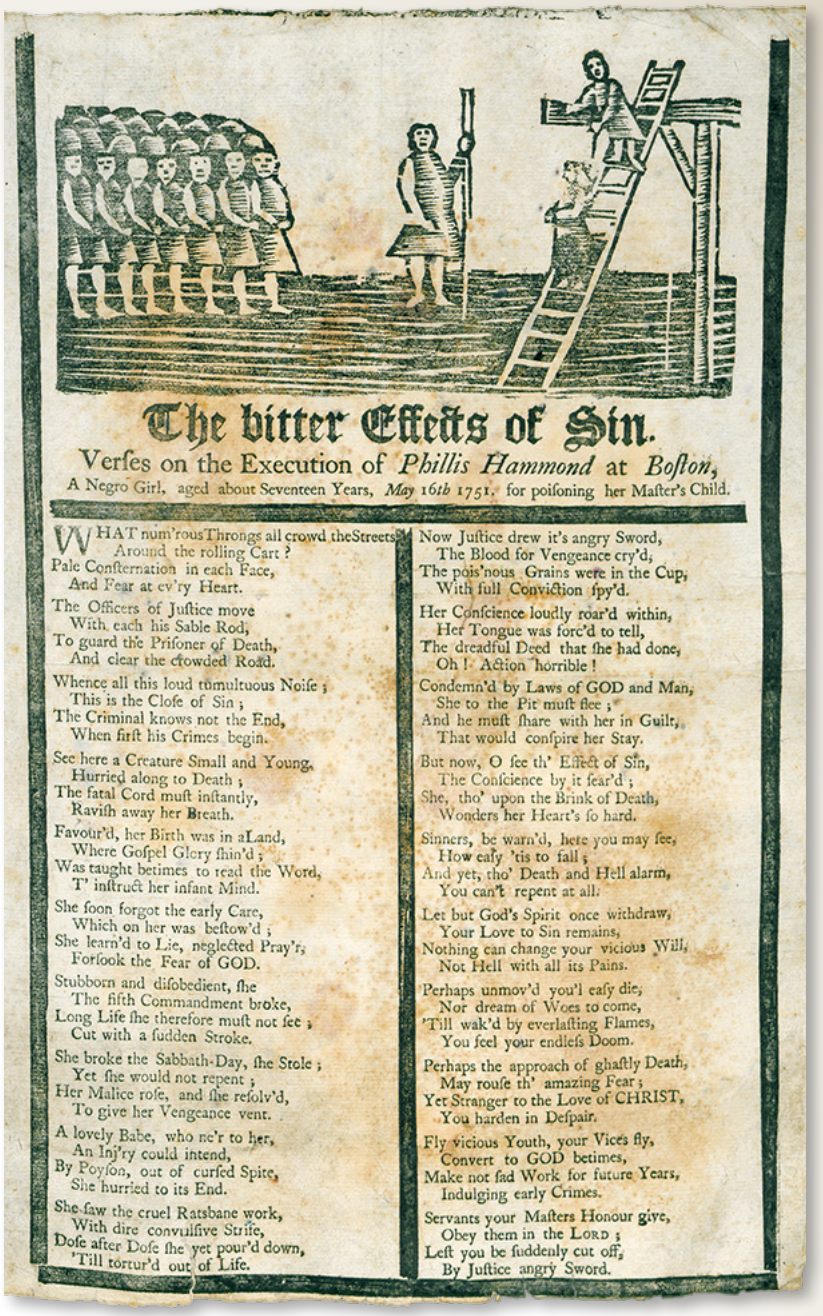
Phillis Hammond's Silence

An Epilogue to the Greenleaf Murder Case



The bitter Effects of Sin.

Verſes on the Execution of *Phillis Hammond* at *Boſton*, A Negro Girl, aged about Seventeen Years, *May 16th* 1751. for poiſoning her Maſter's Child.

WHAT num'rous Throngs all crowd the Streets
Around the rolling Cart?
Pale Conſternation in each Face,
And Fear at ev'ry Heart.

The Officers of Juſtice move
With each his Sable Rod,
To guard the Priſoner of Death,
And clear the crowded Road.

Whence all this loud tumultuous Noiſe;
This is the Cloſe of Sin;
The Criminal knows not the End,
When firſt his Crimes begin.

See here a Creature Small and Young,
Hurried along to Death;
The fatal Cord muſt inſtantly,
Raviſh away her Breath.

Favour'd, her Birth was in a Land,
Where Goſpel Glory ſhin'd;
Was taught betimes to read the Word,
T' inſtruct her infant Mind.

She ſoon forgot the early Care,
Which on her was beſtow'd;
She learn'd to Lie, neglected Pray'r,
Forſook the Fear of GOD.

Stubborn and diſobedient, ſhe
The fifth Commandment broke,
Long Life ſhe therefore muſt not ſee;
Cut with a ſudden Stroke.

She broke the Sabbath-Day, ſhe Stole;
Yet ſhe would not repent;
Her Malice roſe, and ſhe reſolv'd,
To give her Vengeance vent.

A lovely Babe, who ne'r to her,
An Inj'ry could intend,
By Poyſon, out of curſed Spite,
She hurried to its End.

She ſaw the cruel Ratsbane work,
With dire convulſive Striſe,
Doſe after Doſe ſhe yet pour'd down,
'Till tortur'd out of Life.

Now Juſtice drew it's angry Sword,
The Blood for Vengeance cry'd,
The pois'nous Grains were in the Cup,
With full Conviction ſpy'd.

Her Conſcience loudly roar'd within,
Her Tongue was forc'd to tell,
The dreadful Deed that ſhe had done,
Oh! Action horrible!

Condemn'd by Laws of GOD and Man,
She to the Pit muſt flee;
And he muſt ſhare with her in Guilt,
That would conſpire her Stay.

But now, O ſee th' Effect of Sin,
The Conſcience by it fear'd;
She, tho' upon the Brink of Death,
Wonders her Heart's ſo hard.

Sinners, be warn'd, here you may ſee,
How eaſy 'tis to fall;
And yet, tho' Death and Hell alarm,
You can't repent at all.

Let but God's Spirit once withdraw,
Your Love to Sin remains,
Nothing can change your vicious Will,
Not Hell with all its Pains.

Perhaps unmov'd you'l eaſy die,
Nor dream of Woes to come,
'Till wak'd by everlaſting Flames,
You feel your endleſs Doom.

Perhaps the approach of ghaſtly Death,
May rouſe th' amazing Fear;
Yet Stranger to the Love of CHRIST,
You harden in Deſpair.

Fly vicious Youth, your Vices fly,
Convert to GOD betimes,
Make not ſad Work for future Years,
Indulging early Crimes.

Servants your Maſters Honour give,
Obey them in the LORD;
Leſt you be ſuddenly cut off,
By Juſtice angry Sword.

"The Bitter Effects of Sin," May 16, 1751. Courtesy of Nova Scotia Archives.

The background

In "Murder by Arsenic: The Ill-Fated Greenleaf Children and Their Portraits, 1750–1751," a chapter in my 2005 book, *Witches, Rakes, and Rogues: True Stories of Scam, Scandal, Murder, and Mayhem in Boston, 1630–1775*, I set out to investigate a longstanding mystery. I researched whether one or more children of Boston apothecary Dr. John Greenleaf and his wife, Priscilla Brown, had been poisoned and killed in the mid-eighteenth century—something long rumored and even recorded in the 1896 *Genealogy of the Greenleaf Family*. Next to the names of three children in the family—Priscilla (b. 1746), Elizabeth (b. 1748), and John Greenleaf Jr. (b. 1750) author James Edward Greenleaf cryptically noted "Poisoned by a slave nurse."[1]

Some thirty years earlier, the Greenleaf murder case had been discredited as a myth by others. My search, therefore, came in response to a question put to me by a curator from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum at Colonial Williamsburg. Since the Greenleaf children had not been murdered, she queried, what eventually became of them? Ominously, no records of their subsequent lives could be found.

I suspected there might be more to this peculiar story than previously published, but initially, the matter appeared to be settled. In the 1970s, the eminent Boston historian Walter Muir Whitehill and his colleagues at the Boston Athenæum weighed in on the matter: it was reported that not a single original record could be found to substantiate the Greenleaf murder legend. Whitehill's associate, art historian Alfred Frankenstein, went further, stating that the Greenleaf murder was "a complete fiction." The "blood-and-guts of the Greenleaf story," he asserted, was, in his view, "folklore that clings … but [is] considerably less reliable than the truth." With this decree, the story of sordid murder in a family of Boston's mercantile elite had, effectively, been debunked.[2]



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The search

As recounted in two articles in *New England Ancestors* that preceded *Witches, Rakes, and Rogues*,[3] I decided to see if there might be more information on the case. The murderer—if there was in fact a murder—was not identified in any of the few sources that alleged nefarious action had taken place. But through a series of clues, I found that the purported culprit was but a child herself. She was "Phillis" or "Phyllis," an enslaved teenage African American nursemaid of Dr. Greenleaf. Ultimately, the murder case was established by my discovery of the original court record which Whitehill and his associates had likely not located due to the oddity of its placement among the Suffolk County court files. The case was frustratingly short of detail. Phillis was silent during the interrogation. She had apparently already confessed her guilt and was subsequently executed in a public setting.

The discovery of the court record now allowed me to debunk the debunking. Even though my hunch was correct, and one or more murders were legally substantiated, plenty of questions remained unanswered.

The epilogue

Phillis—now identified by her full name, Phillis Hammond—did not speak in her own defense, and we are left with no firsthand accounts or testimony. We know virtually nothing of Phillis's life other than that she was enslaved by the Greenleaf family and that her mother died suddenly a week after Phillis was sentenced to death. Conversely, voluminous documentation exists for the Greenleaf family—a multitude of records and portraits of all the principals in the family—in stark contrast to the nearly total absence of records, or even words, for Phillis Hammond. We know her fate, but we do not know much more than that about her. Was she actually guilty of the crime for which she was executed? Was it an accidental poisoning? What was her experience in the Greenleaf household? In many respects, Phillis remains a mystery, and the lack of her narrative and her undeveloped story has always been a disheartening aspect of the case to me.

But, today, something more is now known about Phyllis—although, once again, through the words of others and not herself.[4] A few years ago, a previously unknown 1751 Boston printed broadside came to light in the Almon Family Fonds in the Nova Scotia Archives. *The Bitter Effects of Sin: Verses on the Execution of Phillis Hammond at Boston, a Negro Girl, about Seventeen Years, May 16th 1751, for Poisoning Her Master's Child* features a woodcut illustration of an execution and a narrative poem through the lens of contemporary Christian values provides an unidentified Bostonian's reaction to this case.

The discovery of this broadside prompted a 2020 study by Jennifer Harris, "Offering Nothing: Phillis Hammond and 'The Bitter Effects of Sin,'"[5] which provides an expansive inquiry into the issues around Phillis's silence. In spite of these new sources, Phillis Hammond may herself remain biographically elusive, for as Harris puts it: "Barring the emergence of a cache of documents, we lack sufficient materials to mount a critical argument about or interpretation of her life."

Nonetheless, gradual discoveries may continue, especially in the genealogical sphere. In particular, I hope that Phillis Hammond, her Boston connections, and her family network will be explored and examined by scholars connected to our 10 Million Names project. A massive but critically needed undertaking, 10 Million Names strives to tell the stories and identify the families and descendants of the approximately ten million individuals enslaved in America from first settlement to Emancipation. I am hopeful that, in time, the family (or even collateral descendants) of Phillis Hammond may be identified and that more pieces of her story and this intriguing yet sorrowful case will emerge. ◆



Witches, Rakes, and Rogues: True Stories of Scam, Scandal, Murder, and Mayhem in Boston, 1630–1775 **by D. Brenton Simons is available from the American Ancestors bookstore for $24.95. Call 1-888-296-3447 or visit shop.AmericanAncestors.org.**

NOTES

1 James Edward Greenleaf, *Genealogy of the Greenleaf Family* (Boston: Frank Wood, 1896), 210.

2 D. Brenton Simons, "Murder by Arsenic: The Ill-Fated Greenleaf Children and Their Portraits," *Witches, Rakes, and Rogues: True Stories of Scam, Scandal, Murder, and Mayhem in Boston, 1630–1775* (Beverly, Mass.: Commonwealth Editions, 2005), 136–142.

3 D. Brenton Simons, "Murder in Colonial Boston: The Ill-Fated Greenleaf Children and Their Portraits. Part One," *New England Ancestors* 1, nos. 5-6 (2000): 11–15; and Part Two, *New England Ancestors* 2, no. 1 (2001): 17–19.

4 The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge and thank Philippe Halbert, PhD, of the Wadsworth Athenæum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, for his kind assistance and for bringing the discovery of the "Bitter Effects of Sin" broadside to the author's attention.

5 Jennifer Harris, "Offering Nothing: Phillis Hammond and 'The Bitter Effects of Sin,'" *Early American Literature* 55, no. 2, (2020), 395–418. The present author gratefully acknowledges this fine study and agrees in almost all respects with Harris, apart from conjectures as to the intent and scope of the original research on the Greenleaf murder case.

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