

VERMIN

If there is a stain on the record of our forefathers, a dark hour in the earliest history of the American colonies, it would be the hanging of the so-called “witches” at Salem. But this was a pinpoint in place and time—a brief lapse into hysteria. For the most part, our 17th century colonists were scrupulously fair, even in fear.

There was one group of people they feared with reason—a society, you might say whose often insidious craft had claimed a multitude of victims, ever since the middle ages in Europe. One group of people, were hated and feared from Massachusetts Bay to Virginia. The magistrates would not burn them at the stake, although surely a great many of the colonists might have recommended such a solution. Our forefathers were baffled by them.

In the first place, where did they come from? Of all who sailed from England to Plymouth in 1620, not one of these two legged vermin was aboard.

“**Vermin.**” That’s what the colonists called them. Parasites who fed on human misery, spreading sorrow and confusion wherever they went. “Destructive” they were called. And still they were permitted coexistence with the colonists. For a while, anyway. Of course, there were colonial laws prohibiting the practice of their infamous craft. Somehow a way was always found around those laws.

In 1641, Massachusetts Bay colony took a novel approach to the problem. The governors attempted to starve those “devils” out of existence through economic exclusion. They were denied wages, and thereby it was hoped they would perish. Four years later, Virginia followed the example of Massachusetts Bay, and for a while it seemed that the dilemma had been resolved. It had not. Somehow, the parasites managed to survive, and the mere nearness of them made the colonists’ skin crawl.

In 1658 in Virginia the final solution: Banishment. Exile. The “treacherous ones” were cast out of the colony. At last after decades of enduring the psychological gloom, the sun came out and the birds sang and all was right with the world. And the elation continued for a generation.

I’m not sure why the Virginians eventually allowed the outcasts to return, but they did. In 1680, after 22 years, the despised ones were readmitted to the colony on the condition they be subject to the strictest surveillance. How soon we forget! For indeed, over the next half century or so, the imposed restrictions were slowly, quietly swept away. And those whose treachery had been feared since the middle ages ultimately took their place in society.

You see, the “**Vermin**” that once infested colonial America, the parasites who preyed on the misfortune of their neighbors until they were officially banished from Virginia, those dreaded, despised, outcast masters of confusion were **lawyers!**

From Paul Harvey’s “The Rest of The Story”