



NEW ENGLAND: ABBOT'S HOUSE, ESSEX COUNTY, MASSACHUSETTS.

Gwen: this week, "history detectives" comes from New England, and our first investigation starts in Essex County, Massachusetts. This colonial-era house is shrouded in a mystery that dates back to the Salem Witch trials. Could it have once belonged to an accused witch? I'm Gwen Wright and I've come to Essex County to investigate this story.

The history of the house was a major attraction for the owners, Dean and Joan Kemper.

Dean Kemper: We gave up our jobs in San Francisco and moved here for this house.

Joan Kemper: Well, this house was here long before we were born, and it's our hope it'll be here long after we're gone. The mystery surrounds the ownership history of the property. A plaque over the door states that Benjamin Abbott built the house in 1685. But the Kempers have heard that an accused witch named Martha Carrier might have owned the property during that time. So what's the real story?

Joan: This is the dining room, originally the great hall.

Gwen: Wow, where everything happens in a house like this.

Joan: Exactly. It's a wonderful place. Benjamin Abbott built this house supposedly in 1685. We have a plaque over the door, and he accused his neighbor, Martha Carrier, of being a witch, and she put a hex or a spell on him.

Gwen: And what happened to Martha? Was she tried?

Joan: She was tried in Salem and she was accused of being a witch and she was hung.

Gwen: But did Benjamin Abbott have an ulterior motive in accusing Martha Carrier of witchcraft?

Joan: In that time, we've been given to believe, that if a person was, in fact, convicted of being a witch, the accuser would take their land. What we'd like to know is: was this original Carrier property that became the Abbotts' after Martha was executed?

Gwen: I've always been fascinated by the Salem Witchcraft Trials, but I've never heard this story. Was the property of accused witches handed over to the accusers once they were convicted? I need to find out more about the witch trials themselves, and the place to start is Salem. In the 1690s, life was changing fast in New England. Small town social tension erupted in the Salem Witch Trials. Martha was one of 140 men, women and children accused of witchcraft. Those who escaped execution did so by pleading guilty, but Martha maintained her innocence to the end. She was executed here on Gallows Hill, Salem, on August 19th, 1692. So if Martha did own this house, it must have been built before 1692. The local historical society's plaque says it was built seven years earlier, in 1685. But the Kempers have told me that this date was based on oral histories, and not concrete evidence. I need to take a look around the house to see if I can date it more accurately. The style and structure suggest the Puritan era, but rooms have been added on over the centuries. So the first thing to do is identify the oldest room. This lean-to would have been added on to create more storage space, so it's definitely not the oldest room. We're here in the parlor, the second ground-floor room, and the wall here is very typical of late medieval English and American practice. Wattle and daub used to fill in between the wood frame. Wattle and daub was a mixture just thrown together of mud and sand and straw to provide some insulation. But this doesn't tell us much, because it was used for several hundred years on many houses well through the 18th century. A parlor this luxurious was unusual in those days, so this one may have been added later. In Puritan houses, this room, the hall, was usually built first, so I'd say it's probably the oldest part of the house. But if it was built in the 1680s, there's one feature that doesn't add up. Look at this fireplace. There's detailing around the fireplace, and it's enormous. This fireplace is probably 9' long. That is a sign that might suggest an 18th-century house. An 18th-century house typically had a very large fireplace because it was extravagant. It was a move away from the functionalism of the early colonists. I sense a bit of excess. What I need to do is nail precisely when this part of the house was built, and there's only one way to do that. So I'd like to try a dendrochronology test. "Dendro" is Greek for tree and "chronology" is a way of dating, so it's using the process of dating a tree

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by counting the rings, to look at the wood in your house. And the person I know is an expert on this in England. He's done houses and castles and manor houses.

Joan: ...and they're still standing?

Gwen: And they're still standing. Michael Worthington is one of the top dendrochronologists in the world. He's flown in from his laboratory in Oxford, England, where he's dated the wood used to build Oxford Castle and Salisbury Cathedral. Now his mission is to do the same for the Kempers' home.

Hi, Michael. Come on inside. If we can get enough samples out of this building, we can date it to the year of felling, so the date the tree was felled. And we know, because they were using hand tools, that the building would have been constructed within six months to a year of that date, so it's very precise. First, Michael has to find suitable wood to test. He's focusing his attention on the hall, which I maintain is the oldest room in the Kempers' home.

Michael Worthington: Down at the bottom here, I think we're going to sample it just in here. Hopefully that will be a good piece of wood. Hundreds of rings in here. What I have to do is have a really good look at that and see if I can find somewhere else where I can sample it. We might be able to get a precise date for this beam and if we do, what it will do is it'll take...

Gwen: Since the house was built in at least three stages, Michael needs to collect 6-10 good samples from each part. Each cigar-sized sample will take us back over 300 years, telling us exactly when the trees were felled and the house was built.

Michael: Here we go. It's hot...look at that...that's fantastic. You can see the rings in there. What I'll do is I'll get a big belt sander and actually sand the face off.

Gwen: Okay, so that's how you'll do it.

Michael: And we'll use finer and finer grits and eventually get a mirror finish. And you'll be able to see each individual ring and then we'll be able to measure them under a microscope and be able to start doing some work with them. That's exciting.

Gwen: While our precious samples head off to England for testing, I've returned to Salem. I want to find out more about the key character in this investigation, Martha Carrier. The Peabody Essex Museum holds the original transcripts from the Witch Trials, over three centuries ago. These are the original documents of Martha's trial as a witch. Here we have "the examination of Martha Carrier, 31 May, 1692". "Abigail Williams, who hurt you? Goody Carrier." So we have a sense of anger and suspicion. But what's very striking, when we come across Benjamin Abbott's is, he's not the only person to accuse her. There are over 12 depositions that have been taken here, including two of Martha's own children. But let's go and look at some more detail in Benjamin's deposition. Abbott says, "then having some land granted to me "near to good man Carrier's his land, "and when this land came to be laid out, "good wife Carrier was very angry, "and she caused a pain in my foot and a pain in my side exceedingly tormented." So he's claiming that it is an issue about land that starts this and then she, as a witch, is able to hurt him. Let's see if land is mentioned in any of the other depositions. Here's one by Alan Toothaker. Here it is. "Sayeth I heard

Martha Carrier say that Benjamin Abbott "would wish he had not meddled with that land so near our house." so Alan Toothaker was a witness to what must have been an intense dispute about land between Martha and Benjamin.

So with more than one accuser, Martha certainly wasn't the most popular person in town. But why? The archive at the Town Hall might give us a clue. First, there's the record of her marriage to Thomas Carrier. Thomas Morgan, alias Carrier, married Martha on March 4, 1674. Only two months later, Martha and Thomas have a child. So Martha's first child was conceived out of wedlock and with a much older man, who was a servant. That would have raised a few eyebrows in 17th-century Essex County. But much worse was to come. Martha and her family were accused of spreading a disease that could wipe out whole communities: smallpox. The town tries to force out Martha and her family because they have smallpox. There's fear of an epidemic because of

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her wicked carelessness. And in fact, 13 people in the town die of smallpox the next year, including Martha's father and two of her brothers. It's getting more and more clear why Martha was accused of being a witch. Already unpopular, the smallpox outbreak would have sealed her fate. The Puritans believed the epidemics ravaging their communities were a sign that God was punishing them for the wickedness in their midst. They were scared and looking for scapegoats. Martha fit the bill. We know that Martha had been in a land dispute with Benjamin Abbott, and we know that he was one of her accusers. But I still don't have any proof that Martha's property passed to Benjamin after her death. I hope Michael's having more luck over in Oxford, England, dating the wood from the Kempers' house.

Michael: If we look down a microscope, as we know, trees in temperate climates produce an annual ring each year. So we're measuring -- what we actually do is, looking across that, begin the ring there, clear that, and we measure to the beginning of the next spring vessel and that gives us an accurate measurement for that. Over a period of 50 years, that will build up a unique sequence. That unique sequence is really important for dendrochronology.

Gwen: Michael compares a carefully measured sequence from the wood taken from the Kempers' house with a collection of tree samples from Massachusetts that are already known to be about 300 years old.

Michael: I'm actually very pleased with this material. And what it's going to be able to give us is actually precise dates for each of the phases, and I think also we're actually going to be able to get the season of the felling of the trees.

[phone rings]

Gwen: Hello?

Michael: Hi, Gwen, it's Michael here, from the Oxford lab.

Gwen: Hi, Michael, how are you?

Michael: I'm fine, thanks. I've got some dates for you.

Gwen: Let me get a pen, hold on.

Michael: What we've got is, on the east range, the dining room area, we've got a timber there that was felled in the winter of 1710 to 1711.

Gwen: Oh. Yeah, it is a lot later than we thought, isn't it?

Michael: Well, I'm not surprised, but I certainly think they will be.

Gwen: The dendrochronology test that Michael did establishes definitively that the house began as a one-room house, this hall, that was built in 1711. So the house was built after both Martha and Benjamin had died.

Dean: Interesting.

Joan: I'm disappointed.

Gwen: In what sense?

Joan: Well, I wanted it to be the oldest house in town.

Gwen: I can understand.

Joan: It is no longer the oldest house in town.

Gwen: It's a great old house.

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Joan: Yeah, it is. It certainly doesn't make it any easier to maintain. Unfortunately.

Gwen: The Carriers never recovered from being branded a witch family. After Martha was executed, her husband moved to Connecticut, taking the surviving children with him. Now, almost 300 years later, I've brought one of her descendants back to visit the house. Joan and Dean, I'd like for you to meet Diane Fowles, who is the 10th-generation descendent of Martha Carrier.

Joan: Oh, wonderful! Oh, my, it's wonderful to meet you! What a nice surprise! Oh, great.

Gwen: Martha's home was like this. It was a garrison home. It was clapboard; it was rough. There's so many books describing witchcraft hysteria, and yet so little that describes what life was like here, what it was like to stand in a house like this. Judging by the dendro results, we're pretty sure that Benjamin Abbott, Jr., built the house six years after his father died in 1705. For many years, the Abbott family continued to be prosperous land owners in the county.

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