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Child Eaters and Other Problems of Democracy

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“They were detected in the act of witchcraft,” declared the governor of the Nambé pueblo. “The deceased confessed they had been guilty of witchcraft and sorcery – they had eaten up the little children of the Pueblo.” For their crimes, the two necromancers – Luis Romero and Antonio Tafolla – were taken north of the Nambé territory and executed by shotgun in March 1854. The nascent American territorial administration, however, did not recognize the crime of witchcraft, and soon had the witches’ executioners on trial for murder. That in turn brought about the governor’s testimony on the sorcerer’s purported pediaphagy, and his declaration in open court that “By my order and with the consent of all the principal men of the Pueblo the two men were put to death. They were killed on my command.”

The deaths in Nambé were not outliers; witch executions followed the American frontier from the moment of American indepedence through the supposed “closing” of the frontier in the early twentieth century. Beginning with the Senecas in the 1790s and continuing west to the Shawnees, Chocktaws, Pueblos, Navajos, and Zunis, witch hunts spread west with the political expansion of the United States. For decades, historians hailed this expansion as the spread of democracy and liberty. Only comparatively recently have American historians come to see westward migration as an enterprise of colonialism and dispossession. It also became an enterprise of witch hunting. This essay examines the Pueblo witch hunts of 1854 as a case study that reveals the typical nature of witchcraft and witch hunts among Native Americans in the great age of American expansion, 1783–1900.

If witchcraft is (among other things) a working-out of old and new ideas of power, as Stuart Clark and other European historians have argued, then it is not surprising that it erupted in New Mexico in 1854. In just over thirty years, this rocky kingdom at the fraying edge of the Comanche, Spanish, and American empires had been ruled by Spanish colonial appointees, absentee leaders from Mexico City, a military junta, and an endless series of political appointees from a United States stumbling through a political and sectional crisis. These changes were perhaps most dramatic for the manifold Pueblo polities – the towns occupied by Native Americans speaking related languages and exercising some degree of autonomy; “Pueblo” was a Spanish misnomer which eventually took on ethnic and bureaucratic significance. The “Pueblo” lived in pueblos, but each pueblo was home to a distinct community. The Nambé
Pueblos were different from the Isleta Pueblos, for example, but all Pueblo communities received the same treatment under Spanish law. The Mexican Revolution of 1821 officially made the Pueblos citizens of Mexico, but in practice, the New Mexicans ruled themselves, and largely left the Pueblos to themselves. American occupation and annexation revoked that right, though the Pueblos were often promised self-government by territorial officials. The 1854 trial – and the subsequent verdict of “not guilty” – emerged during a critical transformation of the political and legal situation of the Pueblos of New Mexico; it was an emblematic struggle of jurisdiction and of justice.2

Of course, the Pueblos did not invent their witchcraft problem in order to take on the American government; Juan Ygnacia Tafolla, the governor, explained in his testimony that “We have not exercised this custom, of killing witches, since the Americans came here, because there had not been such bad doings before.” One white observer thought Tafolla “simple-minded” for thinking that “the killing of two men was a matter of duty instead of a crime,” but Tafolla remained steadfast in his office: “It has always been our custom to put a stop to and check bad acts.”3 Witchcraft had a long history in the American Southwest, part of an intricate pattern of supernatural beliefs that shaped the world of the Pueblos, if not their nominal American overlords. Official witchcraft accusations had been lodged in 1822 against Juan Inocencio of the Nambé pubelo, who confessed he could bring about madness by crafting a mixture of feathers, cotton, and the hair of the victim. Such ideas suggest traditional “shooting magic” of several Native American nations. Yet untangling “traditional” Pueblo beliefs about witchcraft is difficult; Malcolm Ebright and Rick Hendricks have written regarding the mass arrests for sorcery and demon possession in Abiquiu, New Mexico, from 1756–1767, that “what Spaniards called ‘witchcraft’ was actually resistance to priests . . . who were attempting to eradicate the native belief systems and convert the Indians to Catholicism.”4 Yet though witch troubles antedated the American occupation, Tafolla saw the issue as one of politics, not magic: “We have always governed ourselves as an independent community.”5

The strange case of Nambé was the result of conflicting jurisdictional battles; Nambé’s witchcraft trial confirmed its right to self-rule, and this legitimation in turn affected the American conquest of the Southwest. The question raised by the Nambé trials was in part the question of witchcraft and self-governance, which has received recent scholarly attention in other subfields. Outbreaks of witchcraft in postcolonial Africa and Asia – and the disastrous Manhattan Beach witchcraft panics of the 1980s – have provided sobering reminders that witch trials are not merely the province of the early modern world.6

American frontier historiography has little time for witchcraft, more comfortable as it is with questions of race, class, and environment. Such reticence regarding witchcraft is typical for American historiography more broadly. American history’s interest in witchcraft often begins and ends with 1692; works that mention witchcraft beyond Salem routinely base their investigations in the historiography of Salem, which in turn is dominated by Keith Thomas’ Religion and the Decline of Magic. Subsequent scholarship on that “decline” has largely gone unnoticed by Americanists. Thomas’ work more or less places the end of witchcraft conveniently around the time of Salem, and therefore most Americanists have interpreted later witch outbreaks, as Karl Bell writes, as “a few anachronistic examples . . . dismissively associated with uneducated
Most works on Salem begin with the assumption that preexisting social and economic conditions in Salem provoked the witch trials. To understand 1692, “we must take a close look at Salem Village before its moment of notoriety,” according to *Salem Possessed*, the most famous entry in this school of witchcraft historiography. Witchcraft accusations resolve previously established social (or economic, theological, or gender) fissures; witchcraft functions, in Mary Beth Norton’s phrase, as “a replacement crime.” American historians have largely assumed, as Thomas did, that the rise of elite critiques brought an end to witchcraft belief, and therefore, in Jon Butler’s words, America “turned a modern corner” when Massachusetts refused to prosecute a witch in 1720.

Such an outlook does not match the actual facts of the American frontier experience. As Owen Davies notes, more people were killed for witchcraft after 1692 than were executed during the colonial period, not by the state, but by vigilantes, mobs, and ad-hoc extralegal courts – all mainstays of frontier justice. Moreover, witch trials seem to have followed the American frontier. As the inchoate line of white settlement pushed further west, witch trials and panics broke out among the Delawares (1763–64), Senecas (1799–1821), Shawnees (1806), Choctaws (1819–34), Pueblos (1854), and Navajos (1878). White communities attacked or murdered witches in Maine (1796), South Carolina (1813–14), Tennessee (1831), and western Virginia (1838), among many others.

Witchcraft walked along the frontier’s violent path across the continent. Indeed, considered in the light of more recent European historiography, witchcraft would seem to be connected with two very central questions of the frontier experience and historiography: jurisdictional conflict and state formation. The very concept of “nation” remained an idea more than a reality in the eighteenth century; American “nationhood” was a solution to the problem of a decentralized federal empire of Jeffersonian America. Jefferson and his allies imagined the nation as a binding material distinct from the centralized British government from which they had declared independence – but they had to create the nation first. For most of the nineteenth century, the trans-Mississippi West remained “flexible and contingent.” Anne F. Hyde has explained the conflicting levels of loyalty on the American frontier and the limits to effective power those conflicts implied: “Residents of the West seemed quite ambivalent about nationality, easily claiming new citizenship” whenever required, since “no one knew which empire or nation would finally impose control.” The extension of the American state across a vast swath of the continent was largely a process of negotiation and violence; the frontier was a zone where the displays of power legitimated and confirmed arrangements of rule.

Stuart Clark’s *Thinking with Demons* addressed similar questions regarding European demonologists: “In describing witchcraft as a social evil authors necessarily invoked a conception of the social order . . . they committed themselves to views about authority and about the general desirability of certain forms of rulership.” Rulers invoked and performed such views when they successfully rid the countryside of witches; “the criminality of the witch,” Clark writes, “was the product of political values and relations of power.” Successful elimination of witchcraft troubles could justify new or extreme political arrangements. The rise and fall of new political regimes and the establishment of legitimate authority were periennial problems in the American republic and the American frontier, 1776–1861. Witchcraft had interposed in
these questions in early modern Europe, and it also did so on the nineteenth-century American frontier.  

Existing historiography on witchcraft among Native Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth century has not recognized the jurisdictional aspects of witch trials. Much of the work on this subject has focused on the “prophets” – Native American leaders who advocated and preached that a formerly obscure god called the Master of Life had returned to lead Indians to a new golden age. Most prominently, these leaders included Neolin (active 1762–63), Handsome Lake (1799–1815), Tenskwatawa (1806–36). Each of these men made widespread witch accusations or adjudicated witch trials at some point in their careers. Historiography on the prophets has been dominated by Anthony Wallace’s theory of revitalization – the notion that cultures under duress produced new religious leaders. These “hallucinatory” leaders manipulated religion to justify changes in the society’s way of life, even as they claimed to restore traditional practices. Religion acted as a cover for cultural change and renewal. Such interpretations betray a realist approach to witchcraft (and religion) – there must be some real reason for the objectively false belief in witchcraft. As such, works in this vein spend little time analyzing the content of witchcraft belief or the preferred political factors associated with controlling witchcraft. Instead, there is usually something else going on; the trials of Tenskwatawa “strengthened cultural integration” while Seneca witch trials of 1820 were a “tacit acceptance of Euro-American misogyny.” As with Salem, witch trials are seen as a replacement for some other, real conflict in the community. Such interpretations favor the origins of witch trials rather than their effects. Moreover, this approach overshadows the ways witch trials or witch accusations often emerged as a point of legal conflict – between Native American legal practices (traditional or novel) and U.S. legal codes, particularly those involving self-government. Such a conflict was particularly acute in the witchcraft crisis of 1854.

Archival materials from the American territorial period of New Mexico are thin, perhaps because, as Adolph Bandelier discovered in 1880, the archives had been “thrown into an outhouse.” From 1847–54, New Mexico had seven separate American administrations – four governors, two acting governors, and one military headman. The instability was partially bad luck – Charles Bent was assassinated, James Calhoun resigned due to illness – but also by design. The fractious politics of the Jacksonian era required new political appointments for separate presidential administrations – of which there were four in that same time span. Record-keeping suffered accordingly. Other factors compounded administrative weakness. The Department of Indian Affairs was transferred from the War Department to the Interior Department in 1849. Security and monetary concerns hobbled the New Mexican governors as they fought the Jicarilla Apaches and the Navajo. Calhoun wrote deploringly to President Fillmore that “our Treasury is empty and we are without munitions of war.” Calhoun’s successor, William Carr Lane, warned his legislators that “We are very distant, from the States – difficult of access – and surrounded by barbarians, of doubtful faith . . . and your own people are so badly armed.” Lane also inveighed against the “unreasonable jealousies and bickerings . . . between the natives of the country, and the immigrants” Lane meant, of course, natives of “Castillian or Anglo-Saxon” descent, not Native American. All governors accepted the necessity of military defeat of those
whom Calhoun referred to as “the wild Indians,” whose “daring and impudence are equalled only by their success in their butcheries.”

Yet Calhoun’s warning against “wild Indians” also included a reference to “our Pueblo friends,” indicating that the Americans recognized the Spanish classification of Pueblo peoples as a distinct group separate from both whites and other Indians. What remained unclear was whether the Americans would acknowledge the further Mexican recognition of Pueblo citizenship outlined in the 1821 constitution.

Political rhetoric of the early 1850s suggested they would not. Calhoun told his legislature that the Pueblos were “in our midst” and “rightfully . . . without authority to mingle in our political affairs.” Calhoun was particularly irritated at the Pueblos’ presumed immunity from taxation, and advised the legislators “to pass an act authorizing the extension of the laws of the Territory over the Pueblo Indians,” the same political stance that had allowed a host of American politicians to pursue removal policies against the Indian nations of the east. Lane was even more explicit: independent pueblos represented “an imperium in imperio” – the terminology for a state-within-a-state, that republican rhetorical bugbear that had accompanied so many efforts to strangle autonomous political movements in the early republic.

Governors talked tough, but in practice they had few options. With Comanche, Apache, and Navajo raids besieging the territory, none of New Mexico’s rulers wanted to start trouble with the Pueblos. Calhoun repeatedly declined opportunities to interfere in Pueblo matters. In March 1851, he proclaimed that the Pueblo at Taos “had the exclusive right to practise their own laws and customs,” up to and including the right to remove those who moved onto their lands without their consent. A month later, when an Isleta delegation complained of the monetary demands of keeping their priest, he told them to revert to “such tithes and fees as they saw proper.” In June 1850, Calhoun wrote to all Pueblo groups that “the internal affairs of your Pueblos shall be governed by your laws and customs and by the same authorities which each Pueblo has elected.”

The Pueblos seem to have taken Calhoun’s advice. Fragmentary evidence from early 1850s suggests the Pueblo Indians took an active role in promoting their own citizenship – which, after all, had been promised to them in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In 1852, the Pueblos at Santa Clara worked through the governor’s office to protect their water rights. Lane constantly dealt with governors of various pueblos, adjudicating land disputes between whites and Pueblos and among Pueblos themselves. In 1854, Governor Meriwether even reported, dourly, “that in some parts of the Territory the Pueblo Indians were permitted to vote at the late election.”

Thus by 1854, institutional weakness and the encroachment of Apaches, Comanches, and Navajos resulted in de facto self-government for the Pueblos of New Mexico. In some ways, the American regime had recreated the old Spanish model of governance, with Pueblos holding a distinct place above other Indians but below citizens of European descent. Yet American preoccupations did not mean U.S. authorities were pleased with the situation. It was under this kind of tenuous self-rule that Luis Romero and Antonio Tafolla were brought before the Nambé council in March 1854 under suspicion of witchcraft.

Official court documents of the case are astonishingly brief, listing little more than the three defendants, the charge, and the verdict. They did note that “both the defendants and part of their witnesses were indians and did not speak either
the Spanish or English languages,” and that an interpreter was duly sworn. That interpreter very likely saved the case from oblivion, since it allowed the journalist and politician W.W.H. Davis to follow the proceedings. Davis then printed a fuller account of the proceedings in the Santa Fe Gazette, and later wrote about the episode in his 1857 memoir. “Who would have thought,” he wondered, “that the cruel scenes of Salem would have been enacted in this distant region of the world, and that too, in the middle of the nineteenth century?”

Davis spent little time worrying about the prologue to the witch murders, but oral accounts gathered later in the century offered further details. Jean-Baptiste Salpointe, the Frenchman and future archbishop, sketched a brief account of the episode in the 1870s. Bandelier (the German ethnographer) interviewed Juan Luján and a Pueblo woman named Chino in 1888; he preferred Luján’s account since Luján had been “present at least at a part of the Tragedy.”

These accounts describe a severe smallpox outbreak prior to the trial; many died “and the terror was great.” During the outbreak, two Indians of Nambé discovered a third man, Fi-ué, drawing sigils in the dirt, whispering sounds, and fiddling with crow feathers. Chino said that the suspected witch stopped at the house of a sick man, the graveyard, and the door of church, each time performing a short ritual with crow, owl, and woodpecker feathers. “The idea came into their minds suddenly,” according to Luján, “that Fi-ué was a witch.” Brought before the governor of Nambé, Fi-ué confessed to witchcraft, and implicated two other men (Ca-tszi-ré and Cá-ya-mo). At some point, the three witches – after being beaten “to a Jelly” – also accused an unidentified individual in another pueblo. Both Luján and Chino agreed, however, that this final accusation was merely a ruse to throw suspicion off Juana Chávez, “the head witch.” Perhaps the Nambé Indians became wise to the deception, or perhaps the suspicions surrounding Chávez were too great. She was seized and stoned to death; her corpse was disfigured and hung on a tree.

At this point, a Catholic priest named Trujillo arrived after hearing news of the trial, and pleaded for mercy towards the accused. He interviewed the witches about their practices, and – according to Luján, his companion – the men were surprisingly forthcoming about their magic. They confessed to using bones and mushrooms to transform into animals, burying bones to bring disease upon the pueblo, and throwing arrowheads into the water supply to poison it. Their objective, apparently, was to “do away with the inhabitants of the village and remain afterwards the sole owners of the land.” Trujillo burned their implements as satanic devices, and received a promise from the people not to act against the witches until the bishop could arrive. Then he left.

Despite this promise, the ruling council of Nambé initiated proceedings against Romero, Antonio Tafolla, and possibly another person in early March of 1854. (It seems likely that these were the Christian names of Fi-ué, Ca-tszi-ré, and Cá-ya-mo.) No one other than Father Trujillo mentioned the devil; no Nambé witnesses engaged in any Christian fantasies of a satanic sabbat. Both the testimony of Governor Tafolla and Davis’ own account referred to “witchcraft and sorcery” (in the Spanish-language version of the Gazette, “Bruheria y maleficios”), suggesting that the crime here was evil magic. Governor Tafolla ordered the fiscal of the pueblo and three other men to execute Romero and Antonio Tafolla. The fiscal led the convicted witches to a spot “not quite a league” north of the Nambé territory, at twilight, and fatally shot them.
both. It is not clear what happened to the third witch; he may have escaped with the priest’s assistance. With the death of the witches, the smallpox epidemic subsided.32

The ambiguities in the accounts are tantalizing – and frustrating. The court docket lists three executioners as defendants; Davis’ account has four. Sometimes three witches are mentioned, sometimes two. The account in the Gazette mentions that the witches went with the executioners freely; Luján recalled that “the multitude dragged them” to the place of execution and then threw the bodies off a cliff.33

The ambiguity was at least in part intentional. The witnesses called to the court from Nambé engaged in a tactic of obfuscation and denial. One Nambé witnesses described Romero and Tafolla, but could not recall when he had last seen them and had never heard of the execution order. Another witness knew that they were dead, but “did not see the defendants in company with the deceased” and “don’t know when the deceased were first missing.” No one seemed to remember exactly where the execution had taken place, either – in the pueblo or just beyond it.34

That geographical inconsistency proved to be the sticking point. In the twilight of the courtroom – as “candles gave a dusky and indistinct appearance to every thing” – Judge Grafton Baker ultimately decided that since no one knew whether the execution had taken place on U.S. soil administered by the federal government or on the territory of the Nambé pueblo itself, his jurisdiction was unclear. The executioners were found not guilty, though they paid court fines.35

The Gazette proclaimed a victory for the U.S. administration. “Pueblo Indians . . . will be sensible of the fact that they cannot commit crimes without being liable to punishment.” Bandalier, looking back on the trial thirty years later, thought the decision had done just the opposite; though the butchering of victims “for alleged witchcraft” was horrible, the court determined that “no interference was possible” by the American government.36

The Pueblos of Nambé likely took the latter lesson from the proceedings. Governor Tafolla hung his entire testimony on the presumed independence of his little polity – and he was the only witness to answer questions about the execution directly. He noted that they followed their own laws – not exercised, of course, “since the Americans came here, because there had not been such bad doings before.” He directly cited both Spanish and American precedent: “We have always governed ourselves as an independent community; and Governor Calhoun said, as we were poor and ignorant, and could not serve on juries, we might govern ourselves.” Then, he quietly affirmed his own authority, even to the point of murdering witches: “I am Governor and this act was done by the command of myself and the whole of the Pueblo.”37

The witch executioners of 1854 walked away; it appeared Nambé really was “wholly independent of the laws of the U.S. and this Territory,” as the Gazette feared. Baker’s evident confusion about the case – or at least his unwillingness to delve into the complicated and politically sensitive jurisdictional details – validated the self-rule of the Pueblo of Nambé. The independence of Nambé conceivably could have been fought over water rights, military service, or other legal questions. But it was not fought over those things; it was fought over witchcraft.38 While the origins of the 1854 trial clearly have roots in religious and medical beliefs, its resolution had far more to do with the altered legal and political system of New Mexico under U.S. administration. By rid-

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to accept it, too. (Whatever white American rulers might have believed about the necessity of Enlightenment reason as a prerequisite for self-rule, they were in no position to enforce it in the midst of wars with the other tribes.) Most of the Pueblo land claims were confirmed in the next decade; self-rule at Nambé appears to have continued until the 1870s.³⁹

This strange connection between witch trials and Indian self-rule has echoes elsewhere in the Native American experience. Tenskwatawa’s witch hunt in Indiana in 1806 appears to have strengthened his control over his polyglot Indian communities. Among the Seneca, Handsome Lake’s witch accusations in 1801 were soon followed by a meteoric rise to power, as he became “principal Sachem in all things Civil and Religious” and the Seneca ambassador to President Jefferson.⁴⁰ These trials were brutal and terrifying, and took several victims. They were also expressions of power which often resulted in the all-too-rare cases of Indian self-rule in the face of white American dispossession and military threat. Handsome Lake’s condemnation of Delaware witchcraft was followed by the decampment of nearby Delawares and Handsome Lake’s own ascension to power. In 1806 Indiana, Tenskwatawa identified witches within another Delaware tribe; the Delawares executed some of the accused and then joined Tenskwatawa’s religious movement, which culminated in an independent city on the Indiana frontier (shortly thereafter destroyed by American armies at the Battle of Tippecanoe.)⁴¹ The connection between witchcraft and self-rule is a recurrent theme on the American frontier, and it deserves further scrutiny and examination. Witches were part of the violence and power of the American frontier; the contestation over jurisdiction in the American west was also a conflict over witchcraft.

Notes

1 Santa Fe Gazette, 4/22/1854 (hereafter SFG).
3 SFG 4/22/1854.
4 Mexican Archives of New Mexico, “Declaration of Gaspar Ortiz,” 8/21/1822, Roll 1, Frame 1294, State Records Center, Santa Fe; Malcolm Ebright and Rick Hendricks, The Witches of Abiquiu: The Governor, the Priest, the Genízaro Indians, and the Devil (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 5.
5 SFG 4/22/54.


18 Meriwether Papers: Messervy, Proclamation, April 10, 1854; Message of William Carr Lane, Governor . . . to the Legislative Assembly of the Territory, at Sante Fé, Dec. 7, 1852 (Sante Fe, 1852).


20 Message of William Carr Lane, Governor . . . to the Legislative Assembly of the Territory, at Sante Fé, Dec. 7, 1852 (Sante Fe, 1852).

21 *Message of His Excellency Hames S. Calhoun, to the First Territorial Legislature of New Mexico, June 2, 1851*.

22 State Department Territorial Papers, New Mexico, 1851–1872 (henceforth SDTP); Message of His Excellency James S. Calhoun, to the First Territorial Legislature of New Mexico, June 2, 1851.

23 *Message of William Carr Lane . . . to the Legislative Assembly of the Territory, at Sante Fé, December 7, 1852* (Sante Fe, 1852).

24 SDTP, reel 1: 15–16; Undated Scrap, noted only as “28th” (presumably March 28, 1851 – since the record is listed as Executive Department, Santa Fe, New Mexico, March 22nd, 1851)

25 SDTP, 1:25, April 10/51.

26 University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research (henceforth UNMCSR), Indian Affairs Collection, Box 1, Folder 2; John Munrow and James Calhoun to the Pueblos, June 25, 1850.

28 Santa Fe District Court, March Term 1854, entries for March 31 and April 1, 1854. Located at the New Mexico State Records & Archives, Santa Fe.

29 SFG, 3/18/1854.

30 It seems likely that Luján’s Spanish account found its way into Salpointe’s papers, where it was translated as *The Indians of Arizona and New Mexico: Nineteenth Century Ethnographic Notes of Archbishop John Baptist Salpointe*, ed. Patricia Fogelman Lange, Louis A. Hieb, and Thomas J. Steele (Los Ranchos, NM: Rio Grande, 2010), 142–146. The original account from Luján and Chino can be found in UNMCSR, Catron Collection. The quotes are taken from Chino and the translation by Lange et al.


32 SFG 4/22/1854.


34 SFG 4/22/1854.

35 *El Gringo* 329; SJAB 3:206 n1; SFG 4/22/1854.

36 SJAB 3:206 n1; SFG 4/22/1854.

37 SFG 4/22/1854.

38 Ibid.


40 Quoted Wallace, *Death*, 260. See also Conference with Handsome Lake, Cornplanter, and Blue Eyes; TJ Papers v. 37, p. 37.


**Bibliography (selection)**


