



# The Hannah Duston Story Is Fake

*by Dennis H.*

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The woman depicted in the statue was at the end of a momentous two weeks. She had given birth to her twelfth child. A week later they were kidnapped by Indians and she was forced to walk a hundred miles through the wilds of New England in the winter, wearing one shoe. During the march her baby was murdered. But Hannah had her revenge when she, with the help of two others, got the drop on her Indian captors, slaying and scalping ten of them. They then stole a canoe and floated down the river back to town.

That is the gist of the Hannah Duston story, one of the most famous of the [captivity narratives](#). These stories were very popular in colonial New England (and other locales) and typically depicted Puritan settlers stolen from their homes by Indians, forced to endure incredible hardship at the hands of the savages (and sometimes the French), before ultimately persevering through faith in God and returning to their homes. I have no problem with this type of story if true, or if presented as a story, i.e. fiction. But the trouble is that many of these narratives are highly dubious and yet are considered part of the historical record. False stories designed to influence people's behavior is the definition of propaganda, and many of these captivity narratives are just that.

The Duston story is a pretty minor part of history, largely forgotten even in New England. But I think it's instructive to pick some bit of history, largely at random, and see how it holds up under scrutiny.

# Family Background

[Hannah Duston](#) was born in 1657 in Haverhill, Massachusetts, to Michael Emerson and Hannah Webster Emerson. Her father had various jobs: constable, grand juryman, tax collector, cordwainer, and sealer of leather. There was something 'off' with [the Emerson family](#). The father, in an era of corporal punishment, somehow managed to beat Hannah's sister Elizabeth so severely that he was hauled into court and fined. Later, when he tried to move the family closer to the center of town, one of his new neighbors was so against it that persuaded the town to give Emerson an additional tract of land if he would stay two miles away from the center, closer to the woods. In another court proceeding, a townsman is recorded as saying he forbade his son to go into "that wicked house" of the Emersons. It is not reported what made the Emersons so objectionable.

Miles: these Emersons were of course ancestors of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Also note the names Hannah and Webster: these families were crypto-Jewish.

The beaten daughter, Elizabeth, was rumored to be a prostitute, and at the very least had three children out of wedlock. The children died and she was hanged for infanticide in 1693. Also, Hannah's cousin Martha Toothaker Emerson, and her father Roger Toothaker, were both accused of witchcraft in the Salem hoax. Roger died in jail.

Hannah married Thomas Duston, a brickmaker, homebuilder, and farmer. Thomas's father and mother were once fined ten shillings for missing church services.<sup>1</sup> Hannah herself rarely attended church and did not take communion for most of her life. In 1724, when she was 67, she wrote a letter petitioning the Haverhill Center Congregational Church to be allowed to be made a full member of the church. Thomas made a similar appeal that same year. So the family, both the Emersons and the Dustons, did not appear to be model Puritans.

## The Raid

Haverhill was raided March 15, 1697, by Abenaki Indians. 27 colonists were killed and 13 were taken captive. At the time the town militia was led by Col. [Nathaniel Saltonstall](#), who in 1692 served for a while as one of the judges in the Salem Witch Trials. A week prior to the raid Hannah had given birth to her twelfth child, Martha, the ninth surviving one. The Duston house was away from the center of town and the garrison, and during the course of the raid somehow Thomas chaperoned eight of the children to the garrison, while leaving Hannah in the house with Martha and the nurse, Mary Neff. When Thomas returned to his burning house all that remained of his wife was a lone shoe in the center of the room.<sup>2</sup>

Miles: this shoe thing reminds us of many later fakes, including recent ones, where empty shoes often litter the stages of these events. It must be some sort of Intel marker.

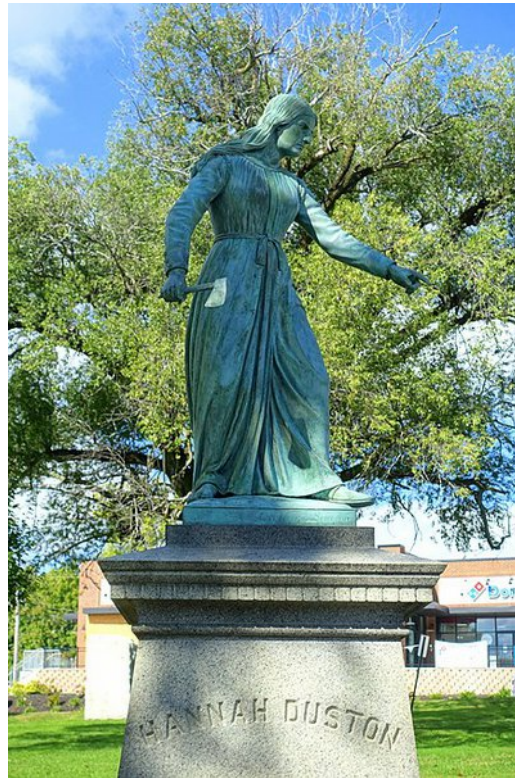
Hannah, Mary Neff and the infant were driven away from the settlement into the wilderness wearing the clothes they had on, lacking winter gear. Hannah had time to only put on one shoe

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<sup>1</sup>Atkinson, p.234

<sup>2</sup>Atkinson, p.45

and was walking through the snow with one bare foot. This detail was added in an 1832 retelling of the story, but is an important part of the lore. (You wonder how they suddenly could have remembered, 130 years later, that she was wearing just one shoe.) Here's a full view of the above statue, in Haverhill center, showing the missing shoe:



Also on the march with them was Hannah Bradley, another woman taken from Haverhill, and Samuel Lenorson, a 12 or 14 year old (variously reported) boy captured two years previously in Worcester. The Indians killed captives who could not keep up the fast march, and not long into the march they murdered Hannah's newborn infant.

Hannah's 'master,' her main captor, was named Bampico. One night on the journey Samuel asks Bampico how one would go about slaying and scalping a person. Bampico is amused and tells him how, illustrating the correct blow to the temple and the scalping motions.<sup>3</sup>

Bampico tells Hannah that they are being taken to the Indian village further north where 'they must be stript, and scourg'd, and run the gauntlet through the whole army of Indians.' This detail is significant because there is no other recorded instance of New England Indians in the early colonial period sexually mistreating their female captives, except for Hannah Duston.<sup>4</sup>

## The Massacre

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<sup>3</sup>Atkinson, p.80

<sup>4</sup>Atkinson, p.240

After traveling 100-130 miles through the wilderness over the course of about two weeks<sup>5</sup>, the Indians split up. Hannah Bradley went with one group of Indians, while Hannah Duston, Mary Neff and Samuel Lenorson went with another group. The latter group stopped at an Indian camp on an island in the Merrimack, near present day Concord, New Hampshire. The Indians by this point numbered twelve: Two adult males (including the original captors), three adult females, and seven children. On the English side were the two women and the boy/teenager, presumably exhausted by the forced march, and starving. The English waited for the Indians to go to sleep and somehow obtained their weapons. Here's the scene, as depicted in a bas-relief in the base of the statue:



They then slew all of them except for one squaw and one child, who escaped wounded. There is no explanation given in the original story how such a feat of bloodshed was possible, though later authors try to explain it.<sup>6</sup>

According to Samuel Sewall (one of the first recorders of the story), in a tasty bit of irony, Bampico is done in by his own instructions that he unwittingly gave to the teenage boy:

“The single man [Bampico] shewed the night before, to Saml Lenarson, how he used to knock Englishmen on the head and take off their Scalps; little thinking that the Captives would make some of their first experiment upon himself. Sam. Lenarson kill'd him”<sup>7</sup>

Here's another rendition of the incident:

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<sup>5</sup>Atkinson, p.239

<sup>6</sup>For example, Atkinson, pp.123-140, where he attempts to plausibly reconstruct the sequence of the massacre over the course of 18 pages.

<sup>7</sup>Sewall diary





According to the Wikipedia author:

“The massacre was illustrated in theatrical style in [Junius Brutus Stearns'](#) historical painting, *Hannah Duston Killing the Indians* (1847)<sup>[5]</sup> in which Stearns, for reasons that remain unclear, depicted Samuel Lennardson as a woman. The Indian children Duston killed are omitted.”

For reasons unclear? Hm, I'll take a crack at clearing it up: Converting the boy into a girl makes the odds even worse for the Puritans, making their victory even more amazing, increasing the propaganda value. And as for the missing children, maybe by 1847 people were feeling a little queasy about this particular aspect of the story, that the woman should slaughter six sleeping children as part of her revenge.

The three find a canoe and wait till first light to head out into the Merrimack River. But before they get far Hannah decides to go back to the scene of the slaughter and take the scalp of each of the ten victims.<sup>8</sup>

## Scalp Bounties

In this period, New France and New England were vying for supremacy in America, and both sides were offering blood money for 'opponents,' which category included combatants, settlers and Indians. Count Frontenac, the governor of New France, offered 20 crowns for a live male captive, 10 for a live female, and 10 for any scalp, regardless of origin. Here's a 20<sup>th</sup>-century illustration of Frontenac going native:

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<sup>8</sup>Atkinson, p.140



On the other side, Gov. William Phips of Massachusetts had been offering 50 pounds for a scalp, later reduced to 25. For comparison, the minister of Haverhill at the time was earning 40 pounds a year. But unfortunately for Hannah Duston, Massachusetts' scalp program had been cancelled only three months earlier.

## Return to Haverhill and Trip to Boston

The three settlers floated in the canoe down the Merrimack, returning triumphantly to Haverhill several days later. Hannah found that her husband Thomas and all of her other children survived the raid (they had been split up initially and she didn't know their fate). Thomas must have been delighted when Hannah handed him her trophies. But at some point they must have learned that the bag of rotting scalps was worthless.

With the help of the town minister, Benjamin Rolfe, Thomas wrote a petition to present to Massachusetts General Court. Thomas and Hannah then travelled to Boston with the petition and the scalps. They first visited an associate justice of the province high court, **Samuel Sewall**:



Sewall also appeared in Miles' [Salem paper](#), where he was one of the magistrates in the witch trials, who later regrets his actions. In the Hannah Duston book he is depicted as being so wracked with guilt that beneath his well-tailored judge's outfit he is wearing a hair shirt.<sup>9</sup> Sewall went on to write two brief diary entries about the Duston affair.

Next Hannah and Thomas visited [Cotton Mather](#), who takes down their story and uses it in his epic history of Christianity in New England, where it takes up all of [two pages](#). This forms the main primary source material for the Duston story.

Curiously this is not Mather's first encounter with Hannah Duston's family, these unknown folk from the frontier town of Haverhill. Hannah's sister Elizabeth Emerson, mentioned above, in 1691 [gave birth to twins](#). She said she was not aware she was pregnant, and quietly gave birth to the babies while sleeping in the same room as her parents. The woman who examined her to confirm that she had just given birth was Mary Neff, who of course was also Hannah Duston's nurse and one of her fellow captives. The authorities found two bodies buried near the house, and did not believe that they had died naturally. Elizabeth was convicted of murder.

On the day of her execution, Cotton Mather delivered a sermon to Elizabeth and the crowd that gathered for the hanging, called "They die in youth and their life is among the unclean," exhorting all to avoid the sins that brought Elizabeth there. She drew out a confession from Elizabeth, but that did not save her from the gallows. Hannah Duston surely witnessed this. Does it make sense that she would later want anything more to do with Cotton Mather?

On this trip to Boston Thomas Duston put in his plea to the Massachusetts General Court. The plea was successful and he was awarded 25 pounds. Also, Mary Neff and Samuel Lenorson were given 25 pounds to split. Two months after the court ruling a deed was registered in

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<sup>9</sup>Atkinson, p.203. This part in the Duston book about Sewall's involvement and regret in the witch trials seems a bit long and off topic, making me wonder whether the author was related to Sewall and trying to rehabilitate him. As it turns out Atkinson got this hair shirt story from Eve LaPlante's 2007 book *Salem Witch Judge: the Life and Repentance of Samuel Sewall*, and in fact she is the 6-g granddaughter of Sewall.

Thomas Duston's name for a new family residence, presumably purchased with this scalp money.<sup>10</sup>

## Other Captivity Narratives

Let's take a look a several other of these stories to see if there are any patterns.

[Mary Rowlandson](#) was born in Somerset, England, in 1637, moved with her family to Salem, Massachusetts in 1650, married the Rev. Joseph Rowlandson of Ipswich and settled with him in Lancaster, Massachusetts. That town was raided by Indian in February 1676.

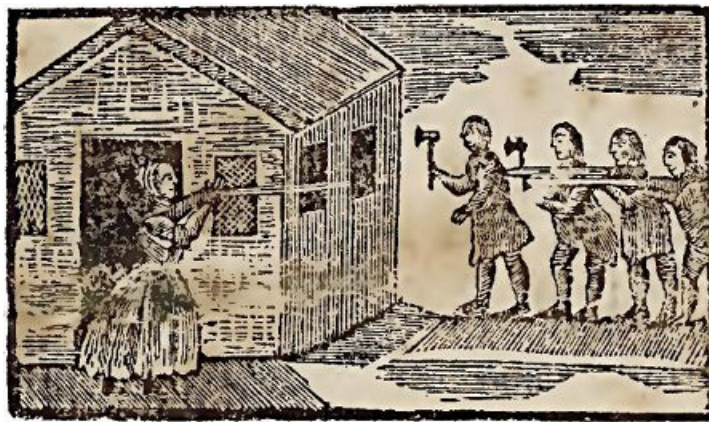


Figure 1 Illustration from 1791 edition of Rowlandson's captivity narrative

Mary was taken captive along with three of her children. Her 6-year-old daughter died in captivity. After 11 weeks, she was ransomed for 20 pounds. Her book, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, was very popular in colonial America.

But she may have had help with the writing. According to the wiki:

Scholars...have noted the similarities between Rowlandson's narrative and the Puritan jeremiad, and have considered the editorial influence that [Increase Mather](#) might have had on the text. In fact, many scholars identify Mather as the anonymous writer of "The Preface to the Reader", which was originally published with the narrative. In recent scholarship, Billy J. Stratton has further elaborated on this line of thought, claiming that Mather may have had a much more extensive involvement in the book's production than has been previously believed.

Increase Mather was of course Cotton's father. The family appears to have an interest in captivity narratives.

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<sup>10</sup>Atkinson, p.222



Also, in an amazing coincidence, Hannah Duston's captor, Bampico, happened to have lived with the Rowlandsons, and learned English there. This is according to Sewall, who says in his diary entry, "She said her master, whom she kill'd did formerly live with Mr. Roulandson at Lancaster". This allows Bampico to be quoted in English in Cotton Mather's book, saying to Hannah, "What need you trouble your self? If your God will have you delivered, you shall be so!"

It must have been very upsetting to the Mather family when one of their own came to be involved in a captivity narrative.



[John Williams](#) was the minister in Deerfield, Massachusetts, another western frontier town, when on February 28, 1704, it was raided by Indians. He and around a hundred other captives were led across the winter landscape to Quebec. Given his stature he was treated well, allowed to dine at the same table with Jesuit missionaries, and sleeping on a feather bed. He was eventually traded for a French captive, but his daughter was forced to stay behind with an Indian family. He wrote one of the most popular books of the genre, *The Redeemed Captive*, which James Fenimore Cooper drew upon for *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Williams was the nephew of Increase Mather and cousin of Cotton Mather, via his first wife Eunice Mather. Given the Mathers' penchant for captivity narratives, the fact that Williams was related to them does seem a bit curious.

Finally there is Hannah Bradley, kidnapped from Haverhill along with Hannah Duston. This was only the second of three captivity incidents involving her family. In 1695, her brother-in-law Isaac Bradley, aged 15, was minding his own business working the fields when Abenaki, bypassing a full raid on the town, took just him and another 11 year old boy captive.<sup>11</sup> They marched them away and put them to labor in the Indian camp, but eventually the boys escaped in a tale worthy of Tom Sawyer.

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<sup>11</sup>Atkinson, p.149

Less than a year after the boys' return, Hannah Bradley was taken in the 1697 raid. After she parted from Duston she was taken into New France, where the Indians sold her to French landowners.<sup>12</sup> She was freed under unknown circumstances about a year later and returned to Haverhill.

Her husband spent several years beefing up their house into a garrison. But then, on February 8, 1704, Hannah Bradley was minding her own business making soap when the Indians raided yet again. They waited until the lone militiaman let down his guard, then rushed the house. One of the Abenaki warriors was heard to exclaim, "Now, Hannah, me got you."<sup>13</sup> Hannah managed to dispatch one of the Indians with a conveniently placed kettle of boiling lye.

She was captured again and marched across the winter landscape, etc. But this time it was worse, as she was 8 months pregnant. After three weeks they reached the Indian village, where she gave birth. A French Jesuit priest blessed the baby, gave Hannah a hunk of moose meat, and left. Then the Indians told her the baby could live if she let them baptize the baby in 'the Catholic manner.' She agreed. They proceeded to use a knife to carve a cross on the baby's forehead.<sup>14</sup> Later they tortured and killed the baby.

Hannah was again sold to a French family, and a year later ransomed. Her peace was short-lived. In spring of 1706, Haverhill was raided yet again, and Hannah found herself in her house with an Indian advancing upon her. But this time she was armed with more than just the lye bucket. "Advancing with her musket, Hannah Bradley fired a ball into the Indian from close range, while shouting at him to go to the devil,"<sup>15</sup> thereby avoiding her third captivity.

In 1738, Hannah Bradley petitioned the General Court of Massachusetts to receive a reward for her feats against the Indians, and she was granted 250 acres.<sup>16</sup> Mary Neff (Hannah Duston's nurse) also received 200 acres. Ponder that for a moment. The 250 acres is in present-day Methuen, MA, and represents an area .4 miles square. If over the years that land was subdivided and became residential properties, that might represent, say, 300 decent house plots. All 300 of these deeds are ultimately derived from Hannah Bradley's dubious claims (leaving aside the initial appropriation of the land from the natives).

Just to be clear, I don't doubt that there were Indian raids in this period or that people were taken captive. What I am objecting to are the captivity narratives themselves. Just as I believe people do murder each other, but thanks to Miles I no longer believe in the serial killer stories.

The parties involved in the captivity narratives had vested interests. The Mathers produced them for religious instruction but also to terrorize the people. What could be scarier than to be going about your normal everyday life when suddenly your family is murdered all around you, and vicious savages kidnap you and force march you through the wilderness? (These aspects of the stories, the kidnapping and subsequent torments at the hands of strange aliens, also

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<sup>12</sup>Atkinson, p.157

<sup>13</sup>Atkinson, p.160

<sup>14</sup>Atkinson, p.163

<sup>15</sup>Atkinson, p.167

<sup>16</sup>Atkinson, p.269

resemble modern alien abduction stories.) A terrorized people are easier to manage, and more likely to submit to the authorities. Plus, the stories of course demonize the Natives.

As for the victims, the Dustons and the Bradleys, they made out pretty well monetarily following their captivities.

## Retellings and Commemorations

The Hannah Duston story has been retold a surprising number of times, given its flimsiness and ostensible bloodthirstiness. Cotton Mather included the story in three different books, while in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Henry David Thoreau, among others, all produced versions. Hawthorne to his credit is appalled by the slaughter of the Indian children.

In 1874 a marble statue was erected in New Hampshire on the supposed location of Hannah Duston's feat. This is the first statue honoring a woman in America, and that's pretty sad if you think about it. Here is the statue, depicting her in her well-draped killing costume, holding the ten scalps in her left hand:



Somebody keeps shooting off the nose. **Let us hope it is a Native.**

There are four other statues of her in various places, and the Haverhill elementary school was named after her until it closed in the 1980s. Also there's a current [nursing home](#) named for her.

Why the story is still being told today is a bit more of a puzzle. The most recent new evidence about Hannah Duston was her letter petitioning to join the church, which was found in 1929. The book I read was from 2015, and it's not clear why it was published as it had no new information,

and only added more speculative detail to the story. Indians did not come out looking very good in the book. Maybe we are in a new phase of Indian blackwashing?

I also don't know why anyone would bother to write an opera on this dreadful subject, but someone did, just [last year](#).

## Conclusion

So to review, what are the actual facts in the Hannah Duston story?

- ! Hannah Duston and Thomas Duston existed and were noted in town records in Haverhill.
- ! Haverhill was raided by Indians on March 15, 1697.
- ! Hannah Duston told her story to Cotton Mather, who produced a 2-page version of it for his book.
- ! Samuel Sewall met her and then made two diary entries describing the story briefly.
- ! Several others in the colony made brief diary entries about the story, basically repeating something they heard had happened.
- ! Thomas Duston filed a petition with the General Court claiming Hannah killed ten Indians. It is unclear whether his petition included the ten scalps as evidence. The court granted him 25 pounds.

Does that seem like a sufficient basis for all those books and statues?



I wonder how many of these roadside signs describe real events. **Can you say NONE?**



# Sources

Atkinson, Jay. *Massacre on the Merrimack: Hannah Duston's Captivity and Revenge in Colonial America*. Lyons Press, 2015.

[Cotton Mather's original account.](#)

[Samuel Sewall's diary entries.](#)