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The Spread Of Lithobolia

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“THE SPREAD OF LITHOBOLIA”

adapted from
*The Devil of Great Island:
Witchcraft and Conflict in
Early New England*

by Emerson W. Baker

In the holiday 2007 issue of *NEW ENGLAND ANCESTORS*, Diane Rapaport introduced readers to the strange case of the “Stone-Throwing Devil” that attacked the Walton family of Great Island (present-day New Castle, New Hampshire). Throughout the summer of 1682, the Waltons and their home and tavern were constantly pelted with rocks. In addition to this stony assault, objects moved about the house or disappeared, and people heard strange noises. Since no culprits were ever seen, the Waltons believed the cause was what contemporaries called “lithobolia, or the stone-throwing devil” (lithobolia is Greek for stone-thrower).

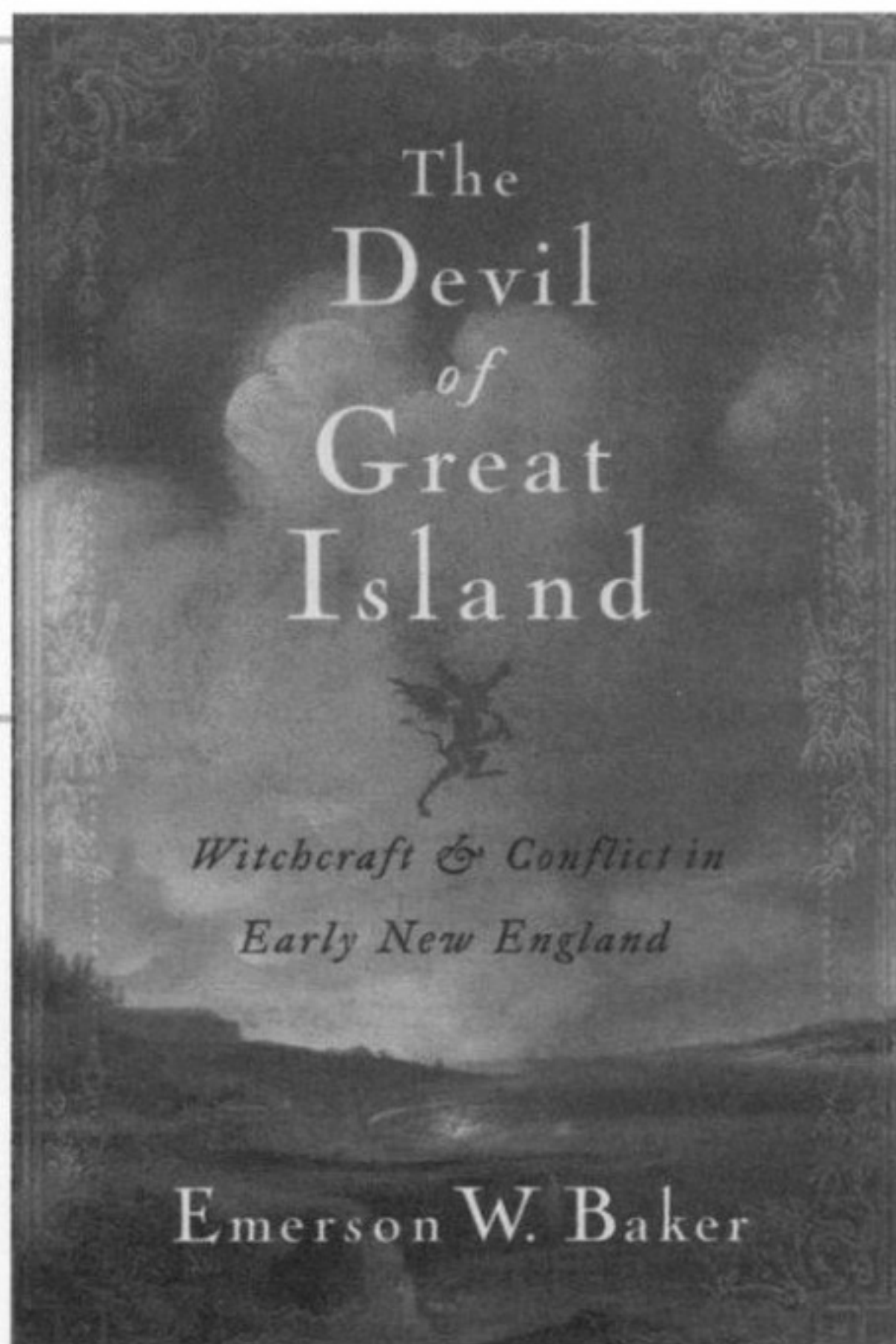
The Waltons became convinced that witchcraft lay behind these attacks, and so accused their elderly widowed neighbor, Hannah Jones, of being in league with the devil. My new book, *The Devil of Great Island*, tells this unusual story of witchcraft and its aftermath. Below is a brief excerpt about a separate but related lithobolia attack on another family.

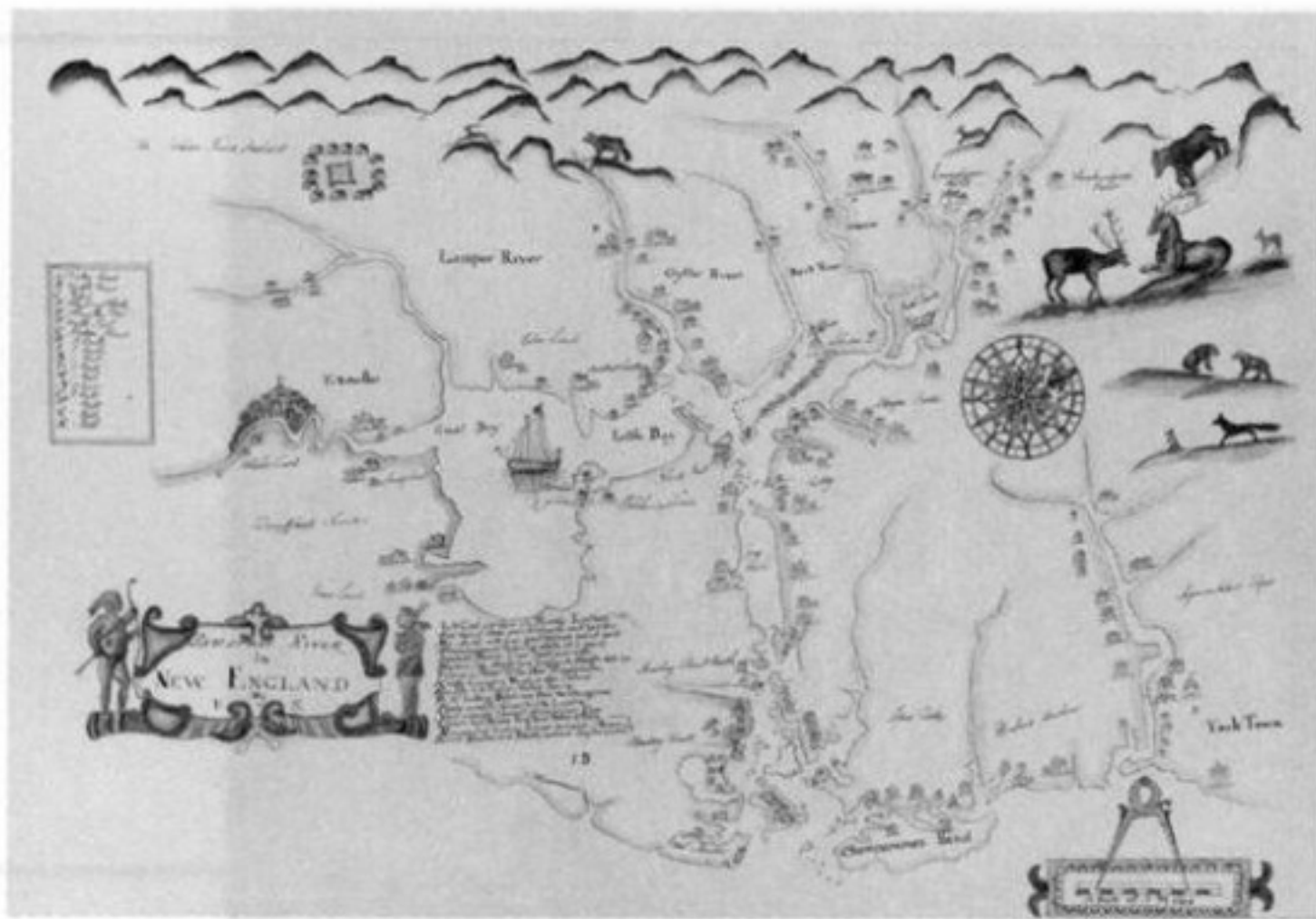
Adapted from Chapter Nine, “The Spread of Lithobolia” in Emerson W. Baker’s *The Devil of Great Island: Witchcraft and Conflict in Early New England*, published by Palgrave Macmillan, October 2007.

ITSELF INSPIRED BY A CASE THAT TOOK PLACE MILES AWAY — THE DEMONIC POSSESSION OF THE MORSE FAMILY HOME — the lithobolia attack on the Walton tavern spawned similar incidents beyond Great Island. Two copycat attacks took place later that same year, one in Maine and another in Connecticut. Increase Mather noted all three incidents in *Illustrious Providences* and pondered the connections between them. “It is observable, that at the same time in three houses in three several towns should be molested by demons, as has now been related.” Since witchcraft spread from one community to the next only rarely — usually during major outbreaks, such as at Salem — these tricks of the stone-throwing devil certainly merit a closer look.

On June 11, 1682, the first stone flew on Great Island. Remarkably, sometime that same month a similar incident began nearby in the Berwick district of Kittery, Maine. The community sat on the banks of the Salmon Falls River, a fifteen-mile sail upriver from Portsmouth and home to Antonio and Mary Fortado. One evening, Mary heard a strange voice outside her house but could find no one there. Later, while standing at the door, she received a blow to the eye from an unseen assailant. Mary reported that, after this initial attack, the house had been peaceful for two or three days when a substantial stone mysteriously slammed down the chimney and into the house. When she went to grab the rock it had strangely disappeared. Next, a frying pan hanging in the chimney began to clang so loudly that it could be heard over a quarter of a mile away. Whoever or whatever was behind these actions remained invisible.

Soon, however, the Fortados did catch a glimpse of one of the malevolent spirits while canoeing across the Salmon Falls River. They saw the freshly shaved head of a man in the water, and two or three feet away,





"Piscataway River in New England," created between 1660 and 1685. Image courtesy Maine State Archives, Baxter Rare Map Collection.

his white, cat-like tail. No body joining the head and tail was visible. On their return passage, the specter followed them but disappeared when they hurriedly landed their canoe. The physical attacks at their home resumed a day or two later, more terrible than before. Mary was standing in the yard of her house when she "was stricken on her head (as she judged) with a stone, which caused a swelling and much soreness on her head." She then retreated into the house and "was bitten on both arms black and blue and one of her breasts scratched; the impressions of the teeth being like man's teeth were plainly seen by many."

After this incident, the terrified family abandoned their home to live with neighbors across the river. Here another spirit troubled Mary. She beheld an apparition of "a Woman clothed with a green safeguard, a short, blue cloak, and a white cap." This figure threatened to strike her with a firebrand. The next day, the same figure — this time, dressed in white — tormented her again. The specter appeared to laugh but produced no sound. After this disturbing incident, the Fortados passed the winter in peace with their neighbors, returning to their own home in March 1683. When Antonio first entered his house, he heard the footsteps of a man walking upstairs in the bedroom chamber, even seeing the floor boards buckle under the invisible man's weight. Antonio went upstairs to see who it was, but no one was there. Spooked by this incident, the Fortados hastily left their home and resumed their stay with their neighbors. Antonio did return to the homestead regularly to plant and tend his corn crop. One day he discovered that something had torn down a long section of his log fence. What appeared to be cattle hooves clearly marked the field between almost

every row of corn, yet not a cow was seen, and there was absolutely no damage done to the corn, as would be expected if livestock had been loose. Perhaps Antonio saw the cloven hooves of the devil.

Antonio Fortado was an unusual man by early Maine standards, the sort of man who might be beset by bizarre events. A Portuguese immigrant from Fayal in the Azores, he was presumably . . . a sailor from a distant land who found a new home in America. Since the early 1640s, New England merchants had carried on extensive commerce in the Azores, as a part of the so-called triangular trade, the backbone of the colonial New England economy. New Englanders shipped wood products, fish, and other foodstuffs in return for wine and sugar. Much of these tropical goods were then sold in Europe for return cargos of manufactured products needed by the colonies. Fortado first appeared in the local records in 1673, but no surviving documents indicate when he arrived in the Piscataqua or why he decided to stay. Regardless, his nationality and his faith would have made him a suspicious character.

This brief excerpt hints at a main theme of my book, the very diverse nature of early New England society, and in particular, the significant differences between settlers of southern and northern New England. There are very few Puritans in this story. Antonio Fortado may have been one of the few Portuguese residents of the region, but in Berwick he lived alongside former Scots prisoners of war and Native Americans. Another neighbor was John "The Greek" Amazeen. As these nationalities suggest, there was also great religious diversity in the Piscataqua. Indeed, the Waltons of Great Island were Quakers and accused their elderly Anglican neighbor of being a witch. The lithobolia outbreak began just as a group of Baptists formed a congregation across the Piscataqua River from Great Island, in Kittery Point. In short, this is not the Puritan New England students read about in textbooks.

Likewise, these incidents are not what readers expect in cases of witchcraft. The Salem story has become so well known that to most people it is now the norm. Just the fact that Salem experienced the largest and most lethal outbreak of witchcraft in American history suggests an atypical story — "the perfect storm" of witchcraft. No afflicted girls and only the two spirits described by the Fortados figure in the lithobolia at Great Island and Berwick. Yet, contemporaries clearly considered events there to be the work of a witch in league with Satan. ♦

EMERSON "TAD" BAKER is a professor of history at Salem State College. He is the author of numerous books and articles on the history and archaeology of early New England. He also served as a consultant and on-camera expert for the PBS series *Colonial House*.