



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC LIBRARY

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

September 20, 1979

Mr. Paul E. Healy
City Clerk
City Hall
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Dear Mr. Healy:

At the request of Mr. Sakey, I am replying to your inquiry of September 13, concerning the burring to death in Cambridge of a black woman named Phillis.

The woman, Phillis, lived in Charlestown, being the slave of a Captain John Codman, a Charlestown merchant. When Captain Codman died in 1755, Phillis and certain other slaves were accused of his murder by poisoning. They were placed on trial in Cambridge at the Middlesex County Court, Charlestown being at that time a part of Middlesex County.

Confessing to the crime, Phillis was found guilty and in conformity to the common law of England then operative in the Massachusetts Colony was sentenced to death by burning. Mark, an accomplice, was sentenced to hanging. Cambridge as the site of the county court was also the site for the executions which took place on September 18, 1755,

Richard Foster, Sheriff of Middlesex County, is quoted as endorsing the execution warrant as follows:

"Middlesex, s.s. September the 18th, 1755

I executed this warrant as above directed by causing Phillis to be burnt to death, and Mark to be hanged by the neck until he was dead, between the hours of one and five o'clock of said day.

Rich'd Foster, Sheriff"

Professor Winthrop of Harvard entered in his diary:

"A terrible spectacle in Cambridge: two negroes belonging to Capt. Codman of Charlestown, executed for petit treason, for murdering their said master by poison. They were drawn upon a sled to the place of execution; and Mark, a fellow about 30, was hanged; and Phillis, an old creature, was burnt to death."

The Boston Evening Post of September 22, stated:

"...the fellow was hanged, and the woman burned at a stake about ten yards distant from the gallows."

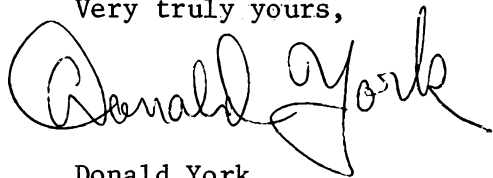
According to several sources, it was the practice of the time to strangle the convict before the actual burning, but I find nothing to indicate whether or not this occurred in the execution of Phillis.

In all of the sources consulted for the above information, there is no indication of any responsibility for the incident falling upon the citizens or government of Cambridge, the actions and decisions being those of the Middlesex Court. The sole connection with Cambridge appears to lie in its being the location of the court.

The above information is drawn from sources within the Cambridge Public Library Collection. If it would be of use, I would be glad to Xerox the full material from which the quotes were taken. If further details are needed, information might be obtained from the county records, Charlestown histories or records, or state historical collections.

If I may be of further assistance, please let me know.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donald York". The signature is fluid and stylized, with the first name and last name clearly legible.

Donald York
Administrative Ass't

S-535

Comm. from Paul E. Healy, City Clerk, transmitting one from Donald York, Adm. Asst., Cambridge Public Library, in response to the request of the City Council on 9/13/79 re: burning to death in Cambridge of a black woman in 1755.

In City Council,
October 15, 1979

10/15/79

Placed on File.