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Ann Austin

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AUSTIN, ANN

The story of the Quaker Ann Austin is a story of resilience and resolve despite unremitting opposition. Mid-seventeenth-century colonial America was a paradox of settlers who braved perilous seas to escape persecution and find religious freedom in the colonies. Yet some of those same groups ironically became inhospitable, even hostile, to other immigrants seeking similar freedom to practice and promote their religious beliefs. Ann Austin, mother of five children and described as a woman “stricken in years,” traveled with fellow Quaker Mary Fisher, an unmarried former maidservant, to the colonies by way of Barbados aboard the ship *Swallow*. Fueled with the ardor to proclaim the truth as they saw it, they arrived in Boston Harbor on 11 July 1656.

But the Puritan leadership did not take kindly to the intrusion of non-Puritan religious ideas and practices which could possibly spawn instability between government and church. Earlier on, Fisher had received a whipping for asserting that it was wrong to make preaching a vocation. Aware of the potential disruption that could be unleashed if this and other “heretical” Quaker ideas were allowed to infiltrate the region, Deputy Governor Richard Bellingham forbade the Austin and Fisher from disembarking the ship. In addition, he ordered that all the books and papers they had brought with them be burned.

Eventually Austin and Fisher were brought ashore to be examined by the magistrates. The ensuing judgment was predictably harsh; the women were

found not only to be transgressors of the former laws, but to hold very dangerous heretical, and blasphemous opinions; and they do also acknowledge that they came here purposely to propagate their said errors and heresies, bringing with them and spreading here sundry books, wherein are contained most corrupt, heretical, and blasphemous doctrines contrary to the truth of the gospel here professed amongst us (Church History Timeline website).

The women were confined to jail under the most inhospitable conditions. The prison window was boarded up and they were refused candles, cutting them off from all light sources. No writing materials were allowed to them. They were strip searched for signs of witchcraft (e.g., having a

third tit or unusual skin moles were sometimes thought to be indications of the demonic). Anyone who tried to speak with them would be fined five pounds. As a final punitive measure they were ultimately refused food. If not for the compassionate aged innkeeper Nicholas Upsall, who bribed the jailer to smuggle in food, they would surely have starved. After five weeks of such inhuman incarceration the women were sent back to Barbados.

Only two days later, eight more Quakers arrived by the ship *Speedwell*, meeting with the same harsh treatment though jailed for eleven weeks. In an attempt to discourage further Quaker intruders, the authorities enacted the first anti-Quaker law on 14 October 1656. Shipmasters bringing Quakers to the colonies were fined a hundred pounds. Newly arrived Quakers met with whippings. Two more anti-Quaker laws were enacted, imposing increasingly stern measures, including the cutting off of ears for some, exile for others, and sometimes hanging if exiled Quakers returned. When the death penalty proved ineffective, they replaced it with a “Cart and Whip Act,” consisting of the public humiliation of being stripped naked from the middle upwards and tied to a cart to be driven through town while being torturously whipped. Yet even the harshest of penalties could not deter the steady influx of Quakers coming to wage “the Lamb’s War” as “children of the Light.” Ann Austin is emblematic of what had become an unstoppable Quaker tide breaking in upon colonial America.

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