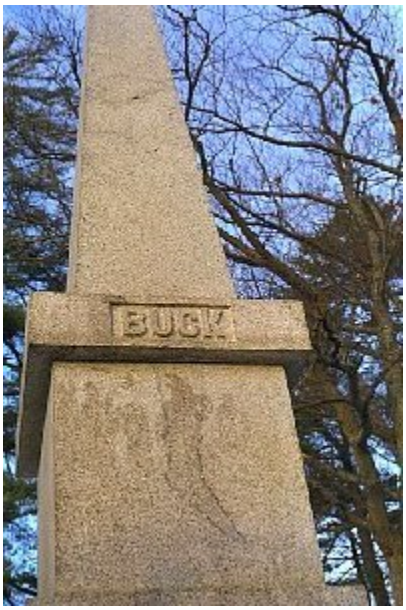
Legends of Jonathan Buck

Written by Valerie Van Winkle for the Bicentennial Edition

Generations have puzzled over the legend of Col. Jonathan Buck: which came first, the monument of the witch's curse?



Ironically, Bucksport's founder, a regional Revolutionary War hero, has achieved national prominence not for his service to his town and country, but because of the image of a woman's foot and leg which appears on his memorial.

Born in Woburn, Mass., Feb. 20, 1719, Buck grew up in Haverhill, Mass. On Oct. 19, 1742, Buck married Lydia Morse. They had nine children, six of whom survived childhood.

In July of 1762, Buck sailed the sloop Sally up the Penobscot River to survey six plantations which have since been designated Bucksport, Orland, Penobscot (Castine), Sedgwick, Blue Hill and Surry. Buck made another trip to the Plantations in 1763, and in 1764 began construction of the first settlement on Plantation No. 1, the present town of Bucksport.

Buck joined the disastrous expedition to Castine and siege of Fort George in July of 1779. The day after the Patriots defeat by the British, Buck took his wife and seriously ill daughter, Lydia, to safety in Brewer. At the age of 60, suffering from gout, he walked the nearly 200 miles from Bucksport to Haverhill. Five years later he returned to Plantation No. 1 and rebuilt everything that had been destroyed by the British in 1779. Buck and his sons were leaders of the community, and in 1792 Plantation No. 1 was renamed Buckstown in Col. Jonathan's honor.

March 18, 1795, at 4:30 p.m., Buck died. He was buried in a cemetery east of Buckstown.

Buck might have remained a traditional local hero, but in August of 1852, his grandchildren erected a monument near his grave site. As the monument weathered, an image in the form of a woman's leg and foot appeared under the Buck name.

Although there is little doubt that stories began to circulate as soon as the image was noticed, the first record of it appearing in print was in the Haverhill Gazette of Marsh 22, 1899. However, that article attributed a quote to an undated edition of the Philadelphia Enquirer. The Gazette article's recounting of the Buck legend has become the classic version, although there are certainly many variations on the theme.

Briefly restated, the tale runs: Jonathan Buck was a Puritan to whom witchcraft was anathema. When a woman was accused of witchcraft, he sentenced her to be executed. Then according to the Haverhill Gazette, "the hangmen was about to perform his gruesome duty when the woman turned to Col. Buck and raising one hand to heaven, as if to direct her last words on earth, pronounced this astounding prophecy: 'Jonathan Buck, listen to these words, the last my tongue will utter. It is the spirit of the only true and living God which bids me speak them to you. You will soon die. Over your grave they will erect a stone that all may know where your bones are crumbling into dust. But listen, upon that stone the imprint of my feet will appear, and for all time, long after you and you accursed race have perished from the earth, will the people from far and wide know that you murdered a woman. Remember well, Jonathan Buck, remember well."

In 1902, a similar version of the story appeared in the New England magazine, written by Bucksport resident James D. Wittemore. According to a pamphlet in the Bucksport Historical Society titled Jonathan Buck of Bucksport, The Man and The Myth, a longtime Bucksport resident and authority on legends, Rev. Alfred G. Hempstead, said that Buck's descendants were dismayed by the story and threatened to sue for slander.

The details of the rather different version of the story, retold by Oscar Morill Heath in Composts of Tradition: A Book of Short Stories Dealing with Traditional Sex and Domestic Situations, are so lurid that many of his embellishments are tastefully skipped over by those writing about the Buck legend. In one variation Heath created a son for the doomed woman, fathered by Buck. At the time of her execution, the woman is pregnant again by Buck. In his role of Justice of the Peace, Buck condemns her, has her tied to the door of her house and then sets her on fire. The son grabs his mother's burning leg and permanently cripples Buck by hitting him with it. The leg becomes a relic, and when, after Buck dies, it touches the dead body, Buck emerges from his coffin to confess all. At the end of the story, Buck returns to his coffin and says to the woman's deformed son, "Close the lid, boy."

Heath's story seems to have inspired a long poem written by Robert P. Tristram Coffin in 1939, The Foot of Tucksport. Coffin has added his own interesting elaboration's to the story, including making the illegitimate son deformed.

In another version written in the 1930's by A. Hyatt Verrill, a "half-witted" man is brought before Buck accused of murdering a woman and removing one of her legs. Buck condemns the man, who says that the appearance of the leg on Buck's tombstone will be his vengeance. Many subsequent articles about the legend seem to be attempts to prove or disprove the various

versions of the story. Research suggest that there is no basis for the legend. It has been noted that there is no record of anyone having been executed by burning in Maine. As a Justice of the Peace, Buck did not have the right to sentence anyone to death. The witch trials in New England occurred more than 25 years before his birth. Although clearly a character of energy and determination, Buck was admired by the soldiers who served under his command, and letters to his wife in Buck's spidery handwriting promising eternal affection are on display at the library in Bucksport.

But then there is the leg. Attempts have been made to remove the image, but it has always returned. Over the years, people knowledgeable about monuments have explained that the image is the result of a natural flaw in the stone, perhaps a vein of iron which darkens through contact with oxygen.

The Bucksport Library has on file an undated piece about local legends by Ester E. Wood. It begins, "Kenneth Roberts wrote, 'Local tradition spins on truth and tramples the gown of common sense.' It could well be said, 'Local tradition feeds upon lies and flies far and fast on wings of nonsense.'"

Writers who have researched the legend seem to conclude that it is a fiction concocted after the appearance of the image on the monument. No records have been discovered suggesting that any version of the legend predates the appearance of the leg. It all seems very reasonable, unless you have seen the image of the leg firsthand. It has a vitality, a naughtiness, which seems to laugh at rational data.