

# Pyewacket: A Familiar Spirit of the Witchfinder General

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The name of a witch's familiar, *Pyewacket*, was reported by the Witchfinder General of England, Matthew Hopkins, at the height of the witch persecution in the middle of the seventeenth century. It has eluded explanation so far. It is suggested that it derives from the name of a village presently in the State of Maine, and that it became known in England through family connections between Hopkins and the Governor of Massachusetts John Winthrop.

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*Pyewacket(t)* is a name bestowed with modest frequency on pet cats. This trend can be traced to a cat featured in the film *Bell Book and Candle* (Columbia Pictures, 1958).<sup>1</sup> He was a Siamese, and most early *Pyewackets* were copy-cats.

The name itself has never been satisfactorily explained. But it has been correctly traced to the name of an imp or familiar spirit “confessed” in the presence of Matthew Hopkins, self-proclaimed Witch Finder General (actually a collaborator of one John Stearne in this role at the relevant moment), during events in Manningtree, Essex, England, one Friday in March 1644.<sup>2</sup> We know this because Hopkins was so proud of his activities that he wrote an infamous and influential little book about them, *The discovery of witches*, published in 1647. In this is a woodcut of a scene featuring two of the Manningtree witches and their familiars, equipped with their names. Many readers will have seen it before (Figure 2).

The first-interrogated of the unfortunate witches, Elizabeth (Besse) Clarke, confessed the names of five of her familiars, and implicated other women, naming their familiars too (including *Pyewacket*, at least according to Hopkins). They all apparently agreed on their names and other details to such an extent that they implicated each other. The relevant passage, like the whole book, is a smokescreen of Hopkins', getting his defense in first against predictable skepticism. Here it is in full, starting with a troublesome pair of questions that he anticipated:



FIGURE 1 Pyewacket with Kim Novak, the leading lady in *Bell Book and Candle* (1958). No known copyright; this is a publicity photo, originally in color

**Quer. 4.**

*I pray where was this experience [of witches, RC] gained? and why gained by him [i.e. Hopkins] and not by others?*

**Answ.**

The Discoverer never travelled far for it, but in *March* 1644 he had some seven or eight of that horrible sect of Witches living in the Towne where he lived, a Towne in Essex called *Maningtree*, with divers other adjacent Witches of other townes, who every six weeks in the night (being alwayes on the Friday night) had their meeting close by his house and had their severall solemne sacrifices there offered to the *Devoll*, one of which this discoverer heard speaking to her *Imps* one night, and bid them goe to another Witch, who was thereupon apprehended, and searched, by women who had for many yeares knowne the *Devills* marks, and found to have three teats about her, which honest women have not: so upon command from the *Justice* they were to keep her from sleep



FIGURE 2 The frontispiece of Hopkins' book (1647).

two or three nights, expecting in that time to see her *familiars*, which the fourth night she called in by their severall names, and told them what shapes, a quarter of an hour before they came in, there being ten of us in the roome, the first she called was

1. *Holt*, who came in like a white kitling.
2. *Jarmara*, who came in like a fat Spaniel without any legs at all, she said she kept him fat, for she clapt her hand on her belly and said he suckt good blood from her body.
3. *Vinegar Tom*, who was like a long-legg'd Greyhound, with an head like an Oxe, with a long taile and broad eyes, who when this discoverer spoke to, and bade him goe to the place provided for him and his Angels, immediately transformed himselfe into the shape of a child of foure yeeres old without a head, and gave halfe a dozen turnes about the house, and vanished at the doore.
4. *Sack and Sugar*, like a black Rabbet.
5. *Newes*, like a Polcat. All these vanished away in a little time. Immediately after this Witch confessed severall other Witches, from whom she had her *Imps*, and named to divers women where their marks were, the number of their *Marks*, and *Imps*, and *Imps* names, as *Elemanzer*, *Pyewacket*, *Peckin the Crowne*, *Grizzel*, *Greedigutt*, &c. which no mortall could invent; and upon their searches the same Markes were found,

the same number, and in the same place, and the like confessions from them of the same Imps, (though they knew not that we were told before) and so peached one another thereabouts that joynd together in the like damnable practise that in our Hundred in *Essex*, 29. were condemned at once, 4. brought 25. Miles to be hanged, where this Discoverer lives, for sending the Devill like a Beare to kill him in his garden, so by seeing diverse of the mens Papps, and trying wayes with hundreds of them, he gained this experience, and for ought he knowes any man else may find them as well as he and his company, if they had the same skill and experience.

It can be seen from this that Pyewacket was not a cat, but an imp. However, we can allow the playwright and Columbia Pictures some latitude, because that is not what this article is about. The point is to establish an origin for the name itself. Whatever the witch said (and her words may have been a pure invention of the Witchfinder), and whether or not Hopkins truly heard the conversation, the name we have on the printed page was filtered through the content of Hopkins' brain.<sup>3</sup>

Rather improbably at first sight, the clue to the origin of the name can be found in Fryeburg, Maine, close to the border with New Hampshire. This town was founded at the site of a substantial Indian village on the Saco river (Williamson, 1832, II: 135–136 and 459). It was first mentioned in the journal of John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, on October 6 1642 as *Pegwagget*, recording an arduous visit by the explorers Thomas Gorges and Richard Vines in August of that year.<sup>4</sup> This place-name was later recorded in no less than 69 different spellings, 68 of them tabulated by George Hill Evans, in an appendix to a book for the title of which he settled on *Pigwacket*.<sup>5</sup> Evans' title is a look backwards, because the usual modern spelling of the name is *Pequawket* (though *Pequaket* is still also found in local names nearby in eastern New Hampshire, alongside *Pequawket* for the native name of Mount Kearsarge (North)). *Pequawket* is generally used for a historic sub-tribe of the Abenaki people, and also in the name of the locally famous interethnic Battle of Pequawket in 1725, otherwise known as *Lovewell's Fight*. The name is believed to be formed in the Abenaki language, a branch of the Algonquian family, though what it meant is debated and we do not need to decide the matter here.<sup>6</sup> The focus of this article is on establishing the connection between an obscure settlement now in Oxford County, Maine, New England, and a dubious event in the county of Essex, Old England.

The first encouraging sign is the near-coincidence of the two dates we have mentioned: the record of *Pegwagget* in 1642 and that of *Pyewacket(t)* in 1647, referring to events which took place in 1644. The second connects two of the leading personalities in the story.<sup>7</sup> The future Witchfinder General was born in Great Wenham, Suffolk, probably in 1620, and he moved with his family the short distance across the county boundary to Manningtree in the early 1640s, where he died in 1647, the year in which his book was published. Governor John Winthrop was, of course, an emigrant. He was born in Edwardstone, Suffolk, in 1587/8, and in childhood moved the short distance to Groton, where he eventually became lord of the manor. Groton is only about six miles from Great Wenham. He sailed for New England in 1630. The reason for his departure connects him with Hopkins even more strongly than the distance between their houses. Winthrop was from a prominent Puritan family which felt under threat in the religious climate of the England of Charles I. Matthew Hopkins' background was also Puritan. His father James, who was minister at Great Wenham, died in 1634, but when the Parliamentary commissioner William

Dowsing visited in 1645 he found nothing in the parish church in need of reform; that is, there were no altars to strip or images to smash, so Hopkins senior's legacy had been a lasting one. Correspondence between Winthrop and James Hopkins has survived.<sup>8</sup> So there is a clear established connection between the two Puritan families. We know for sure that Hopkins' book, or at least the ideas in it, were available in the New World, because the methods he used to extract confessions were also used in the first witch-hunt case in Massachusetts Bay Colony, that of Margaret Jones in 1648 (Winthrop's journal, June 4 1648). It is reasonable to guess that the colony's confidence in Hopkins' methods was underpinned by Winthrop's knowledge of the young man's family and by knowledge of his and his father's personal religious zeal.

The key players can therefore be connected. What is missing, and must remain speculative, is knowledge of how the village of Pegwagget came to be known to Hopkins. We are left to guess that it was mentioned in family conversation or in letters that have not survived. Winthrop's journal in which it is recorded was not published till 1790 (by James Savage),<sup>9</sup> and we have no way of knowing whether any of its contents were available to family and friends in England. We know from the Governor's journal that his son, John Winthrop junior, returned to England in 1641–1643. We do not know what he did there, but he evidently could have been in contact with his old friends and co-religionists, the Hopkins family, and talked about anything of mutual interest, including letters containing news of exploration in New England. News went in the other direction, too. It is no coincidence that the witch hysteria in the borderlands of Suffolk and Essex was followed so closely by the first execution in Massachusetts.

The final piece in the puzzle concerns the difference in linguistic form between *Pegwagget* and *Pyewacket(t)*. Given the evidence of the documentary record, it is not too hard to connect the two. The place-name in Maine is variable, as we have seen, but in none of the records does it lack a consonant before the <w>, with the single exception of *Peywacket* (1703, account of the abduction of the Durrill family; Bradbury, 1837: 55). There is plenty of evidence over the centuries for forms with a <c> in this position, e.g. *Picwaket* (1722, New Hampshire State Papers, 4: 53), *Picwacket* (1772, New Hampshire State Papers, 27: 255), *Pickwocket*, *Peckwalket* (1795), *Picquaket* (date uncertain, Freeman, 1865: 333) all cited by Evans (1939). It is possible either that it came to Hopkins in a form like <Pycwacket>, or that the form found in 1703 represents a genuine earlier variant known to him. In Figure 2, it is striking that the characters <c> and <e> are very similar (and more so in over-inked copies where the loop of the <e> is closed up), and the same is true in the font of the main text. So it is possible that Hopkins' illustrator and printer introduced <e> instead of <c> through an easy-to-make error in letter selection, both in the main text and in the woodcut. The illustrator and printer were not infallible transcribers, even when their usage is judged against the unstandardized English of the period. They differed over the names of other familiars of the anonymous Manningtree witches: where the main text has *Elemanzer*, the woodcut has *Ilemauzar*; the text has *Peckin the Crowne* and the woodcut *Pecke in the Crowne*; *Griezzell Greedigutt* in the woodcut is spelt differently and divided into two by a comma in the text so that the numbers of familiars do not match; and less importantly the main text has *Pyewacket* and the woodcut *Pyewackett*. With regard to the first, whichever rendering of yet another obscure name was intended, *Elemanzer* or *Ilemauzar*, they differ in selecting the

very similar and often confused <n> and <u>. So it is hardly implausible that one tradesman or both should have put <e> for <c>.

If “no mortall could invent” the name *Pyewacket*, we must conclude that it surfaced unbidden at an overheated moment from the pit of Hopkins’ recent memory, and attached itself to whatever it was he was, or claimed to be, watching.<sup>10</sup> It does not seem to have come to other observers, and we do not have to assume it came from Elizabeth Clarke. It seems in every way to have been Hopkins’ own demon.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Based on a Broadway play by John Van Druten. See Figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> John Stearne does not appear in the “credits” of Hopkins’ book. It is Stearne who identifies Elizabeth Clarke of Manningtree in his own book, published after Hopkins’ death (1648: 14–15), but he does not name her familiars, and he denies personal responsibility for the observations (“I came not at her during that time”).

<sup>3</sup> No imp by the name of *Pyewacket* appears anywhere in the anonymous narration *A True and Exact Relation* (1645), even though it rests in part on the testimony of Hopkins. Some of the other familiars, like Vinegar Tom and Jarmara, do indeed appear. Nor does a *Pyewacket* appear in the diary of Nehemiah Wallington, covering the confession of Rebecca West in connection with some of the same trials, on MSS pages 178–181.

<sup>4</sup> Dunn et al. (1996: 418). “They went up Saco river in birch canoes, and that way, they found it 90 miles to Pegwagget, an Indian town, but by land it is but 60.” The wording suggests that the place was known to the colonists before the date of the expedition.

<sup>5</sup> Evans (1939: 121–125). There may be even more, as I have not trawled all the indexes of the State Records of New Hampshire and Maine. There are occasional references to the mentioned Abenaki people as the *Pigwacket* in Massachusetts documents (e.g., the historical overview of the southern coastal town of Marion, <<http://www.sec.state.ma.us/MHC/mhcpdf/townreports/SE-Mass/mrn.pdf>>, p. 4), and there is a commemorative *Pigwacket Lane* in adjacent Mattapoisett.

<sup>6</sup> The current best guess seems to be Eastern Abenaki *apikwabki* “land of hollows” (Snow, 1978: 146).

Huden (1962: 181), followed by Stewart (1970: 384), offers an alternative Algonquian solution meaning “broken land” for the similar *Pequawket Pond*, a different place, in New Hampshire, but he also assigns to *Pequawkett*, i.e., Jockey Cap Mountain, Maine, and to *Pigwacket*, a meaning “land naturally clear or open” or “broken, punched-up land,” the former, and possibly the latter, being from Malecite (i.e., Maliseet) Algonquian (1962: 181 and 185). “Broken land” looks comparable with Snow’s interpretation. It is also believed locally that the name is translatable as “crooked place,” with reference to the great bend in the Saco river here (unattributed opinion in *Wikipedia*, entry *Fryeburg* (accessed January 14 2013), which since November 11 2011 has been incoherent about the semantic relation between *Fryeburg* and *Pequawket*; source of this idea not discovered).

<sup>7</sup> Biographical details can be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Kupperman (1993: 44–45) and Bremer (2003: 231), citing published Winthrop family papers. James Hopkins’ will (Norfolk Record Office, NCC 1634/233 (Playford)) mentions “our frinds in Newe England.”

<sup>9</sup> The 1790 editor James Savage normalized Winthrop’s spelling. The original manuscript of the relevant part of the journal was destroyed in 1825.

<sup>10</sup> This is not the first American place-name to turn up in England. That honor goes to *Pimlico*, though its circumstances and import are very different (Coates, 1995). See also Wright 2012 on the seventeenth-century *The Bermuda Islands* (later *Cribby Islands*) in London.

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