

# Grace Sherwood: The Witch of Pungo



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## Grace Sherwood

### *The Witch of Pungo*

Grace Sherwood was a wife and a mother.

And a witch.

Or at least, that's what she was convicted of. The only woman to be convicted for such a crime in the history of Virginia.

Grace was a strong woman. She was raised on a farm along the coast in Princess Anne County in the late 1600's. She was smart, and opinionated, and a great swimmer – highly unusual for women in the 17th century. She married young and had three boys before her husband died suddenly and unexpectedly. But rather remarry, which is what was expected, she donned her husband's overalls and began tending the farm for herself. It was a local scandal.

Grace was an introvert, so she didn't make friends easily. She had a great interest in horticulture and imported several exotic plants that were useful for the healing arts. Her farm, while considered strange, was something of a local apothecary, and people would come from all over to get her help with illnesses. The buzz about this mysterious woman was beginning to grow.

Then, in 1706, a woman came to Grace in a troubled pregnancy. Grace gave her some herbs in hopes of saving the baby, but the woman miscarried anyway. In her anger, the mother blamed Grace for her baby's death, accusing her of stealing the baby's soul through witchcraft. It was the perfect scenario for public opinion to boil over against the odd and reclusive Grace Sherwood. Several people testified at her trial, and ultimately, she was remanded to the county for trial by ducking. Her hand and legs were tied, cross bound, and a Bible tied around her neck. She was thrown into the Lynnhaven River. If the "pure" waters of the Lynnhaven received her and she drown, she would be exonerated, and though dead, she could at least be buried on holy ground. If, however, she floated, she would be convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to life in prison.

Thanks to her strong swimming, she "floated".

On July 10, 1706 Grace Sherwood was convicted of witchcraft via trial by ducking and was placed in the Princess Anne County jail. Seven years and nine months later, after the furor of witch trials died down in the American colonies, she was quietly released from jail, though her land and worldly possessions had been confiscated by the Commonwealth.

She immediately sued the Commonwealth and won back her land in court.

In retaliation, the colonial government made her pay back-taxes on the land for the years she was in jail.

Grace died in 1740 at the age of 80.

In 2006, Governor Tim Kaine pardoned Grace Sherwood posthumously.

Blaise Paschal said, "Men never do evil so completely or cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." Grace Sherwood's story is about diversity and tolerance. It is a story about the perils of ignorance, and the dark power of fear. It is my hope that by this and all of these stories, we will find a way to see each other through eyes of Grace.

