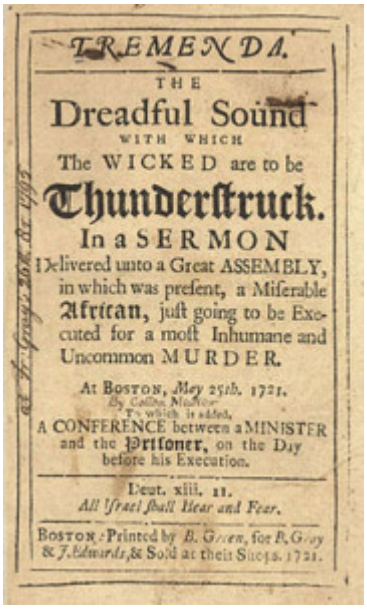
This “Miserable African”: Race, crime, and disease in colonial Boston

This is a story about how a small piece of historical evidence, just a few words on an old map, shed new light on a dramatic murder case from early-eighteenth-century Boston. The evidence involves the spread of a horrible disease that was a scourge of both the Old World and the New and that, recently, has returned to haunt our own. The legal case is that of Joseph Hanno, a freed slave from Africa who, in 1721, was executed for killing his wife. It was a crime of brutality, enacted on the margins of colonial society—and one that, ironically, would challenge the authority of one of the most important religious leaders of the day.

I had encountered the story of Joseph Hanno before. As a graduate student, I had read an essay titled “Narratives of Negro Crime in New England, 1675-1800.” The author described a sermon given upon Hanno’s execution as having “[set] the pattern” for the pamphlet accounts of black robbery, rape, and murder that peppered the colonies, stories that frequently implied that blacks were inherently inferior to whites—criminals by nature. As I debated how to begin a new book on the history of Afro-American citizenship, I recalled the article, and I soon found myself squinting at the first page of a sermon projected on the screen of a microcard reader. It bore an impressive title and an imposing array of typefaces (fig. 1): TREMENDA: The DREADFUL SOUND with which the WICKED are to be THUNDERSTRUCK, Delivered upon the Execution of a MISERABLE AFRICAN for a most inhumane and uncommon MURDER.

Who was this “miserable African”? From what evidence remains, we know that Hanno was a former slave, probably from Madagascar, who arrived in New England

as a child around 1677. His masters were said to have “brought [him] up in the Christian Faith,” and Hanno, baptized and literate, came to be known in Boston for the breadth of his Christian knowledge: he once was described as “always vain gloriously Quoting of Sentences from [the Bible] wherever [he] came.” In 1721, about thirteen years after he was set free, Hanno was accused of murdering his wife, Nanny Negro, as she was getting ready for bed, by hitting her over the head with the blunt end of an axe. He was indicted, tried before a jury at the court of assize and general gaol delivery, convicted (after the trial, he admitted his guilt), and sentenced to die by hanging.



TREMENDA.

THE

Dreadful Sound

WITH WHICH

The WICKED are to be

Thunderſtruck.

In a SERMON

Delivered unto a Great ASSEMBLY, in which was preſent, a Miſerable African, juſt going to be Executed for a moſt Inhumane and Uncommon MURDER.

At BOSTON, *May* 25*th.* 1721.

By Cotton Mather

To which is added,

A CONFERENCE between a MINISTER and the Priſoner, on the Day before his Execution.

Deut. xiii. 11.

All Iſrael ſhall Hear and Fear.

BOSTON: Printed by *B. Green*, for *B. Gray* & *J. Edwards*, & Sold at their Shops. 1721.

Fig. 1. Title page of the sermon Tremenda: The Dreadful Sound with which the Wicked are to be Thunderstruck, delivered on May 25, 1721. Printed by B. Green, for B. Gray & F. Edwards, 1721 (Boston). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Save for their interest in retribution, an interesting point of comparison between the seventeenth century and the twenty-first, Puritans approached matters of crime rather differently than we do today. Among other distinctions, it was typical for a minister to give a sermon just before a condemned criminal was executed. These were extraordinary affairs. Picture a minister in his pulpit explaining the spiritual meaning of a criminal’s actions to his congregation while the condemned stood between them, perhaps in chains—after which the felon would be taken outside, asked to declare that other citizens should avoid the path of his sinful ways, and hanged. The sermon was a contiguous part of the legal system, a public morality play of sin and redemption, central to what punishment was meant to accomplish.

This tradition was followed in the case of Joseph Hanno as well, and the minister who gave the sermon was none other than the great Puritan divine Cotton Mather (fig. 2). Once parodied by Benjamin Franklin as “Silence Dogood,” Mather is popularly (mis)remembered for his role in the Salem Witch Trials, in

which he helped probe the truth of accounts made about the invisible world. As I gazed at the fantastic typography of TREMENDA, I was certain I had found the ideal story with which to begin my book. I imagined Mather's lecture would be an extended fire-and-brimstone exercise of the persecuting spirit, in classic New England style, undertaken by one of its best-known icons and directed specifically at the black "other." I imagined it would be the Scottsboro Boys, 1720s style.

It wasn't. Hanno certainly came in for his share of condemnation, as befit the crime to which he had confessed. But where I had expected to find wholesale antiblack racism, I instead found Mather's comments about Africans to be mild by the lights of his day. They certainly did not express the view that blacks were inherently criminals. And Mather spent at least as much time, if not more, berating whites for their own sins as he spent criticizing Hanno for his. The sermon seemed more like an abstract, though passionate meditation on the nature of wickedness and the torments of a guilty conscience in the face of divine punishment—that was the "dreadful sound" of the title, heard especially before a man's impending death.

And a sense of divine punishment there surely was. Here is a typical passage, with some accommodations made for modern spelling and punctuation:

But what a dreadful sound is made by these threatenings in the ears of all ungodly and unrighteous men? Hearken to the dreadful sound, which the word of God makes, in the threatenings of it. *Hear attentively, the noise of His voice, and the sound that goeth out of His mouth. The voice roareth; he thundereth with the voice of His excellency. He thundereth marvelously with His voice, the dreadful things which he will do unto the wicked: things which we cannot comprehend!* Is there not a dreadful sound in that word of God! . . . Is there not a dreadful sound in that word of God! . . . Is there not a dreadful sound in that word of God! In the predictions of what was to befal a wicked world, we read of a treble *wo-trumpet*, whereon, *An angel flying through the midst of heaven, says with a loud voice, Wo, wo, wo to the inhabitants of the Earth*.

It was stirring stuff, liable to make a young scholar a little anxious during a cold New England winter night. (Mather recorded in his diary that the lecture had made a "great impression," and it seems that some of his congregation moaned just after he read the passage quoted above.) The sermon contained a feeling of urgency, a sense of the immediate presence of a wrathful God strong even for a Puritan minister—and that seemed curious to me, too. Hanno might have had "the dreadful sound" in his ears, but why others should be hearing the treble wo-trumpet so loudly at just that moment, I could not fathom.

Fig. 2. Portrait of Cotton Mather. The first American engraving in mezzotint by Peter Pelham (Boston, 1727). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

I began to dig into the archival record. Among other items, I found the coroner's report made upon Hanno's death. It showed that the foreman of the inquest was the shipbuilder Joshua Gee, whose son was a minister who preached with Cotton Mather in the Old North Church. I also found the warrant for Hanno's execution. It was signed by Judge Samuel Sewall, a notable figure in the history of early American race relations: years earlier, in 1704, he had written the first antislavery pamphlet in New England. Judge Sewall also was Joshua Gee's father-in-law. The documents began to round out my sense of Hanno's case and the legal environment in which it occurred. This was a world whose elite citizens were connected by a tight web of familial and institutional associations—a closely knit, urban religious community—in which foreman, judge, and jurors knew each other well.

I also began to learn a bit about Cotton Mather. When I began my research, I prided myself on knowing that Mather was not the backward-looking figure of medieval superstition he is often portrayed as being; I knew, for example, that he maintained a lively interest in medical science, and that he was something of a man of the Enlightenment. Nor was his role in the witch trials what our popular imagination had made it out to be. What I did not know was that Mather's views about race were far more complicated than I had expected—complicated in ways that seem contradictory from a modern perspective and that, slowly, began to shed light on the meaning of his sermon and the significance of Hanno's case.

For one, Mather was committed to an ideal of spiritual equality among the races. Many Christians of the day believed blacks were the descendants of Ham and had inherited his curse of perpetual bondage, and some even thought blacks might not have souls. Mather took a more universalistic view. In his 1706 pamphlet *The Negro Christianized*, he called the idea that blacks lacked souls a "*Bruitish* insinuation" and asserted that God's saints, at least theoretically,

could be found amongst all peoples. For Mather, no human could truly know who was and was not among the elect—this was a central tenet of his faith—and blacks therefore had to be given the same chance to show themselves to be true Christians as were whites. “Suppose these wretched Negroes to be the offspring of Ham (which yet is not so very certain),” he wrote, “yet let us make a tryal, whether the Christ who *dwelt in the tents of Shem* have not some of His Chosen among them.”

These were not mere idle words for the minister. He enthusiastically put them into practice, devoting his time and money to the cause of black spiritual welfare in Boston. He invited black parishioners to his home for Christian discussion. He helped blacks found a Religious Society for Negroes. He created a free school to teach Africans and their descendants to read the Bible. And he lobbied his fellow believers to teach their slaves the Holy Word, distributing copies of *The Negro Christianized* to convince masters to apply themselves to black religious instruction. “Let not this opportunity be lost,” he admonished, “if you have any concern for *souls*, your own or others.” Mather’s Calvinist orthodoxy made his commitment to converting blacks a serious matter.

But for all his concern for black conversion, Mather, like most other Christians of the time, also believed that racial equality before God did not demand equality on Earth—and, in particular, that it was wholly compatible with the institution of slavery. He asserted that blacks should be granted the opportunity for baptism with the same vigor with which he insisted that the conversion of slaves did not render them free as a matter of law. (This fear prevented some colonists from giving their slaves religious instruction, and Mather sought to reassure them.) And when members of his church gave Mather an African slave, he joyfully called the gift “a mighty smile of Heaven upon my family.” The slave, Onesimus, would remain with Mather’s family for years. For Mather, slavery and Christianity were in full accord.

Indeed, they were not just in accord: they were symbiotic. Slavery allowed heathen Africans to find Jesus Christ. And to owners skeptical about black conversion, Mather argued that religion would make blacks more compliant, better able to know their places within a well-ordered Christian world. Accordingly, he sternly counseled blacks that earthly submission to whites was an essential component of their spiritual duty. To the question, “If you serve Jesus Christ, what must you do?” the Christianized Negro was to answer, in a catechism, “I must love all men, and never quarrel, nor be drunk, nor be unchaste, nor steal, nor tell a lie, nor be discontent with my condition.” It was an injunction, records show, that Hanno had studied.

Joseph Hanno’s crime opened a rift in Mather’s complex views about race, slavery, and Christianity: it put them in tension. On one hand, Joseph Hanno was the product of precisely the kind of spiritual inclusiveness that Mather advocated. “I have a great deal of knowledge,” Hanno told Mather of his own Christian education. “Nobody of my color, in old England or new, has so much.” And yet Hanno’s knowledge of Christ clearly had not made this particular

African more law abiding, as Mather promised whites it would. Hanno instead had committed a crime that struck at the very foundation of the Puritan vision of social order: the benevolent exercise of paternal authority. In the dead of night, Hanno had struck his wife's head with the blunt end of an ax and placed her in their common bed (he then slit her throat with a razor for good measure).

In *Tremenda*, Mather seemed to be searching for a way to resolve the moral and social tension created by Hanno's crime—to condemn Hanno while, at the same time, deflecting the criticism that Christian education was somehow at fault in the case and thus inappropriate for blacks. The absence of strong antiblack racism in the sermon was consistent with that impulse, as was the way Mather used Hanno's life as an object lesson to all members of his congregation, white as much as black. For Mather, Hanno wasn't an archetype of the black man as criminal, but rather a symbol of all humans in a fallen world. That was why he spent so much time condemning the sins of whites and discussing the nature of wickedness in the abstract: all people were "slaves" to sin who wore "chains" of darkness.

Learning about Mather shed a good deal of light on what may have been at stake for him in his sermon on Hanno's execution. But there were still aspects of the document that remained obscure, particularly its sense of urgency. The force with which the minister asked his congregation to see themselves in Hanno's place, as sinners facing divine punishment, seemed somehow too great for the occasion. There were, for example, those highly charged references to death. And then there was a quiet implication in the text that Hanno had brought the hand of God down upon the community through his actions, that Hanno had "brought *plagues* upon all about you." Was the past simply so different that I would never understand what motivated *Tremenda*, or was I just missing something? After more than five months of reading and research, I still had a deep sense of unease that true knowledge of the case remained beyond my grasp.

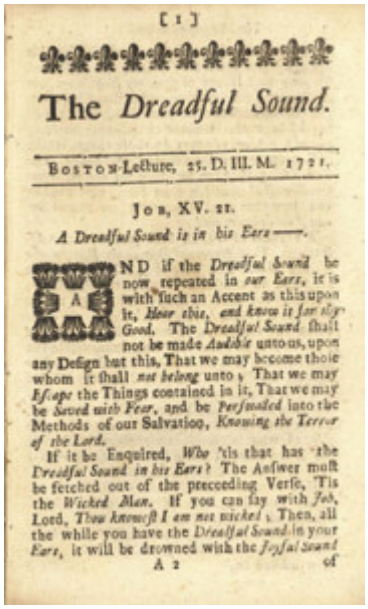
Fig. 3. "The Town of Boston in New England," by Captain John Bonner, 1722. 1867 reprint of the 1835 edition. George G. Smith Publishers. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society. Click on the Map to view an enlargement in a new

window.

And then I found it, wholly by accident. In my sixth month of research, I was trying to add some local color to the narrative I was writing by pinpointing where various participants in Hanno's case lived in town—the grand and petit jurors, the members of the coroner's inquest, the sheriff, and so on. I imagined writing sentences like, "As Elias Goodman turned left from his home on Brattle Street, walking in the direction of the Common, he would have passed the stately home of Judge Sewall on his left." I had found the addresses of my *dramatis personae* in various old record books, and a kindly librarian had pointed out that a Captain John Bonner had made a map of Boston in 1722, the year after Hanno's execution (fig. 3). As I marked the location of the events of Hanno's case, I imagined my cast of characters walking through the crooked streets depicted on Captain Bonner's handsome chart.

And then I noticed something curious in the lower left-hand corner: a list of dates when smallpox had struck Boston. Smallpox was a devastating disease for colonists and regularly left much of the population of Boston dead or covered with disfiguring scars; in 1678, the year after Hanno was brought to Massachusetts, it had killed 25 percent of the residents there. We fear the threat of smallpox in our own day, of course. But to the very anxious Puritan mind, in which the material world had theological significance, the disease was not just a medical event: smallpox also was a symbol of divine judgment against a society of sinners.

I remember sitting straight up in my chair when I saw that Bonner's map indicated that this divine judgment also descended in the year *1721.* The 1721 epidemic, I learned, killed eight hundred people (this from a population of about twelve thousand). Had Hanno brought "plagues" upon all about him? Could it be that the term was not only metaphorical but literal? With a bit more research, I was able to find that indeed, Hanno was executed *just* as smallpox was descending upon Boston. And in reading Mather's diary, I discovered that Mather had been informed of Hanno's need for spiritual counsel the day after the pox had been discovered (the minister immediately asked that a new edition of one of his essays be "scattered thro town and country" to provide solace to "them who are expecting an hour of travail, to quicken their preparation for death").



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The *Dreadful Sound.*

BOSTON-Lecture, 25. D. III. M. 1721.

Jon, XV. 21.

A Dreadful Sound is in his Ears ——.

AND if the *Dreadful Sound* be now repeated in *our Ears*, it is with Such an Accent as this upon it, *Hear this, and know it for thy Good.* The *Dreadful Sound* shall not be made *Audible* unto us, upon any Design but this, That we may become those whom it shall *not belong* unto; That we may *Escape* the Things contained in it, That we may be *Saved with Fear*, and be *Perfuaded* into the Methods of our Salvation, *Knowing the Terror of the Lord.*

If it be Enquired, *Who 'tis that has the Dreadful Sound in his Ears?* The Answer muſt be fetched out of the preceeding Verſe, 'Tis the *Wicked Man.* If you can ſay with *Job*, Lord, *Thou knoweſt I am not wicked*; Then, all the while you have the *Dreadful Sound* in your *Ears*, it will be drowned with the *Joyful Sound*

A 2 of

Fig. 4. Page 1 of Trememda. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Reading Mather's sermon with this new context in mind, I suddenly saw that it was laced with implicit references to smallpox and the reality of impending death. Take the very first page (fig. 4). Mather began his sermon with a quote from Job—"A dreadful sound is in his ears" (the sound of a guilty conscience in the ears of the wicked)—to which he returned throughout the lecture. I now looked to the full biblical passage. Puritans were excellent readers of the Bible, and they would have known it well: it describes how the man with the dreadful sound in his ears "dweleath in desolate cities that are about to become heaps." The title page citation, too, from Deuteronomy, "All Israel shall hear and fear," refers to the destruction of cities: "And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and shall do no more any such wickedness as this is among you. If thou shalt hear say in one of thy cities, which the LORD thy God hath given thee to dwell there, saying, certain men . . . are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods . . . Thou shalt surely smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly." The passages, I saw, were not only about individual responsibility, about Hanno's crime, but also about collective guilt in an urban society. A community that had fallen away from the Lord would surely feel the scourge of what Mather, in his diary, called "the destroying angel."

Here was the missing key to understanding Mather's sermon. The reason for its sense of urgency was now clear: those who came to hear Mather discuss Hanno's crime also expected that they might shortly die a painful death. And this was a fear that Mather put to theological and civic use. He employed the occasion of Hanno's execution not to assert a view of inherent black inferiority or criminality or separateness, but rather to assert the spiritual commonality between whites and blacks. Smallpox, like sin, knew no racial boundaries; everyone was about to die for their wickedness. At the same time, Mather entreated blacks to make a special effort to live up to standards of Christian

behavior, defying Hanno's example, particularly by obeying their superiors. The sermon was an occasion in which Mather could use the spectacle of impending execution to reassert his vision of black Christianity and civic belonging, to resolve the tension Hanno's crime had created.

Four days after Mather's sermon, a notice in the *Boston News-letter* announced Hanno's death: "On Thursday last the 25th Current," read the announcement, "was Executed here One Joseph Hono, Negro, for Murdering his Wife; he had been in the Country about 44 years, and about 14 Years free for himself, and by his Masters brought up in the Christian Faith; and he hoped that all Mankind would take warning by him to keep themselves from committing such Sin & Wickedness as he was guilty of, particularly, Sabbath-breaking and willful Murder, the one being the Ringleader to the other, for which last he was justly Condemned, which had he not been guilty of the first he might probably have never committed the second." By that time, eight persons had been reported sick with pox.

The terrible epidemic that descended—soon, nearly half the town would contract the disease—provided the occasion for Mather to make medical history. Based on his reading of recent British scientific journals, as well as conversations about African folk medicine with his slave Onesimus, the minister fought tremendous opposition to introduce the practice of inoculation to North America (there were even attempts on his life). The scourge of 1721 commemorated on Bonner's map is remembered for that extraordinary medical advance, that achievement of a Puritan man of Enlightenment. But it was not, I now saw, the only reason Mather had to give thanks.

Further Reading:

See, Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860* (New York, 1993); Lornezo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York, 1968); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York, 1997); Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York, 1963); Bernard Rosenthal, "Puritan Conscience and New England Slavery," *New England Quarterly* 46 (1) (1973): 62-81; Richard H. Shryock, "Cotton Mather: First Significant Figure in American Medicine," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 63 (Worcester, 1953): 37-274; Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (Cambridge, 1970); Richard Slotkin, "Narratives of Negro Crime in New England, 1675-1800," *American Quarterly* 25 (1973): 3-31; Margot Minardi, "The Boston Inoculation Controversy of 1721-1722: An Incident in the History of Race," *William & Mary Quarterly* 61 (January 2004): 47-76.

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