

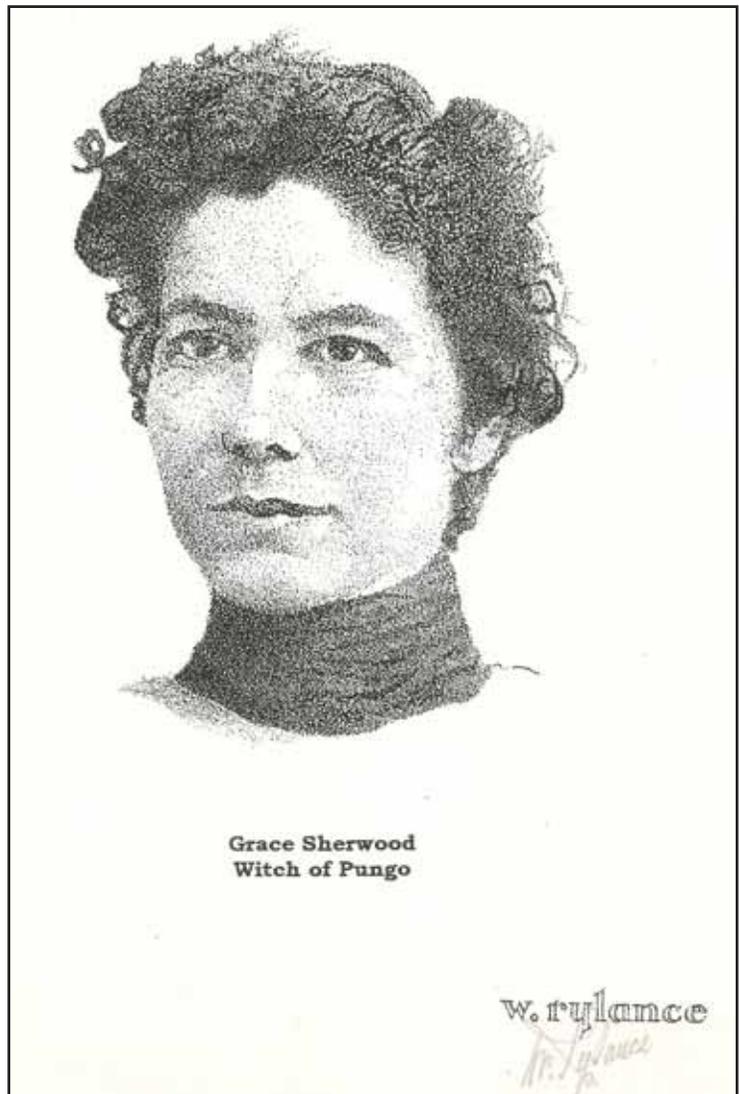
## Grace White Sherwood (ca. 1660–1740)

Contributed by Monica C. Witkowski  
(copied from online source Virginia Encyclopedia)

**G**race Sherwood was the defendant in colonial Virginia's most notorious witch trial, which took place in Princess Anne County in 1706. Sherwood was rumored to be a witch as early as 1698, when she and her husband sued their neighbors for defamation and slander. They lost their cases, and in 1705 another neighbor pressed criminal charges of witchcraft against Grace Sherwood. She was subjected to a water test in which the accused is bound, thrown into a body of water (in this case, the Lynnhaven River), and found guilty if he or she floats. Sherwood floated, but instead of sentencing her to death, the justices jailed her and ordered a re-trial. Whether a second trial occurred is not known. By 1714, Sherwood had been released from prison and returned to her home in Pungo, where she died in 1740.

Sherwood was born in Virginia around 1660 to carpenter John White and his wife, Susan White. Around 1680, when Grace married farmer James Sherwood, her father gave his new son-in-law fifty acres of land. After White's death in 1681, James Sherwood received the remainder of his estate. The Sherwoods had three sons—John, James, and Richard—and lived in Pungo, a community in Lower Norfolk County (Princess Anne County after 1691). Little else is known about Sherwood's life before 1698, when she and her husband sued neighbors John and Jane Gisburne and Anthony and Elizabeth Barnes for defamation and slander. The Sherwoods alleged that the Gisburnes had claimed Grace had "bewitched their piggs to death and bewitched their Cotton." Elizabeth Barnes testified that "the said Grace came to her one night and rid [rode] her and went out of the key hole or crack of the door like a black Catt." The Sherwoods lost both cases.

In 1701, James Sherwood died; Grace never remarried. In 1705, she sued Luke and Elizabeth Hill for assault and battery and won twenty pounds sterling in damages. Early the next year, Luke Hill and his wife charged Sherwood with witchcraft, a criminal offense. Sherwood's trial was delayed time



and again; finally, the court impaneled a jury of women to search Grace for witch's marks—spots where a witch might suckle her familiar, an animal-like demon given to her by the devil. The women found two such marks, but still the case did not go to trial. County justices attempted to forward the case to a higher court, but it was returned. After an investigation of Sherwood's home, county justices ordered her "to be tried in the water by ducking."

The so-called water test, which had been considered so controversial that it was no longer used in European courts at the time of Sherwood's trial, involved binding the accused's hands and feet and throwing him or her into a body of water. A defendant who sank was presumed innocent, because the water—a pure element—had accepted him or her; a defendant who floated was presumed guilty. In Sherwood's case, the justices took several precautions to ensure her safety: they only administered the test after Sherwood herself had agreed to it, and the test was postponed from its original date because the weather had been "very Rainy & Bad soe yt possibly it might endanger her health."

When the test was finally administered in a branch of the Lynnhaven River on July 10, 1706, Sherwood floated. Once she was ashore, a special women's jury searched her again "for all teats Spotts & marks about her body not usuall on others." These women found two black marks on Sherwood's body, and as a result she was convicted as a witch and ordered to jail to await another trial. What happened next is uncertain; no records of a second trial exist. Sherwood appeared before the county court in 1708 to pay a debt, and in 1714, she petitioned the secretary of the colony for reinstatement of her land, so most scholars assume that by this time she had been released from prison. Her request for reinstatement was granted, and she lived the remainder of her life on her 144-acre farm. Sherwood's will was proved in 1740, which is likely the year of her death.

Because few facts are known about Grace Sherwood's life, her story has been expanded upon where there is no historical record. As late as 1883, some historians believed that Sherwood was the only woman accused of witchcraft in Virginia, which contributed to her fame. In 1869, writer W. C. Elam asserted that Sherwood was a "negress," and thus the charges against her were evidence of racial and religious intolerance in the early South. In 1973, Louisa Venable Kyle increased popular interest in the Sherwood's story when she published the children's book *The Witch of Pungo*. Sherwood is often portrayed as a healer, familiar with herbs and friendly to animals. She has also been described as wearing male clothing, or as being so beautiful that she attracted the attention of men in the community, angering their wives. The historical record, however, does not support these descriptions.

Sherwood has become a local legend in Virginia Beach, where she is popularly known as the "Witch of Pungo" and the "Virginia Witch." Several landmarks in the Virginia Beach area are named for her water trial, including Witchduck Road and Witchduck Point, where the trial allegedly took place. In Pungo, "the Witch" is an honorary official of the town's annual strawberry festival. A reenactment of Sherwood's trial is also part of the programming at Colonial Williamsburg.

On July 10, 2006, exactly 300 years after her trial by water, Virginia governor Timothy Kaine pardoned Sherwood. Virginia Beach mayor Meyera E. Oberndorf read the pardon aloud during an annual reenactment of the trial at the Ferry Plantation House. Oberndorf also declared July 10 to be celebrated as Grace Sherwood Day. The following year, a statue of Sherwood was unveiled in Virginia Beach.

## Time Line

ca. 1660 - Grace White is born to John White, a carpenter, and his wife, Susan. Though the exact location of her birth is unknown, it is likely in the Virginia Beach area.

ca. 1680 - Grace White marries James Sherwood, a farmer. They will have three sons: John, James, and Richard. John White, Grace's father, gives his son-in-law fifty acres of land.

May 11, 1681 - The will of John White, father of Grace Sherwood, is proved. White leaves all of his land to his son-in-law James Sherwood.

1698 - James and Grace Sherwood sue John and Jane Gisburne and Anthony and Elizabeth Barnes for defamation and slander. The Sherwoods allege that both couples accused Grace Sherwood of practicing witchcraft.

September 1701 - By this time, James Sherwood has died. His wife, Grace, never remarries.

December 12, 1705 - Grace Sherwood sues Luke and Elizabeth Hill for assault and battery. Sherwood wins the case and is awarded twenty pounds sterling.

January 1706 - Luke Hill formally charges Grace Sherwood with witchcraft.

March 1706 - In response to Luke Hill's charge of witchcraft against Grace Sherwood, the Princess Anne County Court impanels a jury of women, including Elizabeth Barnes, to search Sherwood's body for witch's marks. The jury finds two marks, and Sherwood is ordered to jail to await trial.

July 10, 1706 - Grace Sherwood undergoes a water test to determine whether she is guilty of the charge of witchcraft. Sherwood floats, indicating her guilt, and once ashore is examined for witch's marks. A jury of women finds two marks. Sherwood is imprisoned and ordered to undergo another trial. It is unclear whether the second trial ever occurred.

September 1, 1708 - Grace Sherwood pays a debt of 600 pounds of tobacco to another colonist.

1714 - Grace Sherwood petitions the secretary of the colony for restoration of her property to her. He grants her the 144 acres that the Sherwoods inherited from Grace's father, John White, in 1681.

October 1, 1740 - Grace Sherwood's will is proved. Her son John Sherwood is the executor of her will and inherits most of her land and her belongings.

1973 - Louisa Venable Kyle publishes a children's book, *The Witch of Pungo*. Her short story of the same name revives Grace Sherwood's popularity in southeastern Virginia.

July 10, 2006 - Three hundred years after Grace Sherwood was found guilty of witchcraft by water trial, Governor Timothy Kaine pardons her. During an annual reenactment of Sherwood's trial, Virginia Beach mayor Meyera E. Oberndorf declares July 10 to be celebrated henceforth as Grace Sherwood Day.

2007 - A bronze statue of Grace Sherwood, sculpted by Robert G. Cunningham, is placed in front of Sentara Bayside Hospital in Virginia Beach.

Categories Women's History Colonial History (ca. 1560–1763)

#### Further Reading

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On July 10, 2006, the 300th anniversary of Sherwood's conviction, Governor Tim Kaine granted an informal pardon to "officially restore [her] good name",<sup>[1]</sup> recognizing that she was wrongfully convicted. A statue depicting her was erected near Sentara Bayside Hospital on Independence Boulevard in Virginia Beach, close to the site of the colonial courthouse where she was tried. She is sculpted alongside a raccoon, representing her love of animals, and carrying a basket containing garlic and rosemary, in recognition of her knowledge of herbal healing.

### **From the wiki---**

Sherwood was born in 1660<sup>[2]</sup> to John and Susan White. John White was a carpenter and farmer<sup>[3]</sup> of Scottish descent; it is uncertain whether he was born in America. Susan was English by birth;<sup>[4]</sup> their daughter Grace was born in Virginia, probably in Pungo.<sup>[5][6]</sup>

In April 1680 Grace White married a respected small-farm landowner, James Sherwood, in the Lynnhaven Parish Church.<sup>[2][6][7]</sup> The couple had three sons: John, James, and Richard.<sup>[8]</sup> John White gave the Sherwoods 50 acres (20 ha) of land when they married, and on his death in 1681 left them the remainder of his 145 acres (59 ha) farm.<sup>[8]</sup> The Sherwood family was poor, and lived in an

area inhabited by small landowners or those with no land at all.[6][9][10] In addition to farming, Grace Sherwood grew her own herbs, which she used to heal both people and animals. She also acted as a midwife.[11] When James died in 1701, Grace inherited his property.[12][13] She did not remarry.[5]

No drawings or paintings of Sherwood exist, but contemporary accounts describe her as attractive and tall and possessing a sense of humor. Sherwood wore trousers instead of a dress while working on her farm. This was unusual for the time, as was her herb growing. The combination of clothing and good looks was said to attract men and upset their wives.[3][14] Sherwood biographer and advocate Belinda Nash suggests that Sherwood's neighbors may have been jealous of Sherwood, and that the witchcraft tales may have been conjured up in an effort to remove her from, and subsequently get, her property.[2][14] Sherwood was a party to at least a dozen lawsuits, in which she had to defend against accusations of witchcraft, or in which she sued her accusers for slander.[14]



By a patent dated 26 Sept. 1674 John<sup>1</sup> White was granted 195 acres in Lower Norfolk Co. in the northern branch of Curratuck by Mr. Basnett's land. The patent was given for transport of 4 persons; i.e. John White, Susan White, John White, Jr., and Solomon White.[11] On 24 May 1680 John White gave James Sherwood 50 acres of land in Lower Norfolk Co. on Basnett's Creek.[12] John White left his will in Lower Norfolk Co., dated 9 Feb. 1680/1. He left "unto my loving Sone in Law James Sherwood all my land." Also mentioned were John Sevell, Mary Sevell, James<sup>3</sup> the son of James Sherwood, and Edward Atwood, Sr. He named James Sherwood his sole executor.[13] By a deed, dated 16 May 1690, James Sherwood and Grace<sup>2</sup> (White) Sherwood sold part of the land "given unto said Sherwood his heirs exc., admr., or assigns by John White, carpenter." [14] Grace (White) Sherwood attained some notoriety as the Virginia Witch. She was examined by the county court and in 1706 her case was heard by the Virginia council.[15] She left a will in Princess Anne Co. dated 20 Aug. 1733.[16]

from <http://jimserver.net/the-white-family-of-norfolk-county/>