The New England Sources of The Scarlet Letter

CHARLES RYSKAMP
Princeton University

After all the careful studies of the origins of Hawthorne's tales and the extensive inquiry into the English sources of The Scarlet Letter, it is surprising that the American sources for the factual background of his most famous novel have been largely unnoticed. As would seem only natural, Hawthorne used the most creditable history of Boston available to him at that time, and one which is still an important source for the identification of houses of the early settlers and for landmarks in the city. The book is Dr. Caleb H. Snow's History of Boston. Study and comparison of the many histories read by Hawthorne reveal his repeated use of it for authentication of the setting of The Scarlet Letter. Consequently, for the most part this article will be concerned with Snow's book.

If we are to see the accurate background Hawthorne created, some works other than Snow's must also be mentioned, and the structure of time as well as place must be established. Then it will become apparent that although Hawthorne usually demanded authentic details of colonial history, some small changes were necessary in his portrayal of New England in the 1640's. These were not made because of lack of knowledge of the facts, nor merely by whim, but according to definite purposes—so that the plot would develop smoothly to produce the grand and simple balance of the book as we know it.

During the "solitary years," 1825-37, Hawthorne was "deeply engaged in reading everything he could lay his hands on. It was said in those days that he had read every book in the Athenae-

1 I shall make no reference to the English sources of The Scarlet Letter which have been investigated by Alfred S. Reid in The Yellow Ruff and The Scarlet Letter (Gainesville, 1955) and in his edition of Sir Thomas Overbury's Vision . . . and Other English Sources of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" (Gainesville, 1957). Most of this article was written before the publication of Reid's books. It may serve, however, as a complement or corrective to the central thesis put forth by Reid: "that accounts of the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury were Hawthorne's principal sources in composing The Scarlet Letter" (The Yellow Ruff, p. 112). The page references in my text to The Scarlet Letter are to the Riverside edition (Boston, 1883).
um. . . .” Yet no scholar has studied his notebooks without expressing surprise at the exceptionally few remarks there on his reading. Infrequently one will find a bit of “curious information, sometimes with, more often without, a notation of the source; and some of these passages find their way into his creative work.” But for the most part Hawthorne did not reveal clues concerning the books he read and used in his own stories. About half of his writings deal in some way with colonial American history, and Professor Turner believes that “Hawthorne’s indebtedness to the history of New England was a good deal larger than has ordinarily been supposed.” Certainly in The Scarlet Letter the indebtedness was much more direct than has hitherto been known.

Any work on the exact sources would have been almost impossible if it had not been for Hawthorne’s particular use of the New England annals. Most of these are similar in content. The later historian builds on those preceding, who, in turn, must inevitably base all history on the chronicles, diaries, and records of the first settlers. Occasionally an annalst turns up a hitherto unpublished fact, a new relationship, a fresh description. It is these that Hawthorne seizes upon for his stories, for they would, of course, strike the mind of one who had read almost all the histories, and who was intimate with the fundamentals of colonial New England government.

As a young bachelor in Salem Hawthorne, according to his future sister-in-law, Elizabeth Peabody, “made himself thoroughly acquainted with the ancient history of Salem, and especially with the witchcraft era.” This meant that he studied Increase Mather’s Illustrious Providences and Cotton Mather’s Magnalia Christi Americana. He read the local histories of all the important New England towns. He read—and mentioned in his works—Bancroft’s History of the United States, Hutchinson’s History of Massachusetts, Snow’s History of Boston, Felt’s Annals of Salem, and Winthrop’s Journal.

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3 James T. Fields, Yesterdays with Authors (Boston, 1900), p. 47. For a list of books which Hawthorne borrowed from the Salem Athenaeum, see Marion L. Kesselring, Hawthorne’s Reading 1828-1850 (New York, 1949). All of my sources are included in this list, except the second edition (1845) of Felt’s Annals of Salem.


5 Moncure D. Conway, Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York, 1890), p. 31.

6 Edward Dawson, Hawthorne’s Knowledge and Use of New England History: A Study of Sources (Nashville, Tenn., 1939), pp. 5-6; Turner, p. 551.
His son reported that Hawthorne pored over the daily records of the past: newspapers, magazines, chronicles, English state trials, "all manner of lists of things. . . . The forgotten volumes of the New England Annalists were favorites of his, and he drew not a little material from them." He used these works to establish verisimilitude and greater materiality for his own books. His reading was perhaps most often chosen to help him—as he wrote to Longfellow—"give a life-like semblance to such shadowy stuff" as formed his romances. Basically it was an old method of achieving reality, most successfully accomplished in his own day by Scott; but for Hawthorne the ultimate effects were quite different. Here and there Hawthorne reported actual places, incidents, and people—historical facts—and these were united with the creations of his mind. His explicitly stated aim in *The Scarlet Letter* was that "the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (p. 55). His audience should recognize "the authenticity of the outline" (p. 52) of the novel, and this would help them to accept the actuality of the passion and guilt which it contained. For the author himself, the strongest reality of outline or scene was in the past, especially the history of New England.

The time scheme of the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* may be dated definitely. In Chapter xii, "The Minister's Vigil," the event which brings the various characters together is the death of Governor Winthrop. From the records we know that the old magistrate died on March 26, 1649. However, Hawthorne gives the occasion as Saturday, "an obscure night of early May" (pp. 179, 191). Some suggestions may be made as reasons for changing the date. It would be difficult to have a night-long vigil in the cold, blustery month of March without serious plot complications. The rigidly conceived

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7 Julian Hawthorne, *Hawthorne Reading* (Cleveland, 1902), pp. 107-108, 111, 132. Hawthorne's sister Elizabeth wrote to James T. Fields: "There was [at the Athenaeum] also much that related to the early History of New England . . . . I think if you looked over a file of old Colonial Newspapers you would not be surprised at the fascination my brother found in them. There were a few volumes in the Salem Athenaeum; he always complained because there were no more" (Randall Stewart, "Recollections of Hawthorne by His Sister Elizabeth," *American Literature*, XVI, 324, 330, Jan., 1945).

8 *The American Notebooks*, p. xlii.

last chapters of the book require a short period of time to be dramatically and psychologically effective. The mounting tension in the mind and heart of the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale cries for release, for revelation of his secret sin. Hawthorne realized that for a powerful climax, not more than a week, or two weeks at the most, should elapse between the night of Winthrop’s death, when Dimmesdale stood on the scaffold, and the public announcement of his sin to the crowd on Election Day. The Election Day (p. 275) and the Election Sermons (p. 257) were well-known and traditionally established in the early colony in the months of May or June.¹⁰ (The election of 1649, at which John Endicott became governor, was held on May 2.) Consequently Hawthorne was forced to choose between two historical events, more than a month apart. He wisely selected May, rather than March, 1649, for the time of the action of the last half of the book (Chapters xii-xxiii).

The minister’s expiatory watch on the scaffold is just seven years after Hester Prynne first faced the hostile Puritans on the same platform (pp. 179, 194, 205). Therefore, the first four chapters of *The Scarlet Letter* may be placed in June, 1642 (see p. 68). Hawthorne says that at this time Bellingham was governor (pp. 85-86). Again one does not find perfect historical accuracy; if it were so, then Winthrop would have been governor, for Bellingham had finished his term of office just one month before.¹¹ A possible reason for Hawthorne’s choice of Bellingham will be discussed later.

The next major scene—that in which Hester Prynne goes to the

¹⁰ John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649* (Boston, 1825-1826), II, 31, 218 (a note on p. 31 states that the charter of 1629 provided for a general election on “the last Wednesday in Easter term yearly”; after 1691, on the last Wednesday of May); also Daniel Neal, *The History of New-England . . . to . . . 1700* (London, 1747), II, 252. Speaking of New England festivals, Neal writes: “their Grand Festivals are the Day of the annual Election of Magistrates at Boston, which is the latter End of May; and the Commencement at Cambridge, which is the last Wednesday in July, when Business is pretty much laid aside, and the People are as cheerful among their Friends and Neighbours, as the English are at Christmas.” Note Hawthorne’s description of Election Day (*The Scarlet Letter*, p. 275): “Had they followed their hereditary taste, the New England settlers would have illustrated all events of public importance by bonfires, banquets, pageantries and processions . . . . There was some shadow of an attempt of this kind in the mode of celebrating the day on which the political year of the colony commenced. The dim reflection of a remembered splendor, a colorless and manifold diluted repetition of what they had beheld in proud old London . . . might be traced in the customs which our forefathers instituted, with reference to the annual installation of magistrates.”

mansion of Bellingham—takes place three years later (1645). Hawthorne correctly observes: "though the chances of a popular election had caused this former ruler to descend a step or two from the highest rank, he still held an honorable and influential place among the colonial magistracy" (p. 125). From the description of the garden of Bellingham's house we know that the time of the year was late summer (pp. 132-133).

With these references to time, as Edward Dawson has suggested, we can divide the major action of the novel as follows:

**Act One**

i. Chapters i-iii. The Market-Place, Boston. A June morning, 1642.
ii. Chapter iv. The Prison, Boston. Afternoon of the same day.

**Act Two**

Chapters vii-viii. The home of Richard Bellingham, Boston. Late summer, 1645.

**Act Three**

i. Chapter xii. The Market-Place. Saturday night, early May, 1649.
ii. Chapters xiv-xv. The sea coast, "a retired part of the peninsula" (p. 202). Several days later.
iii. Chapters xvi-xix. The forest. Several days later.

**Act Four**

Chapters xxi-xxiii. The Market-Place. Three days later (see p. 257).

The place of each action is just as carefully described as is the time. Hawthorne's picture of Boston is done with precise authenticity. A detailed street-by-street and house-by-house description of the city in 1650 is given by Snow in his *History of Boston*. It is certainly the most complete history of the early days in any work available to Hawthorne. Whether he had an early map of Boston cannot be known, but it is doubtful that any existed from the year 1650.

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12 *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 138: "Pearl, therefore, so large were the attainments of her three years' lifetime, could have borne a fair examination in the New England Primer, or the first column of the Westminster Catechisms, although unacquainted with the outward form of either of those celebrated works." The Westminster Catechisms were not formulated until 1647; the New England Primer was first brought out ca. 1690.
13 Winthrop, II, 220: on May 14, 1645, Thomas Dudley had been elected governor.
14 I am largely indebted to Dawson, p. 17, for this time scheme.
However, the City of Boston Records, 1634-1660, and the "Book of Possessions" with the reconstructed maps (made in 1903-1905 by George Lamb, based on the original records) prove conclusively the exactness of the descriptions written by Snow and Hawthorne.

Hawthorne locates the first scene of The Scarlet Letter in this way:

...it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house somewhere in the vicinity of Cornhill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all

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18 For the drawing of the map reproduced with this article, I am grateful to Professor W. F. Shellman, Jr., of the School of Architecture, Princeton University.
the congregated sepulchres in the old churchyard of King’s Chapel. (p. 67)\(^{16}\)

It was no great distance, in those days, from the prison-door to the marketplace . . . . Hester Prynne . . . came to a sort of scaffold, at the western extremity of the marketplace. It stood nearly beneath the eaves of Boston’s earliest church, and appeared to be a fixture there. (pp. 75-76)\(^{17}\)

Snow says that in 1650 Governor Bellingham and the Rev. John Wilson lived on one side of the Market-Place and Church Square (Snow, p. 117). Near Spring Lane on the other side of the Square (mentioned by Hawthorne when little Pearl says, “I saw her, the other day, bespatter the Governor himself with water, at the cattle-trough in Spring Lane,” p. 164) was the home of Governor Winthrop (Snow, p. 108). All the action of *The Scarlet Letter* set in Boston is thus centered in the heart of the city. This, as Snow takes great pains to point out, was where all the leading townsmen lived. He writes:

It has been so often repeated that it is now generally believed the north part of the town was at that period the most populous. We are convinced that the idea is erroneous. . . . The book of possessions records the estates of about 250, the number of their houses, barns, gardens, and sometimes the measurement of their lands. It seems to embrace the period from 1640 to 1650, and we conclude, gives us the names of almost, if not quite, all the freemen of Boston. They were settled through the whole length of the main street on both sides. . . . It is evident too, that most of the wealthy and influential characters lived in what is now the centre of the town. We discover only about thirty names of residents north of the creek. (pp. 128-129)

A clear instance of Hawthorne’s borrowing a fact from Snow is in the naming of “Master Brackett, the jailer” (p. 92). Few

\(^{16}\) Concerning Isaac Johnson, Snow writes: “According to his particular desire expressed on his death bed, he was buried at the Southwest corner of the lot, and the people exhibited their attachment to him, by ordering their bodies to be buried near him. This was the origin of the first burying place, at present the Chapel burial ground” (p. 37).

\(^{17}\) Justin Winsor, in *The Memorial History of Boston* (Boston, 1881), I, 506, 539, writes: “The whipping-post appears as a landmark in the Boston records in 1639, and the frequent sentences to be whipped must have made the post entirely familiar to the town. It stood in front of the First Church, and was probably thought to be as necessary to good discipline as a police-station now is . . . . The stocks stood sometimes near the whipping-post . . . . And here, at last, before the very door of the sanctuary, perhaps to show that the Church and State went hand-in-hand in precept and penalty, stood the first whipping-post,—no unimportant adjunct of Puritan life.”
colonial historians mention a jailer in Boston at this time, and if they do, they give his name as Parker. But Snow, alone it would seem, gives this information about Brackett, after writing about the property of John Leverett: "His next neighbour on the south was Richard Parker or Brackett, whose name we find on the colony records as prison keeper so early as 1638. He had 'the market stead' on the east, the prison yard west, and the meeting house on the south" (Snow, p. 116). This last sentence taken from Snow gives the exact location of the action of the early chapters of The Scarlet Letter.

Another example of Hawthorne's use of Snow is shown in the description of Governor Bellingham's house. Here Hawthorne builds a vivid image of the old mansion. He writes of Hester and Pearl:

Without further adventure, they reached the dwelling of Governor Bellingham. This was a large wooden house, built in a fashion of which there are specimens still extant in the streets of our older towns. . . . It had, indeed, a very cheery aspect; the walls being overspread with a kind of stucco, in which fragments of broken glass were plentifully intermixed; so that, when the sunshine fell aslant-wise over the front of the edifice, it glittered and sparkled as if diamonds had been flung against it by the double handful. . . . It was further decorated with strange and seemingly cabalistic figures and diagrams, suitable to the quaint taste of the age, which had been drawn in the stucco when newly laid on, and had now grown hard and durable, for the admiration of after times. (pp. 128-129)\(^8\)

There are almost no representations of the first settlers' houses in the New England annals. But Snow on one occasion does print an old plate showing an "Ancient building at the corner of Ann-Street and Market-Square" (p. 166). And he describes the house in a way which bears a remarkable resemblance to the sketch written by Hawthorne twenty-five years later:

This, says a description furnished by a friend, is perhaps the only wooden building now standing in the city to show what was considered elegance of architecture here, a century and a half ago. . . . The outside is covered with plastering, or what is commonly called rough-cast. But instead of pebbles, which are generally used at the present day to make a hard sur-

\(^8\)Hawthorne also accurately noted that Governor Bellingham was "bred a lawyer" (p. 131). Snow writes of Bellingham: "He was by education a lawyer" (p. 159).
face on the mortar, broken glass was used. This glass appears like that of common junk bottles, broken into pieces of about half an inch diameter. ... This surface was also variegated with ornamental squares, diamonds and flowers-de-luce. (p. 167)\textsuperscript{19}

Snow is also the only historian who tells the story of Mrs. Sherman's pig in order to bring out its effect upon the early Massachusetts government.\textsuperscript{20} Hawthorne, with his characteristic interest in the unusual fact from the past, refers to this strange incident:

At that epoch of pristine simplicity, however, matters of even slighter public interest, and of far less intrinsic weight, than the welfare of Hester and her child, were strangely mixed up with the deliberations of legislators and acts of state. The period was hardly, if at all, earlier than that of our story, when a dispute concerning the right of property in a pig not only caused a fierce and bitter contest in the legislative body of the colony, but resulted in an important modification of the framework itself of the legislature. (p. 126)

In his version of the story Snow said that the incident "gave rise to a change also in regard to the Assistants" (p. 95) and that because of the confusion and dissatisfaction over the decision of the court, "provision was made for some cases in which, if the two houses differed, it was agreed that the major vote of the whole should be decisive. This was the origin of our present Senate" (p. 96).

The characters named in The Scarlet Letter—other than Hester, Pearl, Chillingworth, and Dimmesdale, for whom we can find no real historical bases—were actual figures in history. The fictional protagonists of the action move and gain their being in part through their realistic meetings with well-known people of colonial Boston. Even the fantastic Pearl grows somewhat more substantial in the light of the legend and story of her primitive world. She is seen, for example, against the silhouette of the earlier Mr. Blackstone. When describing Bellingham's garden Hawthorne relates: "There were a few rose-bushes, however, and a number of apple-trees, probably the descendants of those planted by the Reverend Mr. Blackstone, the first settler of the peninsula; that half-mythological person-

\textsuperscript{19} For a possible source for details concerning the interior of Bellingham's house, the front door, knocker, etc., see Joseph B. Felt, Annals of Salem (2nd ed.; Salem, 1845), I, 403-406.

\textsuperscript{20} Snow, pp. 95-96. Hutchinson, I, 135-136 also refers to the incident, but not in this particular way.
age, who rides through our early annals, seated on the back of a bull’’ (p. 133). Snow had said:

By right of previous possession, Mr. Blackstone had a title to proprietorship in the whole peninsula. It was in fact for a time called Blackstone’s neck. . . . Mr. Blackstone was a very eccentric character. He was a man of learning, and had received episcopal ordination in England . . . . It was not very long before Mr. Blackstone found that there might be more than one kind of nonconformity, and was virtually obliged to leave the remainder of his estate here . . . . Let the cause of his removal have been what it may, certain it is that he went and settled by the Pawtucket river . . . . At this his new plantation he lived uninterrupted for many years, and there raised an orchard, the first that ever bore apples in Rhode Island. He had the first of the sort called yellow sweetings, that were ever in the world, and is said to have planted the first orchard in Massachusetts also. . . . Though he was far from agreeing in opinion with Roger Williams, he used frequently to go to Providence to preach the gospel; and to encourage his younger hearers, while he gratified his own benevolent disposition, he would give them of his apples, which were the first they ever saw. It was said that when he grew old and unable to travel on foot, not having any horse, he used to ride on a bull, which he had tamed and tutored to that use. (pp. 50-53)

This account is taken virtually word for word from a series of articles called “The Historical Account of the Planting and Growth of Providence” published in the Providence Gazette (January 12 to March 30, 1765).21 However, Snow adds to this narrative the application to Boston, which would be of special interest to Hawthorne (the phrase, “and is said to have planted the first orchard in Massachusetts also”).

The only minor characters that are developed to such an extent that they become in any way memorable figures are Mrs. Hibbins and the Rev. John Wilson. Hawthorne’s use of Mrs. Hibbins shows again a precise interest in the byways of Boston history. He describes the costume of the “reputed witch-lady” carefully (pp. 264, 286). He refers to her as “Governor Bellingham’s bitter-tempered sister, . . . the same who, a few years later, was executed as a witch” (p. 144). And again, during the minister’s vigil, Hawthorne writes that Dimmesdale beheld “at one of the chamber-windows of Governor

21 These were reprinted in the Massachusetts Historical Society’s Collections, 2nd Ser., IX, 166-203 (1820).
Bellingham’s mansion ... the appearance of the old magistrate himself. ... At another window of the same house, moreover, appeared old Mistress Hibbins, the Governor’s sister ...” (p. 181). In Snow’s book there is this account of Mrs. Ann Hibbins:

The most remarkable occurrence in the colony in the year 1655 was the trial and condemnation of Mrs. Ann Hibbins of Boston for witchcraft. Her husband, who died July 23, 1654, was an agent for the colony in England, several years one of the assistants, and a merchant of note in the town; but losses in the latter part of his life had reduced his estate, and increased the natural crabbedness of his wife’s temper, which made her turbulent and quarrelsome, and brought her under church censures, and at length rendered her so odious to her neighbours as to cause some of them to accuse her of witchcraft. The jury brought her in guilty, but the magistrates refused to accept the verdict; so the cause came to the general court, where the popular clamour prevailed against her, and the miserable old lady was condemned and executed in June 1656. (p. 140)²²

There seems to be only one source for Hawthorne’s reference to Mrs. Hibbins as Bellingham’s sister. That is in a footnote by James Savage in the 1825 edition of John Winthrop’s History of New England, and it was this edition that Hawthorne borrowed from the Salem Athenæum.²³ Savage writes that Mrs. Hibbins “suffered the punishment of death, for the ridiculous crime, the year after her husband’s decease; her brother, Bellingham, not exerting, perhaps, his highest influence for her preservation.”²⁴ Hawthorne leads the reader to assume that Mrs. Hibbins, nine years before the death of her husband, is living at the home of her brother. Hawthorne uses this relationship between Bellingham and Mrs. Hibbins in order to have fewer stage directions and explanations. It helps him to establish a more realistic unity in the tale. It partially explains the presence of the various people at the Market-Place the night of the minister’s vigil, since Bellingham’s house was just north of the scaffold. It also suggests why Bellingham is the governor chosen for the open-

²² This is almost a literal copy from Hutchinson, I, 173. See also William Hubbard, “A General History of New England,” Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, 2nd Ser., V, 574 (1815); Winthrop, I, 321.
²³ Kesselring, p. 64.
²⁴ Winthrop, I, 321 n. This contradicts Julian Hawthorne’s observation: “As for Mistress Hibbins, history describes her as Bellingham’s relative, but does not say that she was his sister, as is stated in the ‘Romance’” (“Scenes of Hawthorne’s Romances,” Century Magazine, XXVIII, 391, July, 1884).
ing scenes of the novel, to prevent the plot from becoming encumbered with too many minor figures.

The Reverend John Wilson's description is sympathetically done, and it is for the most part historically accurate. Hawthorne presents him as "the reverend and famous John Wilson, the eldest clergyman of Boston, a great scholar, like most of his contemporaries in the profession, and withal a man of kind and genial spirit" (p. 86). Cotton Mather, William Hubbard, and Caleb Snow testify to his remarkable "compassion for the distressed and . . . affection for all" (Snow, p. 156). William Allen, in his American Biographical and Historical Dictionary, writes that "Mr. Wilson was one of the most humble, pious, and benevolent men of the age, in which he lived. Kind affections and zeal were the prominent traits in his character. . . . Every one loved him. . . ." Hawthorne, to gain dramatic opposition to Dimmesdale, makes the preacher seem older than he really was. He pictures the man of fifty-seven as "the venerable pastor, John Wilson . . . [with a] beard, white as a snow-drift" (p. 134); and later, as the "good old minister" (p. 182).

Hawthorne's description of Puritan costuming has been substantiated by twentieth-century research. Although the elders of the colonial church dressed in "sad-colored garments, and gray, steeple-crowned hats" (p. 67) and preached simplicity of dress, Hawthorne recognized that "the church attendants never followed that preaching." "Lists of Apparel" left by the old colonists in their wills, inventories of estates, ships' bills of lading, laws telling what must not be worn, ministers' sermons denouncing excessive ornamentation in dress, and portraits of the leaders prove that "little of the extreme Puritan is found in the dress of the first Boston colonists." Alice

26 Hubbard, p. 604.
27 Allen, p. 613. The Reverend John Wilson was born in 1588; he died in 1667.
28 The phrase, "steeple-crowned hats," is used by Hawthorne each time he describes the dress of the Puritan elders (The Scarlet Letter, pp. 24, 67, 79, 278). The only source that I have been able to find for this particular phrase is in an essay on hats in a series of articles on clothing worn in former times: Joseph Moser, "Vestiges, Collected and Recollected, Number XXIV," European Magazine, XLV, 409-415 (1804). The Charge-Books of the Salem Athenaeum show that Hawthorne read the magazine in which this article appeared. Moser wrote about the "elevated and solemn beavers of the Puritans" (p. 414) and the "high and steeple-crowned hats, probably from an idea, that the conjunction of Church and State was necessary to exalt their archetype in the manner that it was exalted" (p. 411).
29 Alice Morse Earle, Two Centuries of Costume in America (New York, 1903), I, 8.
30 Earle, I, 13.
Morse Earle, after going over the lists of clothing brought by the Puritans, concludes:

From all this cheerful and ample dress, this might well be a Cavalier emigration; in truth, the apparel supplied as an outfit to the Virginia planters (who are generally supposed to be far more given over to rich dress) is not as full nor as costly as this apparel of Massachusetts Bay. In this as in every comparison I make, I find little to indicate any difference between Puritan and Cavalier in quantity of garments, in quality, or cost—or, indeed, in form. The differences in England were much exaggerated in print; in America they often existed wholly in men’s notions of what a Puritan must be. (I, 34)

Hawthorne’s descriptions agree with the early annals. The embroideries and bright colors worn by Pearl, the silks and velvets of Mrs. Hibbins, Hester’s needlework—the laces, “deep ruffs . . . and gorgeously embroidered gloves”—were, as he said, “readily allowed to individuals dignified by rank or wealth, even while sumptuary laws forbade these and similar extravagances to the plebeian order” (pp. 105-106). The Court in 1651 had recorded “its utter detestation and dislike that men or women of mean condition should take upon them the garb of Gentlemen, by wearing gold or silver lace . . . which, though allowable to persons of greater Estates or more liberal Education, yet we cannot but judge it intolerable in persons of such like condition.”

Hawthorne’s attempt to create an authentic picture of the seventeenth century is shown in *The American Notebooks* where he describes the “Dress of an old woman, 1656.” But all of Hawthorne’s description is significant beyond the demands of verisimilitude. In *The Scarlet Letter* he is repeating the impressions which are characteristic of his tales: the portrayal of color contrasts for symbolic purposes, the play of light and dark, the rich color of red against black, the brilliant embroideries on the sable background of the “sad-colored garments.”

So far there has been slight mention of the influence of Cotton Mather’s writings on *The Scarlet Letter*. These surely require our attention in any study such as this one. Professor Turner believes that certain elements of Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*, “and

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81 Winsor, I, 484-485. Hawthorne had read the *Acts and Laws . . . of the Massachusetts-Bay in New-England* (Boston, 1726)—see Kesselring, p. 56.
83 One of Hawthorne’s favorite words—for example, see *The American Notebooks*, p. 97.
in particular the accounts of God’s judgment on adulterers [in II, 397-398], may also have influenced The Scarlet Letter. Mather relates [II, 404-405] that a woman who had killed her illegitimate child was exhorted by John Wilson and John Cotton to repent while she was in prison awaiting execution. In like manner, as will be recalled, John Wilson joins with Governor Bellingham and Arthur Dimmesdale in admonishing Hester Prynne to reveal the father of her child. It is possible that an echo of the witch tradition in the Magnalia Christi Americana may also be found in The Scarlet Letter. “The proposal by Mistress Hibbins that Hester accompany her to a witch meeting is typical of the Mather witch tradition, which included, in accordance with the well known passage in The Scarlet Letter, the signing in the devil’s book with an iron pen and with blood for ink…” The Black Man mentioned so often by Hawthorne (pp. 100, 144, 222-225) was familiar to the Puritan settlers of New England. Pearl tells her mother “a story about the Black Man. . . . How he haunts this forest, and carries a book with him,—a big, heavy book, with iron clasps; and how this ugly Black Man offers his book and an iron pen to everybody that meets him here among the trees; and they are to write their names with their own blood” (p. 222). Concerning the Black Man, Cotton Mather had written: “These Tormentors tendred unto the afflicted a Book, requiring them to Sign it, or Touch it at least, in token of their consenting to be Listed in the Service of the Devil; which they refusing to do, the Spectres under the Command of that Blackman, as they called him, would apply themselves to Torture them with prodigious Molesta-

Even the portent in the sky, the great red letter A, which was seen on the night of the revered John Winthrop’s death (and Dimmesdale’s vigil), would not have seemed too strange to Puritan historians. To them it would certainly not have been merely an indication of Hawthorne’s gothic interests. Snow had related that

35 Turner, p. 546—see The Scarlet Letter, pp. 143-144, and Magnalia Christi Americana, bk. VI, p. 81: “It was not long before M. L. . . . confess'd that She rode with her Mother to the said Witch-meeting . . . . At another time M. L. junior, the Grand-daughter, aged about 17 Years . . . declares that . . . they . . . rode on a Stick or Pole in the Air . . . and that they set their Hands to the Devil's Book . . . .”
36 Magnalia Christi Americana, bk. II, p. 60; see also Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, V, 64 (1708); Neal, II, 131, 133-135, 144, 150, 158, 160, 169.
when John Cotton had died on Thursday, December 23, 1652, “strange and alarming signs appeared in the heavens, while his body lay, according to the custom of the times, till the Tuesday following” (p. 133).

The idea of the scarlet A had been in Hawthorne’s mind for some years before he wrote the novel. In 1844 he had made this comment in his notebooks as a suggestion for a story: “The life of a woman, who, by the old colony law, was condemned always to wear the letter A, sewed on her garment, in token of her having committed adultery.” Before that, in “Endicott and the Red Cross,” he had told of a “woman with no mean share of beauty” who wore a scarlet A. It has commonly been accepted that the “old colony law” which he had referred to in his notebooks had been found in Felt’s Annals of Salem, where we read under the date of May 5, 1694: “Among such laws, passed this session, were two against Adultery and Polygamy. Those guilty of the first crime, were to sit an hour on the gallows, with ropes about their necks,—be severely whipt not above 40 stripes; and forever after wear a capital A, two inches long, cut out of cloth coloured differently from their clothes, and sewed on the arms, or back parts of their garments so as always to be seen when they were about.”

Exactly when Hawthorne began writing The Scarlet Letter is not known, but by September 27, 1849, he was working on it throughout every day. It was finished by February 3, 1850. In the novel there is the same rapid skill at composition which is typical of the notebooks. From the multitude of historical facts he knew he could call forth with severe economy only a few to support the scenes of passion or punishment. Perhaps it does not seem good judgment to claim that Hawthorne wrote The Scarlet Letter with a copy of Snow’s History of Boston on the desk. But it does not appear believable that all these incidental facts from New England histories, the exacting time scheme, the authentic description of Boston in the 1640’s, should have remained so extremely clear and perfect in his mind when he was under the extraordinary strain of writing the story. Here the studies of Hawthorne’s literary borrowings made by Dawson, Turner, and others must be taken into account. They have

[Notes: 
^87 The American Notebooks, p. 107. 
^89 Randall Stewart, Nathaniel Hawthorne (New Haven, 1948), pp. 93-95.]
shown that in certain of his tales, he "seems to have written with his original open before him." To claim a firm dependence upon certain New England histories for the background of The Scarlet Letter should therefore not seem unreasonable.

The incidents, places, and persons noticed in this article are the principal New England historical references in The Scarlet Letter. A study like this of Hawthorne's sources shows something of his thorough method of reading; it reveals especially his certain knowledge of colonial history and his interest in the unusual, obscure fact. But these are side lights of an author's mind. His steady determination was to make the romances of his imagination as real as the prison-house and the grave.

It would be unfair to leave the study of Hawthorne's historical approach here. His final concern in history was the attempt to find the "spiritual significance" of the facts. As his sister Elizabeth had said of the young man: "He was not very fond of history in general." Hawthorne stated concretely his conception of history and the novel in a review (1846) of W. G. Simms's Views and Reviews in American History:

... we cannot help feeling that the real treasures of his subject have escaped the author's notice. The themes suggested by him, viewed as he views them, would produce nothing but historical novels, cast in the same worn out mould that has been in use these thirty years, and which it is time to break up and fling away. To be the prophet of Art requires almost as high a gift as to be a fullfiller of the prophecy. Mr. Simms has not this gift; he possesses nothing of the magic touch that should cause new intellectual and moral shapes to spring up in the reader's mind, peopling with varied life what had hitherto been a barren waste.

With the evocation of the spirit of the colonial past, and with a realistic embodiment of scene, Hawthorne repeopled a landscape wherein new intellectual and moral shapes could dwell. The new fiction of Hester Prynne and the old appearances of Mrs. Hibbins could not be separated. Time past and time present became explicable as they were identified in the same profound moral engagement.

40 Turner, p. 547.
41 Julian Hawthorne, Hawthorne Reading, p. 100.
42 "Recollections of Hawthorne by His Sister Elizabeth," p. 324.
43 Stewart, "Hawthorne's Contributions to The Salem Advertiser," American Literature, V, 331-332 (Jan., 1934).