Witches on the Wind: Weather Magic in New England Folktales

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New England’s coasts are teeming with witches and magicians who can summon storms and sink ships. Or so it seems if you open any collection of New England folktales. The theme of weather magic is rampant here. Folklorists collected and published these stories from the 1830s through the 1960s.

In the next 15 minutes I will explain why this theme appears so prevalent in New England.
This map is from Elizabeth Reynard’s book *The Narrow Land*. It illustrates witch stories from across Cape Cod, many of which involve weather magic. Although we don’t have time to explore all the fantastic folktales from these collections, I want you to have an idea of what these folktales are like. I want you to have an idea of what these folktales are like.

Allow me to briefly tell you a story.

Raise your hand if you’ve been to Kittery, Maine. This story is from there.

There is young shipmaster known as Skipper Perkins who is about to set sail from Kittery with his fishing crew. Old Betty Booker, a known witch from the town, asks him to bring her back some halibut. He laughs at her and chastises her for begging, so she promises to take her revenge. Sure enough, old Betty Booker scratches her way into his house one stormy night, strips him naked and bridles him, then rides him ragged through the wind and...
rain down to York Harbor and back again before sunrise. In the end, Skipper Perkins “more dead than alive” had learned to be kinder to his neighbors...

But before old Betty Booker bridled the shipmaster, she had performed a feat of weather magic; She had summoned a storm, which had battered his ship, ripped his sails, driven away the fish, and made his men sick. Her use of weather magic endangered the safety and livelihoods of these sailors.

Despite this delightful story, no one has really investigated this particular intersection of American folklore, history, and climatology before. Buckle up for my own foray into the subject, but there’s a lot of work still to do.
Skipper Perkins wasn’t the only captain to run into toil and trouble. These weather magic stories often involve seafaring and nautical life.

Folktales contain specific elements called “motifs” that are repeated and reused as tales are passed on.
Where did the weather magic motifs in New England come from? There are multiple direct parallels between the weather magic motifs found in this region and those from countries whose people eventually came to live in New England.
Comparing particular weather magic motifs across regions makes it clear that immigrants from England, Scotland, and Ireland (and perhaps modern-day Germany and Scandinavia) brought these motifs to New England.

However, this evidence is insufficient to explain the prevalence of this theme in New England.
People moved to other parts of America from those countries, so why did these motifs survive so well in New England?
Why does a folk story survive?

“Folklore is most likely to survive when it is both practical and entertaining.”

– Ronald M. James

Entertainment
Relevance
Identity

Why does any folk story survive?

Folktales continue to be told because they are entertaining, they are relevant, and they express an identity.

People tell stories that are relevant to them.
For example, what better time to tell a story about weather magic than after a sudden storm, the sinking or building of a ship, or the sighting of your own town witch.

I argue that the following factors are especially relevant to the success of the weather magic theme in coastal New England folktales from the 19th and 20th centuries:

1. Bias on the part of the folklorists and story collectors
2. The ever-present idea of witches in New England
3. A regional climate marked by highly changeable weather
4. A robust and shifting seafaring industry
The Folklorists and their Bias

I was able to access these stories through published texts. So, while we are looking at what made these motifs relevant to the original storytellers, we also must consider the relevance of these stories to the authors who decided to document them with such prominence.

New England's strong sense of regional identity and the older ways of life preserved along its coasts likely made these folktales appealing to folklorists. In seeking out stories for collections of New England Folktales which represented the “true” New England identity, folklorists may have shown bias in which stories they chose to collect or emphasize.

In the middle of the slide is a photo of Elizabeth Reynard, who wrote The Narrow Land: Folk Chronicles of Old Cape Cod. She was clearly passionate about the Navy, was the second in command of WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) during World War II, and even wrote a novel about a weather witch and a pirate in Cape Cod.

Indeed, quite a few of these authors served time in the Navy or enjoyed other nautical pursuits, which may have encouraged their collection of tales involving
nautical themes, such as weather magic. Crucially, many of the authors were from coastal New England themselves.

Even if some of the material they documented wouldn’t hold much weight in folklore scholarship today, these texts can be viewed as an expression of what these New England authors found important, relevant, and entertaining from their own regional identity.

While the nautical elements of weather magic tales embody a vision of New England identity...

*Quote: https://www.homefrontheroines.com/exhibits/speciality-training/*
...so too does the idea of witches. New England is known for its witches. Indeed, few collections of New England folktales leave out a section on witches. It’s plausible that the authors emphasized witchcraft stories due in part to the region’s reputation, but it’s also evident that witches were on the minds of the original storytellers.

While there is a crucial and evident difference between the witches in folktales and the real humans accused of the crime of witchcraft, the memories and ideas of witchcraft in New England provided relevant elements for good stories.

There were many witch trials across colonial America, but New England’s trials were comparatively well documented. The most infamous are of course the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, but the word “witch” was summoned with some seriousness in court as late as 1878. In 2024, a trip through Salem and Danvers will present fresh monuments to the Salem tragedy that are still visited by tourists.

As late as 1956, Richard Dorson recorded a man from Washington County, Maine
who shared that his wife had the power to curse people who wronged her. Dorson notes that this story aligns with a folktale motif G269.10 “Witch punishes person who incurs her ill will.” It’s clear that the idea of witches didn’t fade away in the modern age.

Witches inside and outside of folktales are often credited with the power to raise storms. So, the ever-present idea of New England witches provides a vehicle for weather magic stories that supports their prevalence here.

However, it does not on its own explain why these witches are so often doing weather magic. Other regions of the US are ripe with witch stories, but their witches entertain themselves in other ways. Indeed, there are plenty of non-witches doing weather magic in New England folktales, such as the Maine wind-buyers also documented by Dorson.

Map via the Library of Congress
Quote: Elizabeth Reynard, The Narrow Land: Folk Chronicles of Old Cape Cod
What of the weather itself?

New England’s climate is marked by weather that changes frequently, drastically, and somewhat unpredictably. One summer rarely looks like the next, a peaceful morning may surprise you with sudden showers, or gales of wind. These shifts in weather provide a setting that befits tales of weather magic.

That pattern of changeability that we see day to day matches the climate patterns of the last few hundred years. European colonizers recorded their experiences with the weather during what is now known as the little ice age. They included accounts of their own attempts (as well as some attempts from Native people) to influence the weather. So, ideas of weather magic and religious prayers for weather were present among settlers here for hundreds of years before the weather magic folktales were collected. The Little Ice Age ended in 1850, just as folklorists were really gearing up in America.
This map shows the trajectory of major storm patterns in the United States, which culminate in and around New England.

There were some major storms that were fresh in the memories of New Englanders while these stories were collected, such as “The Portland Storm” of 1898 which led to the sinking of at least 150 ships and around 450 lives lost. Around the same time, right in our window of folktale collection, the region was experiencing a dense pattern of tropical storms.

Just before then, the Weather Bureau was created in the Department of Agriculture, but the first weather forecast over radio didn’t occur until 1921 in Wisconsin. Before weather broadcasts, sailors used folk wisdom and superstitions to predict the weather. Many of those superstitions illustrate the strong relationship held between the weather and the supernatural; the idea of weather magic was not far from everyday life, even into the 20th century.

With a climate marked by tricky, changeable weather, reeling from the devastation of some serious storms, in the final days of an ice age, equipped with beliefs of influencing the weather through prayer and magic... how could we not have a plethora of weather magic stories in New England?

Weather Bureau Info: https://www.weather.gov/timeline
The last key factor is the seafaring industry itself. Fishing has been a crucial industry in New England since European colonization; our seafaring reputation is not new. While every town on New England’s coast has its own unique history, all of them were (of course) altered by the Industrial Revolution.

Let’s zoom into an example from Daniel Vickers’ book, *Young Men and the Sea*: Salem, Massachusetts was a town centered around sailing. Every aspect of town life involved the seafaring industry. In the 1800s, the leadup to the Industrial Revolution brought other job opportunities that pushed seafaring and sailors themselves to the margins of town life. It changed the workforce; sailors had been familiar with each other; captains now had crews of strangers and were punishing them harshly. Captains were also still using a master-servant, patriarch dynamic – a labor relation from a much earlier era. It’s possible that this played into the popularity or relevance of stories where witches torment captains or captains make disastrous decisions.
The Industrial Revolution changed more than working relationships in New England. It brought new types of ships, new methods for storing fish, changed the type of fish gathered. It had a significant effect on the everyday lives of coastal people.

The emergence of the New Navy in the late 1800s meant more new ships and national focus on maritime concerns and the work happening in New England.

All these factors kept boats, fishing, and seafaring relevant during the period these folktales were collected and published.

Stories of seafaring life would have been important to the storytellers and collectors. To the storytellers themselves, tales of weather magic troubling coastal life may have resonated with the stresses of maritime change in this period or captured a nostalgic image of an older coastal lifestyle. To the authors collecting them, the nautical nature of weather magic stories would have underscored New England’s maritime identity and appealed to the early notion in folklore scholarship of preserving fading ways of life. These folktales are imbued with centuries-old images and ideas in their depiction of coastal life at a time when the nautical world was not only at a pinnacle of relevance but also embroiled in significant changes.

*Image: Naval History and Heritage Command Photo Archives, Catalog #: NH 43022*
Here’s the takeaway:

1. Bias on the part of the folklorists and story collectors
2. The ever-present idea of witches in New England
3. A regional climate marked by highly changeable weather
4. And a robust and shifting seafaring industry

...were all factors that supported the popularity and collection of folk stories with weather magic motifs in coastal New England during the 19th and 20th centuries.