

Testimony
HJ 2 Criminal Law – Witchcraft – Exoneration
Sue Esty

I write in **support** of HJ 2. This Resolution would acknowledge and finally resolve the unfairness experienced by at least 7 women in Maryland who were wrongfully accused of witchcraft. Both the accusation and the way these individuals were treated were wrong and, as much as possible, should be corrected.

While some may view this topic as belonging in the past, it is relevant today, and worthy of consideration and discussion. That is because even though those accusations and events happened many years ago, there are lessons to be learned in the present day. The demonizing and scapegoating innocent individuals is at the bottom of the witchcraft allegations.

I write as a direct descendent of one of the women that was hung as a witch in Salem Massachusetts. Mary Towne Esty and her older sister Rebecca Nurse had been well-regarded in their community. However, prompted by a small group of young girls, and greatly pressured and encouraged by the religious and political leaders of the time, a witchcraft hysteria took over. There was no sequestration of witnesses and other judicial protections that we have today. Ultimately, nineteen women that were hanged. One man was crushed to death, and others died in jail. Hundreds of others were accused.

Comparisons have rightly been made between that time in history and others. The McCarthy era is a prime and more recent example. Arthur Miller's 1953 play, "The Crucible" was a thinly veiled comparison between the two time periods. The witchcraft hysteria has echoes worth remembering today. Well-meaning people can become convinced of untruths by those in authority. Fear can take over. Innocent people can be harmed.

Scapegoating can have dangerous consequences. Clearly that was the case in Salem, during the McCarthy era, and in various racial, ethnic, and gender persecutions in the world today.

All the Massachusetts victims were exonerated; Maryland victims should be too.
I hope the General Assembly provides serious and positive consideration to HR 2.