

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Samuel Sewall (1652-1730)

From the *Diary*

Samuel Sewall was born in England and brought to America at age nine, although his father had first come to New England in 1634. He graduated from Harvard in 1671, and then decided not to go into the ministry. He married Hannah Hull, daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Massachusetts, and devoted himself to managing her property, to scholarly hobbies, and to public life. From 1692 to 1728 he was a judge on the highest court in the colony, serving for the last ten years as chief justice. In 1693 he was made a member of the special court that tried witchcraft cases, consenting to the hanging of nineteen people. But in 1697, as shown below, he publicly recanted before the congregation of Boston's Old South Church.

He started his diary on December 3, 1673, and continued it almost unbroken until October 13, 1729—nearly fifty-six years. Such a span puts his diary in a class with Anais Nin (see below, Part 7). It is an invaluable record of his own works and days and also of his culture, although it was not published until the late nineteenth century. Excerpts describing his “Courtship of Madam Winthrop,” in 1720, were once in all American Literature anthologies.

The following excerpts, however, show the earnest, middle-aged Puritan leader rather than the somewhat comic, or pathetic, widower in his late sixties. Is he a sympathetic figure? As with other diaries, one can further ask whether he did or did not write for eventual publication, and for whom he wrote.

Sewell also wrote *The Selling of Joseph* (1700), the first American pamphlet against slavery.

The full text of the Diary is in Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th series, vols. 5-7 (1878-82). For a biography, see Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Samuel Sewall of Boston* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

Reading

Diary of Samuel Sewall
<http://archive.org/stream/diaryofsamuelsew01sewaiala#page/n9/mode/2up>