TEXT LENDS INSIGHT INTO PURITAN MIND

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The long-lost text of a sermon delivered 271

years ago by Puritan leader Cotton Mather has been rediscovered, offering a more complex portrait of the man best known for his role in the Salem witch trials."Because of Mather's standing as one of the most learned and most influential of the Puritan people, a find of this nature is very significant," said Richard Fyffe, who identified the document. He is chief librarian of the Essex Institute, which collects, preserves and studies the history of Essex County.

Although historians and bibliographers knew Mather gave a stirring funeral sermon from newspaper accounts, letters and other sources, they had searched in vain for decades for a full text of Mather's remarks.

Mather read the sermon on Nov. 9, 1718, at the funeral of George Worthylake, his wife, Ann, and their daughter, Ruth.

Worthylake, keeper of Boston's first lighthouse on Beacon Island, was drowned with his wife and daughter when their boat capsized in a fierce storm. Worthylake's two other children witnessed the accident from the shore.

"Tho they were now so very near the shoar, yet the winds and the seas, were so high they could not fetch it, before they were all of them unhappily drowned." Mather

horror and anguish, beheld the deadly distress of their parents and sister, and others thus perishing in the waters; unable to give the least help unto them.

"Imagine if thou canst, the agony," he urged in the sermon.

"The dead bodies of their parents and sister and others being thrown upon the land, were the only company which these poor children had upon the desolate island; for two whole days and nights together."

Mather's eulogy pointed to the Puritan ethic that tragedies are a part of God's will, but Fyffe noted that Mather's sympathy for the children and the horror expressed at the accident were characteristics not normally associated with Puritan expression.

"It is not surprising that we have caricatured the Puritans as a hard, unemotional people, but they were not as unfeeling and unsympathetic as we seem to believe they were," said Fyffe. "Mather's sermon is an example of this."

Fyffe found the sermon, "Providence Asserted and Adored," last year as he was cataloging the Essex Institute's collection for a nationwide computer database of all early American printed material made before 1801.

In the course of the work, Fyffe came across the pamphlet, which had never been properly identified because it was missing a cover. A former librarian had placed a note with the document suggesting it might be written by Mather but apparently never followed up on it. Fyffe did.

The pamphlet is now at the institute in Salem, a seaside city about 20 miles north of downtown Boston.

Mather, who lived from 1663 to 1728, was considered a leading theological and scientific expert of his time. He published nearly 400 documents, ranging from fiery sermons to scientific examinations.

However, he is probably best known for his role in support of the Salem witch trials of 1692, during which 20 people were executed.

Fyffe said the finding is important because Mather has long been considered both an intellectual and spiritual genius, and the pamphlet could change an image tainted by the witch trials.

"If this contributes to the public's developing a more complex sense of who Cotton Mather was, then it is important," Fyffe said. "Cotton was not the ideal man in any means, but he was a more sympathetic man than we tend to give him credit for being."