

# Death by Cow – Humphrey Atherton

Humphrey Atherton is my paternal eighth great-grandfather. At the time of his death he was considered a powerful leader who was very active in the political affairs of the colony. However, through the lens of history,



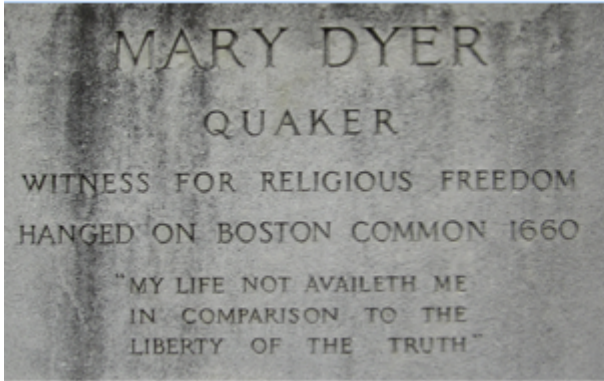
his persecution of Quakers, questionable acquisition of Indian lands and apprehension and conviction of heretics presents him in less favorable lights.

Humphrey Atherton was born in England in 1608 and arrived in Boston by 1635/36. According to [published accounts](#), he held the highest military rank in colonial New England, served as deputy governor, a representative in the General Court, Speaker of the House, representing Springfield, Massachusetts and as magistrate in the judiciary of colonial government.

Major General Atherton after a review of the troops on Boston Common, September 16, 1661, died as a result of being thrown from his horse, which stumbled over a cow lying in the road.

**Persecution of Quakers** – Mary Dyer and three other Quakers were hanged on Boston Common in 1660 for civil disobedience. They were given the opportunity to leave, to agree to permanent exile from Massachusetts, and instead they chose to die. Many view their act as a touchstone for the separation of church and state in America, the birth of our First Amendment rights. Humphrey Atherton, as the below quote

attests, held a different view of Mary's death.



General Atherton, one of her persecutors, "Mary Dyer did hang as a flag for others to take example by."

### [Mary Dyer of Rhode Island: The Quaker Martyr that was Hanged on Boston Common](#)

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A later play by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow ([John Endicott](#)) portrays Atherton's death, as seen by the Quakers, as a punishment from God for his persecution of them.

ENDICOTT.

And did not some one say, or have I dreamed it,  
That Humphrey Atherton is dead?

BELLINGHAM.

Alas!

He too is gone, and by a death as sudden.  
Returning home one evening, at the place  
Where usually the Quakers have been scourged,  
His horse took fright, and threw him to the ground,  
So that his brains were dashed about the street.

ENDICOTT.

I am not superstitious, Bellingham,  
And yet I tremble lest it may have been  
A judgment on him.

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In 1659, he (Atherton) began a land speculation venture called

the Atherton Company, supported by influential shareholders in the colonies and at the metropole. Hardly a model of ethical practice, the company was a method of gaining control over vast quantities of Indian land. In 1660, Atherton was part of a scheme to defraud the Narragansetts of much of their territory and remove them from their land. ([Yale Indian Papers Project](#))

Additional background: [Profits in the Wilderness: Entrepreneurship and the Founding of New England](#)

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