

THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

A Brief Overview

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Every year as Hallowe'en approaches, the memory of the Salem Witch Trials rises again. This brief moment in American history is a horror story, but the legend is nonetheless burned into American culture. Most people know the basic story: some young girls began having seizures, and upon being examined, said that they had been bewitched. On further examination, they named three women of the village. The Puritans of that time had a deep-seated belief in Satan and witchcraft, caused this incident to spark a panic, and more accusations came out. That led to the convening of a trial in which several accused witches were convicted and hanged. Finally, the Boston authorities stepped in, calmed the panic, and put an end to the whole affair. In the end, 20 alleged witches were executed.

Salem, Massachusetts, is known as the Witch City, and it has many tourist attractions associated with the 17th-century witch trials. One of the main ones is the "Witch House," a museum of the Salem trials. It was originally the home of Judge Jonathan Corwin, who was the judge in the first trials. There is no record of any accused witch ever living there. There is also the Cauldron Black, a shop that sells "metaphysical supplies." It is not a souvenir shop, although it does sell some, but its primary offering is "materials for beginning and experienced practitioners" of Wicca (witchcraft).

The traditional Hallowe'en image of witches with pointy hats, black cats, and riding on broomsticks, comes from fairytales and folk legends. It has very little rooting in history. For most of history, witches were not persecuted, although they were generally feared and shunned. Most of those thought to be witches were probably people who were extraordinarily knowledgeable about the use of herbs, particularly in medicine. It wasn't until the Middle Ages that the concept developed of people selling their souls to the devil for worldly power and an exalted place in Hell after death. When the Satanic idea arose, persecution of witches began. Most of the European persecutions were brutal, widespread, and well-organized, being led primarily by fanatics or power-seekers. Accused witches were tried, often tortured, and when convicted (which was most of them), burned at the stake. This was not the case in America. There is no record of a witch in America ever being burned or tortured, and the only organized "witch hunt" was the one in Salem. There were occasional convictions and executions of witches in the early colonies, but they were rare, and execution was by hanging. The Salem witch trials should not be confused with

the European witch persecutions of the Middle Ages. They were a localized, short-lived panic, not a widespread, organized persecution.

The Salem witch trials were not a spontaneous event that erupted unexpectedly. There were many factors over many years that led to them. In the 17th century in Massachusetts Bay Colony, Salem Town was a prosperous seaport and mercantile center that today is the City of Salem. Many wealthy upper-class families lived there. Salem Village was a poor rural farming community that was under the authority of Salem Town. There were a few prosperous farmers, but most struggled to eke out a living. Today Salem Village is the Town of Danvers. Although both communities were involved, most of the activity of the witch trials centered around Salem Village (Danvers). Records of what happened were scanty, carried more by oral tradition than by documented historical evidence. This changed in the mid-20th century. The present building of the Congregational Church in Danvers was built in 1861. That church was a direct descendant of the 1692 Puritan meeting house in Salem Village, the building in which the trials took place. Shortly after World War II the building was renovated, and several boxes of documents were discovered in the basement. They contained court records, letters, and contemporary accounts of the witch trials. The story that they told was fascinating and yet horrifying.

In 1692, most of the New England colonies were in turmoil. There was a constant fear of war. In the middle of the 17th century, the chief of the Wampanoag tribe, Massasoit's son Metacomet, organized all the Indian tribes in New England into a confederation and launched a war against the British colonists. The British called Metacomet King Philip, and the war is still known as King Philip's War. Per capita, it was the bloodiest war in American history. Each side committed horrible atrocities against the other. The war waged for decades, but finally, in 1676, Metacomet was defeated and killed. In 1692, King Philip's War was still a vivid memory, and many were still alive who had fought and lost loved ones in it. England was at war with France sporadically, and the French in western New York and Canada frequently goaded the Indians to raid British villages in the colonies. The French and Indian War would not begin for another 50 years, but the people lived in constant fear of an outbreak of another bloody war.

Another factor in the tensions of the times was that King William III had rewritten the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and the people feared a massive increase in taxes and a loss of many of their freedoms. Salem Village had unsuccessfully petitioned for independence from Salem Town. They wanted autonomy over their own taxes, church, and social life. Most of the people in Salem Village were rigid Calvinist Puritans. Most of

the people in Salem town were Congregationalists, a more liberal variation of Puritanism. The people of Salem Town saw the people of Salem Village as stern and uncompromising, and the people of Salem Village saw the people of Salem Town as degenerate and liberal their religion. Nonetheless, the only church was the Congregational Church in Salem Town, to which the people of Salem Village by law had to attend and pay a tithe.

A third factor in the tension was that the law provided very few safeguards for accused criminals. Most trials were not by jury but by tribunal, which was appointed by the judge. Often, even the judge had no formal legal training. The tribunals in that community were almost always judged and tried by people from Salem Town, giving the people of Salem Village a strong sense of bias. There were no constitutional protections about what evidence could be used in a trial, and “spectral evidence” was frequently allowed. This was evidence based on claims of visions and revelation, not on any hard, provable circumstances. For example, you could claim that a person’s spirit had molested you, and if the tribunal were gullible enough and you were persuasive enough, that was sufficient for conviction. That became an important factor in the witch trials.

There were two factions, each following a leading family in the community. The Putnams were prosperous farmers in Salem Village. They were leaders in the movement for independence of the Village from the Town. They wanted the Village to have its own authority over local affairs, taxes, and the church. They were strict Calvinist Puritans. The Porters were wealthy merchants in Salem Town, and they strongly opposed the independence of the Village. They were particularly opposed to the formation of a church in the Village, because it would have drawn parishioners and, more importantly, tithes, from the church in the Town. They were more liberal Congregationalist Puritans.

The family rivalry first came to a head in 1672 when the Porters built a dam and sawmill that flooded part of the Putnams’ farmland. John Putnam Sr. sued the Porters, but the court was made up completely of people from Salem Town, and the suit was dismissed. Strong factions developed behind each family very quickly thereafter. This rivalry did not cause the witch trials, but it was an important factor in who was accused, defended, and mistrusted.

By 1689, the religious differences between the two communities became so strong that the Putnams recognized the need for a Puritan congregation in Salem Village. They funded and built a meeting house, and recruited Samuel Parris as the minister. They offered him land, a house, a barn, and a salary. In those days, that was a very generous offer. The Porters

saw Samuel Parris as a divisive and very expensive stumbling-block. The Putnams saw the liberal religious laxity of Salem Town as corrupt and degenerate. The Porters considered this a threat for several reasons. There was already a church in Salem Town, and they did not want to see the loss of parishioners and tithes from that church. It also would have weakened the hold of the town over the village, because the people from the village would no longer have had to travel to Salem Town every Sunday to go to church. These factors, plus the rigid theological stance of Samuel Parris, made the religious tensions between the two communities very strong.

Fear of disease was another factor. There had been a major smallpox epidemic in eastern Massachusetts in the 1660s, with an outbreak in 1677, and another in 1690. These epidemics left many people dead or badly scarred. There was always a suspicion that epidemics were caused by witches, and people lived in constant fear of another smallpox outbreak.

The spark that ignited the powder keg occurred in 1692. Two young girls in Salem Village began having seizures, rolling on the floor and screaming either in pain or in terror. They were Elizabeth (“Betty”) Parris, Samuel’s daughter, age 9, and Abigail Williams, age 11. Abigail Williams lived in the Parris household. There is no record as to why, but she may have been an orphan that they took in. This was common in those days. For years, historians suspected that they might have been victims of ergotism. Ergot is a hallucinogenic fungus that grows on rye and causes seizures and painful abdominal cramps. This theory has been discarded by historians, however, since the discovery of the documents in the Danvers Church. Ergotism usually affects whole communities, not individuals. Most historians now believe that the seizures were no more than a prank by two bratty little girls who were bored and seeking attention. When they were examined by the village elders, however, they realized that they had gone too far. If they admitted that it was a prank, they would have been punished, which almost undoubtedly, especially in Samuel Parris’s household, would have included a severe beating. They had painted themselves into a corner and did not know how to get out of it. They finally claimed that they had been bewitched. This idea may well have been planted by one of the elders asking if they had been bewitched, and they then said that they had. On being pressed to name the witch, they accused Samuel Parris’s Jamaican slave, Tituba. She had probably told the girls about the voodoo-like occult practices in Jamaica that many Christians considered witchcraft. Their attitude, as unfortunate as it is, was common at the time. Tituba was just a black slave, so what did she matter? On being pressed further, however, the girls named two women of Salem Village. They were Sarah Good and

Sarah Osborne, who were both, sharp-tongued, ill-tempered widows whom nobody liked. By now the girls realized that there was no turning back. If they admitted that it was a prank, they would have been in very serious trouble. The genie was out of the bottle, so they continued the charade, even having seizures in the court during the trials.

Tragically, the panic caught like wildfire. More and more accusations started coming out as people released their fears and tensions by accusing anyone they suspected. Undoubtedly, some of the accusations were purely malicious, but most were simply the result of fear and panic. People sincerely believed in Satan and witchcraft, and this was a release for the fears and tensions that had been building up in them for years. The elders organized a trial court under Judge Jonathan Corwin of Salem Town. He appointed a tribunal made up primarily of people from Salem Town, and the accused witches were tried. Many confessed and named other witches, probably in the hope that it would save their lives. In most cases, it did not. Because spectral evidence was allowed, every one of those tried was convicted and all but one were hanged. Giles Corey refused to testify or confess, so instead of hanging he was pressed to death. This involved placing a door on him and piling stones on it until he was crushed to death.

At the peak of the madness, the trials came to the attention of Governor Sir William Phipps in Boston, when his wife was accused. He immediately called a halt to the trials for further investigation. He appointed Increase Mather, the president of Harvard College and a Congregationalist minister, to assemble a tribunal and investigate the situation. Mather appointed his son Cotton to lead the investigation, but Cotton wanted to allow spectral evidence and Increase forbade it, being supported by Governor Phipps. The trials continued under the new tribunal, but without spectral evidence, every one of the accused was acquitted. Governor Phipps dissolved the court and pardoned all who were still in jail awaiting trial. The madness quickly abated, and the 15-month-long horror was finally over.

Epilogue

At the end of the episode, there were 153 accusations affecting over 200 people. Tituba confessed and was jailed. Because she confessed and was only a slave, she was never tried. There is no evidence that she was tortured, but she probably confessed out of sheer terror. She remained in jail for 13 months because Samuel Parris refused to pay the £7 fee (about \$2,000 in today's money) for her release. A prosperous farmer in Salem Village finally paid the fee, and she was released as his slave. There is no

record of her after that, or of what happened to her husband John, who was also a slave in the Parris household.

Sarah Good, an impoverished recent widow, was imprisoned with her 5-year-old and infant children. She and her children died in prison before trial. Sarah Osborne was a reasonably prosperous widow. She had been involved in a bitter inheritance conflict with the Putnam family, and had failed to attend church for four months, allegedly because of illness. She had also been accused of living out of wedlock before marrying her recently deceased husband, an indentured servant whose freedom she had purchased. She was convicted and executed.

Of the 153 accused, 30 were brought to trial. Twenty of those were convicted and executed. Nineteen were hanged (6 men and 13 women), and one, Giles Corey, was pressed to death. Five died in jail awaiting trial. Ten were still in jail and were pardoned and released by Governor Phipps. Betty Parris married Benjamin Baron in 1710, raised four children, and died in Concord, MA in 1760 at age 77. She never recanted her accusations. Abigail Williams vanished from the historical records in 1697, and her fate remains unknown. In 1711, the Massachusetts Legislature offered a compensatory payment to the families of each of the victims of the witch trial. Each family was paid according to its need and the degree of suffering of the victim. The 1985 TV mini-series "Three Sovereigns for Sarah" deals with the case of Sarah Cloyce, who was convicted and hanged, and the compensation paid to her family. In 1752, Salem Village finally gained independence from Salem Town. In 1757, it was incorporated as the Town of Danvers. The Danvers militia played an important role in George Washington's Christmas Eve attack on Trenton.

In 1692, Salem Town and Salem Village were a powder keg just waiting to explode. What was probably a silly prank by two bored, bratty little girls was the spark big enough to ignite it. The result was the deaths of 25 people, the destruction of many families, and a black mark in history that has lasted for over 300 years.