A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials
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The Salem witch trials occurred in colonial Massachusetts between 1692 and 1693. More than 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft—the Devil's magic—and 20 were executed. Eventually, the colony admitted the trials were a mistake and compensated the families of those convicted. Since then, the story of the trials has become synonymous with paranoia and injustice, and it continues to beguile the popular imagination more than 300 years later.

Several centuries ago, many practicing Christians, and those of other religions, had a strong belief that the Devil could give certain people known as witches the power to harm others in return for their loyalty. A "witchcraft craze" rippled through Europe from the 1300s to the end of the 1600s. Tens of thousands of supposed witches—mostly women—were executed. Though the Salem trials came on just as the European craze was winding down, local circumstances explain their onset.

In 1689, English rulers William and Mary started a war with France in the American colonies. Known as King William's War to colonists, it ravaged regions of upstate New York, Nova
Scotia and Quebec, sending refugees into the county of Essex and, specifically, Salem Village in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. (Salem Village is present-day Danvers, Massachusetts; colonial Salem Town became what's now Salem.)

The displaced people created a strain on Salem's resources. This aggravated the existing rivalry between families with ties to the wealth of the port of Salem and those who still depended on agriculture. Controversy also brewed over Reverend Samuel Parris, who became Salem Village's first ordained minister in 1689, and was disliked because of his rigid ways and greedy nature. The Puritan villagers believed all the quarreling was the work of the Devil.

In January of 1692, Reverend Parris' daughter Elizabeth, age 9, and niece Abigail Williams, age 11, started having "fits." They screamed, threw things, uttered peculiar sounds and contorted themselves into strange positions, and a local doctor blamed the supernatural. Another girl, Ann Putnam, age 11, experienced similar episodes. On February 29, under pressure from magistrates Jonathan Corwin and John Hathorne, the girls blamed three women for afflicting them: Tituba, the Parris' Caribbean slave; Sarah Good, a homeless beggar; and Sarah Osborne, an elderly impoverished woman.

All three women were brought before the local magistrates and interrogated for several days, starting on March 1, 1692. Osborne claimed innocence, as did Good. But Tituba confessed, "The Devil came to me and bid me serve him." She described elaborate images of black dogs, red cats, yellow birds and a "black man" who wanted her to sign his book. She admitted that she signed the book and said there were several other witches looking to destroy the Puritans. All three women were put in jail.

With the seed of paranoia planted, a stream of accusations followed for the next few months. Charges against Martha Corey, a loyal member of the Church in Salem Village, greatly concerned the community; if she could be a witch, then anyone could. Magistrates even questioned Sarah Good's 4-year-old daughter, Dorothy, and her timid answers were construed as a confession. The questioning got more serious in April when Deputy Governor Thomas Danforth and his assistants attended the hearings. Dozens of people from Salem and other Massachusetts villages were brought in for questioning.

On May 27, 1692, Governor William Phipps ordered the establishment of a Special Court of Oyer (to hear) and Terminer (to decide) for Suffolk, Essex and Middlesex counties. The first case brought to the special court was Bridget Bishop, an older woman known for her gossipy habits and promiscuity. When asked if she committed witchcraft, Bishop responded, "I am as innocent as the child unborn." The defense must not have been convincing, because she was found guilty and, on June 10, became the first person hanged on what was later called Gallows Hill.

Five days later, respected minister Cotton Mather wrote a letter imploring the court not to allow spectral evidence—testimony about dreams and visions. The court largely ignored this request and five people were sentenced and hanged in July, five more in August and eight in September. On October 3, following in his son's footsteps, Increase Mather, then president of Harvard, denounced the use of spectral evidence: "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person be condemned."

Governor Phipps, in response to Mather's plea and his own wife being questioned for witchcraft, prohibited further arrests, released many accused witches and dissolved the Court of Oyer and Terminer on October 29. Phipps replaced it with a Superior Court of Judicature, which disallowed spectral evidence and only condemned 3 out of 56 defendants. Phipps eventually pardoned all who were in prison on witchcraft charges by May 1693. But the damage had been done: 19 were hanged on Gallows Hill, a 71-year-old man was pressed to death with heavy stones, several people died in jail and nearly 200 people, overall, had been accused of practicing "the Devil's magic."

Following the trials and executions, many involved, like judge Samuel Sewall, publicly confessed error and guilt. On January 14, 1697, the General Court ordered a day of fasting and soul-
searching for the tragedy of Salem. In 1702, the court declared the trials unlawful. And in 1711, the colony passed a bill restoring the rights and good names of those accused and granted £600 restitution to their heirs. However, it was not until 1957—more than 250 years later—that Massachusetts formally apologized for the events of 1692.

In the 20th century, artists and scientists alike continued to be fascinated by the Salem witch trials. Playwright Arthur Miller resurrected the tale with his 1953 play The Crucible, using the trials as an allegory for the McCarthyism paranoia in the 1950s. Additionally, numerous hypotheses have been devised to explain the strange behavior that occurred in Salem in 1692. One of the most concrete studies, published in Science in 1976 by psychologist Linnda Caporael, blamed the abnormal habits of the accused on the fungus ergot, which can be found in rye, wheat and other cereal grasses. Toxicologists say that eating ergot-contaminated foods can lead to muscle spasms, vomiting, delusions and hallucinations. Also, the fungus thrives in warm and damp climates—not too unlike the swampy meadows in Salem Village, where rye was the staple grain during the spring and summer months.

In August 1992, to mark the 300th anniversary of the trials, Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel dedicated the Witch Trials Memorial in Salem. Also in Salem, the Peabody Essex Museum houses the original court documents, and the town’s most-visited attraction, the Salem Witch Museum, attests to the public’s enthrallment with the 1692 hysteria.

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According to the law at the time, a person who refused to plead guilty or not guilty could not be tried. To avoid persons cheating justice, the legal remedy for refusing to plead was "peine forte et dure" (more commonly known as pressing). A prisoner would be stripped naked, with a heavy board laid on his or her body. Then rocks or boulders would be laid on a plank of wood. More and more weight would be added until the prisoner either confessed or died.
Since water is pure, it rejects evil. Persons accused of witchcraft were tied to chairs or had weights placed in their pockets. They were then thrown into water. If a person floated he/she was a witch because the water would reject sinfulness; if the person sank (often drowning), he/she was innocent. If the person drowned, they were considered fortunate because they would be entering the Kingdom of Heaven. © Retrieved August 30, 2016 Foxearth Historical Society. www.foxearth.org.uk

A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

- 1629: Salem is settled.
- 1641: English law makes witchcraft a capital crime.
- 1684: England declares that the colonies may not self-govern.
- 1688: Following an argument with laundress Goody Glover, Martha Goodwin, 13, begins exhibiting bizarre behavior. Days later her younger brother and two sisters exhibit similar behavior. Glover is arrested and tried for bewitching the Goodwin children. Reverend Cotton Mather meets twice with Glover following her arrest in an attempt to persuade her to repent her witchcraft. Glover is hanged. Mather takes Martha Goodwin into his house. Her bizarre behavior continues and worsens.
- 1688: Mather publishes Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions
- November, 1689: Samuel Parris is named the new minister of Salem. Parris moves to Salem from Boston, where Memorable Providence was published.
- October 16, 1691: Villagers vow to drive Parris out of Salem and stop contributing to his salary.
- January 20, 1692: Eleven-year old Abigail Williams and nine-year old Elizabeth Parris begin behaving much as the Goodwin children acted four years earlier. Soon Ann Putnam Jr. and other Salem girls begin acting similarly.
- Mid-February, 1692: Doctor Griggs, who attends to the "afflicted" girls, suggests that witchcraft may be the cause of their strange behavior.
- February 25, 1692: Tituba, at the request of neighbor Mary Sibley, bakes a "witch cake" and feeds it to a dog. According to an English folk remedy, feeding a dog this kind of cake, which contained the urine of the afflicted, would counteract the spell put on Elizabeth and Abigail. The reason the cake is fed to a dog is because the dog is believed a "familiar" of the Devil.
- Late-February, 1692: Pressured by ministers and townspeople to say who caused her odd behavior, Elizabeth identifies Tituba. The girls later accuse Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne of witchcraft.
February 29, 1692: Arrest warrants are issued for Tituba, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne.

March 1, 1692: Magistrates John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin examine Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborne for "witches teats." Tituba confesses to practicing witchcraft and confirms Good and Osborne are her co-conspirators.

March 11, 1692: Ann Putnam Jr. shows symptoms of affliction by witchcraft. Mercy Lewis, Mary Walcott, and Mary Warren later allege affliction as well.


March 19, 1692: Abigail Williams denounces Rebecca Nurse as a witch.

March 21, 1692: Magistrates Hathorne and Corwin examine Martha Cory.

March 23, 1692: Salem Marshal Deputy Samuel Brabrook arrests four-year-old Dorcas Good.

March 24, 1692: Corwin and Hathorne examine Rebecca Nurse.

March 26, 1692: Hathorne and Corwin interrogate Dorcas.

March 28, 1692: Elizabeth Proctor is accused of witchcraft.

April 3, 1692: Sarah Cloyce, after defending her sister, Rebecca Nurse, is accused of witchcraft.

April 11, 1692: Hathorne and Corwin examine Sarah Cloyce and Elizabeth Proctor. On the same day Elizabeth's husband, John, who protested the examination of his wife, becomes the first man accused of witchcraft and is incarcerated.

Early April, 1692: The Proctors' servant and accuser, Mary Warren, admits lying and accuses the other accusing girls of lying.

April 13, 1692: Ann Putnam Jr. accuses Giles Cory of witchcraft and alleges that a man who died at Cory's house also haunts her.

April 19, 1692: Abigail Hobbs, Bridget Bishop, Giles Cory and Mary Warren are examined. Deliverance Hobbs confesses to practicing witchcraft. Mary Warren reverses her statement made in early April and rejoins the accusers.

April 22, 1692: Mary Easty, another of Rebecca Nurse's sisters who defended her, is examined by Hathorne and Corwin. Hathorne and Corwin also examine Nehemiah Abbott, William and Deliverance Hobbs, Edward and Sarah Bishop, Mary Black, Sarah Wildes, and Mary English.

April 30, 1692: Several girls accuse former Salem minister George Burroughs of witchcraft.

May 2, 1692: Hathorne and Corwin examine Sarah Morey, Lyndia Dustin, Susannah Martin and Dorcas Hoar.

May 4, 1692: George Burroughs is arrested in Maine.

May 7, 1692: George Burroughs is returned to Salem and placed in jail.

May 9, 1692: Corwin and Hathorne examine Burroughs and Sarah Churchill. Burroughs is moved to a Boston jail.

May 10, 1692: Corwin and Hathorne examine George Jacobs, Sr. and his granddaughter Margaret Jacobs. Sarah Osborne dies in prison.

May 14, 1692: Increase Mather and Sir William Phips, the newly elected governor of the colony, arrive in Boston. They bring with them a charter ending the 1684 prohibition of self-governance within the colony.

May 18, 1692: Mary Easty is released from prison. Following protest by her accusers, she is again arrested. Roger Toothaker is also arrested on charges of witchcraft.


May 31, 1692: Hathorne, Corwin and Gednew examine Martha Carrier, John Alden, Wilmott Redd, Elizabeth Howe and Phillip English. English and Alden later escape prison and do not return to Salem until after the trials end.

June 2, 1692: Bridget Bishop is the first to be tried and convicted of witchcraft. She is sentenced to die.

June 8, 1692: Eighteen-year-old Elizabeth Booth shows symptoms of affliction by witchcraft.

June 10, 1692: Bridget Bishop is hanged at Gallows Hill. Following the hanging Nathaniel Saltonstall resigns from the court and is replaced by Corwin.

June 15, 1692: Cotton Mather writes a letter requesting the court not use spectral evidence as a standard and urging that the trials be speedy. The Court of Oyer and Terminus pays more attention to the request for speed and less attention to the criticism of spectral evidence.

June 16, 1692: Roger Toothaker dies in prison.

June 29-30, 1692: Rebecca Nurse, Susannah Martin, Sarah Wildes, Sarah Good, and Elizabeth Howe are tried, pronounced guilty and sentenced to hang.
July 19, 1692: Rebecca Nurse, Susannah Martin, Elizabeth Howe, Sarah Good and Sarah Wildes are hanged at Gallows Hill.

August 5, 1692: George Jacobs Sr., Martha Carrier, George Burroughs, John Willard and John and Elizabeth Proctor are pronounced guilty and sentenced to hang.

August 19, 1692: George Jacobs Sr., Martha Carrier, George Burroughs, John Willard and John Proctor are hanged on Gallows Hill. Elizabeth Proctor is not hanged because she is pregnant.

August 20, 1692: Margaret Jacobs recants the testimony that led to the execution of her grandfather George Jacobs Sr. and Burroughs.

September 9, 1692: Martha Corey, Mary Easty, Alice Parker, Ann Pudeator, Dorcas Hoar and Mary Bradbury are pronounced guilty and sentenced to hang.

Mid-September, 1692: Giles Cory is indicted.

September 17, 1692: Margaret Scott, Wilmott Redd, Samuel Wardwell, Mary Parker, Abigail Faulkner, Rebecca Earnes, Mary Lacy, Ann Foster and Abigail Hobs are tried and sentenced to hang.

September 19, 1692: Sheriffs administer Peine Forte Et Dure (pressing) to Giles Cory after he refuses to enter a plea to the charges of witchcraft against him. After two days under the weight, Cory dies.

September 22, 1692: Martha Cory, Margaret Scott, Mary Easty, Alice Parker, Ann Pudeator, Willmott Redd, Samuel Wardwell, and Mary Parker are hanged. Hoar escapes execution by confessing.

October 3, 1692: The Reverend Increase Mather, President of Harvard College and father to Cotton Mather, denounces the use of spectral evidence.

October 8, 1692: Governor Phipps orders that spectral evidence no longer be admitted in witchcraft trials.

October 29, 1692: Phipps prohibits further arrests, releases many accused witches, and dissolves the Court of Oyer and Terminer.

November 25, 1692: The General Court establishes a Superior Court to try remaining witches.

January 3, 1693: Judge Stoughton orders execution of all suspected witches who were exempted by their pregnancy. Phipps denied enforcement of the order causing Stoughton to leave the bench.

January 1693: 49 of the 52 surviving people brought into court on witchcraft charges are released because their arrests were based on spectral evidence.

1693: Tituba is released from jail and sold to a new master.

May 1693: Phipps pardons those still in prison on witchcraft charges.

January 14, 1697: The General Court orders a day of fasting and soul-searching for the tragedy at Salem. Moved, Samuel Sewall publicly confesses error and guilt.

1697: Minister Samuel Parris is ousted as minister in Salem and replaced by Joseph Green.

1702: The General Court declares the 1692 trials unlawful.

1706: Ann Putnam Jr., one of the leading accusers, publicly apologizes for her actions in 1692. She is the only “accuser” to apologize.

1711: The colony passes a legislative bill restoring the rights and good names of those accused of witchcraft and grants 600 pounds in restitution to their heirs.

1752: Salem Village is renamed Danvers.

1957: Massachusetts formally apologizes for the events of 1692.

1992: On the 300th anniversary of the trials, a witchcraft memorial designed by James Cutler is dedicated in Salem.


The following links are all available on my website: www.makingwings.net

SALEM WITCH TRIALS WEB RESOURCES:

• A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRIALS (Smithsonian Magazine website): http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-brief-history-of-the-salem-witch-trials-175162489/?no-ist
• LIST OF PEOPLE ASSOCIATED WITH THE TRIALS (with links to biographies of the principal persons): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_of_the_Salem_witch_trials
• IMPORTANT PERSONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE TRIALS (University of Virginia): http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/people?group.num=all
• CHRONOLOGY: http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/ASAL_CH.HTM
• HOW TO TEST FOR A WITCH (History Channel): http://www.history.com/news/history-lists/7-bizarre-witch-trial-tests
• THE SWIMMING OF WITCHES (from the website for The Foxearth and District Local History Society in East, Anglia, UK): http://www.foxearth.org.uk/SwimmingOfWitches.html
• DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT COTTON MATHER (The Mather Society): http://matherproject.org/node/1
• SALEM VILLAGE vs. SALEM TOWN (Tulane University project): http://www.tulane.edu/~salem/Salem%20and%20Village.html
• PURITANS AND MASSACHUSETTS BAY COLONY (History of Massachusetts website): http://historyofmassachusetts.org/history-of-the-massachusetts-bay-colony/
• DOCUMENT AND TRANSCRIPT PROJECT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA (numerous links to documents, library holdings, and government transcripts; one of the more exhaustive sites for Salem Witch Trial research): http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/home.html
• ERGOT POISONING: https://www.damninteresting.com/bad-rye-and-the-salem-witches/
• ERGOT POISONING: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/witches-curse-interview/1502/

THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS. 19th Century Lithograph

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SOURCES FOR THIS LECTURE AND FURTHER STUDY INCLUDE (Titles in **BOLD FACE** are especially informative):

DEMON AMONG US: THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS  Dr. Bill Thiefelder


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