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## Witchcraft in Salem

By USHistory.org  
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*In 1692, a series of strange events that cannot be fully accounted for today broke out in the Puritan settlement of Salem, Massachusetts. Accusations of witchcraft quickly spread throughout the town and many—especially the women of Salem—feared that they would be next. As you read, take notes on how the witch trials were conducted in Salem.*

[1] Surely the Devil had come to Salem in 1692. Young girls screaming and barking like a dog? Strange dances in the woods? This was behavior hardly becoming of virtuous<sup>1</sup> teenage maidens. The town doctor was called onto the scene. After a thorough examination, he concluded quite simply — the girls were bewitched. Now the task was clear. Whomever was responsible for this outrage must be brought to justice.



*"Witchcraft at Salem Village" by William A. Crafts is in the public domain.*

The ordeal originated in the home of Salem's Reverend Samuel Parris. Parris had a slave from the Caribbean named Tituba. Several of the town's teenage girls began to gather in the kitchen with Tituba early in 1692.<sup>2</sup> As winter turned to spring the townspeople were aghast<sup>3</sup> at the behaviors exhibited by Tituba's young followers. They were believed to have danced a black magic dance in the nearby woods.<sup>4</sup> Several of the girls would fall to the floor and scream hysterically.<sup>5</sup> Soon this behavior began to spread across Salem. Ministers from nearby communities came to Salem to lend their sage<sup>6</sup> advice. The talk turned to identifying the parties responsible for this mess.

Puritans believed that to become bewitched a witch must draw an individual under a spell. The girls could not have possibly brought this condition onto themselves. Soon they were questioned and forced to name their tormentors.<sup>7</sup> Three townspeople, including Tituba, were named as witches.<sup>8</sup> The famous Salem witchcraft trials began as the girls began to name more and more community members.

1. **Virtuous (adjective):** having or showing high moral standards or goodness
2. Among these girls notably included Parris' daughter Betty and his niece Abigail Williams, who began having fits and hysterical outbursts. These two young girls were among the first accusers.
3. **Aghast (adjective):** filled with horror or shock
4. In Puritan society, dancing of any kind was frowned upon or outright forbidden. It was considered idle activity and thus a sin.
5. **Hysterical (adjective):** with wild, uncontrolled emotion
6. **Sage (adjective):** having, showing, or indicating great wisdom
7. **Tormentor (noun):** someone or something that causes a lot of pain and suffering
8. Tituba was the first woman to confess to the crime of witchcraft, but this confession was forced (i.e. due to physical abuse from Parris).

Evidence admitted in such trials was of five types. First, the accused might be asked to pass a test, like reciting the Lord's Prayer. This seems simple enough. But the young girls who attended the trial were known to scream and writhe<sup>9</sup> on the floor in the middle of the test. It is easy to understand why some could not pass.

- [5] Second, physical evidence was considered. Any birthmarks, warts, moles, or other blemishes were seen as possible portals through which Satan could enter a body.<sup>10</sup>

Witness testimony was a third consideration. Anyone who could attribute their misfortune to the sorcery of an accused person might help get a conviction.<sup>11</sup>

Fourth was spectral evidence. Puritans believed that Satan could not take the form of any unwilling person. Therefore, if anyone saw a ghost or spirit in the form of the accused, the person in question must be a witch.<sup>12</sup>

Last was the confession. Confession seems foolhardy to a defendant who is certain of his or her innocence. In many cases, it was the only way out.<sup>13</sup> A confessor would tearfully throw himself or herself on the mercy of the town and court and promise repentance.<sup>14</sup> None of the confessors were executed. Part of repentance might of course include helping to convict others.<sup>15</sup>

As 1692 passed into 1693, the hysteria began to lose steam. The governor of the colony, upon hearing that his own wife was accused of witchcraft ordered an end to the trials. However, 20 people and 2 dogs were executed for the crime of witchcraft in Salem. One person was pressed to death under a pile of stones for refusing to testify.<sup>16</sup>

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9. **Writhe (verb):** to twist your body from side to side (in pain)
  10. Puritans looked for something called "the witches' mark" or "the Devil's mark," which was believed to be the mark that sealed a witch's pact with Satan. The accused were often stripped and publicly examined for these marks.
  11. Pretty much any misfortune or bad thing could be attributed to an act of sorcery: illness, poor harvest, sick or dead farm animals, spoiled food or milk, bruises, scratches, nightmares, etc. The accusers (i.e. the girls) complained of being attacked by the witches' spirits mentally and physically. Even though there was no way to prove this, the girls were often believed over the accused.
  12. Again, there was no way to prove this. It was taken on faith alone, but it is believed now that the accusers intentionally lied or were caught up in the hysteria to the point of hallucination.
  13. Those who pleaded not guilty were almost always found guilty and then killed. Confessing to the crime meant, ironically, that they would live, even at the cost of lying. Another incentive to confess involved property; if found guilty (under the plea of not guilty) the defendant's money and property would be confiscated from their family.
  14. **Repentance (noun):** sincere regret or remorse; atonement
  15. Though they would live, the people who confessed to practicing witchcraft faced a number of other consequences. One, their reputations would be damaged, if not destroyed; two, their confessions were lies they could not take back, and Puritans believed lying was a sin; and three, a confession freed the accused but left them at risk of future accusations of witchcraft.
  16. Giles Corey used a tactic called "standing mute," in which he refused to submit a plea of guilt or innocence. Torture was often used on these individuals until they either spoke or died. Supposedly his last words were "more weight!"

[10] No one knows the whole truth behind what happened in Salem. Once witchcraft is ruled out, other important factors come to light. Salem had suffered greatly in recent years from Indian attacks.<sup>17</sup> As the town became more populated, land became harder and harder to acquire. A smallpox epidemic<sup>18</sup> had broken out at the beginning of the decade. Massachusetts was experiencing some of the worst winters in memory. The motives of the young girls themselves can be questioned. In a society where women had no power, particularly young women, is it not understandable how a few adolescent girls, drunk with unforeseen attention, allowed their imaginations to run wild? Historians make educated guesses, but the real answers lie with the ages.

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17. Footnote: The term "Indian" refers to Native American or American Indian people. While attacks on white settlements were not uncommon in colonial America, few attacks were unprovoked by white Europeans.
18. **Epidemic** (*noun*): a widespread outbreak of a disease or undesired event