

By Tim Sutter © 2000-2003

What caused the Salem witch trials of 1692? This question has been asked for over 300 years. Although it is a simple question, it does not have an easy answer. The answer is difficult because there are numerous factors and events that helped create and influence the trials. The main factors that started and fueled the trials were politics, religion, family feuds, economics, and the imaginations and fears of the people. The following essay on these causes and the events surrounding the Salem witch trials of 1692 is divided into four sections: 1) [Salem Politics](#) 2) [Cold Winter Days](#) 3) [Salem Witchcraft](#) 4) [Aftermath](#).

### **Salem Politics**

Salem Village had a very colorful history before the famous witch trials. It was not exactly known as a bastion of tranquillity in New England. The main reason was its 600 plus residents were divided into two main parts: those who wanted to separate from Salem Town, and those who did not. The residents who wanted to separate from Salem Town were farming families located in the western part of Salem Village. Those who wanted to remain a part of Salem Town were typically located on the eastern side of Salem Village--closest to Salem Town. The residents who wished to remain a part of Salem Town were economically tied to its thriving, rich harbors.

Many of the Salem Village farming families believed that Salem Town's thriving economy made it too individualistic. This individualism was in opposition to the communal nature that Puritanism mandated. Thus, they were out of touch with the rest of Salem Village. One particularly large farming family who felt that Salem Town was out of touch with the rest of Salem Village was the Putnams.

The Putnams were the leaders of the separatist group primarily because they owned the most farmland in Salem Village. They hoped to solidify a separation from Salem Town by establishing a congregation unique from it. So in 1689, a congregation was formed under the Rev. Samuel Parris and began worshipping in the Salem Village Meetinghouse. However, the congregation only represented a select group since over half of its members were Putnams. If this action did not further strain already weakened relations between the two factions, the events concerning Parris' contract did.

Contracts for ministers during this period often provided them with a modest salary, use of a house, and free firewood. Parris received this and much more. He not only got a modest salary and free firewood, but the title and deed to the parsonage and its surrounding land. Needless to say, this was a very uncommon perk to be included in a minister's contract during this time. This perk especially angered the residents who wanted to remain a part of Salem Town. The Salem Town supporters showed their opposition by refusing to worship at the Meetinghouse and withholding their local taxes. This latter action was of important consequence because the local taxes helped pay the minister's salary and provided his firewood.

In October of 1691 a new Salem Village Committee was elected that was comprised mostly of Parris' opponents. This new committee refused to assess local taxes that would pay Parris' salary, and also challenged the legality of his ownership of the ministry-house and property. These actions by the new committee caused Parris and his family to rely solely on voluntary contributions for sustenance. The Putnams were now worried of losing Parris and the soughted independence from Salem Town the congregation would help bring, and Parris was concerned about his job and providing for his family.

### **Cold Winter Days**

The Rev. Samuel Parris had a relatively small family. He was married and had a nine year old daughter, Betty, and a twelve year old niece, Abigail Williams, who was an orphan. Abigail was expected to earn her keep by doing most of the household chores, and also care for her invalid aunt. Betty's poor health prevented her from helping with the household chores, so much of the work fell on Abigail's young shoulders.

After chores were done, there was little entertainment for Betty and Abigail. Salem Town was eight miles away, and Boston was a twenty mile journey over unforgiving roads. Thus, Samuel Parris only visited

these places when business required it. He also opposed the girls playing hide-and-seek, tag and other childhood games because he believed playing was a sign of idleness, and idleness allowed the Devil to work his mischief.

Reading was a popular pastime during the winter months. There was an interest in books about prophecy and fortune telling throughout New England during the winter of 1691-92. These books were especially popular among young girls and adolescents. In Essex County girls formed small, informal circles to practice the divinations and fortune telling they learned from their reading to help pass the cold months.

Betty Parris, her cousin Abigail Williams, and two other friends formed such a circle. Tituba, Rev. Parris' slave whom he bought while on a trip to Barbados, would often participate in the circle. She would entertain the others with stories of witchcraft, demons, and mystic animals. Other girls soon joined their circle in the evenings to listen to Tituba's tales and participate in fortune telling experiments. They would tell their fortunes by dropping an egg white into a glass of water and then interpret the picture it formed. However, Betty Parris and Abigail Williams began to become upset and frightened with the results of their fortunes. This, coupled with the family financial and social difficulties, likely caused the two girls to express their stress in unusual physical expressions. Samuel Parris believed this unnatural behavior to be an illness and asked Salem Village's physician, William Griggs, to examine the girls. He did not find any physical cause for their strange behavior and concluded the girls were bewitched.

### **Salem Witchcraft**

Puritans believed in witches and their ability to harm others. They defined witchcraft as entering into a compact with the devil in exchange for certain powers to do evil. Thus, witchcraft was considered a sin because it denied God's superiority, and a crime because the witch could call up the Devil in his/her shape to perform cruel acts against others. Therefore, in any case when witchcraft was suspected, it was important that it was investigated thoroughly and the tormentor(s) identified and judged. Unknown to Samuel Parris, Mary Sibley ordered Tituba and her husband, John Indian, to bake a "witch cake" in order to help the girls name their tormentors. A witch cake is composed of rye meal mixed with urine from the afflicted. It is then fed to a dog. The person(s) are considered bewitched if the dog displays similar symptoms as the afflicted. The girls were at first hesitant to speak, but Betty eventually spoke and named Tituba. The other girls soon spoke and named Sarah Osborne and Sarah Good.

All three women were prime candidates for the accusations of witchcraft. Sarah Osborne was an elderly lady who had not gone to church in over a year, and poor church attendance was a Puritan sin. Sarah Good was a homeless woman who begged door to door. If people failed to give her alms, she would utter unknown words and leave. Residents would often attribute her visits to death of livestock. They believed the mumbled words she spoke under her breath were curses against them for not showing her charity. Since Tituba was Parris' slave and well known to Betty and Abigail, it is no surprise then that her name was the first to be called out by Betty. The negative reputations and low social standing shared by these three women clearly made them believable suspects for witchcraft.

Now that three Salem Village residents stood accused of witchcraft, an investigation of the charges was in order. Two magistrates from Salem Town, John Hathorne, the great-grandfather of famed writer Nathaniel Hawthorne (Nathaniel added a "w" to his name to help disassociate himself from this great-grandfather) and Jonathan Corwin, traveled to Salem Village to investigate the cases of witchcraft. Their investigation of Sarah Osborne, Sarah Good and Tituba was conducted in the Salem Village Meetinghouse. During the questioning of the three accused, Betty, Abigail, and six other girls would often scream and tumble on the floor of the meetinghouse. Even with the harsh questioning by the two magistrates and the unusual actions of the afflicted girls, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne maintained their innocence. Tituba, however, confessed for three days.

During Tituba's confession, she talked of red rats, talking cats, and a tall man dressed in black. She stated that the man clothed in black made her sign in a book, and that Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne and others, whose names she could not read, had also signed this book. It is not exactly clear why she confessed to witchcraft. She might have thought that she was guilty since she practiced fortune telling, which was considered a form of "white magic," or perhaps thought that the judges would be lenient if she

confessed. Whatever her reason, a confession was not likely obtained from her by torture. Although physical torture was employed in Europe to elicit confessions from accused witches, there are no confirmed cases of it being used in Colonial America for the same purposes as New England law did not sanction it. When Tituba finished her lengthy confession, she, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne were taken to a Boston jail. Sarah Osborne would later become the first victim of the Salem witch trials when she died two months later of natural causes while still in jail.

The accusations of witchcraft continued despite the jailing of three accused witches. Why the accusations continued is still debated to this day. A recent small pox outbreak, the revocation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter by Charles II and the constant fear of Indian attacks helped in creating anxiety among the early Puritans that God was punishing them. This fear of punishment established a fertile atmosphere in which a case of possible witchcraft, let alone three, could easily be interpreted by the Puritans as the cause of God's wrath. Due to this belief and fear, they would want to make sure that every last witch be discovered and punished in order to end His anger. However, some historians and scientists argue that the girls continued with their accusations because they suffered from hysteria. Hysteria is known to cause strange physical symptoms in a person of good health. Whether it was fear of God's wrath or hysteria, the accusations did not relent.

In the middle of March, Ann Putnam accused Martha Corey of afflicting her. Even though Martha Corey attended church regularly, she was not very popular in the community. She was outspoken, opinionated and also mothered an illegitimate mulatto that still lived with her and her second husband, Giles. Despite her excellent church attendance, her character made her a prime candidate for the charge of witchcraft.

Rebecca Nurse was the next person to be accused of witchcraft. However, the 71-year-old woman did not make for a likely witch. She was a kind and generous lady that was well liked by the community. Ann Putnam and the other girls testified that her specter would float into their rooms at night, pinching and torturing them. When Rebecca was notified of these charges, she responded, "What sin has God found in me unrepented of that He should lay such an affliction upon me in my old age?" Probably the only flaws that could be found with the prudent woman were that she one time disputed with the Rev. James Allen over the boundary of their neighboring properties, and often did not respond when spoken to because of poor hearing.

As the accusations of witchcraft continued to increase, some started to doubt the truthfulness of the afflicted girls. One such person was a 60-year-old farmer and tavern owner from Salem Town by the name of John Proctor. When his maidservant, Mary Warren, began to display the same uncanny behavior as the afflicted girls, he threatened to beat her. This threat temporarily cured her afflictions. He believed the afflicted girls would, "make devils of us all," and that their behavior could easily be corrected with harsh discipline. With such opinions, it was not long before he and his wife, Elizabeth--whose grandmother, Ann B. Lynn, was once suspected of witchcraft--were jailed in Boston under charges of witchcraft.

A shocking accusation came when Ann Putnam accused the former Salem Village minister, George Burroughs, as being the master of all witches in Massachusetts. He was also identified by the afflicted girls as the "Black Minister" and leader of the Salem Coven. Despite being a minister, he did not have a character of an angel. He left Salem Village after serving as its minister from 1680-82 due to a dispute over his salary. He also was widowed three times, and rumored to have mistreated his wives. Furthermore, when his temper was tested, he sometimes would brag about having occult powers. Even though he was a minister, his actions at times did not reflect it.

By the end of May 1692, around 200 people were jailed under the charges of witchcraft. Almost all of them as a result of spectral evidence. Cotton Mather, son of famed minister and Harvard President, Increase Mather, spoke out against spectral evidence. He felt it was unreliable because the Devil could take the form of an innocent person to do his evil deeds. His warning against the use of spectral evidence was followed by Royal Governor William Phips establishing a Court of Oyer and Terminer to investigate the allegations of witchcraft at Salem Village.

The first to be tried under the newly formed court was Bridget Bishop on June 2, 1692. This was not the

first time she faced the charge of witchcraft. In 1680 she was tried for witchcraft, but was not convicted. Despite not receiving a conviction, she still was suspected of practicing the black arts. When work was being done on her cellar, "poppets" were found in the walls by the workers. It was testified that the poppets were stuck with pins, and some had missing heads. This discovery and testimony helped confirm the suspicions that she was indeed a practicing witch because it was believed that a witch could harm someone by sticking pins and other objects into a poppet that represented the victim. She was found guilty of witchcraft and hanged June 10, 1692, on Gallows Hill.

The cases of Sarah Good, Sarah Wilds, Elizabeth How, Susannah Martin, and Rebecca Nurse were heard next by the court on June 29, 1692. Unlike Bridget Bishop's trial, spectral evidence was a key in the conviction of four of the five accused. The one accused who escaped a guilty verdict was Rebecca Nurse. However, when the jurors announced a not guilty verdict in her case, the afflicted girls howled, thrashed about, and rolled around on the floor. With the courtroom in an uproar, the judges asked the jury to reconsider its decision. When they did, a guilty verdict was returned. Rebecca Nurse, along with the other four convicted women, were hanged July 19, 1692, on Gallows Hill. At the hangings, the Rev. Nicholas Noyes asked Sarah Good to confess. "I am no more a witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my life God will give you blood to drink." was her reply to him. Twenty-five years later, the Rev. Nicholas Noyes died of a hemorrhage, choking on his own blood.

The hangings of six convicted witches did little in abating the spread of witchcraft in Massachusetts during the summer months of 1692. More people began displaying signs of affliction. As a result, accusations and arrests for witchcraft continued to grow in number. Those from all walks of life, rich and poor, farmer and merchant, were now being accused. No one was exempt from being cried out as a witch.

As the jails continued to swell with accused witches, the court reconvened to try the Rev. George Burroughs, John and Elizabeth Proctor, George Jacobs, Sr., John Willard and Martha Carrier on August 5, 1692. Spectral evidence again played a significant factor in the trials of these individuals. In George Burroughs case, his lying and failure to have one of his children baptized did not help his cause to be found innocent. All six were found guilty of witchcraft by the court. Elizabeth Proctor escaped the sentence of death because she was pregnant, but the rest were hanged on Gallows Hill on August 19, 1692. At the hangings, George Burroughs recited the Lord's Prayer flawlessly. This achievement was important because it was believed that a wizard could not recite this prayer without making a mistake. Even with such an act of innocence, it was not enough to save his life.

George Burroughs' flawless recitation did little in impeding the witch trials. The trials continued with Giles Corey's scheduled for mid-September of 1692. However, he refused to answer the questions asked by the court. Due to his refusal, the court exercised its legal right and ordered the sheriff to pile rocks upon him until he co-operated. He was taken to a field near the Salem Meetinghouse, his hands and legs were bound, and heavy rocks were piled upon his chest. Even with the increasing weight, he refused to answer the court's questions. "More weight." would be his response to the court's inquiries. On September 19, 1692, after two days of enduring the increasing weight, Giles Corey was crushed to death. Why Giles Corey refused to answer the court's questions and suffer this slow death instead is not clear. Some historians feel that he wanted to protect his property for heirs. Since witchcraft was a capital offense, his property could be sequestered to the government if he was found guilty. Unfortunately, this does not explain why John Proctor and he both made wills before their deaths; neither would have any property to leave because it could be secured by the government. Due to this action by the two men, other historians argue that Giles Corey was not acting on behalf of his heirs by refusing to stand trial. Rather, he chose this fate to serve as a protest against the witch trials and the methods of the court. Whatever his reason, Giles Corey chose death over standing trial for witchcraft.

Giles Corey's refusal to stand trial did not slow the court's conviction of accused witches. Martha Corey, Mary Easty, Alice Parker, Ann Pudeater, Margaret Scott, Wilmott Reed, Samuel Wardwell, and Mary Parker were hanged on Gallows Hill September 22, 1692. Before the hangings, Mary Easty, a sister of Rebecca Nurse, wrote the magistrates and the Essex County ministers. In her petition, she stated:

...I know I must die, and my appointed time is set. But the Lord He knows it is, if it be possible, that no more innocent blood be shed, which undoubtedly cannot be avoided in the way and

course you go in. I question not but your honors do to the utmost of your powers in the discovery and detecting of witchcraft and witches, and would not be guilty of innocent blood for the world. But by my own innocency I know you are in the wrong way. The Lord in his infinite mercy direct you in this great work, if it be His blessed will, that innocent blood be not shed...

George Burroughs' prayer, Giles Corey's refusal to stand trial and Mary Easty's letter began to lessen the public support and faith that the witch trials once had. Many people felt the accusations and trials were getting out of control. By October, ministers, judges and numerous others believed that the trials claimed innocent lives. "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than that one innocent person should be condemned." was the sentiment Increase Mather imparted to the Boston clergy. It was not long after Increase Mather made this statement that on October 12, 1692, Governor Phips issued orders to protect the current prisoners accused of witchcraft from harm, and suspended the arrest of suspected witches--unless the arrests were absolutely necessary. He soon followed these orders with dissolving the Court of Oyer and Terminer on October 29, 1692.

Governor Phips' orders, Increase Mather's statement to the Boston clergy and waning support of the trials soon left the cries of the afflicted to fall on deaf ears. People began to ignore the accusations of the afflicted. The fury of the witch trials subsided, and the last witch trial was held in January 1693. Governor Phips ended the witch trials when he pardoned the remaining accused in May 1693. With this pardon, the Salem witch trials, which resulted in nineteen hangings and a death by crushing rocks, was finally concluded.

### **Aftermath**

The aftermath of the Salem witch trials was severe. Even with the witch trials over, many were still in jail because they could not pay for their release. The law stipulated that prisoners had to pay for their food and board before being released. Unless the prisoners or someone else could pay for these expenses, they could not be freed. Additionally, those who were convicted of witchcraft had their property confiscated by the government. This left their families without money and, in some cases, a home.

The trials took a toll on the surrounding land and structures as well. Houses and fields were left untended, and the planting season was interrupted. The fields that were planted were not cultivated or harvested. Also, the Salem Meetinghouse was left dilapidated due to the distraction of the trials.

Crop failures and epidemics continued to bother Salem for years after the trials ended. The Puritans felt that these events were happening because God was punishing them for the hangings of innocent people. Therefore, a day of fasting and prayer for forgiveness was ordered for January 13, 1697.

The land and structures were not the only things to change as a result of the trials. Salem Village politics also changed. The Essex County Court declared that the Salem Village committee was derelict in its duties, and ordered for a new election on January 15, 1693. An anti-Parris committee was elected as a result.

The Rev. Samuel Parris was now in jeopardy of losing his job because of the outcome of the new election. Whether he was worried about losing his job, or simply had a guilty conscience, Parris gave his "Meditation for Peace" sermon on November 26, 1693. In the sermon, he admitted to giving too much weight to spectral evidence. However, his sermon and confession seemed not to have repaired the damaged relations between him and the community, for Parris agreed to move from Salem Village in April 1696.

Before Parris and his family moved, the legal matter of the parsonage needed to be resolved. In July 1697, it was finally settled when arbitrators decided that Salem Village should pay Parris 79 pounds, 9 shillings and 6 pence in back salary. In return, Parris agreed to relinquish the deed to the parsonage. Parris and his family then left for Stowe, Massachusetts.

Little information has survived as to what happened to Samuel Parris and his family after they left Salem Village. Tituba was sold to pay for her jail costs. It is believed that Abigail Williams never recovered from

her "affliction" and died young. Betty Parris later married Benjamin Barron in 1710. She had five children and lived in Concord, Massachusetts. She died March 21, 1760, at the age of 78. Parris' son, Noyes, died insane.

Joseph Green replaced Samuel Parris as minister. To help heal the scars that the witch trials left on the community, he seated the accusers with the accused. This action appeared to help heal the wounds because the family of Rebecca Nurse--John Tarbell, Samuel Nurse, and Thomas Wilkins--asked to rejoin the congregation in November 1698. Their request to join was granted. With the Nurse family welcomed back into the congregation, Green asked the congregation to revoke the excommunication of Martha Corey in 1703. The motion was finally adopted in 1707. Rebecca and Giles Corey also had their excommunications revoked on March 6, 1712.

Not all families wished to rejoin the congregation after the trials. Peter Cloyce and his wife, Sarah--who was accused of witchcraft--left Salem Village and moved to Marlborough, Massachusetts. Philip English, who was accused of witchcraft along with his wife, never forgave his persecutors for the loss of his property and reputation. He asked for a large settlement for his losses, but only received a small one. So in order to sever ties with Puritanism, he helped found the St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

What happened to the afflicted girls is not widely known. Surviving information regarding them has provided only small details as to what happened to them after the Salem witch trials. Ann Putnam, Jr. raised her brothers and sisters when her parents died two weeks apart from each other. In August 1706, she asked the congregation of her church for forgiveness. The pastor read her prepared statement to the congregation.

I desire to be humbled before God. It was a great delusion of Satan that deceived me in that sad time. I did it not out of any anger, malice, or ill will...I desire to lie in the dust and earnestly beg forgiveness of all those I have given just cause of sorrow and offense, and whose relations were taken away and accused.

She later died unmarried and was buried with her parents in an unmarked grave. Whatever the future held for the afflicted girls, they undoubtedly never forgot their involvement with the witch trials.

No one died as a convicted witch in America again after the Salem witch trials. It was also the last of the religious witch hunts. Salem Village separated from Salem Town in 1752 and became the town of Danvers. However, this separation did not wipe away the history of the witch trials from its past. For over 300 years, historians, sociologists, psychologists and others continue to research and write about them to this day, and they continue to serve as a reminder of how politics, family squabbles, religion, economics and the imaginations and fears of people can yield tragic consequences.