

# The salem witchcraft trials

Religion



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The Salem Witchcraft Trials Number Introduction It is rightly said that behind every cloud, there is a silver lining. Heyrman (2013) observes that the Witch Trials took place in Massachusetts, Salem, from 1691 to 1693. On a personal standpoint, the Salem Witch Trials aptly exemplify some of the darkest misfortunes that have befallen the US history, and the resilience with which America can turn its tragedies into positive values. Particularly, this is because historians such as Smith (2012) see the Salem Witch Trials as having helped influence future interactions between religion and the US legal system.

One of the ways in which the Salem Witch Trials influenced the interactions between religion and the US legal system is by strengthening the US legal and court system. According to Wilson (1994), " Because of the changes that followed the Salem Witch Trials, prosecution came to involve the subtraction of religious institutions from participating in legal processes, so that religious institutions do not act as the jury. Instead, the need to adduce evidence before the court of law as the basis upon which a court case is to be sustained and the verdict is to be issued was made inevitable." Again the need to have a competent jury to preside over cases became more perceptible. Initially, judges who presided over the Salem Witch Trials were untrained.

Particularly, the idea above can be said to be true, given that during the Salem Witch Trials, a number of teenage girls leveled accusations of witchcraft against 200 people, without producing any evidence to validate their claims. Instead, the teenage girls only made unverifiable claims that they were attacked by ghosts or evil spirits. It is against this backdrop that the right to defend oneself, the right to free trial and the right to not have to <https://assignbuster.com/the-salem-witchcraft-trials/>

present any form of incriminating testimony became necessary and can thus be traced back to the Salem Witch Trials. According to Smith (2012), " This is because, when the Massachusetts Colonial Governor, Sir William Phips saw the alarming hanging of 19 suspects and the crushing of 1 suspect to death and consequently disbanded the court presiding over the Salem Witch Trials, the need for a fairer judicial system became inevitable."

Another way in which the trials became the spring board for an independent system (devoid of purely religious claims) is through the myriad of relentless protests that ensued. Smith (2012) contends that, " The protests followed the fact that even after the convention of the second court to preside over 23 other cases, spectral evidence proved to be too inadequate to secure 20 of these cases. Even the 3 other convictions which had been previously arrived at were annulled." The protesters rightly charged that innocent people were being executed merely because of few family conflicts in Salem.

Another way by which the Salem Witch Trials underscored the need for and catalyzed the examination of evidence is the Putnam versus the Towne family affair. The Putnams were the chief accusers in the trials, while the Towne family women were their main target. To this effect, Rebecca T Nurse (c. 1621- 1692) was executed by hanging, while her sisters Elizabeth Proctor and Sarah Cloyce were merely convicted, instead of being executed.

Because of this precedence, the need to legislate crimes of religious or spiritual nature became expedient, in order to bring about uniformity in the dispensation of the law. The first step in this development would be William Phips granting pardon to incarcerated suspects awaiting trial. This was followed by his declaration of witchcraft as an offense that was not

punishable by law.

### Conclusion

The impact that the Salem Witch Trials had on the US is far-reaching and spans even to the Cold War and present eras. In the Cold War, the effect of the Salem Witch Trials became readily palpable when the Red Scare witch-hunt was launched in the 1950s, in the US. At the time, Sen. Joseph McCarthy (b. 1908-1957) ran congressional hearings on the presence and activities of communism in the US, in lieu of acting whimsically against perceived communist supporters.

### References

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