

History extension proposal – salem witch trials

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Description of Preliminary Research The Salem witch trials occurred in colonial Massachusetts between 1692 and 1693, and involved over two hundred people being accused of practicing witchcraft. After the execution of twenty people, the colony admitted the trials were a mistake and compensated the families of those convicted. Following the events, the story of the trials has become synonymous with paranoia and injustice, and continues to beguile the common imagination.

Initially, I aimed my research at allowing myself to attain a sense of the atmosphere that pervaded Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, as I was unsure about the focus of my project. After reading playwright Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, my interest in the social, cultural and religious context of the time was enhanced. The play encapsulated the hysteria of the townsfolk and provided a general arc of the events, adding to my fascination surrounding the Salem witch trials and why they occurred. To enhance my knowledge, I proceeded to investigate the general and historiographical information surrounding the event.

I looked at various websites, primarily Wikipedia, the online article Salem Witchcraft: The Events and Causes of the Salem Witch Trials written by Tim Sutter and A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials, an article written by Jess Blumberg. I extracted information from books including *Witchcraft: A Secret History*, written by Michael Steeter and _____. From my research I gathered that the most important historiographical issue was not in fact the context, but the cause of the event, and I have extracted as many theories from my readings as I could collect.

The evidence we have from the time before, during and after the period of the trials is expansively open to interpretation, as is the evidence that isn't there, this being the spectral evidence and misdiagnosis of the afflictions of the alleged witches. Linda Caporeal's hypothesis Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem? investigates a possible psychological condition afflicted on the women as the cause of the girl's illness and misconduct. The recent article Were the American Colonists Drugged During the Salem Witchcraft Trial? written in 2008 by Josh Clarke demonstrates the continual debate over the cause of the trials amongst various historians. Description of Historiographical Focus The Research Intentions My project will focus primarily on the historical debate over the cause of the Salem witch trials, as from my research it has become clear that in order to deal with this topic, I must focus on the contrasting perspectives of historians and others, and why they hold certain opinions.

In order to proceed with my research, I have comprised a list of subsidiary questions, these being: -Why is the cause of the trials a controversial issue? - What approaches have been taken by historians and others to investigate why the trials occurred? -How do different approaches to history reflect both the context of the historian and their ideology? I am aware there is no 'right' answer in relation to cause, but I will investigate the answers to these questions and will attempt to better understand why a historical event is continually revised, reviewed, debated and theorised by historians.

I intend to select, dissect and analyse three opposing theories surrounding the cause of the trials. At this stage in my research I am interested in exploring the oppressive religious beliefs and customs of the Puritan religion,

as well as the Linda Caporeal's theory on convulsive ergotism. I aim to select a third theory that will best demonstrate conflicting approaches to the ordeal following further investigation into the topic. Preliminary Essay Question Ideas