

How did the people of
massachusetts use
the



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August 19, 1692. The colony of Massachusetts has just hanged five prominent members of their community in Salem. George Burroughs, John Proctor, John Willard, George Jacobs, Sr., and Martha Carrier, all well-known, well-respected members of the Salem community, one of them a minister, were all hanged for witchcraft (New England Ancestors, 2006). Accused by a handful of hysterical adolescent girls who were covering for their own forays into the occult, these five were found guilty and sentenced to hang on the flimsiest of evidence.

Most in the community believed the witch trials to be a sham, and John Proctor even had a large number of his friends and relatives write a petition to the colonial government to release him, vouching for his character and good nature. It was no matter. Proctor and the other four to hang that day were only the latest batch in a series of hangings that began on June 10, 1692 with the hanging of Bridget Bishop and did not end until September 22, 1692 with the hanging of a group of eight people. In all, nineteen citizens of Salem, Andover, and the surrounding communities were hung in the witchcraft hysteria, and one, Giles Corey, an old man in his 80s, was pressed to death for not pleading guilty or not guilty to the charges against him. It was only after the last group hangings that the witchcraft hysteria that had gripped the community for months began to die down as people gradually came to their senses. The origins of the Salem witch trials are well-known, having been the subject of many books and immortalized in Arthur Miller's play, "The Crucible."

" In January 1692, Betty Parris, the nine year old daughter of Salem's minister, the Reverend Samuel Parris, fell mysteriously ill. Soon, other girls

in Salem who were around Betty's age also began to fall ill, and in February 1692, the village physician declared that the girls were bewitched. This set off a firestorm of activity to find who was bewitching the girls. By the end of February, the first accusations were made and arrests soon followed. The fact was, these adolescent girls were covering for their own occult activities. They had been spending time with Reverend Parris's West Indian slave, Tituba, who taught the girls how to cast spells that would supposedly reveal who they were to marry (Peabody Essex Museum, 2006).

There were also rumors of naked dancing among the girls and Tituba in the woods at night. While these things may seem fairly harmless today, along the lines of slumber party games such as Ouija Board and Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board, in the 17th century Puritan colony of Massachusetts, these things were of the utmost, gravest concern. The girls knew that if it was found out what they had been doing, they would all be in serious trouble, likely subjected to whippings or worse. Their strictly religious upbringing also led them to feel guilty about what they had done, and in an effort to mask their guilt and to draw attention away from themselves, they began to develop a sort of group psychosis that led to their illnesses and fits. When they began accusing their neighbors of witchcraft, it was only a natural extension of their psychosomatic physical symptoms. They may not even have been completely aware of what they were doing and why.

Witchcraft was a serious matter in 17th century Salem. The colony was founded by and run by religious extremists, the Puritans, for whom the traditional Anglican church in England was not good enough. Experiencing persecution in England and wanting to find a place where they could

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establish a “ pure” church free of corruption and false doctrine, where they could worship as they chose, the Puritans left England in droves throughout the first half of the 1600s, settling largely in the Puritan colony of Massachusetts Bay. There, a semi-theocratic government was set up that prohibited working on the Sabbath (fines were even handed out for carrying firewood on Sundays) and instituted financial penalties for not attending public worship at church on Sunday. Religion and religious practice were the law in Puritan Massachusetts.

A person had to be accepted as a member of the Puritan church in order to vote in town affairs (only men were eligible, of course), and dissent of any sort was not tolerated. It is interesting that the Puritans created such an oppressive theocratic regime in Massachusetts, as they were doing to dissenters exactly what had been done to them in England, and worse. But, there was no room for different opinions in their carefully constructed “ city on a hill”. They believed that if they became too permissive, then God would pour out his wrath on them. There were periodic days of atonement and fasting whenever the community leaders felt there was sin within the ranks of the faithful. Sin of any sort was likely to get you fined at the least, and set in the stocks or pillory, whipped, or publicly humiliated in some way for greater offenses.

Some sins, such as adultery, could get you executed. There were even laws calling for the execution of children who were disrespectful to their parents. The Puritan leadership was serious about stamping out sin in Massachusetts. Because the Puritans had set up such a strict, carefully controlled religious

community, they were also constantly on vigil for signs of the devil among them.

Being a city of God on earth, their colony would naturally be susceptible to attempts at infiltration by the forces of evil. God might also allow the devil to enter Massachusetts if its citizens fell into sin or tolerated sin in others. As God's chosen people (and they truly believed they were, touched by God's grace and specially chosen to be saved), they had a duty to not only obey God in all things, but to fight His enemies on earth and to resist temptation in all its forms. An accusation of witchcraft within their community meant the possibility, if the accusation was true, that the devil had somehow entered the colony, and the Puritans could not tolerate that. It was their greatest fear come true. Of course, the Puritans had been fighting the infiltration of the devil into their community for decades by the time the 1690s came around.

Starting in the 1630s with the problems surrounding Anne Hutchinson and her band of Anabaptists, a religious group that met in Anne's home and commented on and criticized the teachings of the local minister (something the Puritan authorities felt was heretical, as Anne was not, in their eyes, qualified to do this), the Puritans began to have to defend their city upon a hill from the forces of evil. After the Anne Hutchinson affair, which had attracted hundreds to her home Bible studies and religious meetings at one point, there came the Quakers in the 1650s. The Quakers were a new religious sect from England that believed in following one's own "inner light" to God, rather than the teachings of any minister. The Quakers believed anyone could be a minister and preach if he or she was moved to do so by

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God. The Quakers, officially known as The Society of Friends, began sending missionaries into Massachusetts in the 1650s, and quickly found many converts.

The Puritans were so alarmed by the arrival and popularity of the Quakers that they immediately instituted some harsh penalties against them and anyone found to be harboring them. During the next decade, men would have their ears cut off, women would have their tongues bored through with sticks or slits put in their noses, and there would be countless whippings, imprisonments, and fines of those confessing to be Quakers. Several Quakers were banished under pain of death from the colony, a young brother and sister were put up for sale as slaves to Barbados to pay their fines for being Quakers (but no ship captain could be found to transport them, so they were allowed to go home), and four Quakers were hung. The persecutions against the Quakers in Massachusetts only ended with an edict to do so from the king of England. After the Quaker fiasco, the citizens of Massachusetts began to adopt a more tolerant attitude toward the Quakers and others like them, and it was not long before some religious groups that were not Puritans were allowed to practice quietly within the colony's borders.

Throughout the 1670s and 1680s, tolerance increased to the point where there was almost a religious apathy among the citizenry. Many people stopped going to church regularly, and while the Puritan religion was still the official religion of the colony and voting was dependent on church membership, there was not the strict enforcement of religious conformity that there once had been. That is why, when the first accusations of witchcraft began to plague the community, that they religious leaders saw

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this as an opportunity to bring the populace back to the Puritan church.

Obviously, they reasoned, the devil had been allowed by God to enter their community and afflict their children as a punishment for the colony turning its back on the ways of God (Hill, 2002). By drifting away from church, by not attending worship services, by working on the Sabbath, by tolerating other religious groups to live and worship within the colony, Massachusetts had made itself vulnerable to the forces of evil, and God was letting those forces in to teach Massachusetts a lesson. For a while, these scare tactics seemed to have an effect on the community.

This was especially true when the “ afflicted girls” began displaying bizarre and unexplainable symptoms, such as temporary paralysis and muscle contractures that twisted their bodies into strange and unnatural shapes for hours or even days at a time (Le Beau, 1997). In the courtroom, during the trials that followed the arrests, the girls began to also cry out that the accused were sending out their “ spirits” to torment them. These torments took a variety of shapes, from the girls all screaming and ducking together as if trying to escape something that was flying at them, to talking to these “ spirits” and asking why they were tormenting them, to even more dramatic examples (Le Beau, 1997). One girl, for instance, began screaming during a trial that they spirit of the accused had put pins in her hand (Salem Witch Trials, 2002). Upon opening her hand, it was revealed that there were, in fact, several pins stuck into her palm.

When the girls began telling the court that they were having dreams of certain citizens at night, and that these citizens were in the woods having meetings with the devil in these dreams, the Puritan authorities knew they

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were up against a serious threat. They allowed “ spectral evidence” to be presented in courtroom testimony, meaning that if the girls said they were being tormented by a spirit only they could see, then this was accepted as valid evidence against the accused (Hill, 2001). Whether this type of evidence, virtually unprecedented anywhere else, was permitted because the magistrates truly believed in spectral evidence or because they wanted to be able to use this vague and invisible threat as a way to encourage people back to church is unclear from the records of the court testimonies. Whatever the reason spectral evidence was permitted, however, it did have the effect of causing many in Salem and the surrounding towns to suddenly rediscover their religion. The girls quickly got so deep in their ruse that they had no choice but to do whatever they could to protect themselves from discovery. Their theatrics, intended to avoid getting in trouble for their spell-casting with Tituba, caused such turmoil in the community that they knew they could never let anyone know what their real motives were.

This is why when some citizens, such as John Proctor, began to question why the girls were making these accusations and the wisdom of listening to a bunch of hysterical children, the girls began accusing those who questioned them. Wanting to bring everyone possible back into the folds of the church, the court allowed anyone who confessed to witchcraft to live, and, after undergoing rigorous religious intervention and counseling, these people were permitted back into the church (Roach, 2004). Those who were hanged were those who would not confess. These were people who believed it a greater sin to lie about being a witch to save their own lives than to confess to false charges in order to save their own lives (Roach, 2004). Those who would not

confess were considered to be hopelessly lost to the church, as they would not recognize their own sin.

At the hangings, lengthy and dramatic sermons were preached on the evils of witchcraft, on the sins of the colony, and how those sins had allowed the devil into their midst. It was a shocking and effective way to get many people to return to church, and to bring Massachusetts back to the religious roots it had strayed from. It was only after one of the girls accused the wife of a prominent judge of witchcraft that the motives of the girls were questioned. Once the power of the girls was broken, many in jail who had confessed expressed a desire to recant their confessions. One of the girls, Mary Warren, admitted to having lied in court about her afflictions and her accusations.

Fairly quickly, the special court of Oyer and Terminer that had been set up to try the accused witches was dissolved, and a new court set up to try the remaining accused. This new court did not admit spectral evidence into the testimonies. Without spectral evidence, no other witches were convicted, and those who had previously been convicted and were in jail awaiting execution were pardoned. Over the next couple of decades, the girls involved in the Salem Witch Trials began confessing their lies during the trials, and the reasons behind those lies. Many of those who had been executed were pardoned posthumously.

The colony provided financial compensation to the families of many of those who had been executed. The colony also had a day of atonement for the whole witchcraft affair. While the witchcraft trials had the temporary effect

of increasing church attendance and religious observation, it did not last too long after the trials were over, and the Puritan religion in Massachusetts began to get broken down and compartmentalized into many denominations. The Salem Witch Trials, while used to attempt to strengthen the Puritan religion in the colony, ultimately had the effect of being the beginning of the downfall of Puritanism as a religious force in the colony.