

The causes of the salem witch trials (dbq) essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Living as we do in the 20th century, the charges imposed on people throughout New England during the 1680s and 1690s seem preposterous. Any behavior regarded as strange by fellow citizens was sufficient to hold a trial with a sentence of death. Though such scenarios seem unfathomable in our modern culture, it was a reality for hundreds of New England settlers. The causes of the famous outbreak of witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts are rooted in social, economic, and political aspects of the late 17th century Salem community.

Early New Englanders were unable to accept the increase in diversity and the break in tradition that occurred between generations. This, in addition to various unappealing events which occurred throughout the late 1600s, created tensions within the New England community. Such tensions were the cause of the prevalent hysteria concerning witchcraft in the 1680s and 1690s. The disastrous consequences of these tensions included the execution of hundreds of innocent civilians during the Salem witch trials. Accusations of witchcraft often targeted widowed, middle-aged women with few children, and of low social standing. Sometimes, the accused women were those who had acquired possession of property and respectively contested the gender norms of Puritan society.

In addition, separation of Church and State was nonexistent, and often religion was intertwined with political law. As a result, anyone who opposed the Puritan Church in even the slightest of instances was susceptible to chastisement by law. "Witchcraft" was viewed as a rebellion against the Church, heresy, and association with the devil, and was punishable accordingly. Finally, people living in Salem, Massachusetts were motivated to

<https://assignbuster.com/the-causes-of-the-salem-witch-trials-dbq-essay-sample/>

accuse others of witchcraft because, if convicted, the property that they had owned would be sold. These factors contributed to the major social, political, and economic reasons why the Salem witch trials began.

The Salem witch trials began as a result of a variety of causes. These causes were derived from the social, political, and economic aspects of society.

Though all of these societal aspects contributed to the witch trials throughout New England, it is apparent through careful examination of the provided documents that the economic causes could not possibly outweigh the significance of the social and political causes to the events of the 1680s and 1690s.

Throughout the late 17th century, numerous events occurred which eventually contributed to the hysteria of the Salem witch trials. The timeline of “ Yearly Events” begins with the revoking of the charter of Massachusetts by England followed by the creation of the Dominion of New England (Document F). Soon after, Massachusetts endured a flood of extremely cold winters and an outbreak of smallpox. Such undesirable events greatly aggravated the social constancy of the New England colonies. Having nobody else to blame, the people of Salem came to the conclusion that heretic individuals practicing witchcraft were accomplices of Satan, and therefore were the source of the pandemonium infesting New England. What was then believed to be a simple solution to reinstate social stability in Massachusetts ultimately resulted in the execution of hundreds of innocent individuals.

As the Salem witch trials continued throughout the late 1600s, more than 100 people in Massachusetts were accused of committing crimes related to witchcraft. When studying the “ Age and sex of Accused witches,” one is able to identify certain patterns concerning witchcraft accusations (Document B). More often it was women as opposed to men who were indicted on the basis of witchcraft. In addition, the majority of accusations included those under the age of twenty and between the ages of forty and sixty. Similar trends can be studied in “ Table 1: Victims of Witchcraft by age and sex” (Document C). Through assessment of this chart, it is clear that the number of “ victims” of witches skyrocketed in the population of men between the ages of twenty and forty. Women from ages twenty to sixty also composed a significant fraction of the supposed “ victims.” In conclusion the charts concerning the “ Age and sex of Accused witches” and the “ Victims of witchcraft by age and sex,” allow one to realize that during the extent of the Salem witch trials, many young and middle aged women were targeted in witchcraft accusations by a large number of middle aged men as well as other middle aged women.

The culture of Salem, Massachusetts as well as other New England colonies greatly influenced accusations of witchcraft. As previously mentioned, the most common accusations were made by middle aged men and against young or middle aged women. This idea is fortified through a “ Description of Bridget Bishop Accused Witch” (Document G). The indicted “ witch,” Bridget Bishop, is looked down upon. She is described to be keeping refreshments for travelers and entertaining guests. In addition she wears bright and colorful clothing, which is seen as scandalous to the Puritan

community of New England. Bridget's liveliness and happiness are foreign to the Puritan ideals of menial, hard work.

Mrs. Bishop is noted by Reverend Hale, the local minister, as being a dangerous and corrupt influence to youths (Document H). Bridget Bishop is a middle-aged woman, and through the "Testimony by Richard Coman at the witchcraft trial of Bridget Bishop," it is understood that the believed victim of her witchcraft was a middle-aged man (Document I). Coman's wife discovered that her husband had been in an affair with Mrs. Bishop. To prevent disorder within his own family, Coman responded by accusing Bridget Bishop of bewitching him. A similar charge would be discarded as preposterous today's society, however was viewed as completely plausible at the time of the witchcraft trials in New England throughout the 1680s and 1690s.

The social reasons for the Salem witch trials are somewhat intertwined with the political causes. This is a result of the lack of separation between Church and State in Massachusetts colonial society. Religion was an important element of Puritan society, and played a major role in all aspects of colonial life. Witchcraft was viewed by Puritans as heresy, disrespect of the Church, and an individual's association with the devil. Failure to comply with religious expectations was punishable by colonial law, and therefore, witchcraft was punishable by law. The lack of separation between Church and State is visible in the "Capital Laws of New England," where capital laws are accompanied by Biblical references (Document A). The social importance of the Church and its entanglement with local law allows for political causes to be significant throughout the witch trials of New England.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-causes-of-the-salem-witch-trials-dbq-essay-sample/>

Though the importance of the social and political factors in the initiation of witchcraft trials is unambiguous, some scholars believe that economic causes were more influential. For instance, settlers soon found that charging others with satanic beliefs was an infallible way to increase their own social standing. Puritans of economic inferiority used witchcraft accusations to disgrace affluent members of the community. When someone was convicted of being a witch, his or her land is subsequently available for sale at a low price. The “ Average Size of Salem Village Landholdings 1640-1700” illustrates how as the number of witchcraft accusations increase, the average property size steadily decreases (Document D). This is a consequence of large amounts of land, which had previously been the property of a single wealthy individual, being divided between numerous poorer individuals. The possibility of gaining more property motivated many people in New England to accuse neighbors of being witches. Though economic causes did contribute to the witch trials of New England, the social and political causes of these witch trials were much more significant.

The inability of New England Puritans to recognize the increase in diversity occurring throughout the late 17th century had profound impact on the community. Discouraging events which took place in New England increased apprehension within the society. These tensions in addition to other social, economic, and political factors resulted in the catastrophic consequence of the Salem witch trials. However, by studying the provided documents, one can recognize the significance of the social and political causes as being profound in relationship to the economic reasons for the witch trials of New England throughout the 1680s and 1690s.