

# The salem witch trials history essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## **Introduction**

The Salem witch trials of 1692 took place in Salem, Massachusetts. Overall, 141 people were arrested as 19 were hanged and one person crushed to death. Researchers describe the Salem witch trials as a series of court trials that were aimed at prosecuting persons who had been accused of witchcraft. The trials took place between 1692 and 1693[1].

Prior hearings of the Salem witch trials were carried out in several different towns. The major trial was conducted by the Court of Oyer and Terminer situated in Salem town[2]. Several people were rounded up and charged with witchcraft. Some of those arrested died in prison. Of the accused, 14 women and 5 men were hanged.

There were fears about religious extremists as many critics perceived witchcraft as being counterproductive. Many problems within the society were attributed to the witches living in the town of Salem. At the time of their arrest, most of them were found with things believed to be used to propagate their activities.

## **Causes of the trials**

There were about 600 residents in Salem town that conflicted with one group arguing that they had the right to remain in the town as farming families and the other to settle on the eastern side of the rich suburban town of Salem. The thriving economy of Salem town that was mainly a farming community made it to be perceived as being individualistic.

The individualism was clashing with the communal nature of Puritanism. The Putnams felt that the large farming families were completely isolated from the rest of the town and amassed a large quantity of wealth. The Putnams were acknowledged leaders of a separatist group. This separatist group owned most of the farming land in Salem village. The Putnams felt the need to form a congregation that would indeed unite them within Salem. In 1689, the religious congregation was formed under the lead of Reverend Parris[3].

This religious congregation only represented a small group of the populace in Salem as most of the members were Putnams. Two factions had emerged within the religious congregation. These factions were basically divided on the basis of the contract under which Reverend Parris was employed to conduct the church affairs.

Ministers in the religious groups at the time were often granted lots of fringe benefits to go along with their heavy salaries, such as free houses and use of firewood[4]. It is believed that Reverend Parris received this and much more, hence creating questions as to why he was being accorded such kind of treatment. Reverend Parris salary was paid by the local tax payers. Critics who did not support this, often mumbled in silence hence creating and deepening the already existing crevice with the religious organization in which Reverend Parris was the main leader.

Most Puritans believed in witchcraft as the source of power to harm others. They further believed that the witchcraft was entering partnership with the devil in exchange for certain evil powers in order to propagate their evil activities. Therefore, the religious sect who lived in the same town of Salem

was against witchcraft as they considered it as a sin[5]. It is also believed that most Puritans were against the Church of England and opposed most of their doctrines. As a result, enmity was created between the Puritans and the Church of England at the time. This culminated into frequent conflicts between the Puritans and the church members who often level accuses against each other. The puritans did not buy any of the traditions that the church was conducted.

It was this religious divide that fueled the Salem witchcraft trial of 1692 that led to the killing of several witches within the town, most of who were Puritans.

There was a huge political divide in Salem between the English settlers in the east and their opponents who were large farming families. They made several attacks on each other with considerable casualties being reported. In 1692 when the new Governor was elected, he had many issues to settle. He initiated the commission of special court known as the court of Oyer and Terminer which was charged with the responsibility of handling the increasing number of people who were accused at the time[6].

Farming was often the main cause of dispute between neighbors and families. As families grew in size, so did their farming land. Most of the farming land pushed forward into the wild, thus causing tension to the conflict that was already brewing. Drought or change in weather could easily wipe out a year's crop without much consideration. This resulted in tension. Religious tension made this worse as many Puritans believed that God had advanced his wrath on man due to his sinful nature[7]. This belief made

many people fear the actions of those who were against God. Therefore, many religious groups such as the Church of England advocated for the elimination of witches from the Salem society in order to enjoy a good bumper harvest and experience rain.

Moreover, the social status that the Puritans accorded to the women did not help much as the women were believed to be devil's servants. The Puritans' perception about women increased the tension that had already built within the community leading to conflict in beliefs, one of the foundations that the Salem trials were based upon.

Children were discouraged from playing and generally living a social life among the Puritans. They were the least valued. Similarly, girls were restricted from social groupings and activities in the belief that they would be used by the devil at a tender age. Women were generally not allowed to own land and in most cases land reverted to the previous owner if the husband died. Witch-hunting became a sport and a daily norm among the Puritans in order to acquire property. The effects of this on the society were far reaching.

### **Preconceived ideas of witches**

There were several preconceived ideas about witches in the Salem village. Most people believed that witches were the main cause of crop failure and drought. This was because, witches often performed certain acts which could reverse the nature of climate change and bring about rain[8]. The Puritans were revered for their activities involving witch-hunting. Witches were thus

believed to poses the power to ill other people and even make their lives difficult.

Furthermore, there was a wide belief that the witches were often in contact with the devil and could order any kind of destruction upon their targets with impunity. In fact, most of the illness and attacks during the 17th century were attributed to the powers of the witches[9].

In addition, witches were believed to be anti-Christian in nature since they derived their powers from the devil and destroyed other people's lives. The Salem society believed that witches should be killed. Therefore, the offence of witchcraft carried the death sentence automatically and without the option of appealing.

### **Analysis of the accusers and their motivations of targeting certain people**

Most of the accusers of witches were mainly the religious organizations which indeed were against the activities of the witches in Salem during the 17th century. The Puritans were increasingly becoming aggressive and threatened the very existence of humanity due to their social beliefs about women and children[10]. Moreover, the Puritans were against the traditions practiced by the church. The witches often laid accusations upon the church's conduct hence creating tension whenever they were illuminated within the Salem village.

In addition, most of the large farming families also accused the witches of crop failure and drought. The powers of the witches were believed to cause deaths in children and livestock. Farming was the main economic activity

that the people of Salem practiced[11]. Therefore, it farming failed then life became subsequently very difficult for them considering that they often had very large families.

Reverend Parris who was a church minister was also an accuser of the witches. His daughter and niece had epileptic fits that were beyond any normal comprehension. Following this, three witches were arrested and arraigned in court to be charged with inflicting such evil upon the children. The arrested individuals were Puritans and were charged with witchcraft.

On February 1692, Betty Parris, the daughter of the leader of the religious covenant organization, became strangely ill[12]. Critics were quick to point out that this was a result of witchcraft that had been directed towards the minister's home. What made the belief worse was the fact that Reverend Parris' cousin and niece also fell strangely ill.

Strange illness were often attributed to witchcraft and the accusers who were often family members could not compel with the idea that strange diseases were as a result of a combination of stress, trauma and other physiological causes. These strange diseases mainly attacked children. There was a wide belief that witches often targeted children since they were vulnerable to the witches' activities[13]. This made witches to be accused of any strange disease like symptoms as most households ignored the diagnosis of the doctors.

This was fueled by the strange disease that was exhibited by Ann Putnam, Mercy Lewis and Mary Walcott all who were juveniles. The cure to the

strange behavior was not understood as the children continued to wriggle on the ground suffering from this strange disease.

The accusers were mainly motivated by the need to curb evil within the Salem community by stopping the witches from killing and depressing people in the society. For instance, women and children were accorded the lowest social class in the Salem community among the Puritans[14]. This was seen as a counter-development move and was thus fought by the greater farming community as well as the religious Christian society.

When the reverend's daughter and niece, Elizabeth Parris and Abigail Williams fell ill, they were taken to hospital. Since the doctor could not establish anything physically wrong with the girls, it was concluded that they had been bewitched. Tituba, an Indian witch was accused of bewitching the two girls[15]. This saw a number of many other witches arrested in 1691 with many people condemning witchcraft.

### **Analysis of the accused**

The accused witches were predominantly Puritans. Trouble began when Cloyce and Proctor were arrested. These individuals were members of the covenanted church. After days of interrogation and investigation, more arrests were made and the suspects arraigned in court to be charged with witchcraft. Most of those who had been named went into hiding for fear of being arrested and charged in court.

The prosecutor found the presentation of evidence to be most challenging since evidence in such cases was merely imaginary. The Court of Oyer and Terminer was responsible for prosecuting and charging the witches. The



court convened on June 2, 1692 where Bridget Bishop's case was heard first[16]. The grand jury indeed acknowledged all the charges made against her. Several other witches who were arrested and totaled 150 were charged before the Court of Oyer and Terminer with witchcraft. Only one accused who refused to enter a plea was crushed to death using stones[17]. The Court of Oyer and Terminer handled all formal prosecutions of witchcraft. About 36 people were arrested on July 2, 1692 following the convening of the new Governor, Chief Magistrate and Crown's attorney. Local magistrate presided over the cases where they arrested, examined and charged the witches according to the law.

The accused were often individuals who maintained a high social status within the Salem setting. They were individuals who were revered and feared for their evil powers[18]. Most of them lived in eastern Salem. The witches of Salem had amassed massive wealth due to witch-hunting. They had been accused at one time of killing innocent people for the benefit of their wealth.

## **Conclusion**

The Salem witch trials were hence as a result of the beliefs that the witches held within the Salem society. The witches were also accused of causing strange diseases among children. Many of the Salem witches were often wealthy people who enjoyed a high social status within the community. Moreover, they were located on the eastern side of the Salem village just next to the farming communities in the Salem town.

The Salem trials led to the arrest and imprisonment of over 150 people, 19 of whom were hanged and one crushed to death. These trials were the most

controversial in the history of Salem. The trials were done in such haste in order to clear the large backlog of cases concerning witches in the Court of Oyer and Terminer[19].

Concerns about witchcraft were often muffled under the pillow until when Elizabeth Parris became strangely ill. She was the daughter of the Reverend Parris, leader of the religious church. Abigail Williams, a niece to the reverend also fell strangely ill. Tituba, the Indian witch was accused of bewitching the girls. Critics of the trial of Salem suggest that witchcraft should be death with witchcraft instead of convicting of witchcraft and sentenced to death.

## References

Blumberg Jess. A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials. Accessed from

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/brief-salem.html>

“ Giles Cory and the Salem Witch Craft Trials.” Salem Witchcraft Trials.

Accessed from

<http://coryfamsoc.com/resources/articles/witch.htm>

Poole William Frederick. Cotton Mather and Salem witchcraft. Harvard: University press, 1869,

p. 61. accessed from

[http://books.google.co.ke/books?id=5DT0mK6JxO4C&pg=PA61&dq=](http://books.google.co.ke/books?id=5DT0mK6JxO4C&pg=PA61&dq=The+Salem+Witch+Trials&hl=en&ei=s9nCS6qPEp3AmsgPdHbj-Bg&sa=)

[The+Salem+Witch+Trials&hl=en&ei=s9nCS6qPEp3AmsgPdHbj-Bg&sa=](http://books.google.co.ke/books?id=5DT0mK6JxO4C&pg=PA61&dq=The+Salem+Witch+Trials&hl=en&ei=s9nCS6qPEp3AmsgPdHbj-Bg&sa=)

<https://assignbuster.com/the-salem-witch-trials-history-essay/>

X&oi= book\_result&ct= result&resnum= 7&ved= 0CFUQ6AEwBg#v= onepage&q= The%20Salem%20Witch%20Trials&f= false

“ Salem Witch Trials.” Accessed from

[http://www. articlesbase. com/law-articles/salem-witch-trials-67616. html](http://www.articlesbase.com/law-articles/salem-witch-trials-67616.html)

“ Salem Witch Trials.” Accessed from [http://www. 42explore2.](http://www.42explore2.com/salemwitch.htm)

[com/salemwitch. htm](http://www.42explore2.com/salemwitch.htm)

“ The Salem Witch Trials, 1692,” Eyewitness to History. Accessed from

[http://www. eyewitnessstohistory. com/salem. htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/salem.htm)

“ The Salem witch hunts.” Accessed from

[http://www. essortment. com/all/salemwitchhunt\\_ rkto. htm](http://www.essortment.com/all/salemwitchhunt_rkto.htm)

“ The Salem Witch Trials of 1692.” Accessed from

[http://www. kidzworld. com/article/2536-the-salem-witch-trials-of-1692](http://www.kidzworld.com/article/2536-the-salem-witch-trials-of-1692)

Upham Charles Wentworth. Salem witchcraft and Cotton Mather: a reply.

New York: Historical

magazine, 1869, p. 16. accessed from [http://books. google. co. ke/books?](http://books.google.co.ke/books?id=qdmvN-fB5xYC&pg=PA10&dq=The+Salem+Witch+Trials&hl=en&ei=s9nCS6qPEp3AmsgPdhhj-Bg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CEEQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=The%20Salem%20Witch%20Trials&f=false)

[id= qdmvN-fB5xYC&pg= PA10&dq= The+Salem+Witch+Trials&hl= en&ei=](http://books.google.co.ke/books?id=qdmvN-fB5xYC&pg=PA10&dq=The+Salem+Witch+Trials&hl=en&ei=s9nCS6qPEp3AmsgPdhhj-Bg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CEEQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=The%20Salem%20Witch%20Trials&f=false)

[s9nCS6qPEp3AmsgPdhhj-Bg&sa= X&oi= book\\_result&ct= result&resnum=](http://books.google.co.ke/books?id=qdmvN-fB5xYC&pg=PA10&dq=The+Salem+Witch+Trials&hl=en&ei=s9nCS6qPEp3AmsgPdhhj-Bg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CEEQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=The%20Salem%20Witch%20Trials&f=false)

[3&ved= 0CEEQ6AEwAg#v= onepage&q= The%20Salem%20Witch](http://books.google.co.ke/books?id=qdmvN-fB5xYC&pg=PA10&dq=The+Salem+Witch+Trials&hl=en&ei=s9nCS6qPEp3AmsgPdhhj-Bg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CEEQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=The%20Salem%20Witch%20Trials&f=false)

[%20Trials&f= false](http://books.google.co.ke/books?id=qdmvN-fB5xYC&pg=PA10&dq=The+Salem+Witch+Trials&hl=en&ei=s9nCS6qPEp3AmsgPdhhj-Bg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CEEQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=The%20Salem%20Witch%20Trials&f=false)

“ What Were the Salem Witch Trials?” accessed from

<https://assignbuster.com/the-salem-witch-trials-history-essay/>

<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-were-the-salem-witch-trials.htm>

<https://assignbuster.com/the-salem-witch-trials-history-essay/>