

# The salem witchcraft crisis of 1692 history essay



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The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692 represents a low point in the history of colonial New England. There have a variety of interpretations crafted in an effort to explain the rise of this period of crisis. Some interpretations blame ergot poisoning or an outbreak of encephalitis as the primary causes of the SajgmjWitchcraft Crisis. 1 Other historians have argued that it was the social and political discord among the men of Salem that engineered the rise of the Salem witchcraft calamity. 2 Mary Beth Norton, in her work *In The Devil's Snare*, offers a significant departure from the current historiography of the Salem witchcraft crisis. Norton argues that the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692 can only be understood by examining the military conflict between the English settlers and the New England Native Americans which occurred for the better part of two decades. The author is quick to note that the military conflicts did not cause the crisis that befell Salem rather, these conflicts created the circumstances that enabled the events in Salem to develop as quickly and as completely as they did. 4

In developing her thesis, Norton presents her interpretation in a chronological fashion focusing primarily on the events swirling out of control in Essex County, Massachusetts in the early 1690s. 5 Not only does Norton make the link between the ensuing military conflicts of the settlers and the natives with the ongoing witchcraft crisis, she also discusses a myriad of other topics. Norton through the course of her work examines the change of the Salem Witchcraft Crisis over time, the unique elements inherent to the Salem Witchcraft Crisis, and she also provides an historical look at the first and second Indian wars. 6 In order for Norton to engage in an intelligent discourse of these aforementioned topics she uses a generous amount of

journal articles, secondary source materials, and primary sources. She draws upon such secondary source works as Salem-Village Witchcraft, and A Quest For Security: The Life of Samuel Paris; The

1 Mary Beth Norton, *In The Devil's Snare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), p. 4.

2 Norton, *Devil's Snare*, p. 4.

J Norton, *Devil's Snare*, pp. 5, 12.

4 Norton, *Devil's Snare*, p. 298.

5 Norton, *Devil's Snare*, p. 7.

6 Norton, *Devil's Snare*, pp. 6, 8, 11.

Sermon Notebook of Samuel Paris, 1689-1694, and Cotton Mather's *Wonders Of The Invisible World* are among the primary source materials that are used by Norton. By understanding Norton's thesis, viewing the various topics addressed in this work, and the sources used to construct this interpretation one must consider the main points Norton brings up in support of her thesis.

The lives of two New England women, and a household slave were irrevocably altered on February 25, 1692. Upon that very day Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and a slave named Tituba were accused of being beholden to Satan, and in his employ as witches. Of the three women that were accused of witchcraft, Norton argues, it is the charges against Tituba that are the most significant. 7 The racial identity of Tituba, Norton notes, played a decisive role in her joining both Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne among the

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first of the accused. Historians have debated as to whether Tituba was an African or even a half-African slave, but Norton explains that in the surviving records related to this event villagers commonly referred to Tituba as “Tituba Indian” or “the

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Indian woman”. This racial connection between Tituba, as an Indian, placed her within a similar vein of hatred that was solely reserved for the New England Native Americans by the settlers of Essex County, and ultimately elsewhere in the New England colonies. 9 Norton notes the significant timing of this accusation of witchcraft against an Indian slave:

Less than a month after the devastating raid on York and following more than three years of unrelenting frontier warfare. . . the first person identified as a witch in the crisis of 1692 was someone known to all primarily as an Indian. . . .[The accusers] thus named a woman with whom they were intimately acquainted, and who could be seen as representing the people who were then ‘tormenting’ New England as a whole. 10

The accusation of Tituba was to send in motion a calamity, Norton argues, that was to be inextricably linked with the violence between the English settlers and the New England Native Americans. 11

7 Norton, *Devil’s Snare*, p. 21.

8 Norton, *Devil’s Snare*, p. 21.

9 Norton, *Devil’s Snare*, p. 21.

10 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 21.

11 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 21.

The accusation brought against the Indian slave Tituba unleashed a torrent of witchcraft accusations throughout Essex County. Another woman, Martha Corey, was accused on March 18, 1692. Corey, through the course of her examination on March 21, was to further link the witchcraft crisis in Essex County to the ongoing violence with the Native Americans. Martha Corey's examination added the figure of the spectral "black man".<sup>12</sup> The spectral "black man" was witnessed by one of Corey's accusers, Abigail Williams, who stated, "There is a black man whispering in [Martha Corey's] ear."<sup>13</sup> Norton explains that the term "black man" was generally employed interchangeably with Indian during this period in New England, as a means of addressing the native people of New England.<sup>14</sup> It is Cotton Mather in his work *Wonders of the Invisible World* who makes the connection absolutely explicit, "[T]he Black Man. . . they [the confessing witches and accusers] generally say he resembles an Indian."<sup>15</sup> It is casually remarked by Norton that such an association between Indians, this "black man" and Satan would not have been surprising to the residents of Essex County:

English settlers. . . had long regarded North America's indigenous residents as devil worshippers. . . . Puritan New Englanders. . . were particularly inclined to see themselves as antagonists of the 'devilish' Indians.<sup>16</sup>

Martha Corey's fraternization with a spectral "black man" implied a direct alliance between Satan and the Native Americans of New England.<sup>17</sup> The frequent references by confessors and those "afflicted" by witchcraft proved

to establish an illicit connection between the witchcraft crisis of Salem and the ongoing military conflicts with Native Americans.

The link between the witchcraft crisis and the military conflicts between the

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Native Americans was made absolutely clear by the confession of Abigail Hobbs. On April 19, 1692 Abigail Hobbs confessed. Through the course of her examination, Hobbs

12 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 58. Ij Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 58.

14 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 58.

15 Norton, Devil's Snare, pp. 58-59.

16 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 59.

17 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 59.

18 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 81.

admitted to having met the devil on the Maine frontier in 1688. iy During her time in Maine Hobbs stated that she encountered the devil in the woods near her home in Falmouth, Maine, which was one of the main areas attacked by the Native Americans in both the first and second Indian wars. 20 To any who were present at this examination on April 19 the connection was clear: Satan and their Native American nemesis were aligned in a covenant to utterly destroy the “ goodly” Christians of New England.

Abigail Hobbs' confession of having secured a pact with Satan in the woods of

Falmouth. Maine left the residents of Essex County emotionally and spiritually shaken.

Norton notes two specific events that demonstrate how deeply ingrained this connection between Satan and the New England Native Americans was in the collective psyche of

the colonist

In mid July of 1692 the port town of Gloucester many residents were convinced that their beloved town would soon be descended upon by the natives and their detested French allies." The Babson family was among the first to hear ominous sounds around their home almost every night in mid July. Ebenezer Babson and his family reported constantly heard, at night, men fleeing into the shadows discussing a plot to invade Gloucester. Norton explains that Ebenezer at one point thought, " that he saw two Frenchmen. . .[and] at other times, he and others believed they spotted Indians." 23 After these encounters for a period of two weeks the militia of Gloucester had occasional " encounters" with spectral assailants who seemed to melt into the shadowy confines of the Gloucester wood. On July 18, with the injection of some sixty militia men from Ipswich and after another week of sightings, caused the people to conclude that their shadowy tormentors were only figments of their imagination. 24 This incident of a large scale case mass hysteria clearly shows the extent of the fear caused by

the recent connection between the witchcraft crisis and the conflict with the Native Americans in New England.

19 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 81.

20 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 81.

21 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 297.

22 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 232-233.

23 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 232.

24 Norton, Devil's Snare, p. 232.