

# The horror of the salem witch trials



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Would you ever die for what you believe? In 1692, many people had no other choice but to do just that. The belief in magic and spells was introduced by Native American and African slaves in New England. Many who practiced this were accused of witchcraft. Salem, Massachusetts was the sight of many witch trials and perhaps the most well-known, but other villages held them too such as Andover, Massachusetts; Fairfield, Connecticut; and other places in New England (Historical Witches, n. p.). Historians have analyzed the accusations and hearings of the Salem Witch Trials, and have since observed possible causes of the hysteria.

It all started when Betty Parris, the daughter of Puritan minister, Samuel Parris, and his niece, Abigail Williams, experimented with magic and witchcraft (Salem Witch, n. p.). They began twitching, screaming, and not speaking, so a doctor diagnosed the girls with being under the spell of a witch (Currie, 7-8). Samuel Parris pressured the girls to identify the perpetrator. They named Tituba, their slave, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborn. The latter two, who were outcasts and did not attend church regularly, declared their innocence, but Good accused Osborn. Tituba originally pleaded innocent, but eventually told the officials of her dealings with the devil (Britannica School Salem witch, n. p.).

What followed was a witch hunt, as the girls went on a spree of identifying witches, even pointing the finger at a former minister. Newly identified and confessed witches then turned around and named more witches. By the time the uproar had quieted down, 156 people sat in prison, charged as witches.

Then trials were held by a panel of untrained judges, trying people who were forced to defend themselves without lawyers (Salem witch, n. p.).

The trials took a year to complete, only stopping when accusations extended to well respected members of the community. The accused were convicted using “ spectral evidence”, which is claims by victims that the defendant’s Satanic form attacked them. As, each “ witch” testified, the victims seemed to have fits in the crowd, giving the judges enough evidence to believe that person is guilty (Britannica School Salem witch, n. p.). The judges also allowed a “ touch test”, and if the accused person’s touch stopped the victim’s contortions, their demonic presence was confirmed. Other forms of evidence was allowed such as examining people for witch marks and accepting gossip, hearsay, and stories (The Witchcraft, n. p.). If someone confessed (or confessed and named others), they were spared as it was thought they would receive their punishment from God. Those who declared their innocence did not have it so easy, “ becoming martyrs to their own sense of justice” (Britannica School Salem witch, n. p.). It was thought a witch could not recite the Lord’s Prayer perfectly, yet an ex-minister did so but was still hanged. Using these methods, 19 people were hanged that year. An additional eight people died in prison, and one man was pressed to death by a heavy board. Over 200 townspeople were accused of being witches by the young girls between June and September of 1692. (Currie 37-38). When the accusations extended to his own wife, the governor stopped the trials and established a court that accepted only concrete evidence. There, the rest of the accused were pardoned by the governor (Britannica School Salem witch, n. p.).

Historians have turned to many different reasons for so many people to believe the claims of the girls. Many believe that in transitioning from one governor to the next, Salem was in the midst of many social issues. The former governor had done nothing to stop the worsening of the hysteria, and while the new leader tried to step in and conduct fair trials, he unearthed a law causing the death penalty to be inflicted on those practicing witchcraft, a capital punishment. Betty Parris's involvement was attributed to her fear of having disobeyed the laws of her religion as her father was a minister (Salem Witch, n. p.). There is also a theory that ergotism was present in Salem during this time, and is what caused mass hysteria. Ergot grows on cereal grain, and in this case, it would have been rye which the people relied heavily on. It causes a poisoning that is most common in women and children (Ergotism, n. p.). One type of ergotism, or long term ergot poisoning causes hallucinations, delusions, muscle contractions or convulsions, and shaking, all of which were reported in Salem. All the facts add up, and the weather at that time was warm and damp which is perfect for ergot to thrive (Ergot Theory, n. p.). There are many other theories, but no one knows for sure if any of them are the real cause of the frenzy.

The accusations and trials have led to many theories about the possible reasons for the delusions in Salem around 1692. Many people wonder how the judges were able to convict so many without concrete evidence or why the governor did not stop it until it was too late. It has taught us a lot about our country's history and about the many mistakes we made. Those trials led to the first amendment which is freedom of religion. Nowadays, the government cannot persecute anyone for what religion they practice or for

what they believe. We need to respect others and their beliefs even if they are different from us. We know now that we should not be afraid to stand up for what we believe, and not conform to what society tells us because it is not always right.

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