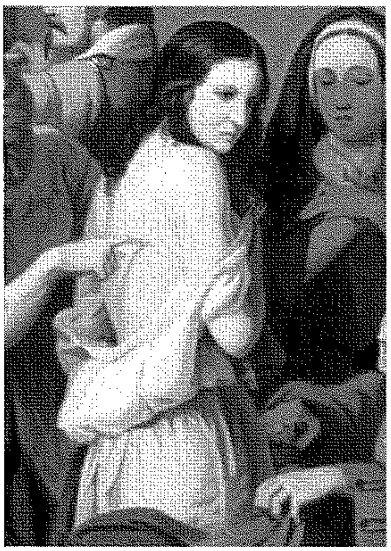
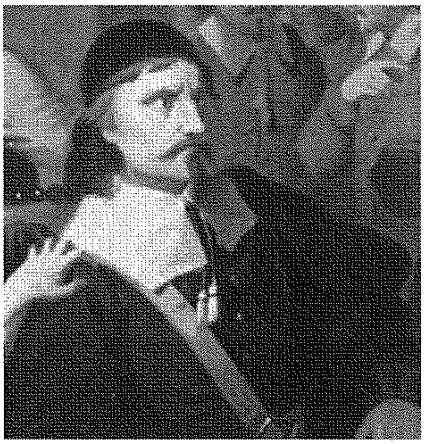
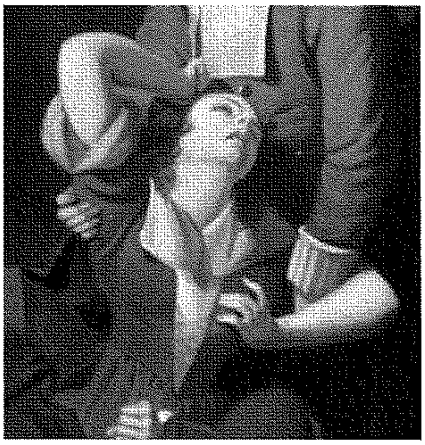
# What Caused The Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?







## Background Essay

# What Caused the Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?

On September 19, 1692, 81-year-old Giles Cory lay beneath several rough-sawn boards piled high with rocks. A tough old man, Giles had refused to testify on his own behalf in the Salem witchcraft trials. As another stone was added, his last words are believed to have been "More weight!" Something had gone terribly wrong. Why in the summer months of 1692 was Giles Cory pressed to death and 19 other Salem, Massachusetts, residents hanged?

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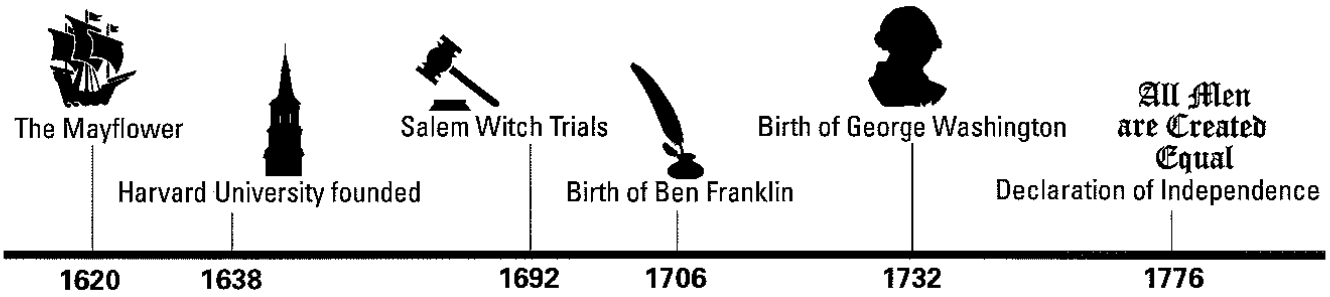
Beginning in 1620 and continuing throughout the 1600s, a large number of English immigrants arrived in that part of North America known as New England. The leaders of these settlers were **Puritans**. Puritans were Protestant Christians who were unhappy with their mother church in England. They came to the new world so they could practice their Christianity in its purest form.

The New England landscape and the Puritan belief system fit naturally together. Both were stern taskmasters. The New England climate was harsh with cold, unforgiving winters. New England soil was rocky and gave grudgingly of its corn, wheat, and leafy vegetables. Puritanism was equally demanding. Puritans believed in **predestination**, the idea that God elects before birth who will go to Heaven and who will not. Puritans lived with the possibility that they were damned to Hell. The Puritan ethic of hard work was partly an attempt to prove to themselves and others that they were among the elect. Perhaps for this reason, Puritans set a very high standard for themselves. In their own words, they were creating "a city upon a hill," a model of right belief and good conduct for the world to follow. It was like living in a glass house; every naughty word, every secret kiss, every angry gesture was there for God, if not the world, to hear and see. There was pressure in just being alive.

To help guide them through this difficult life, Puritans turned to the Bible. Puritans were **fundamentalists**; they believed that every word in the Bible was the true word of God and was to be followed to the letter.

But God was not the only supernatural power in this Puritan world. There was a darker force lurking in the wilderness. This force was the Devil, also known as Satan. The Devil was as sneaky as he was real. He could enter the body of a weak-willed person and recruit that person to become a witch. (In more precise terms, a woman who made a pact with the Devil was called a **witch**; a man was called a **wizard**.) Once under Satan's power, the witch or wizard could cause all kinds of trouble – shipwrecks, illness, even murder.

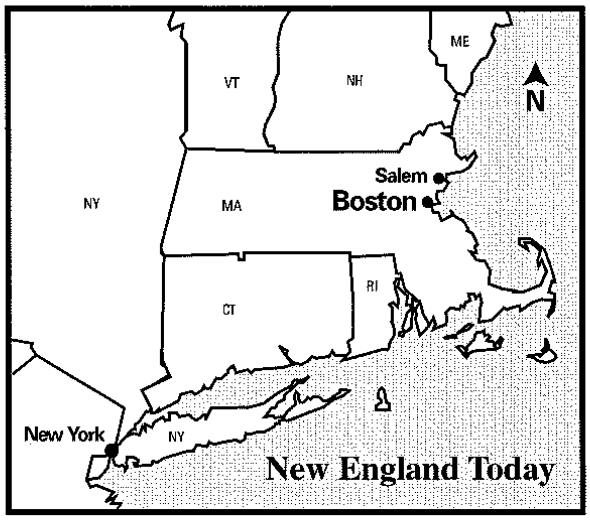
Throughout 17th century New England, witchcraft was a crime punishable by death. Because the stakes were so high, evidence had to be solid. This was not easy, because the contract between the Devil and the soon-to-be witch took place inside the witch's mind. The most sought-after type of evidence by the courts was admission of guilt. Admissions of witchcraft did



sometimes occur when a person believed he or she was practicing it. Such an admission often got the accused off the hook and out of the noose.

According to Salem historians Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, the next most reliable form of evidence was supernatural strengths, weaknesses or unusual physical characteristics. A man who could hold a rifle, arm extended, with his finger in the barrel, was suspect. A woman who botched the words when saying the Lord's Prayer might be the Devil's agent. A person with an unexpected flap of skin growing on the body, the so-called "witch's tit," was a candidate for the gallows.

Two other kinds of evidence of witchcraft were considered less persuasive, although they seem to have influenced certain New England magistrates. One was anger followed by mischief – a sidelong glance by the suspected witch followed quickly by an accident to the victim. The last and most fragile evidence was **spectral evidence**, testimony by the afflicted that they were "visited" by some demonic form. Because the victim's story of a spectral visitation was impossible to verify, it was regarded as flimsy evidence when taken alone.




How common were witchcraft trials in the American colonies? In his book *Entertaining Satan* (1981), John Demos says that, not counting Salem, there were 93 cases in New England in the 17th century in which someone was tried in a court of law for being a witch. Sixteen people were put to death. At this same time witch trials were occurring in England, but the rates were lower.

Sixteen witch hangings outside of Salem between 1620 and 1700 is a striking fact, but it seldom makes the history books. What put witchcraft front and center in American colonial history were the events of one year, in one town. These were the famous Salem, Massachusetts, witch trials of 1692.

In a 15 week period from June 10 through September 22, 1692, 19 men and women from the Salem area were hanged for witchcraft. Another, an 81-year-old man, was pressed to death by stones in an unsuccessful effort to force him to testify. More than 100 other suspected witches remained in Massachusetts jails when the trials and hangings were finally called to a halt by Governor Phips. The fact that the governor's own wife had recently been accused may have been the deciding factor in stopping the killing.

The surface events leading to the trials have become part of American folklore. Two young Salem Village girls, Betty Parris, age nine, and her eleven-year-old cousin Abigail Williams, engaged a West Indian slave woman named Tituba to help them know their fortunes. They were especially interested in what their future sweethearts would be like. To find this out they used an old trick of suspending an egg-white in a glass of water and looking for telltale shapes. Disturbingly, one of the girls thought she saw the shape of a coffin. Over the next several weeks and months the two girls began to exhibit strange behavior. Betty's father, the Reverend Samuel Parris, was the Salem Village minister and had for sometime been puzzled by the girls' "getting into Holes, creeping under Chairs and Stools,… (and) uttering foolish and ridiculous speeches…." Reverend Parris somehow learned about the magic seances with Tituba and concluded that this was no simple physical sickness, but the work of more sinister forces. The malady spread and other young girls were afflicted. Under pressure from Reverend Parris and other adults,

on February 29, 1692, the girls identified two local white women and the slave Tituba as the witches who were causing them such pain. The Salem witch hunt was under way.

The three accused women were carted off to jail in Boston. Only Tituba confessed to practicing witchcraft, an admission that saved her life. Over the next few weeks, despite fasting and prayer, the odd behavior of the girls continued. Then in late March the first adult supposedly fell victim to the witches' spell. Accusations increased and even included a four-year-old girl, who, though never hanged, would spend nine months in irons.

Throughout March, April, and half of May the jails continued to fill, but no trials were held because Massachusetts at this time was without a legal government. Finally, on May 14, 1692, the new Governor Phips arrived from England. A special court was quickly set up and the first trials were held June 2. On June 10, Bridget Bishop from Salem Village was hanged. On July 19, five more people accused of witchcraft met the same fate. And so it continued until September 22, when a mass hanging of eight accused witches ended the executions.

The tragedy at Salem was finally playing itself out. A key reason the hangings stopped was a sermon and manuscript written by the Puritan church leader Cotton Mather in early October. Mather acknowledged that witches could rightfully be put to death, but he argued that the evidence had to be very carefully weighed. Perhaps the key sentence in his sermon was the following: "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned." Mather's caution reflected a shifting mood in Salem. By May of 1693, the jails had been emptied and all the accused acquitted or pardoned.

The hangings had ended, but the big question remains to this day: Why were 19 people put to death for witchcraft in Salem and another pressed to death by stones? Was it just bored pre-teen girls caught in their own fantasies and forced to play their story out? But if so, why did it not stop sooner? Why did it go beyond the accusations of Betty Parris and Abigail Williams? How could it extend, for example, to a several days' walk into Maine to implicate Rev. George Burroughs, a man who had left his ministry in Salem nine years before and was among the 19 hanged for witchcraft?

After reading this background essay you are going to look over some key documents that pertain to the Salem witch trials. You will analyze the documents then make an argument in the form of a short essay that answers the question:

***"What caused the Salem witch trial hysteria of 1692?"***