

## The Salem Witch Trials – A Case Review

By Kenneth E. Blackstone

## **Abstract**

In 14th century Europe, the nearest thing to law was the Church and any deviation from the Church's interpretation of the Bible was considered heresy. The plague that swept through the European continent was considered by the Church to be proof of the existence of Satan's witches and set off the inquisition of heretics and witches. The largest number of burnings in England occurred during the Catholic regime of Queen Mary (1553-1558), who, between February 1555 and November 1558, executed for heresy almost 300 people.

By 1689, when England adopted a Bill of Rights and discontinued its burning of heretics, hundreds of thousands of people had become victims of several Church condoned Inquisitions and the practice of burning heretics had crossed the Atlantic. During the seventeenth century, the very existence of the societies of Salem Village (now Danvers) and Salem Town (now Salem), Massachusetts depended on an allegiance to the Church and witchcraft was one of the few crimes punishable by death in Colonial America.

Of 36 suspected heretics executed in America, 20 died during the Salem Witch Trials in 1692.

## **The Salem Witch Trials – a case review:**

In 1688, John Putnam, one of the most influential elders of Salem Village, invited Samuel Parris, a planter and merchant from Barbados, to preach in the Village church. A year later, after negotiations over salary, inflation adjustments, and free firewood, Parris accepted the job as Village minister. He moved to Salem Village with his wife Elizabeth, his six-year-old daughter Betty, his eleven-year-old “niece” Abigail Williams, and, acquired by Parris in Barbados, his Indian slave Tituba and her husband John.

The colonists were at war with the Indians, the weather was harsh, and the villagers relied on the Church for some sense of safety. Sometime during the exceptionally cold winter of 1692, young Betty Parris became strangely ill. She dashed about, dove under furniture, contorted in pain, and complained of fever. The cause of her symptoms may have been some combination of stress, asthma, guilt, boredom, child abuse, epilepsy, and delusional psychosis. Not long after this the Reverend’s “niece” Abigail displayed the same symptoms.

The symptoms also could have been caused, as Linda Caporael argued in a 1976 article in *Science* magazine, by a disease called “convulsive ergotism” brought on by ingesting rye--eaten as a cereal and as a common ingredient of bread--infected with ergot. (Ergot is caused by a fungus that invades developing kernels of rye grain, especially under warm and damp conditions such as existed at the time of the previous rye harvest in Salem.)

Convulsive ergotism causes violent fits, a crawling sensation on the skin, vomiting, choking, and--most interestingly--hallucinations. In fact, the hallucinogenic drug LSD is a derivative of ergot. Many of the symptoms of convulsive ergotism seem to match those attributed to Betty Parris, but there is no way of knowing with any certainty if she in fact suffered from the disease--and the theory would not explain the afflictions displayed by others in Salem later in the year.

There is another theory that explains the girls’ symptoms. The minister Cotton Mather, who had a somewhat radical and oversexed view of theology, had recently published a popular book, “*Memorable Providences*,” which described the suspected witchcraft of an Irish washerwoman in Boston. Betty Parris’ behavior mirrored those described in Cotton Mather’s widely read and discussed book.

It is easy to believe in 1692 Salem, with an Indian war raging less than seventy miles away (and many refugees from the war in the area), that the devil was close at hand. Sudden and violent death occupied minds. Talk of witchcraft increased when other playmates of Betty and Abigail, including eleven-year-old Ann Putnam and seventeen-year-old Mercy Lewis, and Mary Walcott, began to exhibit similar unusual behavior.

When his own elixirs and remedies failed to have an effect on their afflictions, William Griggs, a doctor called to examine the girls, suggested that the girls’ problems might have a supernatural origin. The widespread belief that witches targeted children made the doctor’s diagnosis seem increasingly likely.

A neighbor, Mary Sibley, proposed a form of European white magic. She told Tituba to bake a rye cake with the urine of the afflicted victim and feed the cake to a dog. (Dogs were believed to be used by witches as agents to carry out their commands.) By this time, suspicion had already begun to focus on Tituba because of the earlier episode when she was caught telling the girls tales from the Caribbean of omens, voodoo, and witchcraft. Her participation in the urine cake episode made her an even more obvious scapegoat for what was otherwise inexplicable.

Meanwhile, the number of girls in distress continued to grow with the addition of Ann Putnam, Elizabeth Hubbard, Susannah Sheldon, and Mary Warren. According to historian Peter Hoffer, the girls “turned themselves from a circle of friends into a gang of juvenile delinquents.”

The girls twisted into grotesque poses, fell down into frozen postures, and complained of biting and pinching sensations.

In a village where everyone believed that the devil was real, close at hand, and acted in the real world, the suspected affliction of the girls became an obsession that was easy to accept as true. With their wide-eyed trances, contortions and screams the girls were now considered victims of Satan and by March had claimed that Tituba and two village outcasts were “witches” commissioned by the Devil.

Sarah Good, a beggar and social misfit who lived wherever someone would house her, and Sarah Osborne, an old, quarrelsome woman who had not attended Church for over a year, both denied the accusations. Tituba, who was beaten, confessed to practicing witchcraft and pointed to other “witches” in the community who had also signed the Devil’s book. In an effort to satisfy the Church and save themselves from the Court some of these others pointed out more “witches.”

Then while stuck in jail with the damning testimony of the afflicted girls widely accepted, suspects began to see confession as a way to avoid the gallows. Confession became seen as one of few options to accused witches for avoiding the gallows, but of course confessions also had the effect of confirming suspicions of witchcraft and widening the circle of accusations.

As an example let’s look at one family:

Deliverance Hobbs, about 50 years old at the time of the trials, was the wife of William Hobbs and the mother of Abigail Hobbs. All three members of the Hobbs family were accused of witchcraft. Abigail had a reputation for being a wild, irreverent and disrespectful young girl. She would brag that she was not afraid of anything. She was also known to mock the holy sacrament of baptism by sprinkling water on her mother’s head and reciting the appropriate words. Abigail was one of the first arrested, and acted as a witness against both of her parents. She also enthusiastically contributed to efforts to accuse and convict other supposed witches.

A warrant was issued for Deliverance Hobbs on April 21 and two days later she was arrested and put in jail. For a while she professed her innocence, but after a time her resistance and her will were broken by the harshness of the proceedings and she confessed to anything the magistrates, afflicted girls, or the crowds would suggest. Preceded by her daughter Abigail and Mary Warren, Deliverance Hobbs was the third Salem resident to confess to practicing witchcraft. She even acted as a witness against

her husband, who never swayed from his claims of innocence. Despite the circle of accusations in the family, all three Hobbs managed to avoid the noose.

As the witch hunt continued, the first governor of Massachusetts, William Phips, was absent and the Church was in charge. With more than 150 villagers jailed before the trials began, the colony “teetered on the brink of chaos” as Governor William Phips returned. Phips immediately created a new court, the “court of oyer and terminer,” to hear the witchcraft cases. These were not the actual trials, but more like today’s grand jury. Someone would bring a complaint to the authorities, and the authorities would decide if there was enough reason to send the sheriff or other authority to arrest them. While this was happening, depositions -- statements people made on paper outside of court -- were taken and evidence gathered, typically against the accused.

After evidence or charges were presented and depositions sworn to before the court, the grand jury would decide whether to indict the accused. If indicted, the person’s case would then go to a petit jury, or to “trial” something like we know it only much faster, to decide guilt or innocence. The actual trials began on 2 June 1692 and, per English law, though the practice had already discontinued in England, guilt in the case of witchcraft came with an automatic sentence of death by hanging.

The main evidence introduced into these trials became known as “spectral evidence” because the “witch” supposedly appeared in the form of a ghost or “specter” while the accused villager’s physical body was at another location engaging in seemingly innocent activities or, as was increasingly the case, locked up in a dungeon. The accused included a retired preacher named George Burroughs and a tavern keeper/farmer named John Proctor. On 10 June, Bridget Bishop was the first “witch” to be hanged.

A petition from John Proctor was sent to a council of ministers in Boston. One of these ministers, Increase Mather, father of Cotton Mather, was highly respected in that he was the first president of Harvard College and had headed a commission sent to England to negotiate for a new charter for the colony. After receiving the petition of John Proctor, Increase Mather and seven other ministers from Boston met at Cambridge on August 1, 1692.

After the meeting, Increase attended the trial of George Burroughs, a retired preacher, and became convinced of his innocence. He visited many of the accused in prison, and several of them recanted their confessions to him. Despite doubts as to the trials, Increase would never denounce the judges, most likely because many of them were his personal friends. About the time rumors began that Increase’s wife would be named a witch, he presented his “Case of Conscience,” which represented a dramatic break from his former position on witchcraft. In it he publicly questioned the credibility of the possessed persons, confessed witches, and spectral evidence.

Increase Mather is quoted as saying “It were better that 10 suspected witches should escape than one innocent person should be condemned” and the council urged Governor Phips to exclude spectral evidence and disband the “court of oyer and terminer.” The governor was not willing to take that course until his wife was named as a suspect. At that point Phips declared that spectral evidence was

no longer acceptable. He then pardoned those waiting to be hanged, and the Salem Witch trials ended in October 1692.

In May 1693 a general release freed all of those prisoners who remained jailed. By the end of the trials 24 villagers had died, 19 as a result of hanging, four died in the dungeon of illness and one died while tortured. Within five years, Salem officials publicly apologized for their fervor at a “Day of Fast and Repentance.”

**About the Author:**

*Mr. Blackstone is recognized as an expert in the fields of sexual offense investigation, proper forensic interviewing techniques and pre and post conviction testing of alleged offenders. He is a polygraph examiner, forensic consultant and expert witness regarding the proper use of polygraph in civil, clinical and criminal testing settings with a focus on child molestation and child abuse. With over twenty-seven years of experience, over fifteen thousand examinations and more than one hundred court appearances as an expert witness, Mr. Blackstone's expertise is well respected.*