



This 1855 oil painting named *The Trial of George Jacobs* depicts George Jacobs standing trial on August 5, 1692. Under pressure from hysteria, his own granddaughter testified against him, leading to his arrest on May 10, 1692. At his trial, Jacobs failed to properly recite the Lord's Prayer, a sign ofte...

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HISTORY & CULTURE

Witch hunts were common in the 17th century. Here's what made Salem infamous.

The Salem witch trials are more than just a historical curiosity. Explore how this chilling history teaches us about fear, power, and the consequences of mass paranoia.



Statistics is just one way to tell the tale of the infamous Salem witch trials. In just 16 months between February 1692 and May 1693, up to 200 people—mostly women—were accused of practicing witchcraft in colonial Salem, Massachusetts. Of those 200, there were 30 convictions and 19 executions.

But mass accusations, trials, and executions in Salem could never have happened without the perfect storm of individual factors and personalities. These forces turned a Puritan community, and the lives of its residents, upside-down. Here's how the Salem witch trials came about—and why what happened there is still worth remembering today.

The origins of witch hunts

First, some myth-busting. “There were no green-faced women in pointy hats stirring cauldrons and casting spells in Salem in colonial times,” says Bridget M. Marshall, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell who has written about historic witch trials. Instead, witchcraft accusations usually plagued women whose behavior irked members of their close-knit, deeply religious communities. They were also common among the community's most powerless members, such as poor women and women of color—people who were easy to accuse as witches.

estimated 100,000 people—mostly women—for accusations of conspiring with the devil and performing heretical acts like curses. European colonization spread this preoccupation as social unrest and religious and political changes in Salem made it susceptible to witchcraft accusations.

(Witch panics killed thousands throughout history.)

Like other cities within English-held Massachusetts Bay Colony, Salem was peopled by Puritan settlers. Their daily lives played out alongside the area's Indigenous inhabitants, enslaved Africans, and a growing number of refugees displaced from what is now Canada and New York by King William's War—a conflict between Britain and France that raged between 1689 and 1697. The new residents stretched Salem's resources to its limits, fueling already intense personal rivalries between villagers and their religious and government leaders.

The first accusation of witchcraft

One of the Salem's most enduring conflicts was over its church leader, as the town had trouble keeping a permanent minister. After multiple attempts to retain a minister, the village's church congregation hired Samuel Parris. Parris's tenure was marked by even more controversy due to his strict, orthodox views and quarrels over his pay.

In January 1692, Parris's nine-year-old daughter Elizabeth and 11-year-old niece Abigail Williams began experiencing "fits" after playing fortune-telling games. Such amusements were considered wicked under Puritan doctrine.

In this case, the girls dropped an egg white into a glass of water and interpreted the shapes that formed as indicators of their future husbands' professions. After spotting a coffin-like shape in one of the glasses, the girls began behaving oddly. During these episodes, they made loud, incoherent noises such as barking like dogs, wept, and fell to the floor, bodies racked with seemingly involuntary movements.

The town doctor diagnosed both as having an “evil hand upon them”—being under the spell or curse of a witch who had caused the devil to possess them. Witchcraft and dealing with the devil were both crimes under Massachusetts law, and the girls' behavior swiftly snowballed into a legal matter.



This 1685 oil on card portrait shows Samuel Parris, the pastor who led the Salem witch hunt in 1692. The early accusations against his fa...

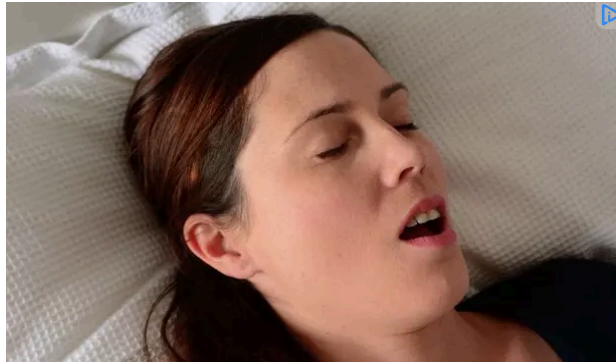
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When confronted, the girls blamed Tituba—an enslaved woman owned by Parris—of charming them with witchcraft. Though she was not involved in the fortune-telling game, Tituba had concocted a “witch cake” of urine and rye to try to heal the girls from their supposed possession. When Parris found out Tituba had prepared and fed them the food, he became furious and beat her. Under duress, Tituba confessed to witchcraft, admitting she was the devil’s servant.

(‘Witch bottles’ filled with nails and teeth were once thought to heal the cursed.)

“Tituba was an easy target in that she would have been considered the lowest of the low in a very hierarchical society,” says Marshall. “This was a



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Tituba wasn't the only unfortunate scapegoat for the girls' behavior. They pointed the finger at two other women: Sarah Osborne, a townswoman who was considered promiscuous by her neighbors, and Sarah Good, a penniless woman whose family was widely disliked. Soon, all three were formally accused of witchcraft, jailed, and tried.

The effects of mass hysteria

While the true motives behind the accusations remain murky, their consequences are clear. The arrests set off a bout of what modern analysts called mass hysteria—and which scholars have attributed to everything from ergot poisoning to hallucinogenics to “group polarization.”

In the wake of provocative testimony in which Tituba claimed she and the girls had ridden broomsticks and signed a book offered to her by the devil, other girls within the village began displaying odd behavior.

(*The 5 scariest mythological witches from around the world.*)





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By Cotton Mather.

Boston Printed by Benj. Harris for Sam. Phillips: 1693.

As the trial progressed, more Salem residents began accusing one another of practicing witchcraft. Historian Carol F. Karlsen notes that many of the villagers who made witchcraft accusations against people in their community had uncertain lives and few future prospects. These mounting pressures explained both the village girls' interest in learning more about their futures and their desire for validation from the community after their odd behavior drew questions from fellow villagers.



Victims of the Salem witch trials

Salem created a special court for the trials and began indicting, trying, and executing supposed witches in large numbers. Indictees were not presumed innocent, and convictions rested on coerced confessions, hearsay, and even “spectral evidence” involving witnesses’ dreams. Officials also considered defendants’ reputations, past behavior, and bodies, searching for physical characteristics like moles or scratches that they interpreted as “witch’s marks.”

victims. She was released after 34 weeks in prison—though not before the execution of her mother, by hanging. Dorothy’s newborn sister Mercy was the trials’ youngest victim. She was imprisoned and died in jail shortly after her birth.

Though women made up the overwhelming majority, the court also tried and convicted six men. John Proctor, a 60-year-old man who publicly objected to the trials, paid for it with his life. Proctor’s story, and execution by hanging, was later dramatized in Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*.

After being accused, 81-year-old Giles Corey refused to admit to or deny “sundry acts of witchcraft” in an attempt to protect his estate from forfeiture if he was convicted. Instead of trying him, authorities instead slowly pressed him to death between two stones, one of the era’s most brutal forms of execution.

The aftermath of the Salem witch trials

Ultimately, Marshall says, “only a small percentage were found guilty.” But it’s difficult to determine the fates of the acquitted. They either managed to convince courts of their innocence or passed a variety of tests—like being willing to say the Lord’s Prayer or lacking any physical characteristics that could be construed as “witch’s marks.”



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Five of the accused perished while still imprisoned. Those who were released weren't necessarily better off. "They would have been in rough financial [shape,]" says Marshall, pointing to asset forfeiture, stiff imprisonment fees, and other penalties. Others, like Tituba, faced further marginalization within the community. Tituba eventually recanted her testimony but languished in jail for 13 months before an anonymous benefactor posted her bail. She was never given restitution.

These survivors walked away with devastating damage to their reputations, made worse by the fact that some were also excommunicated from the church. As a result, many fought lengthy battles to have their names cleared for years, Marshall says.

The witch trial craze in Salem Village faded in 1693, possibly due in part to the public stance taken by prominent anti-witch-trial figures like Puritan minister Cotton Mather.

(*Witch hunt tourism is lucrative. It also obscures a tragic history.*)

It took centuries for Salem—now a popular destination for tourists interested in the paranormal—to fully acknowledge its victims. Massachusetts officials only began apologizing for the trials in

finally dedicated a memorial at the site where the mass hangings took place. The monument, surrounded by forest, consists of a simple wall engraved with the names of the trials' 19 hanging victims.

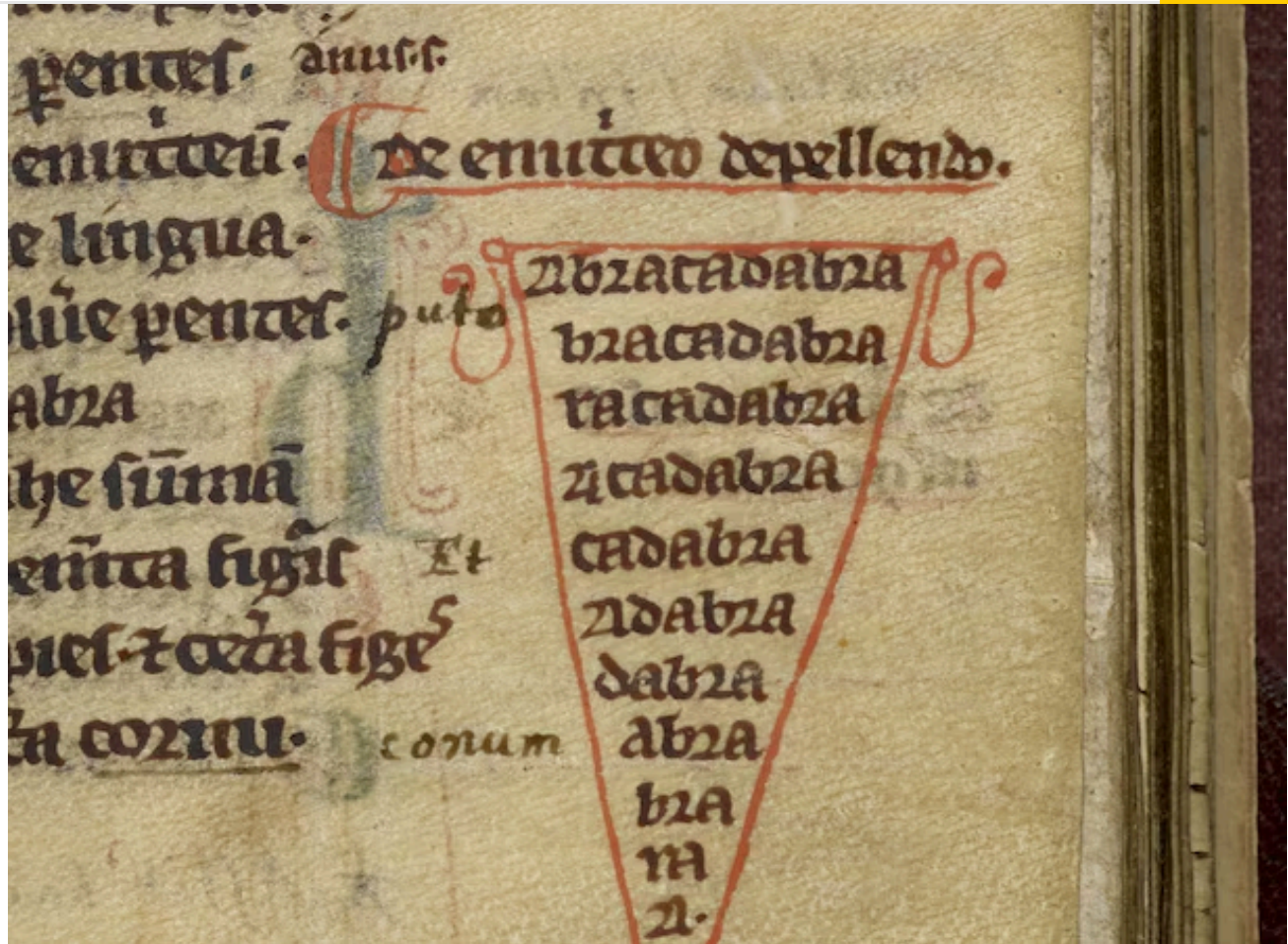
By prompting quiet reflection, the memorial goes beyond the statistics and speculation to the real victims at the center of Salem's witch hysteria: Marginalized, embattled individuals whose own neighbors were willing to kill them.



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