

## The Visible and Invisible Worlds of Salem

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If historians are in the business of reconstruction, it follows that they must make some of the same kinds of decisions as architects or builders. Before they begin their work, they must decide on the scale of their projects. How much ground should be covered? A year? Fifty years? Several centuries? How will the subject matter be defined or limited? The story of slavery's arrival in Virginia might be ranked as a moderately large topic. It spans some sixty years and involves thousands of immigrants and an entire colony. Furthermore, the topic is large because of its content and themes. The rise of slavery surely ranks as a central strand of the American experience. To grasp it well requires more breadth of vision than, for instance, understanding the history of American hats during the same period. The lure of topics both broad and significant is undeniable, and there have always been historians willing to pull on their seven-league boots.

The great equalizer of such grand plans is the twenty-four-hour day. Historians have only a limited amount of time, and the more years covered, the less time available to research the events in each year. Conversely, the narrower the area of research, the more the historian can become immersed in a period's details. A keen mind working on an apparently small topic may uncover relationships and connections whose significance goes beyond the subject matter's original boundaries.

Salem Village in 1692 is such a microcosm—one familiar to most students of American history. That was the place and the time witchcraft came to New England with a vengeance, dominating the life of the village for ten months. Because the witchcraft episode exhibited well-defined boundaries in both time and space, it shows well how an oft-told story may be transformed by the intensive research of small-scale history. Traditionally, the outbreak at Salem has been viewed as an incident separate from the events of everyday village life. Even to label the witchcraft episode as an “outbreak” suggests

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that it is best viewed as an epidemic, alien to the community's normal functions. The “germs” of bewitchment break out suddenly and inexplicably—agents, presumably, of some invading disease.

Over the past decades, however, historians have studied the traumatic experiences of 1692 in great detail. In so doing they have created a more sophisticated model of the mental world behind the Salem outbreak. They have also suggested ways in which the witchcraft episode was tied to the everyday events of village life. The techniques of small-scale history, in other words, have provided a compelling psychological and social context for the events of 1692.

### BEWITCHMENT AT SALEM VILLAGE

The baffling troubles experienced in Salem Village began during the winter of 1691–1692 in the home of the village's minister, Samuel Parris. There, Parris's nine-year-old daughter Betty and his niece Abigail Williams had taken strangely ill, claiming that they had been “bitten and pinched by invisible agents; their arms, necks, and backs turned this way and that way, and returned back again . . . beyond the power of any Epileptick Fits, or natural Disease to effect.” Later traditions—not necessarily reliable—suggested that the afflictions came after a group of girls met to divine what sort of men their future husbands might be, a subject of natural enough interest. Lacking a crystal ball, they used the next available substitute, the white of a raw egg suspended in a glass of water. At some point during these conjurings, things went sour. One of the girls thought she detected “a specter in the likeness of a coffin” in the glass—a threatening omen. Betty, the youngest of the girls, began complaining of pinching, prickling sensations, knifelike pains, and the feeling that she was being choked. In the weeks that followed, three more girls exhibited similar symptoms.

Whatever the cause of the young girls' symptoms, the Reverend Parris was baffled by them, as were several doctors and ministers he brought in to observe the strange behaviors. When one doctor hinted at the possibility of witchcraft, a neighbor, Mary Sibley, suggested putting to use a bit of New England folklore to reveal whether there had been any sorcery. Sibley persuaded two slaves living in the Parris household, John Indian and his wife, Tituba, to bake a “witch cake” made of rye meal and urine given them by the girls. The cake was fed to a dog—the theory of bewitchment confirmed, presumably, if the dog suffered torments similar to those of the afflicted girls.

This experiment seems to have frightened the girls even more, for their symptoms worsened. Thoroughly alarmed, adults pressed the girls for the identity of the specters they believed were tormenting them. When the girls named three women, a formal complaint was issued, and on February 29 the suspects were arrested. That was the obvious action to take, for seventeenth-century New Englanders conceived of witchcraft as a crime. If the girls were being tormented, it was necessary to punish those responsible.

Two of the women arrested, Sarah Good and Sarah Osbourne, were already unpopular in the village. The third accused was Parris's Indian slave, Tituba. Tituba may have been purchased by Parris during a visit to the Caribbean and was perhaps originally from South America, Florida, or the Georgia Sea Islands. When questioned by village magistrates, Sarah Good angrily denied the accusations, suggesting instead that Sarah Osbourne was guilty. Osbourne denied the charges, but the dynamics of the hearings changed abruptly when Tituba confessed to being a witch. One account of the trials, published eight years later, reported that her admission came after an angry Reverend Parris had beaten Tituba. For whatever reason, she testified that four women and a man were causing the afflictions of the young women. Good and Osbourne were among them. "They hurt the children," Tituba reported. "And they lay all upon me and they tell me if I will not hurt the children, they will hurt me." The tale continued, complete with apparitions of black and red rats, a yellow dog with a head like a woman, "a thing all over hairy, all the face hairy," and midnight rides to witches' meetings where plans were being laid to attack Salem.

During New England's first seventy years, few witchcraft cases had come before the courts. Those that had were dispatched quickly, and calm soon returned. Salem proved different. In the first place, Tituba had described several other witches and a wizard, though she said she was unable to identify them. The villagers felt they could not rest so long as these agents remained at large. Furthermore, the young women continued to name names—and now not just community outcasts, but a wide variety of villagers, some respectable church members. The new suspects joined Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osbourne in jail. By the end of April, the hunt even led to a former minister, George Burroughs, then living in Maine.

If the accused refused to admit guilt, the magistrates looked for corroborating proof. Physical evidence, such as voodoo dolls and pins found among the suspect's possessions, were considered incriminating. Furthermore, if the devil made a pact with someone, he supposedly required a physical mark of allegiance and thus created a "witch's tit" where either he or his familiar, a likeness in animal form, might suck. Prisoners in the Salem trials were often examined for any abnormal marks on their bodies.

Aside from physical signs, the magistrates considered evidence that a witch's ill will might have caused a victim to suffer. This kind of black magic—harm by occult means—was known as *maleficium*. Villager Sarah Gadge, for example, testified that she had once refused Sarah Good lodging for the night. According to Gadge, Good "fell to muttering and scolding extremly and so told said Gadge if she would not let her in she should give her something . . . and the next morning after . . . one of the said Gades Cowes Died in a Sudden terrible and Strange unusuall maner."

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The magistrates also considered what they called "spectral evidence"—ghostly likenesses of the witches that victims reported seeing during their torments. In an attempt to confirm that these specters were really links to the accused witches, the magistrates kept the afflicted women in the courtroom and observed them while the accused were being examined. "Why doe you hurt these children?" one of the magistrates asked Sarah Osbourne, in a typical examination. "I doe not hurt them," replied Osbourne. The record continues: "The children abovenamed being all personally present accused her face to face which being don, they ware all hurt, afflicted and tortured very much: which being over and thay out of there fits they sayd that said Sarah Osburne did then Come to them and hurt them."

The problem with spectral evidence was that it could not be corroborated by others. Only the victim saw the shape of the tormentor. Such testimony was normally controversial, for theologians in Europe as well as in New England believed that spectral evidence should be treated with caution. After all, what better way for the devil to spread confusion than by assuming the shape of an innocent person? In Salem, however, the magistrates considered spectral testimony as paramount. When they handed down indictments, almost all the charges referred only to the spectral torments exhibited by accusers during the pretrial hearings.

On June 2 a court especially established to deal with the witchcraft outbreak heard its first case, that of a woman named Bridget Bishop. Even before the Salem controversy, Bishop had been suspected of witchcraft by a number of villagers. She was quickly convicted and, eight days later, hanged from a scaffold on a nearby rise. The site came to be known as Witch's Hill—with good reason, since on June 29 the court again met and convicted five more women. One of them, Rebecca Nurse, had been found innocent, but the court's chief justice disapproved the verdict and convinced the jurors to change their minds. On July 19 Nurse joined the other four women on the scaffold, staunch churchwoman that she was, praying for the judges' souls as well as her own. Sarah Good remained defiant to the end. "I am no more a witch than you are a wizard," she told the attending minister, "and if you take away my life, God will give you blood to drink."

Still the accusations continued; still the court sat. As the net was cast wider, more and more accused were forced to work out their response to the crisis. A few, most of them wealthy, went into hiding until the furor subsided. Giles Cory, a farmer whose wife, Martha, was executed as a witch, refused to submit to a trial by jury. The traditional penalty for such a refusal was the *peine fort et dure*, in which the victim was placed between two boards and had heavy stones placed on him until he agreed to plead innocent or guilty. Although that punishment had been outlawed in Massachusetts, the court nonetheless carried it out. Cory was slowly crushed to death, stubborn to the end. His last words were said to be, "More weight."

Some of the accused admitted guilt, the most satisfactory solution for the magistrates. Puritans could be a remarkably forgiving people. They were not

interested in punishment for its own sake. If a lawbreaker gave evidence of sincere regret for his or her misdeeds, Puritan courts would often reduce or suspend the sentence. So it was in the witchcraft trials at Salem (unlike most trials in Europe, where confessing witches were executed). But the policy of forgiveness had unforeseen consequences. Those who were wrongly accused quickly realized that if they did not confess, they were likely to be hanged. If they did admit guilt, they could escape death but would have to demonstrate their sincerity by providing details of their misdeeds and names of other participants. The temptation must have been great to confess and, in so doing, to implicate other innocent people.

Given such pressures, the web of accusations continued to spread. August produced six more trials and five hangings. Elizabeth Proctor, the wife of a tavern keeper, received a reprieve because she was pregnant, the court being unwilling to sacrifice the life of an innocent child. Her husband, John, was not spared. September saw another eight victims hanged. More than a hundred suspected witches remained in jail.

Pressure to stop the trials had been building, however. One member of the court, Nathaniel Saltonstall, resigned in protest after the first execution. More important, the ministers of the province were becoming uneasy. In public they had supported the trials, but privately they wrote letters cautioning the magistrates. Finally, in early October, Increase Mather, one of the most respected preachers in the colony, published a sermon signed by fourteen other pastors that strongly condemned the use of spectral evidence. Mather argued that to convict on the basis of a specter, which everyone agreed was the devil's creation, in effect took Satan at his own word. That, in Mather's view, risked disaster. "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned," he concluded.

Mather's sermon convinced the colony's governor, William Phips, that the trials had gone too far. He forbade any more arrests and dismissed the court. The following January a new court met to dispose of the remaining cases, but this time almost all the defendants were acquitted. Phips immediately granted a reprieve to the three women who were convicted and in April released the remaining prisoners. Satan's controversy with Salem was finished.

That, in outline, is the witchcraft story as it has come down to us for so many years. Rightly or wrongly, the story has become an indelible part of American history. The startling fits of possession, the drama of the court examinations, the eloquent pleas of the innocent condemned—all make for a superb drama that casts into shadow the rest of Salem's more pedestrian history.

Indeed, the episode is unrepresentative. Witchcraft epidemics were not a serious problem in New England and were even less of a problem in other American colonies. Such persecutions were much more common in Europe, where they reached frightening proportions. The death of 20 people at Salem is sobering, but the magnitude of the event diminishes considerably

alongside the estimate of 40,000 to 60,000 people executed for witchcraft in early modern Europe.

Now, a curious thing has resulted from this illumination of a single, isolated episode. Again and again the story of Salem Village has been told, quite naturally, as a drama complete unto itself. The everyday history that preceded and followed the trials—the petty town bickerings, arguments over land and ministers—was for many years largely passed over. Yet the disturbances at Salem did not occur in a vacuum. They may indeed have constituted an epidemic, but not the sort caused by some germ pool brought into the village over the rutted roads from Boston. So the historian's first task is to take the major strands of the witchcraft affair and see how they are woven into the larger fabric of New England society. Salem Village was small enough that virtually every one of its residents can be identified. We can find out who owned what land, the amount of taxes each resident paid, what sermons people listened to on Sundays. In so doing, a richer, far more intriguing picture of New England life begins to emerge.

## THE INVISIBLE SALEM

Paradoxically, the most obvious facet of Salem life that the historian must recreate is also the most insubstantial: what ministers of the period would have called the "invisible world." Demons, familiars, witchcraft, and magic all shaped seventeenth-century New England. For most Salem Villagers, Satan was a living, supernatural being who might appear to people, bargain with them, even enter into agreements. The men and women who submitted to such devilish compacts were said to exchange their souls in return for special powers or favors: money and good fortune, perhaps, or the ability to revenge themselves on others.

Most often, ordinary folk viewed witchcraft as a simple matter of *maleficium*: Sarah Gadge, for example, believing that Sarah Good caused one of her cows to die after a hostile encounter. The process by which such suspicions grew was described well in 1587 by George Gifford, an English minister who was himself quite skeptical of witchcraft:

Some woman doth fall out bitterly with her neighbour: there followeth some great hurt . . . There is a suspicion conceived. Within few years after, [the same woman] is in some jar [argument] with another. He is also plagued. This is noted of all. Great fame is spread of the matter. Mother *W* is a witch. She had bewitched Goodman *B*. Two hogs died strangely: or else he is taken lame.

Well, Mother *W* doth begin to be very odious and terrible unto many. Her neighbours dare say nothing but yet in their hearts they wish she were hanged. Shortly after, another [person] falleth sick and doth pine; he can have no stomach unto his meat, nor he cannot sleep. The neighbours come to visit

him. "Well neighbour," sayeth one, "do ye not suspect some naughty dealing: did ye never anger Mother W?" "Truly neighbour (sayeth he) I have not liked the woman a long time."

Such suspicions of witchcraft were widespread in the early modern world. Indeed, the belief in *maleficium* was only one part of a worldview filled with magic and wonders—magic that could be manipulated by someone with the proper knowledge. Fortune-tellers provided a window into the future; objects like horseshoes brought good luck; earthquakes and comets warned of God's judgments. People who possessed more than the usual store of supernatural knowledge were known as "cunning folk" who might be called upon in times of trouble to heal the illness of a sick villager, cast horoscopes for a merchant worried about a ship's upcoming voyage, or discover what sort of children a woman might bear.

The outlines of such beliefs are easily enough sketched, but it can be difficult to imagine how a Salem Villager who believed in such wonders might have behaved. People who hold beliefs foreign to our own do not always act the way that we think they should. Over the years, historians of the witchcraft controversy have faced the challenge of re-creating Salem's mental world.

One of the first people to review Salem's troubles was Thomas Hutchinson, who in 1750 published a history of New England's early days. Hutchinson did not believe in witchcraft; fewer and fewer educated people did as the eighteenth century progressed. Therefore he faced an obvious question, which centered on the motivations of the accusers. If the devil never actually covenanted with anyone, how were the accusers' actions to be explained? Some of Hutchinson's contemporaries argued that the bewitched were suffering from "bodily disorders which affected their imaginations." He disagreed: "A little attention must force conviction that the whole was a scene of fraud and imposture, begun by young girls, who at first perhaps thought of nothing more than being pitied and indulged, and continued by adult persons who were afraid of being accused themselves." Charles Upham, a minister who published a two-volume study of the episode in 1867, was equally hard on the young women. "There has seldom been better acting in a theatre than displayed in the presence of the astonished and horror-stricken rulers," he concluded tartly.

Indeed, the historical record does supply some evidence that the possessed may have been shamming. When Elizabeth Proctor was accused of being a witch, a friend of hers testified that he had seen one of the afflicted women cry out, "There's Goody Procter!"\* But when people in the room challenged

\* *Goody* was short for *Goodwife*, a term used for most married women. Husbands were addressed as *Goodman*. The terms *Mr.* and *Mrs.* were reserved for those of higher social standing.

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the woman's claim as evidently false, she backed off, saying only that "she did it for sport; they must have some sport."

Another of the tormented young women, Mary Warren, stopped having fits and began to claim "that the afflicted persons did but dissemble"—that is, that they were only pretending. But then the other accusers began to declare that Mary's specter was afflicting them. Placed on the witness stand, Mary again fell into a fit "that she did neither see nor hear nor speak." The examination record continued:

Afterwards she started up, and said I will speak and cried out, Oh! I am sorry for it, I am sorry for it, and wringed her hands, and fell a little while into a fit again and then came to speak, but immediately her teeth were set, and then she fell into a violent fit and cried out, oh Lord help me! Oh Good Lord Save me!

And then afterward cried again, I will tell I will tell and then fell into a dead fit againe.

And afterwards cryed I will tell, they did, they did they did and then fell into a violent fit again.

After a little recovery she cryed I will tell they brought me to it and then fell into a fit again which fits continueing she was ordered to be had out.

The scene is tantalizing. It appears as if Mary Warren is about to confess when pressure from the other girls forces her back to her former role as one of the afflicted. In the following weeks, the magistrates questioned Mary repeatedly, with the result that her fits returned and she again joined in the accusations. Such evidence suggests that the girls may well have been acting.

Yet such a theory leaves certain points unexplained. If the girls were only acting, what are we to make of the many other witnesses who testified to devilry? One villager, Richard Comans, reported seeing Bridget Bishop's specter in his bedroom. Bishop lay upon his breast, he reported, and "so oppressed" him that "he could not speak nor stur, noe not so much as to awake his wife" sleeping next to him. Comans and others who testified were not close friends of the girls; there appears no reason why they might be conspiring with each other. How does the historian explain their actions?

Even some of the afflicted women's behavior is difficult to explain as conscious fraud. It is easy enough to imagine faking certain fits: whirling through the room crying "whish, wish"; being struck dumb. Yet other behavior was truly sobering: being pinched, pummeled, nearly choked to death; contortions so violent several grown men were required to restrain the victims. Even innocent victims of the accusations were astounded by such behavior. Rebecca Nurse on the witness stand could only look in astonishment at the "lamentable fits" she was accused of causing. "Do you think these [afflicted] suffer voluntary or involuntary?" asked one examiner. "I cannot tell what to think of it," replied Nurse hesitantly. The prosecutor pressed others with

*Were some of the "afflicted" girls merely willful adolescents having fun at the expense of their elders?*

oppressed" him that "he could not speak nor stur, noe not so much as to awake his wife" sleeping next to him. Comans and others who testified were not close friends of the

similar results. What ails the girls, if not your torments? “I do not know.” Do you think they are bewitched? “I cannot tell.” What do you think does ail them? “There is more than ordinary.”

“More than ordinary”—historians may accept that possibility without necessarily supposing the presence of the supernatural. Psychiatric research has long established what we now take almost for granted: that people may act for reasons they themselves do not fully understand; even more, that emotional problems may be the unconscious cause of apparently physical disorders. The rationalistic psychologies of Thomas Hutchinson and Charles Upham led them to reject any middle ground. Either the Salem women had been tormented by witches, or they were faking their fits. But given a fervent belief in devils and witches, the Salem episode can be understood not as a game of fraud gone out of control, but as a study in abnormal psychology on a community-wide scale.

*Conversion hysteria suggests that emotional problems may be the unconscious cause of apparently physical disorders.*

Scholars of the twentieth century have been more inclined to adopt this medical model. Indeed, one of the first to make the suggestion was a pediatrician, Ernest Caulfield. The accused “were not impostors or pests or frauds,” he wrote in 1943; “they were not cold-blooded malignant brats. They were sick children in the worst sort of mental distress—living in fear for their very lives and the welfare of their immortal souls.” Certainly, the fear that gripped susceptible subjects must have been extraordinary. They imagined themselves pursued by agents of the devil, intent on torment or even murder, and locked doors provided no protection. Anthropologists who have examined witchcraft in other cultures note that bewitchment can be traumatic enough to lead to death. An Australian aborigine who discovers himself bewitched will

stand aghast. . . . His cheeks blanch and his eyes become glassy. . . . He attempts to shriek but usually the sound chokes in his throat, and all that one might see is froth at his mouth. His body begins to tremble and the muscles twist involuntarily. He sways backwards and falls to the ground, and after a short time appears to be in a swoon; but soon after he writhes as if in mortal agony.

Afterward such victims often refuse to eat, lose all interest in life, and die. Although there is no record of bewitchment death in Salem, the anthropological studies indicate the remarkable depth of reaction possible in a community that believes in its own magic.\*

Historian Chadwick Hansen compared the behavior of the bewitched with the neurotic syndrome that psychiatrists refer to as “conversion hysteria.”

\* A least one bewitchment death may have occurred, however. Daniel Wilkins believed that John Willard was a witch and meant him no good. Wilkins sickened, and some of the afflicted girls were summoned to his bedside, where they claimed that they saw Willard’s specter afflicting him. The doctor would not touch the case, claiming it “preternatural.” Shortly after, Wilkins died.

A neurosis is a disorder of behavior that functions to avoid or deflect intolerable anxiety. Normally, an anxious person deals with an emotion through conscious action or thought. If the ordinary means of coping fail, however, the unconscious takes over. Hysterical patients convert their mental worries into physical symptoms such as blindness, paralysis of various parts of the body, choking, fainting, or attacks of pain. These symptoms, it should be stressed, cannot be traced to organic causes. There is nothing wrong with the nervous system during an attack of paralysis, or with the optic nerve in a case of blindness. Physical disabilities are mentally induced. Such hysterical attacks often occur in patterns that bear striking resemblance to some of the Salem afflictions.

Pierre Janet, the French physician who wrote the classic *Major Symptoms of Hysteria* (1907), reported that a characteristic hysterical fit begins with a pain or strange sensation in some part of the body, often the lower abdomen. From there, it

seems to ascend and to spread to other organs. For instance, it often spreads to the epigastrium [the region lying over the stomach], to the breasts, then to the throat. There it assumes rather an interesting form, which was for a very long time considered as quite characteristic of hysteria. The patient has the sensation of too big an object as it were, a ball rising in her throat and choking her.

Most of us have probably experienced a mild form of the last symptom—a proverbial “lump in the throat” that comes in times of stress. The hysteric’s lump, or *globus hystericus*, is more extreme, as are the accompanying convulsions: “the head is agitated in one direction or another, the eyes closed, or open with an expression of terror, the mouth distorted.”

Compare those symptoms with the fits of another tormented accuser, Elizabeth Brown:

When [the witch’s specter] did come it was as birds pecking her legs or pricking her with the motion of thair wings and then it would rize up into her stamack with pricking pain as nayls and pins of which she did bitterly complain and cry out like a women in travail and after that it would rise to her throat in a bunch like a pullets egg and then she would tern back her head and say witch you shant choak me.

The diagnosis of hysteria has gained ground over the past decades. Yet the issue of fraud cannot be put so easily to rest. Bernard Rosenthal, a scholar who has reexamined the Salem records, argues that fraud and hysteria were intermingled. What are we to make, for example, of testimony about the “torments” of one Susannah Sheldon?

Susannah Sheldon being at the house of William Shaw she was tied her hands a cross in such a manner we were forced to cut the string before we could git her hand loose and when shee was out of her fit she told us it [was] Goody Dustin that did tye her hands after that manner, and 4 times shee hath been tyed in this manner in [two] weeks time[.] The 2 first times shee sayth it was Goody Dustin and the 2 last times it was Sarah Goode that did tye her.



A hysterical convulsive attack of one of the patients in Salpêtrière Hospital during the nineteenth century. J. M. Charcot, the physician in charge of the clinic, spent much of his time studying the disorder. Note the crossed legs, similar to some of the Salem girls' fits.

It is one matter to have "fits" through terror but another to have wrists tied four times by a specter. Unless we believe in invisible spirits, the only reasonable explanation would seem to be that Susannah Sheldon had a confederate who tied her hands. Similarly Deodat Lawson, a minister who devoutly believed in witchcraft, reported in March 1692 that

some of the afflicted, as they were striving in their fits in open court, have (by invisible means) had their wrists bound fast together with a real cord, so as it could hardly be taken off without cutting. Some afflicted have been found with their arms tied, and hanged upon an hook, from whence others have been forced to take them down, that they might not expire in that posture.

The conclusion, argued Rosenthal, must be similar: "Whether the 'afflicted' worked these shows out among themselves or had help from others cannot

be determined; but there is little doubt that such calculated action was deliberately conceived to perpetuate the fraud in which the afflicted were involved, and that theories of hysteria or hallucination cannot account for people being bound, whether on the courtroom floor or on hooks." Such evidence suggests a complex set of behaviors in which both hysteria and fraud played a part.

As for those who were accused of witchcraft, they were put under severe pressure by the court's decision to view confession as worthy of pardon while viewing denials of witchcraft as a sign of guilt. Indeed, the court magistrates appeared not to want to take no for an answer. John Proctor complained that when his son was examined, "because he would not confess that he was Guilty, when he was Innocent, they tyed him Neck and Heels till the Blood gushed out at his Nose, and would have kept him so 24 Hours, if one more Merciful than the rest, had not taken pity on him."

Sarah Churchill, a young woman of about seventeen, experienced similar pressures. She apparently succumbed to her fears and testified that she was a witch. Soon, however, she had second thoughts, for she came crying and wringing her hands to an older friend, Sarah Ingersoll. "I asked her what she ailed?" reported Ingersoll.

She answered she had undone herself. I asked her in what. She said in belying herself and others in saying she had set her hand to the devil's Book whereas she said she never did. I told her I believed she had set her hand to the book. She answered crying and said no no no, I naver, I naver did. I asked then what had made her say she did. She answered because they threatened her and told her they would put her into the dungeon and put her along with Mr. Burroughs, and thus several times she followed [me] on up and down telling me that she had undone herself in belying herself and others. I asked her why she didn't tell the truth now. She told me because she had stood out so long in it that now she darst not. She said also that if she told Mr. Noyes [an investigating minister] but once that she had set her hand to the Book he would believe her, but if she told the truth and said she had not set her hand to the book a hundred times he would not believe her.

Thus psychological terrors sprang from more than one source. The frights of the invisible world, to be sure, led many villagers to fear for their lives and souls. But when the magistrates refused to accept the protests of innocence, they created equally terrifying pressures to lie in order to escape execution. As the witchcraft episodes spread to include hundreds of people in the community, it is not surprising that different individuals behaved in a wide variety of ways.

## THE VISIBLE SALEM

It would be tempting, having explored the psychological dynamics of Salem, to suppose that the causes of the outbreak have been fairly well explained. There is the satisfaction of placing the symptoms of the modern hysteric side

by side with those of the seventeenth-century bewitched and seeing them match, or of carefully reading the trial records to distinguish likely cases of fraud from those of hysteria. Yet by narrowing our inquiry to the motivations of the possessed, we have left other important facets of the Salem episode unexplored.

In the first place, the investigation thus far has dealt with the controversy on an individual rather than a social level. But step back for a moment. For whatever reasons, approximately 150 people in Salem and other towns found themselves accused. Why were those particular people singled out? Does any common bond explain why they, and not others, were accused? Only after we have examined their social identities can we answer that question.

Another indication that the social context of Salem Village needs to be examined is the nature of hysteria itself. Hysterics are notably suggestible—that is, sensitive to the influence of their environment. Scattered testimony in the records suggests that sometimes when the young women saw specters whom they could not identify, adults suggested names. “Was it Goody Cloyse? Was it Rebecca Nurse?” If true, such conditions confirm the need to move beyond strictly personal motivations to the social setting of the community.

In doing so, a logical first step would be to look for correlations, or characteristics common to groups that might explain their behavior. Are the accusers all church members and the accused nonchurch members? Are the accusers wealthy and respectable and the accused poor and disreputable? The historian assembles the data, shuffles them around, and looks for matchups.

Take the two social characteristics just mentioned, church membership and wealth. Historians can compile lists from the trial records of both the accusers and the accused. With those lists in hand, they can begin checking the church records to discover which people on each list were church members. Or they can search tax records to see whose tax rates were highest and thus which villagers were wealthiest. Land transactions were recorded, indicating which villagers owned the most land. Inventories of personal property were made when a member of the community died, so at least historians have some record of an individual’s assets at death, if not in 1692. Other records may mention a trade or occupation, which will give a clue to relative wealth or social status.

If you made such calculations for the Salem region, you would quickly find yourself at a dead end, a spot all too familiar to practicing historians. True, the first few accused witches were not church members, but soon enough the faithful found themselves in jail along with nonchurch members. A similar situation holds for wealth. Although Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osbourne were relatively poor, merchants and wealthy farmers were accused as the epidemic spread. The correlations fail to check.

*What if we view the witchcraft outbreak from within a social context rather than an individual one?*

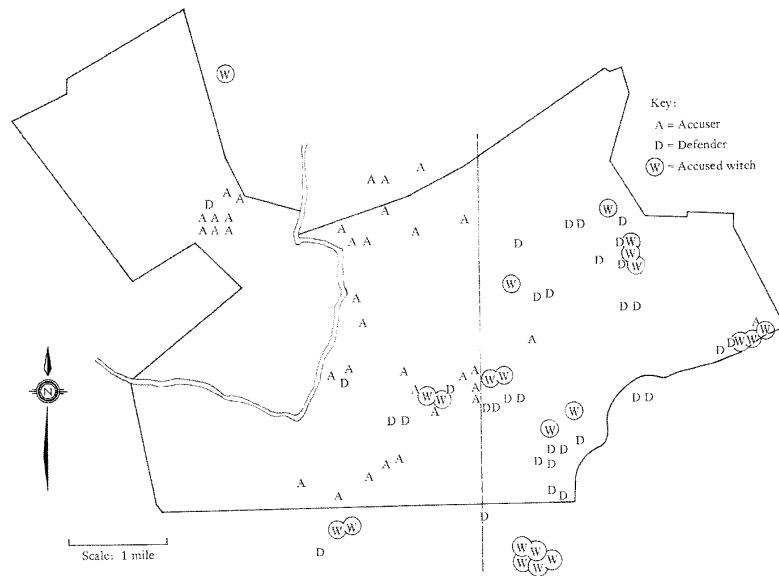
This dead end was roughly the point that had been reached when two historians, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, were inspired to take literally the advice about going back to the drawing board. More than a hundred years earlier, Charles Upham had made a detailed map of Salem for his own study of the witchcraft episode. Upham examined the old town records, paced the actual sites of old houses, and established to the best of his knowledge the residences of a large majority of Salem Villagers. Boyer and Nissenbaum took their list of accusers and accused and noted the location of each village resident. The results were striking, as can be seen from the map on page 66.

Of the fourteen accused witches in the village, twelve lived in the eastern section. Of the thirty-two adult villagers who testified against the accused, thirty lived in the western section. “In other words,” concluded Boyer and Nissenbaum, “the alleged witches and those who accused them resided on opposite sides of the Village.” Furthermore, of twenty-nine residents who publicly defended the accused in some way, twenty-four lived in the eastern half of the village. Often they were close neighbors of the accused. It is moments like these that make the historian want to behave, were it not for the staid air of research libraries, like Archimedes leaping from his fabled bathtub and shouting “Eureka!”

The discovery is only the beginning of the task. The geographic chart suggests a division, but it does not indicate what that division is, other than a general east-west split. So Boyer and Nissenbaum began to explore the history of the village itself, expanding their microcosm of 1692 backward in time. They investigated a social situation that historians had long recognized but never associated with the Salem witch trials: Salem Village’s uneasy relation to its social parent, Salem Town.

Salem Town’s settlement followed the pattern of most coastal New England towns. Original settlers set up houses around a central location and carved their farmlands out of the surrounding countryside. As a settlement prospered, the land in its immediate vicinity came to be completely taken up. As houses were erected farther and farther away from the central meeting house, outlying residents found it inconvenient to come to church or attend to other civic duties. In such cases, they sought recognition as a separate village, with their own church, their own taxes, and their own elected officials.

Here the trouble started. The settlers who lived toward the center of town were reluctant to let their outlying neighbors break away. Everyone paid taxes to support a minister for the town church, to maintain the roads, and to care for the poor. If a chunk of the village split off, revenue would be lost. Furthermore, outlying settlers would no longer share the common burdens, such as guarding the town at night. So the centrally located settlers usually resisted any movement by their more distant neighbors to split off. Such disputes were a regular feature of New England life.

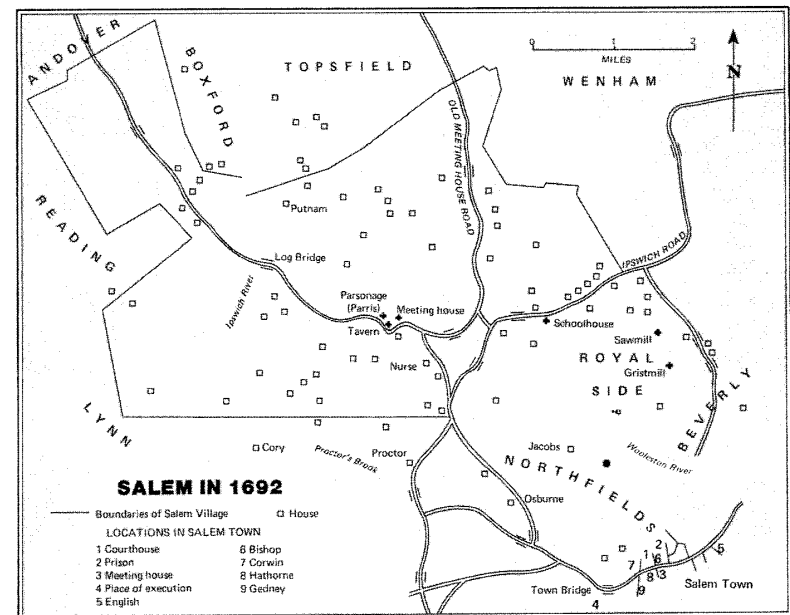


“The Geography of Witchcraft” (after Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, Harvard University Press, 1974)

Salem Town had followed this pattern. Its first settlers located on a peninsula extending into Massachusetts Bay, where they pursued a prosperous colonial trade. By 1668 four outlying areas had already become separate towns. Now the “Salem Farmers,” living directly to the west, were petitioning for a similar settlement, and the “Townsmen” were resisting. In 1672 Massachusetts’s legislature allowed Salem Village to build its own meeting house, but in other matters, the village remained dependent. Salem Town still collected village taxes, chose village constables, and arranged for village roads. The colony’s records include petition after petition from villagers complaining about tax rates, patrol duties, boundary rulings.

Here, then, is one east-west split—between the village and the town. But the line drawn on Boyer and Nissenbaum’s map is within the village. What cause would the village have for division?

Many causes, the records indicate—chief among them the choice of a minister. When the village built its own meeting house, it chose James Bayley to be its pastor in 1673. Soon enough, however, some churchgoers began complaining. Bayley didn’t attend regularly to his private prayers. Church members had not been fully consulted before his selection. After a flurry of petitions and counterpetitions, Bayley left in 1680, and George Burroughs was hired. Three years later, Burroughs left in another dispute. He was succeeded by Deodat Lawson, who lasted through four more years



“Salem in 1692” (From *The Pursuit of Liberty: A History of the American People*, vol. 1, by R. Jackson Wilson, et al. Copyright 1966 by HarperCollins College Publishers. Reprinted by permission of Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc.)

of quarrels. Finally, Samuel Parris occupied the pulpit after 1688. His term was equally stormy, and in 1696 his opponents finally succeeded in starving him out of the job by refusing to collect taxes to pay his salary.

The maneuverings that went on during the years of bickering seem bewilderingly complex. But Boyer and Nissenbaum recognized that the church records, as well as the petitions and counterpetitions, provided a key to local divisions. When the lists from the different quarrels were compared, Boyer and Nissenbaum found that the same names were being grouped together. The people who supported James Bayley usually supported George Burroughs and then opposed the second two ministers. Conversely, the supporters of Deodat Lawson and Samuel Parris had been the people who complained about Bayley and Burroughs. And—here is the link—the two lists from those disputes coincide closely with the divisions in 1692 between accusers and accused.

Suddenly the Salem witch trials take on an entirely new appearance. Instead of being a dramatic disruption that appears out of nowhere in a village kitchen and then disappears equally suddenly at the end of ten months, it becomes an elaboration of a quarrel that has gone on for nearly twenty years!



What lay behind the divisions? One reading of the evidence suggests that the larger split between Salem Town and Salem Village was reflected in the village itself, with the villagers on the east retaining enough in common with the town to continue their affiliation and the westerners favoring complete separation. Boyer and Nissenbaum argue that the division also went beyond the simple geographical one to a difference in lifestyle. Salem Town was becoming one of the major commercial centers of New England. It boasted a growing merchant class whose wealth would soon support the building of fine mansions. By contrast, the farmers in the western portion of Salem Village were more traditional: they practiced subsistence farming, led spartan daily lives, and were more suspicious of the commercial habits of offering credit and making speculative investments. Worse, the Salem farmers found themselves increasingly hard-pressed. The land available in the village was dwindling. What land there was proved less fertile than the broad plains on the eastern side of the village.

Look, too, at the occupations of the accused witches and their defenders. Many lived along the Ipswich Road, a route that passed by the village rather than through it, a main thoroughfare for travelers and for commerce. The tradespeople who had set up shop there included a carpenter, sawmill operator, shoemaker, and miller. And of course there were the taverns, mainstays of travelers, yet always slightly suspect to Puritans. The people along the Ipswich Road were not rich, most of them, but their commercial links were with Salem Town and with outsiders. They were small-scale entrepreneurs rather than farmers. Out of twenty-one villagers who lived along or near the road, only two signed petitions linking them with the western faction; thirteen signed petitions linking them with the eastern faction. Tavern keeper John Proctor was hanged as a witch; his wife Elizabeth barely escaped with her life.

Boyer and Nissenbaum's reconstruction of village factions thus suggests an alternate way of looking at the Salem trials. Traditional accounts place Samuel Parris and his supporters as leaders of the village, terrorizing innocent villagers and controlling the trials. Certainly Parris's supporters had their day in 1692, but from the longer perspective they appear to have been fighting a losing battle. If Boyer and Nissenbaum are correct, the Salem trials were an indirect yet anguished protest of a group of villagers whose agrarian way of life was being threatened by the rising commercialism of Salem Town.

The brilliance of Boyer and Nissenbaum's research lay in placing the individual dramas of Salem into a larger social context. But their maps are not the only maps that can be drawn, nor their connections the only connections to be made. Boyer and Nissenbaum focused their attention on Salem Village. But as the witchcraft trials gained momentum, the fever spread to a few neighboring villages. In the summer of 1692, several of the possessed women of Salem were invited to Andover by concerned residents. The resulting round of accusations led to the arrest of nearly forty Andover villagers. A month later, a smaller outbreak centered in the fishing port of

Gloucester, where six people were arrested. Several more of the accused from Salem had Gloucester ties. All these people were tried by the same court that dealt with the Salem cases.

Taking these additional episodes into account makes it more difficult to generalize about embattled farmers arrayed against a rising commercialism. Gloucester was a fishing port, while Andover, though it was just as agrarian as Salem Village, had no commercial "parent" the likes of Salem Town. But if rising commercialism was not the only, or primary, social factor influencing the Salem outbreak, what then?

Several historians, most recently Mary Beth Norton, have explored the connections between the trials and New England's Indian wars. Memories of King Philip's War of 1676 lingered in the region for many years, leaving inhabitants anxious and uneasy, especially along the frontier. Then came a

*A new outbreak of Indian-white violence on the Maine frontier left its mark on many of the women afflicted by witch torments.*

new outbreak of violence in 1689, which the settlers referred to as "the second Indian war." In January 1692, just as the witchcraft controversy was getting started, word came from York, Maine, that Indians had massacred residents there. Indeed, a number of the accusers at the Salem trials experienced firsthand the horrors of the conflict. Mercy Lewis—one of the principal accusers—only two years earlier had seen her mother, father, sister, and brother murdered in an Indian attack.

Analyzing the chronology of the trials, Norton pointed out that the number of witchcraft accusations rose sharply only in April 1692. It was at this point that Abigail Hobbs was brought before the magistrates because of her reputation for being flippant about the spreading crisis. (She was "not afraid of anything," she is said to have boasted, because she had "Sold her selfe boddy & Soull to the old boy"—that is, to Satan.) During the late 1680s, Hobbs had lived for some time along the Maine frontier. Under hostile questioning from the magistrates, she admitted that she had covenanted there with the devil—while "at Casco-bay." Having thus confessed, she quickly turned into an enthusiastic prosecution witness. Before her confession on April 17, only ten people had been charged with witchcraft. In the seven weeks that followed, the total jumped to sixty-eight. The spectral visions of Abigail Hobbs and Mercy Lewis led to the indictment of a number of folk from Maine, chief among them the Reverend George Burroughs, who seemed the ringleader of the devilish conspiracy, in the eyes of many. The anxieties spawned by the frontier attacks, argued Norton, were what pushed the Salem hysteria beyond the bounds of the usual witchcraft trials of seventeenth-century New England.

In addition to the fear of Indian "devils," did the accusers perhaps fear religious demons? For years the colony's ruling Congregationalists had worried about the heresies spread by Quakers, members of the Society of Friends. In the 1650s and 1660s, Massachusetts Bay hanged four Quaker missionaries

on the Boston Common. Other members of this Protestant sect had been whipped, thrown into prison, or driven from the colony. The Quaker belief that every person possessed his or her own divine inner light seemed to Congregationalists to suggest the heretical notion that God could speak directly to individuals. Even more disquieting, Friends caught up in their enthusiasm would “quake” when the holy spirit possessed them, behavior that seemed all too much like the fits of the Salem afflicted. “Diabolical Possession was the thing which did dispose and encline men unto Quakerism,” warned Boston minister Cotton Mather, the son of Increase, in 1689.

By 1692, Congregationalists no longer had the power to persecute Quakers, for Massachusetts’ new charter guaranteed toleration to all Protestants. Yet many ordinary folk remained suspicious, and within Essex County, the largest concentration of Quakers lived in Salem and Gloucester. In Andover too, Quaker connections seemed to figure in the arrests. Rebecca Nurse, who was pious and well respected in other ways, had taken an orphaned Quaker boy into her family. John and Elizabeth Proctor, the tavern keepers, counted a large number of Quakers among Elizabeth’s family.

## “WOMEN ALONE”

While Boyer, Nissenbaum, and other historians pursued correlations based on the social geography of witchcraft, another striking connection can be made. That connection is the link between witchcraft and gender.

Out of the 178 accused Salem witches who can be identified by name, more than 3 out of 4 were female. And nearly half of the accused men were husbands, sons, or other relatives of accused women. The gender gap widens further when witchcraft outside Salem is examined. Of 147 additional accused witches in seventeenth-century New England, 82 percent were women. In the cases that actually came to trial, 34 involved women and only 7 involved men. Of the women tried, 53 percent were convicted. Of the men, only 2 were convicted, or 29 percent. And of those people who were not only convicted but executed, women outnumbered men 15 to 2.

When historian Carol Karlsen examined the trial records, she found that the authorities tended to treat accused women differently from men. Magistrates and ministers often put pressure on women to confess their guilt. In New England cases (excluding Salem), when that pressure led a woman to confess a “familiarity with Satan,” she was invariably executed, in accordance with the biblical command, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” But when men were accused, pressure was seldom applied to make them confess. In fact, confessions from men were not always accepted. In 1652 one John Broadstreet of Rowley admitted having familiarity with Satan. The court ordered him whipped and fined twenty shillings “for telling a lie.” In 1674 Christopher Brown confessed to “discoursing with . . . the devil,” but the court rejected his statement as being “inconsistent with truth.”

Such evidence suggests that, by and large, most seventeenth-century New Englanders expected women to be witches, whereas men who confessed were seldom believed. But why should women be singled out for such attention?

*Why was it that more women than men were accused of witchcraft?*

Part of the answer, Karlsen argues, lay in the cultural position of women. Like Martin Luther and other Reformation theologians, the Puritans exalted the role of motherhood over the chaste life of the convent; they saw women as partners and helpmates in marriage. Even so, Puritans retained a distinctly hierarchical conception of marriage. They viewed families as miniature commonwealths, with the husband as the ruler and his family as willing subjects. “A true wife accounts her subjection [as] her honor and freedom,” noted Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts.

A wife’s unequal status was reflected legally as well: she was known in law as a *feme covert*—one whose identity was “covered” by that of her husband. As such, she had no right to buy or sell property, to sue or be sued, or to make contracts. Similarly, the patterns of inheritance in New England were male dominated. A husband might leave his widow property—indeed, the law required him to leave her at least a third of his estate. But she was to “have and enjoy” that property only “during [the] term of her natural life.” She could not waste or squander it, for it was passed on to the family’s heirs at her death. Similarly, daughters might inherit property, but if they were already married, it belonged to the husband. If a young woman had not yet married, property usually seems to have been held for her, “for improvement,” until she married.

Thus the only sort of woman who held any substantial economic power was a widow who had not remarried. Such a woman was known as a *feme sole*, or “woman alone.” She did have the right to sue, to make contracts, and to buy or sell property. Even when remarrying, a widow could sometimes protect her holdings by having her new husband sign a prenuptial contract, guaranteeing before marriage that the wife would keep certain property as her own. In male-dominated New England, these protections made the *feme sole* stand out as someone who did not fit comfortably into the ordinary scheme of things.

So, women in Puritan society were generally placed in subordinate roles. At the same time, a significant number of accused witches were women who were *not* subordinate in some way. In refusing to conform to accepted stereotypes, they threatened the traditional order of society and were more likely to be accused of subverting it as witches.

A woman might stand out, for example, through a contentious, argumentative nature. If a woman’s duty was to submit quietly to the rule of men and to glory in “subjection,” then quite a few witches refused to conform to the accepted role. We have already seen how Sarah Good’s “muttering and scolding extreamly” were perceived by Salem Villagers to have caused the death of cattle. Trial records are filled with similar accusations.



**Older women**—especially those who were reputed to have medical knowledge of herbs and potions—often came under suspicion of witchcraft both in England and in America. This English drawing of 1622 portrays the stereotypical willful older woman, a supposed witch by the name of Jenner Dibble. She was said to have been attended for forty years by a spirit in the shape of a great black cat called Gibb.

Often, more than short tempers were at stake. A remarkably high percentage of accused women were *femes sole* in an economic sense. Of the 124 witches whose inheritance patterns can be reconstructed from surviving records, as many as 71 (57 percent) lived or had lived in families with no male heirs. Another 14 accused witches were the daughters or granddaughters of witches who did not have brothers or sons to inherit their property. This figure is at least twice the number that would be expected, given the usual percentage of *femes sole* in the New England population. Furthermore, of the women executed at Salem, more than half had inherited or stood to inherit their own property. Such statistics suggest why witchcraft controversies so often centered on women.

## TANGLED WEBS

The early modern world, including that of colonial New England, was uncertain, unpredictable, full of chance. Amidst so many unpredictable tragedies, witchcraft offered an explanation for misfortunes that otherwise might have seemed inexplicable.

Unlike diviners or witch doctors, historians have followed the example of the natural sciences in seeking testable, rational links between cause and effect. Yet the longing for a simple, coherent story remains strong. We all wish to see the confusing welter of events lock together with a clarity that leads us, like Archimedes, to cry Eureka—conversion hysteria! Or Eureka—the pressures of the new commercial economy! Or Eureka—*femes sole*!

Instead, the discipline of small-scale, local history forces humility. As historians sift the web of relationships surrounding the Salem outbreak, most

have come to believe that its causes are multiple rather than singular. “Irreducible to any single source of social strain,” concludes Christine Heyrman, the scholar who traced out the Quaker connections to witchcraft. No single “governing explanation,” argues Bernard Rosenthal. The very fact that the witchcraft outbreak did not recur elsewhere in New England suggests that the magnitude of Salem’s calamity depended on an unusual combination of psychological and social factors.

Certainly, an agrarian faction in the village did not consciously devise the trials to punish their commercial rivals or Quaker-loving neighbors. Nor was the male Puritan patriarchy launching a deliberate war against women. But the invisible world of witchcraft did provide a framework that amplified village anxieties and focused them. As the accusations of a small circle of young women widened and as controversy engulfed the town, it was only natural that long-standing quarrels and prejudices were drawn into the debate. The interconnections between a people’s religious beliefs, their habits of commerce, even their dream and fantasy lives, are intricate and fine, entwined with one another like the delicate root system of a growing plant. Historians who limit their examination to a small area of time and space are able, through persistent probing, to untangle the strands of emotions, motivations, and social structures that provided the context for those slow processions to the gallows on Witch’s Hill.

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