

# The Lesson of Salem

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After 300 years, people are still fascinated by the notorious Puritan witch hunts-maybe because history keeps repeating itself. They came for Martha Carrier at the end of May. There was plenty of evidence against her: Allen Toothaker testified that several of his cattle had suffered "strange deaths" soon after he and Carrier had an argument, and little Phoebe Chandler said that shortly before being stricken with terrible pains, she had heard Carrier's voice telling her she was going to be poisoned. Even Carrier's children spoke against her: they confessed that they, too, were witches and that it was their mother who had converted them to evil. (Their statements were not introduced in court, however-perhaps because two of her sons had to be tied up until they bled from the mouth before they would confess. A small daughter spoke more freely; she told officials that her mother was a black cat.) Most damning of all was the evidence offered by half a dozen adolescent girls, who accused Carrier of tormenting them and who fell into writhing fits as she stood before the magistrate. They shrieked that they had seen the Devil whispering into Carrier's ear. "You see you look upon them and they fall down," said the magistrate. "It is a shameful thing that you should mind these folks that are out of their wits," answered Carrier. "I am wronged." On Aug. 19, 1692, she was hanged on Gallows Hill in Salem, Mass., for the crime of witchcraft.

Last week marked the 300th anniversary of Carrier's death, an execution carried out during the most notorious summer in Massachusetts's history. Between June and September of 1692, 14 women and 5 men were hanged in Salem as witches, and 1 man was tortured to death. Scores more were named as witches and imprisoned. "What will be the issue of these troubles, God only knows," wrote Thomas Brattle, a merchant in nearby Boston who was horrified by the events. "I am afraid that ages will not wear off that reproach and those stains which these things will leave behind upon our land."

He was right: even now the Salem witch trials haunt the imaginations of hundreds of thousands of Americans, tourists and history buffs alike, who visit Salem for a glimpse of our Puritan past at its most chilling. This year Salem is getting more attention than ever: the city is sponsoring an array of programs commemorating the Tercentenary, including dramatizations of the trials and symposiums on the legal and medical aspects of identifying witches in the 17th century. With the participation of such organizations as Amnesty International, the Tercentenary has placed a special emphasis on human rights and the role of the individual conscience in times of terror. In 1692, those who "confessed" to witchcraft were spared; only those who insisted on their innocence were hanged. Earlier this month a memorial to the victims was unveiled (page 66), and on that occasion the first annual Salem Award, created to honor a significant contribution to social justice, was presented to Gregory Allen Williams of Inglewood, Calif. In the midst of the Los Angeles riots last spring, Williams, who is black, risked his life to save an Asian American attacked by a mob.

At the heart of the Tercentenary is the awareness that the witch trials represent more than just a creepy moment in history: they stand for the terrible victory of prejudice over reason, and fear over courage-a contest that has been replayed, with different actors, again and again since 1692. Modern witch-hunts include the roundup of Japanese-Americans during World War II, the pursuit of Communists in the '50s and, according to an increasing number of critics, some of today's outbreaks of community hysteria over purported sex abuse in preschools. Experts say

that although most child-abuse allegations are valid, the preschool cases are the flimsiest, resting as they do on a mixture of parental terror and children's confusion. Just as in Salem, the evidence in these cases tends to spring from hindsight, fueled by suspicion and revulsion. Whatever the truth may be, it has little chance to surface under such conditions.

Like all witch hunts, the troubles of 1692 began in a community that felt torn and besieged. Salem Village, now the town of Danvers, was about eight miles from the seat of local power in Salem Town. A contentious place, chafing to pull free of Salem Town and its taxes, Salem Village had suffered bitter disputes over its first three ministers before settling on a fourth, the Rev. Samuel Parris. During the winter of 1691-92, a few girls, mostly teenagers, started gathering in Parris's kitchen. There they listened to stories, perhaps voodoo tales, told by his West Indian slave Tituba; they also tried to discern their future husbands by fortune telling—dropping an egg white into a glass and seeing what shape it took. For girls raised in Puritanism, which demanded lifelong discipline and self-control, these sessions with Tituba represented a rare and risky bit of indulgence in pure fancy. Too risky, perhaps. Suddenly one after another of the girls was seized with fits. Their families were bewildered: the girls raved and fell into convulsions; one of them ran around on all fours and barked. Dr. William Griggs was called in and made his diagnosis: the "evil hand" was upon them.

Fits identified as satanic possession had broken out among adolescent girls at earlier times in New England. Often their distress was traced to local women who, it was said, had entered into a compact with the Devil and were now recruiting new witches by tormenting the innocent until they succumbed. So the adults in Salem Village began pressing the girls with questions: "Who torments you? Who torments you?" Finally they named three women—Tituba, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne—all of them easily recognizable as Satan's handmaidens. Tituba was seen as a shameless pagan, Good was a poor beggar given to muttering angrily as she went from house to house and Osborne was known to have lived with her second husband before they were married. The three were arrested and jailed, but the girls' torments did not cease. On the contrary, fits were spreading like smallpox; dozens more girls and young women went into violent contortions, flailing, kicking and uttering names.

And the names! Rebecca Nurse was 71, the pious and beloved matriarch of a large family; she was hanged in July. George Jacobs, an old man whose servant girl was one of the afflicted, thought the whole lot of them were "bitch witches" and said so; he was hanged in August. Susannah Martin was named, but that surprised nobody; people had been calling her a witch for years. Six or seven years earlier, Barnard Peach testified, he had been lying in bed at night when Martin appeared at his window and jumped into his room; she then lay down upon him and prevented him from moving for nearly two hours. Others had similar tales; Martin was hanged in July. Nor was there much doubt about Dorcas Good, who was arrested soon after her mother, Sarah, was jailed. The afflicted girls cried out that Dorcas was biting and pinching them, and although the attacks were invisible to everyone else, the girls had the bite marks to prove it. Dorcas was jailed with the others, and a special set of chains was made for her. She was only 5, and the regular shackles were too big.

All along, there were townspeople who had misgivings about what was happening. Several came to the defense of some of the accused citizens, and others testified that they had heard an afflicted girl saying she had made at least one accusation "for sport." But the machinery seemed unstoppable. If a prisoner was released or a jury decided to acquit someone, the girls went into such shrieking torments that the court quickly reversed itself.

Spectral evidence: Finally, in October, the governor of Massachusetts stepped in. Too many citizens "of good reputation" had been accused, he wrote, including his own wife. What's more, clergy in both Boston and New York were expressing dismay over the witch trials, especially the reliance on "spectral" evidence, such as the sight of the Devil whispering in Martha Carrier's ear--other worldly evidence invisible to everyone but the person testifying. The governor ruled out the use of spectral evidence, making it virtually impossible to convict any more of the accused. That fall the witch craze effectively ended, and by spring the last prisoners had been acquitted.

What really happened in Salem? Scholars have been trying to understand the events of 1692 for three centuries. Even while the witch-hunt was in progress, Deodat Lawson, a former minister at Salem Village, made a visit to his old parish and published the equivalent of a quickie paperback describing "the Mysterious Assaults from Hell" he had witnessed there. Like everyone else in Salem--in fact, like everyone else in colonial New England--he believed in witches, though he was powerless to understand why or whether they were truly on the loose in Salem.

Today many scholars believe it was clinical hysteria that set off the girls in Tituba's kitchen. Fits, convulsions, vocal outbursts, feelings of being pinched and bitten--all of these symptoms have been witnessed and described, most often in young women, for centuries. Sometimes the seizures have been attributed to Satan, other times to God, but ever since Freud weighed in, hysteria has been traced to the unconscious. As Dr. Richard Pohl, of Salem Hospital, told a Tercentenary symposium, hysteria "can mimic all the physical diseases known to man," and occurs when repressed thoughts and emotions burst forth and take over the body. Life could be dreary for girls in 17th-century Salem: their place was home and their duty was obedience; many were illiterate, and there were few outlets for a youthful imagination except in the grim lessons of Puritan theology. Dabbling in magic in the reverend's own kitchen would have been wonderfully scary, perhaps enough to release psychic demons lurking since childhood.

Despite the fact that young girls made the accusations, it was the adults who lodged formal charges against their neighbors and provided most of the testimony. Historians have long believed that local feuds and property disputes were behind many of the accusations, and in "Salem Possessed" (1974), Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum uncovered patterns of social and civic antagonism that made the community fertile ground for a witch hunt. One of the young ringleaders was 12-year-old Ann Putnam, whose older male relatives lodged many of the complaints. The Putnams, Salem Village landowners whose wealth and power were in decline, pursued witches with vigor, apparently in an effort to muster new political strength. Working quietly in opposition to the witch trials were the Porters, who represented the more sophisticated merchant class that would soon reign in Salem Town. When 39 courageous townspeople signed a petition in support of Rebecca Nurse, the pious old woman accused by Ann Putnam and her mother, the name Porter was at the top of the list. The petition failed, but in 1706 Ann Putnam stood up in church on a hot August day and begged to be forgiven. She had suffered, she said, "a great delusion of Satan."

Old scolds: More recently, scholars have begun to investigate the most obvious fact of all about the Salem witches: most were women. Historian Carol Karlsen analyzed New England witchery in "The Devil in the Shape of a Woman" (1987) and found that many of the accused women had indeed committed crimes--against femininity. Some engaged in business; some did not attend church; some were nasty old scolds. Even more important, they tended to be over 40 and without sons or brothers. Hence they stood to inherit property, either from their husbands or fathers. Puritan custom tended to discourage such legacies, since the very notion of an

independently wealthy woman was an affront to the social order. Susannah Martin had been to court numerous times trying to overturn her father's will, which all but disinherited her and seemed a blatant forgery. Dated 20 years before his death, the will was witnessed by a woman who would have been a child at the time, and who signed her future married name. The court consistently ruled against Martin. A year after her father's death, she faced her first arrest warrant for witchcraft.

Susannah Martin and women like her scared people, so much so that the fear was almost impossible to dislodge. Perhaps the best way to identify a witch-hunt, today or 300 years ago, is to look for fear, because fear spawns witches. For every Salem citizen who was imprisoned in chains, another witch was unmasked, then another and another, or so their terrified and bewildered neighbors believed. Nothing could stop the infestation—except, finally, the will to see clearly, beyond prejudice. Late in the fall of 1692, as the witch craze was fading, several of the afflicted girls were traveling through nearby Ipswich when they encountered an old woman on a bridge. A witch! Instantly they fell into fits. But Ipswich was not on the lookout for witches; it didn't want them. Nobody begged the girls for names or particulars, so they picked themselves up and continued on their way. The witch-hunt was over—until another time, and another Salem.

### Discussion Questions

1. What details indicate that the accusations against Carrier were false?
2. What are the numbers killed during the Salem witch trials?
3. What was the emphasis as they celebrated the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Salem witch trials? What does this particular emphasis have to do with the Salem witch trials?
4. What does the article say that the witch trials represent?
5. Describe what took place in Parris' house before the first signs of "witchcraft" emerged.
6. Why were Sarah Good, Tituba, and Sarah Osborne all obvious people to accuse of witchcraft?
7. Why were a special set of shackles made for Dorcas Good?
8. In what way did the girls who were accusing others of witchcraft seem to have the court under their control?
9. What is "spectral evidence" and what part did it play in the Salem witch trials?
10. To what do experts now attribute the outbursts? How did the Puritan culture contribute to these outbursts?
11. What do some believe was behind the allegations leveled by adults?
12. What did many of the women accused have in common? How did they threaten the Puritan's society?
13. What does the article suggest is the best way to spot a witch hunt?
14. What are some modern-day witch hunts?