

What Caused the Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?

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Overview: Between June 10 and September 22, 1692, 20 people were put to death in Salem, Massachusetts for witchcraft. It has long remained one of the more troubling events in American history. What caused neighbor to turn on neighbor? What was at the bottom of the hysteria that so frightened this colonial town? This Mini-Q will present some possible answers.

The Documents:

- Document A: The Salem Death Toll (chart)
- Document B: The Accused and the Accusers (chart)
- Document C: The Examination of Bridget Bishop
- Document D: Charles Upham: A Historian's Opinion
- Document E: Map: The Geography of Witchcraft

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: What Caused the Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?

Examining Personal Beliefs

Directions: Below are 7 belief items. Check your belief about each. Do not sign your name.

Likely
Exists

Possibly
Exists

Likely
Does Not Exist

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1. angels
2. lucky numbers
3. the Soul
4. the Devil
5. good luck charms
6. witches
7. God

Witch: a person who has been inhabited or taken over by the Devil

What Caused the Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?

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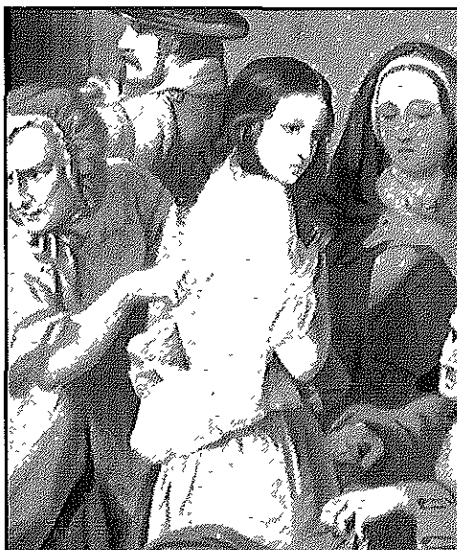
On September 19, 1692, 81-year-old Giles Cory lay beneath several boards piled high with rocks. A tough old man, Giles had refused to testify in the Salem witchcraft trials. As another stone was added, his last words are believed to have been, “More weight!” Something had gone terribly wrong. Why in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

In the 1600s, a large number of English immigrants arrived in New England. A number of these settlers were **Puritans**. Puritans were **Protestant Christians** who were unhappy with their church in England. They came to New England so they could practice Christianity in ways they felt were pure.

The land of New England and the Puritan settlers fit together well. Both were tough. New England soil was rocky and not easy to farm. But the Puritans were determined. To guide them through this difficult life, Puritans had help – the word of God as spoken in the Bible. What the Bible said, Puritans believed, and one subject about which the Bible spoke was the Devil. The Devil was real and the Devil was clever. One of his tricks was to enter a normal person’s body and turn that person into a witch. Once under the Devil’s power, the witch could make all kinds of trouble. A witch might cause a neighbor’s bread to burn or cow to run away... or things even worse.

In 17th century New England, witchcraft was a serious crime. In Exodus 22:18, the Bible proclaimed, “Though shalt not suffer a witch to live!” In fact, between 1620 and 1700, 16 colonists outside of Salem were executed. This, however, fell short of what happened at Salem.

The trouble in Salem began when two young girls, Betty Parris, age nine, and her 11-year-old cousin Abigail Williams, asked a West Indian slave woman named Tituba to help them know their fortunes. Over the next several months the two girls began to show strange behavior. Betty’s father, the Reverend Samuel Parris, was puzzled by the girls’ “getting into Holes, creeping under Chairs and Stools,…” Under pressure, the girls identified two local white women and the slave Tituba as the witches who were causing them such pain. The three accused women



were carted off to jail in Boston. Only Tituba confessed to practicing witchcraft. This admission saved her life.

Throughout the spring, the number of accusers grew, and the jails continued to fill. A special court was set up and the first trials were held. On June 10, Bridget Bishop from Salem Village was hanged. On July 19, five more witches met the same fate. And so it continued until September 22,

when a mass hanging ended the executions. The fact that the governor’s own wife was accused helped to stop the killing. More than one hundred accused witches still in jail were released.

The hangings had ended, but more than three centuries later, the question remains. Why were 20 people put to death for witchcraft in Salem? Over the years, historians have come up with a number of possibilities ranging from **hallucinogens** like LSD getting mixed in the grain supply to a general **paranoia** triggered by Indian raids. These and other theories may be important but in this Mini-Q we must narrow the task. Drawing upon the five documents that follow, develop your answer to the question: *What caused the Salem witch trial hysteria of 1692?*

Background Essay Questions

1. In what year did the Salem witch trials begin and end?
2. How seriously did the Puritans take the written word of the Bible?
3. What is the meaning of the passage in Exodus, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”?
4. According to Puritan belief, what is the connection between the Devil and a witch?
5. How did the slave Tituba avoid being hung?
6. What was one reason that the hangings stopped after September 22?
7. There are other possible causes of the witch trial hysteria that will not be covered in the Mini-Q. What are two of them?
8. Define these terms:
 - Puritans
 - Protestant Christians
 - witch
 - hallucinogens
 - paranoia

1620 – The Mayflower brings the first separatist Puritans to New England

1638 – Harvard University is founded

1692 – Salem Witch Trials

1706 – Birth of Ben Franklin

1732 – Birth of George Washington

1776 – Declaration of Independence

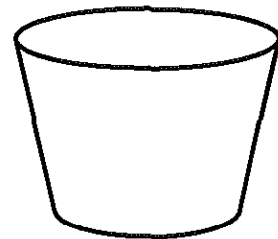
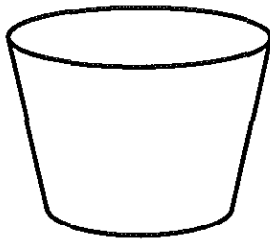
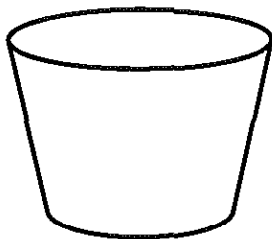
Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?
2. What terms in the question need to be defined?
3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

Pre-Bucketing

Directions: Using clues from the Mini-Q question, write down labels for the buckets.



Document A

Source: Adapted from Salem Court Records.

SALEM WITCHCRAFT HANGINGS 1692

June 10	Bridget Bishop
July 19	Sarah Good
July 19	Elizabeth Howe
July 19	Susannah Martin
July 19	Rebecca Nurse
July 19	Sarah Wildes
August 19	George Burroughs
August 19	Martha Carrier
August 19	George Jacobs
August 19	John Proctor
August 19	John Willard
September 19	Giles Cory (pressed to death)
September 22	Martha Cory
September 22	Mary Easty
September 22	Alice Parker
September 22	Mary Parker
September 22	Ann Pudeater
September 22	Margaret Scott
September 22	Wilmot Redd
September 22	Samuel Wardwell

ACCUSED WHO DIED IN JAIL

Sarah Good's child died prior to July 19, 1692.

May 10, 1692	Sarah Osborne
June 16, 1692	Roger Toothaker
December 3, 1692	Ann Foster
March 10, 1693	Lydia Dustin

Document Analysis

1. How many people were hanged (or pressed to death at Salem in 1692?
2. How many of the people put to death were men? How many were women?
3. The hangings were carried out at monthly intervals. What might explain that?
4. Based only on this document, what might have caused the Salem witch trial hysteria?

Document B

Source: John Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of 17th Century New England."
American Historical Review, June, 1970.

The Accused (Salem, 1692)					
Marital Status					
	<i>Single</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Widowed</i>	Total	
Male	8	15	1	24	
Female	29	61	20	110	
Total	37	76	21	134	
Age					
	<i>Under 20</i>	<i>21-40</i>	<i>41-60</i>	<i>Over 60</i>	Total
Male	6	6	11	7	30
Female	18	15	41	14	88
Total	24	21	52	21	118

The Accusers (Salem, 1692)					
Marital Status					
	<i>Single</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Widowed</i>	Total	
Male	5	0	0	5	
Female	23	6	0	29	
Total	28	6	0	34	
Age					
	<i>Under 11</i>	<i>11-15</i>	<i>16-20</i>	<i>Over 21</i>	Total
Male	0	1	1	0	2
Female	1	7	13	6	27
Total	1	8	14	6	29

Document Analysis

- Look at The Accused chart. What generalization can you make about each of the following:
 - The gender of the accused?
 - The marital status of the accused?
 - The age of the accused?
- Look at The Accusers chart. What generalization can you make about each of the following:
 - The gender of the accusers?
 - The marital status of the accusers?
 - The age of the accusers?
- Why do you think more women than men were involved both as the accused and the accusers?
- Based on this document, what can you say about what caused the Salem witch trail hysteria?

Document C

Source: The examination of Bridget Bishop at Salem Village, 19 April, 1692, as recorded by Samuel Parris.

As soon as she came near, all (the afflicted girls) fell into fits....

(Examiner) (Speaking to afflicted girls) Hath this woman hurt you?

(Bridget Bishop) I never saw these persons before....

(Examiner) They say you bewitched your first husband to death.

(Bishop) If it please your worship, I know nothing of it.

She shook her head, and the afflicted were tortured.

(Examiner) Why you seem to act witchcraft before us by the motion of your body, which seems to have influence upon the afflicted?

(Bishop) I know nothing of it. I am innocent to a witch.
I know not what a witch is.

Then she turned up her eyes, and the eyes of the afflicted were turned up.

Note: Samuel Parris was the minister of Salem Village. Parris's nine-year-old daughter Betty had earlier made charges of witchcraft against the family's Carib slave, Tituba.

Document Analysis

1. In the transcript above, who is being accused of witchcraft?
2. What is meant by the term "afflicted girls"?
3. Who recorded this examination testimony? Is that significant?
4. What eventually happened to Bridget Bishop? See Document A.

Document D

Source: Charles W. Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, Boston, 1867.

Note: Charles Upham was a 19th century historian who lived in Salem and studied the witch trials much of his adult life. He served in the House of Representatives and as the mayor of Salem.

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What are we to think of those persons who...continued the accusations -- the "afflicted children" and their associates?... They soon...became intoxicated...by the terrible success of their imposture (acting), and were swept along by the frenzy they had occasioned.... Once or twice they were caught in their own snare; and nothing but the blindness of the bewildered community saved them from...well-deserved punishment.... It is dreadful to reflect upon the enormity of their wickedness.... [T]here can be no doubt that they were great actors.

*notoriety: fame for doing something bad

Document Analysis

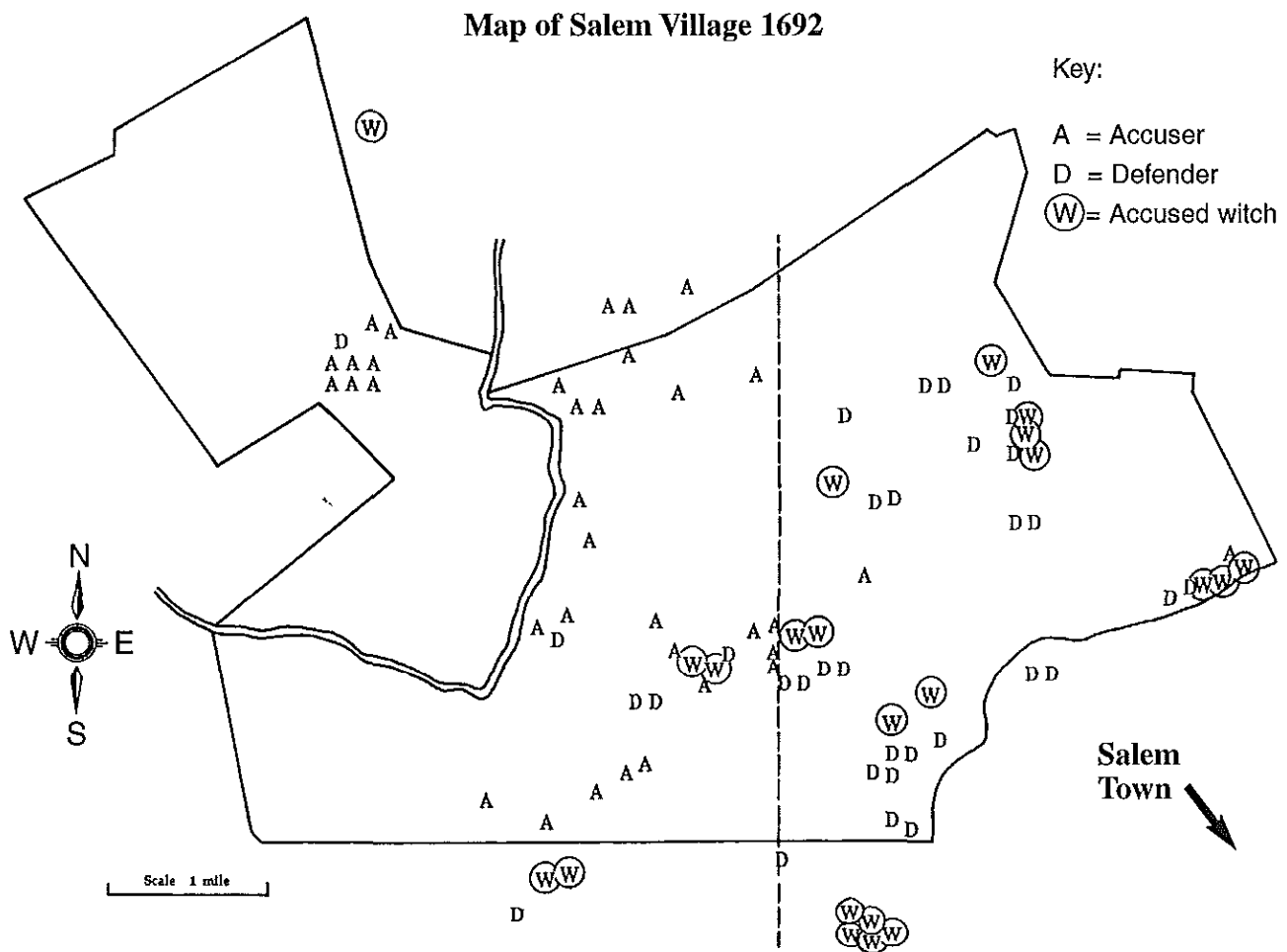
1. Who was Charles Upham and when did he write this passage.?
2. According to Upham, what was the cause of the Salem witch trial hysteria?
3. What does Upham mean when he says the girls "became intoxicated ... by the terrible success" of their acting?
4. Does Upham offer any explanation in this passage why the adults in the Salem community took the girls seriously? Explain.
5. Does the testimony in Document C support Upham? Explain your thinking.
6. Do the statistics in Document B support Upham? Explain your thinking.

Document E

Source: Reprinted by permission of Harvard University Press from *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright (c) 1974 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Note: According to Paul Boyer, in *The Enduring Vision* (1992), between 1661 and 1681 the people in the eastern half of Salem Village gained in wealth and political influence. The people in the western half of Salem Village farmed poorer land and lost political power.

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Document Analysis

1. Who are the "D"s, the "A"s, and the "W"s shown on the map?
2. What generalization can you make about the location of the "A"s, "D"s, and "W"s?
3. Based on evidence in the map and the Note, what caused the witch trial hysteria of 1692?
4. Compare this map to the accuser and accused chart (Doc B) and the examination testimony (Doc C). Which of the three documents is the most valuable in explaining the Salem witch trial hysteria? Why?