LESSON 10 What Caused the Salem Witch Hysteria?

Background Information

In the cold winter months of 1691–1692, several teenage girls gathered at the home of Reverend Samuel Parris, the minister and religious leader of Salem Village. Here, they listened to tales of the supernatural from Reverend Parris's slave, Tituba.

In January 1692 some of these girls began to behave oddly. A doctor was called in who (since he was unable to explain the strange behavior) suggested that witchcraft might be the cause. A number of other girls soon joined the original group and began accusing people from the surrounding area of bewitching them. In the public hearings (called examinations) the girls screamed and went through contortions as they pointed out their tormentors. A sense of hysteria gripped the whole colony.

Salem Village (in the present location of Danvers, Massachusetts) was, in some respects, part of Salem Town (today's Salem, Massachusetts) in 1692. Villagers paid taxes to the town, and many villagers traded with and through the town. In other respects, however, Salem Village was independent from Salem Town. By 1692 the village had its own minister and meeting house, which made it a separate congregation—and a separate community from Salem Town.

In June of 1692, the governor of Massachusetts established a special court to try the witchcraft cases in Salem Town. The judges of this court were political leaders appointed by the governor. None of the judges was a minister, although one had been.

Before the hysteria died down in the autumn of 1692, nineteen persons had been hanged and one man had been pressed to death. Eight more were under sentence of death, 50 awaited sentencing, and 150 were in jail awaiting trial when they were pardoned.

Almost everyone in the 1600s believed in witchcraft. During the years 1300–1600, probably a half million people were killed as alleged witches in England alone.

The common belief of the time was that someone became a witch by signing the "Devil's Book." He or she would then go to black masses where, among other things, Christian prayers were said backwards. (This is why a witch was not supposed to be able to say the Lord's Prayer without making a mistake.)

Witches also were presumed to have a "familiar," such as a cat or dog, which served as a messenger from the devil. On the witch's body was something called a "Devil's Mark" (a spot where the devil or a familiar sucked the blood of the witch, thereby feeding on the witch's soul). Accused witches were examined for such a mark.

Once someone became a witch (males were called witches or wizards; "warlock" was rarely used), his or her spirit (also called an "apparition" or "specter") could move out of the witch's physical body and torment other people. The court of 1692 accepted the testimony of witnesses that the specters of accused witches had tormented them. Such testimony was called "spectral evidence."

Many people who practiced witchcraft at this time used puppets to hurt people they didn't like. The witch would stick pins into the doll and the targeted person would feel pain or have other physical symptoms. Although this was similar to voodoo as practiced in Haiti, it was different from voodoo in that it was not intended to be as serious.

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Salem Witch Hysteria: Relevant Information

[Note: English usage in all quotations has been modernized.]

1. Salem Village was about five miles northwest of Salem Town. In 1692 it had 90 houses and about 550 people. (See Figure 3, p. 47.)
2. In addition to farming, some people took up such "winter" occupations as weavers, brickmakers, coopers (barrel makers), and sellers of alcoholic beverages (tavern owners).
3. The people in Salem Village were mostly farmers and had a reputation for quarreling and being stubborn. Their disputes often involved land or church controversies and resulted in ill feelings and long-lasting resentments.
4. Local church disputes were famous in colonial history. From as early as 1672, two groups in Salem Village had carried on controversies over the Village minister. One minister, George Burroughs, was denied his salary.
5. Samuel Parris took over as minister of Salem Village in 1689.
6. Increase Mather, one of the most influential ministers in Massachusetts, challenged the evidence accepted in the Salem Trials. In a sermon to other ministers in Cambridge on October 3, 1692, he criticized the Court's acceptance of spectral evidence, claiming, "Better that ten suspected witches should escape than that one innocent person should be condemned."
7. There is no evidence regarding what the accused believed would happen to them if they confessed. In some previous cases, the courts delayed execution when the accused confessed; most were, nevertheless, executed. People in Salem may have believed they could escape execution by confessing.
8. Petty neighbor disputes had helped cause several earlier witchcraft episodes.
9. Although the Salem witchcraft episode was much larger than any other episode in the colonies (because of the large numbers participating and the large numbers hanged), it was small compared to European witch hysterias.
10. In most Salem Witchcraft Trial cases, the accuser and the accused person did not live next to each other and did not know each other well.
11. Reverend Samuel Willard is believed to have anonymously published a pamphlet in 1692 in which he condemned the use of spectral evidence and denounced the accusers as "liars."
12. On June 15, 1692, a group of Boston ministers led by Cotton Mather sent a letter to Governor Phips and his council. The letter urged vigorous prosecution of proven witches but recommended "a very critical and exquisite caution" in the use of spectral evidence.
13. Some of the people who were accused of witchcraft and some of those who were hanged as witches were outcasts in Salem Village. Others, such as Rebecca Nurse, were respected members of the community and of the church.
14. Some people who were accused of witchcraft and some people who were hanged for it lived in Salem Village, but most of the accused did not.
15. One of the afflicted girls, Betty Parris, took no part in the examinations or trials because her father, Reverend Parris, sent her away. Her younger brother, who was born in 1692, later died insane.
16. One of the afflicted girls accused John Proctor's wife of being a witch. Adults who heard the accusation were skeptical of it, and the girl responded, "It [the accusation] was for sport. I must have some sport."

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17. In 1720 three sisters in Littletown, Massachusetts, claimed that a witch in town was causing them headaches. There was no trial, and in 1728 the oldest sister admitted that the girls had made up the story to get attention. She said they had picked the woman they accused at random.
18. During the trial of Sarah Good, one of the afflicted girls presented part of a broken knife blade with which she said Sarah had tormented her. A boy then came forward, said the blade part was from his knife, and showed that the broken piece of blade fit perfectly. The judge told the afflicted girl to stick to the facts and had her continue her testimony.
19. Reverend Parris took the official notes at witchcraft examinations and trials.
20. In 1706 Ann Putnam, Jr. admitted that she had been used as an instrument of the devil in the Salem Witch Trials.
21. Robert Calef criticized Cotton and Increase Mather on many occasions other than the witchcraft trials.
22. When accused witches were released from jail in late 1692, the afflicted girls did not become tormented again.
23. In his book *Major Symptoms of Hysteria* (1907), Pierre Janet, a French doctor, described the major symptoms of hysteria as a pain or strange sensation in some part of the body, often below the stomach, which then spreads to an area just above the stomach, the chest, and the throat (choking).
24. During the Salem Witch Trials, Elizabeth Brown said that a specter in the form of a bird was pecking her legs, then her stomach, and then her throat.
25. John Locke, who lived in England in the 1600s and who was well known for his scholarly books, said that spirits (specters) could appear in the material world: "Spirits can assume to themselves bodies of different bulk, figure, and conformation of parts."
26. Thomas Hobbes, a famous political thinker in seventeenth-century England, wrote: "As for witches, I think not that their witchcraft is any real power; but yet they are justly punished, for their false belief they have that they can do such mischief...."
27. In Boston in 1688, Goodwife Glover was tried as a witch. Testimony showed that when Glover stuck pins into one of her dolls, one of the Goodwin children fell into fits and convulsions. She was overheard in her jail cell yelling at the devil for having abandoned her at her moment of need in the trial.
28. Abigail Hobbs said that George Burroughs had brought puppets to her, and thorns to stick into those puppets. She also said that she had caused a death by following his instructions.
29. According to one author, "convulsive ergotism" (the type that may have occurred in Salem Village) has occurred almost exclusively in areas where people suffered from a lack of vitamin A.
30. One author says that it is common for all members of a family to develop symptoms of convulsive ergotism during epidemics.
31. Residents of Salem Village lived in an area where fish and dairy products, both good sources of vitamin A, were common.

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Salem Witch Hysteria: Glossary of Terms

A number of terms in this lesson might be unfamiliar to you or are used in a particular manner regarding the witchcraft trials. This glossary explains some of those terms; others are explained when they are used in the readings.

Afflicted To be distressed or tormented. In this lesson, it refers to those who appeared to be tormented by witchcraft.

Congregation The members of a particular church.

Devil's Book A book in which the devil was reported to keep a record of the souls he owned. A person who signed his or her name in this book indicated that he or she was now a witch.

Devil's Mark A mark on a witch's body where the devil or familiar sucked the blood of the witch, thereby feeding on her soul.

Examination A pretrial hearing to determine if there is enough evidence to try the accused in court. Similar to an indictment or Grand Jury hearing today.

Familiar A small animal, such as a cat or dog, that served as a messenger between the devil and the witch.

Goodwife (Goody) A title of address for married women; equivalent of Mrs.

Hysteria [1](medical) Physical ailments, such as pain, itching, or convulsions, caused by a mental state.

[2]A common use of the term is to describe a person who, due to some upsetting experience, screams or yells uncontrollably.

[3]The term is also used in this problem to describe a time of fear and irrationality among a large group of people ("mass hysteria").

Meeting House The place the town gathered for religious services, as well as political matters. Usually the largest building in a town.

Minister The religious leader (also called reverend, pastor, or clergyman) of the Puritan Church in a town or village.

Spectral Evidence Testimony that an accused witch's spirit or ghost appeared to the accuser, sometimes tormenting the accuser.

Theocracy Government ruled and/or controlled by a religion. Iran is a modern-day example.

Witch [1]As used in Puritan New England, a woman who had sold her soul to the devil, thereby becoming an enemy of the Christian church.

[2]A more general definition is someone who uses magic.

Wizard A male witch.

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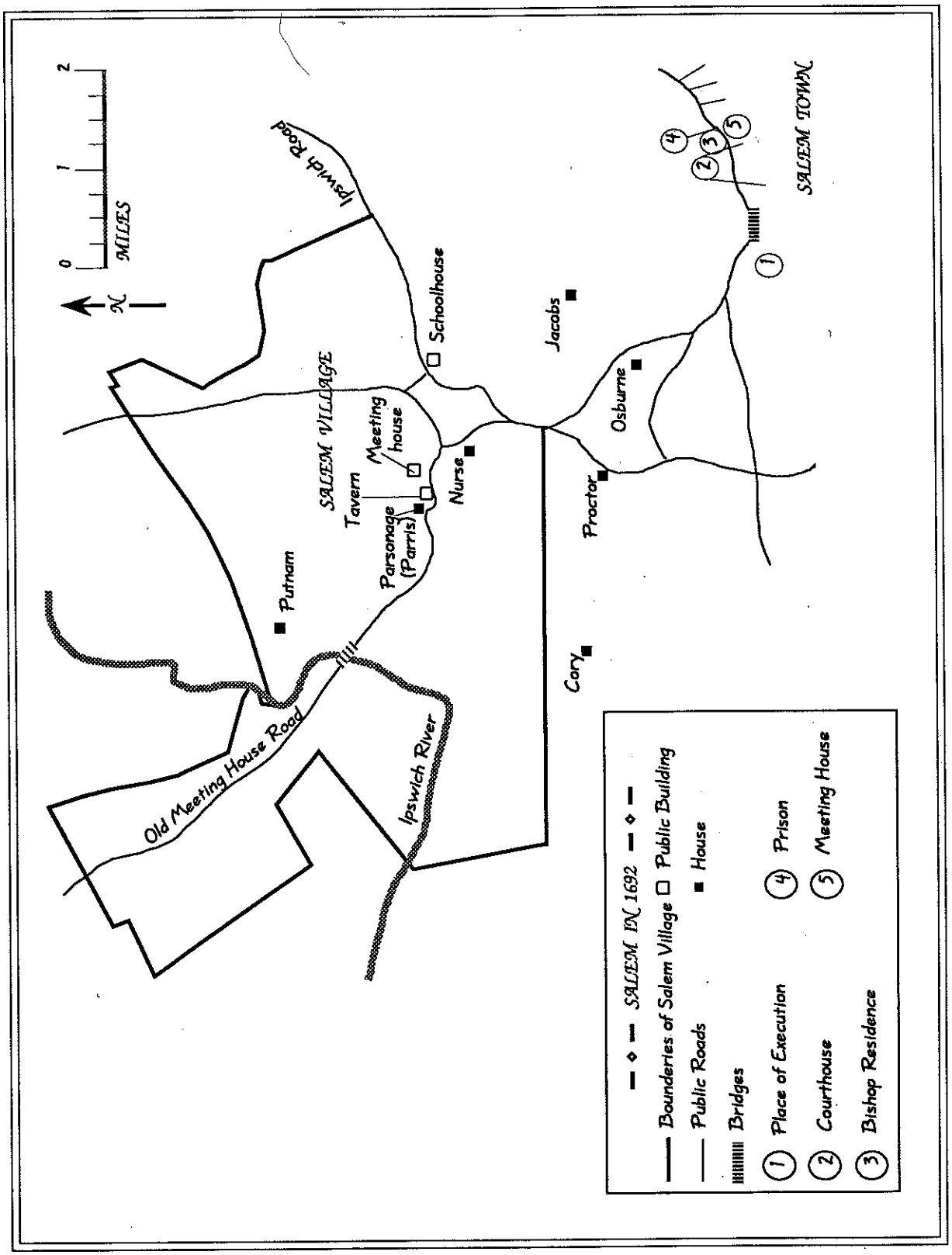

Figure 3: Salem and Salem Village in 1692, showing main roads and several locations important to the Witchcraft Trials

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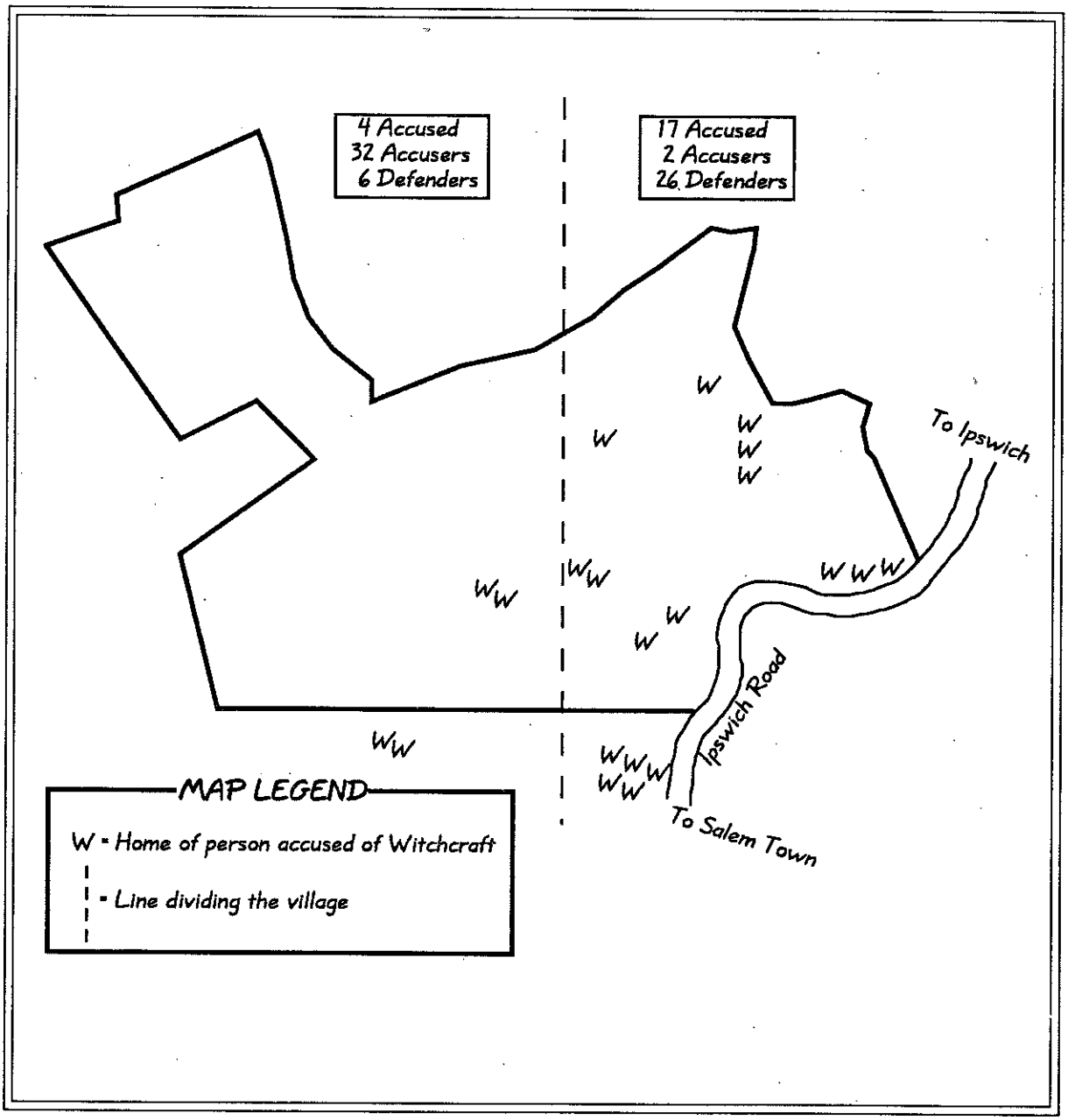

Figure 4: Salem Village residents (and some from Salem Town) involved in the Witchcraft Trials of 1692. [This does not include those accused from other towns or villages. Also not shown on the map are Sarah and Dorcas Good, who had no residence; Mary DeRich, whose residence has never been identified; and five villagers who were both accusers and defenders.]

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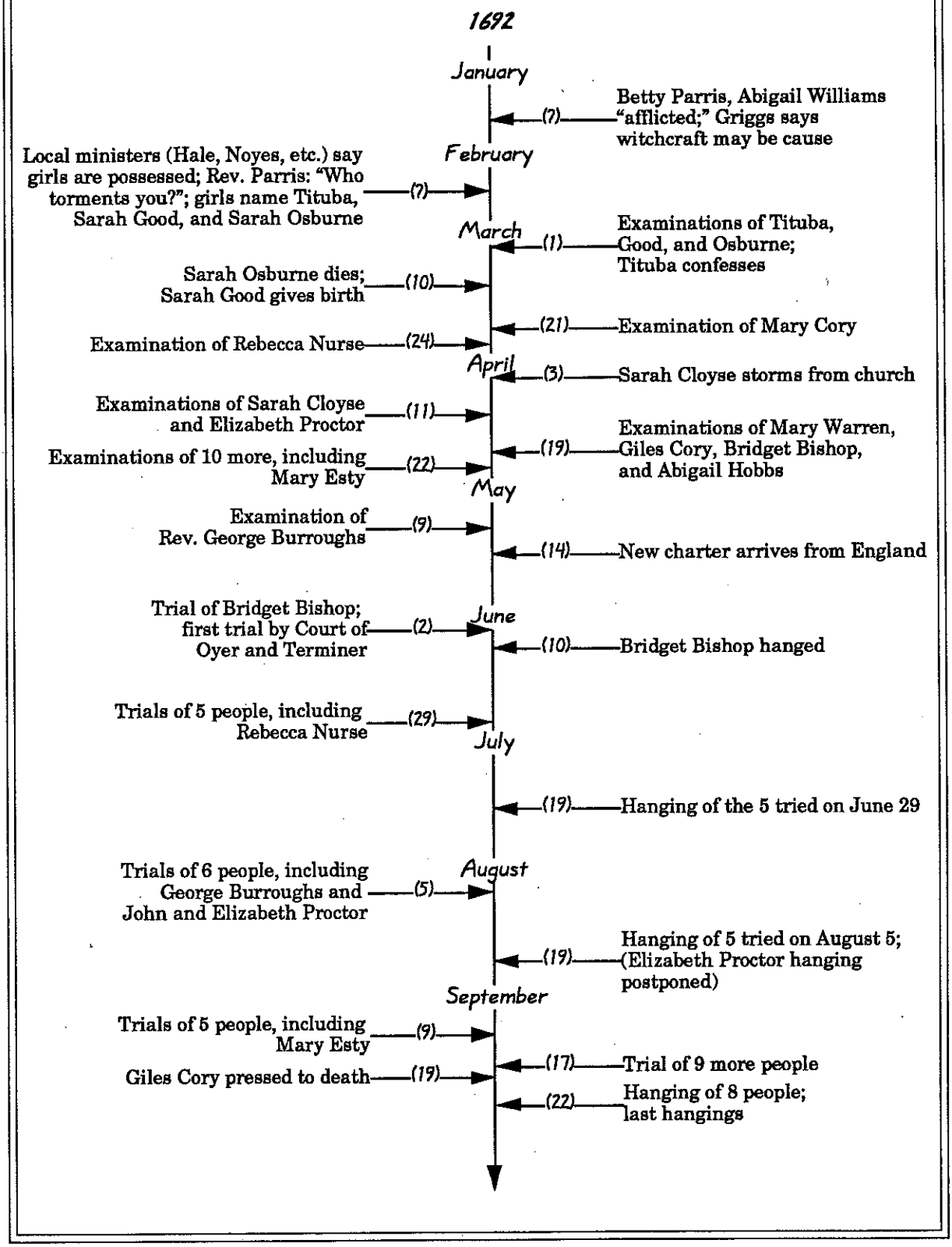
Salem Witch Hysteria: Time Line of Events



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Salem Witch Hysteria: The Afflicted and the Accused

The Afflicted (Ages in Parentheses)

Betty Parris (9)
Abigail Williams (11) — Lived with Reverend Parris

Mary Wolcott (16)
Susanna Sheldon (18) — Close neighbors of Reverend Parris

Ann Putnam Jr. (12)
Ann Putnam Sr. (30s) — Lived in the home of Thomas Putnam

Mary Warren (20) — Worked for John Proctor

Elizabeth Hubbard (17) — Worked for Dr. Griggs

Sarah Churchill (20) — Worked for George Jacobs

Mercy Lewis (17) — Worked for Thomas Putnam

The Accused (Partial Listing; Home Town in Parentheses)

Tituba (Salem Village)
Sarah Good (Salem Village)
Dorcas Good (Salem Town)
Sarah Osburne (Salem Town)
Martha Cory (Salem Town)
Giles Cory (Salem Town)
Rebecca Nurse (Salem Village)
Sarah Cloyse (Salem Village)
Mary Esty (Topsfield)
George Burroughs (Wells, ME; had lived in Salem Village)
Elizabeth Proctor (Salem Town)
John Proctor (Salem Town)
Abigail Hobbs (Topsfield)
Deliverance Hobbs (Topsfield)
William Hobbs (Topsfield)
Nehemiah Abbot (Topsfield)
Bridget Bishop (Salem Town)
Dorcas Hoar (Beverly)
Susanna Martin (Amesbury)
George Jacobs (Salem Town)

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Salem Witchcraft Trials: Interpretation A

(1) In Salem Village, Reverend Samuel Parris, like ministers in all colonial Massachusetts towns, was an important, well-respected person and a leader. In January 1692 the two girls who lived in his household, Betty Parris and Abigail Williams (his niece), became sick and began behaving oddly. News of the illness spread, and more girls seemed to become afflicted. Dr. Griggs, a local physician who was called in to examine Betty and Abigail, declared, "The evil hand is on them," meaning the girls were possessed by evil spirits.

(2) Since the cause of the disease was deemed a spiritual one, ministers had to deal with it. Reverend Parris called in half a dozen ministers from local towns, including Nicholas Noyes of Salem Town and John Hale of Beverly. But instead of trying to stop the girls' behavior, they inflamed it by asking, "Who is it who torments you?" Reverend Parris even started suggesting names. When he suggested the name of Tituba, who had done some fortune telling with the afflicted girls, Betty Parris repeated the name, thus suggesting that Tituba was afflicting them. The ministers had converted a minor incident into a full-blown hysteria. The witch hunt was on.

(3) Accused witches were arrested and taken to the meeting house for examination to see if the evidence against them was sufficient to have them tried in court. "Spectral evidence" was presented, with the afflicted girls saying that the spirit of the accused witch was hurting them.

(4) Some people questioned the use of such evidence; but each time doubts were raised, the ministers would rekindle the mad hysteria. For example, Reverend Deodat Lawson gave a sermon in March 1692 to the congregation in Salem Village in which he stressed that Satan could use apparently good Christians as witches.[1] This reassured people that the apparently devout Rebecca Nurse could, in fact, be a witch. On April 3 Reverend Parris preached, naming as his scripture, "Have I not chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" Then Parris added, "Christ knows how many devils there are in His church, and who they are."[2]

(5) Ministers outside the local Salem area also spread the hysteria. The Reverend Joseph Ballard asked Ann Putnam, Jr., to come to Andover to see if Martha Carrier was causing his wife's illness, and the witch hysteria soon spread to Andover.[3]

(6) When a controversy arose among the judges concerning whether to allow spectral evidence, they asked the ministers for advice. The ministers advised them to be careful of such evidence, but to prosecute the accused witches vigorously.[4] Since a witch wasn't supposed to be able to say the Lord's Prayer, the crowd became very disturbed when George Burroughs said the Lord's Prayer just before he was to be hanged. The Reverend Cotton Mather reassured the crowd, saying that the devil was never more subtle than when he appeared as "an Angel of Light." Burroughs was hanged.[5]

(7) In short, ministers were responsible for starting the hysteria and for continuing it once it had begun. The result was the death of twenty innocent people. Although the reasons for the ministers' behavior are complex, a key factor was their drive to be in control. Puritan theocracy was declining, as shown by the 1692 charter brought back from England,[6] and the clergy was

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Interpretation A

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losing its power. To reestablish their influence in the community, the ministers charged that the area was under attack by Satan. The common people were duly scared and turned to the ministers for guidance. The ministers' control could not last, however. Eventually many people, having seen the shedding of innocent blood, turned away from the rigid views of the clergy.

Endnotes for Interpretation A

[1] Charles Upham, *Salem Witchcraft,* vol. 2 (Boston: Wiggins and Lunt, 1867; reprinted 1959), pp. 75-87. The entire sermon is quoted in this source.

[2] Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World, 1700* (London, 1700; reprinted Bainbridge, NY: York Mail-Press, 1972). Calef lived in Boston at the time of the trials. At one point his name was mentioned as a possible wizard, but he was never called to examination or trial.

[3] Ibid. pp. 371–6.

[4] Thomas Hutchinson, *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay,* vol. 2, ed. Lawrence Shaw Mayo (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), pp. 38–9. This book contains reprints of some of the original sources regarding the trials, including this letter by the ministers.

[5] Calef, *More Invisible World,* pp. 360–1. Calef may have been an eyewitness to this hanging.

[6] The new charter, brought back in May 1692, allowed any propertied Christian male, not just Puritans, to vote. Also, the governor was to be appointed by the King, not elected by the people (that is, by the congregations of the Puritan churches).

Salem Witchcraft Trials: Interpretation B

(1) Winters in seventeenth-century New England were harsh, especially for females. Beginning in December, 1691, some of the girls in Salem Village, depressed by the lack of any legitimate outlet in Puritan society for their natural emotional energy and inflamed by the Puritan belief in sinfulness and evil, found relief for their tensions by starting a mass hysteria. The girls created the excitement and attention they craved, but twenty innocent people died as a result of their actions.

(2) The madness began in the home of the minister of Salem Village, Reverend Samuel Parris. During the winter months of 1691–1692, Betty Parris, Abigail Williams (Reverend Parris' niece), and six or seven neighbor girls gathered to listen to fortune-telling stories told by Parris's West Indian slave, Tituba. Betty Parris, probably because of the tales, became sick in January 1692. The other girls soon followed suit, exhibiting convulsions, screaming, and general fits. Adults in the area had never seen such behavior, and most really thought the girls were suffering. Since demon possession was an accepted cause for weird behavior and physical illness in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, it was natural to ask the girls who was afflicting them.

(3) The girls, of course, cooperated by naming their afflicters. Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osburne were accused and brought in for examination on the charge of witchcraft. Tituba confessed to save her neck and accused Sarah Good of also being a witch.[1] At

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Interpretation B

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the examinations the girls' visions of the specters of the accused were taken as nearly foolproof evidence of guilt.[2] The girls were now among the most important people in the village.

(4) As the girls accused more people of witchcraft, and as more examinations and trials were held, the girls' importance rose still further. Several times the afflicted girls were able, through their actions, to reverse decisions that adults had made.

- When Mary Esty was released from jail, one afflicted girl, Mercy Lewis, fell deathly ill. The other afflicted girls said it was the specter of Mary Esty which was killing Mercy. Mary Esty was again arrested, and Mercy recovered.[3]
- When the jury found Rebecca Nurse "not guilty," the afflicted girls exploded into fits. The jury reconsidered the case, then returned a "guilty" verdict.[4]

(5) But the girls were also caught in the web of hysteria. Having captured the attention of the adult world, they could not easily back out. Arrests, examinations, and trials were very serious matters. It would not have been well-received had the girls said they had just been kidding.

(6) One girl, Mary Warren, did say that she—as well as the other afflicted girls—was wrong in her accusations. The others promptly accused her of becoming a witch, and Mary decided to join the afflicted girls once more.[5] Another accuser, Sarah Churchill, said that her accusations against George Jacobs were also a lie. The court did not believe her, however, and she too was restored to the accusers' ranks.[6]

(7) So the madness continued. Accused witches, some having been beaten or tortured, confessed to their crimes and implicated other people. The hysteria spread until the jails were filled with over 150 accused witches. Finally, the voice of reason returned to the area, and the hysteria died down.

(8) Interestingly, the girls had no recurrence of convulsions or fits when the madness ended and the "witches" were returned to society. With adults no longer paying special attention to them, the girls had no reason to act strangely.

(9) The girls of Salem Village brought on the witch hunt when they noticed that their apparent afflictions brought them a great deal of attention from the adult world. Many adults, especially those with problems of mental illness (such as Ann Putnam, Sr.),[7] were also caught up in the unreal world of hysteria, joining the afflicted girls and testifying against each other. The girls created this nightmarish world, then could not stop it. Unfortunately, twenty people died before it ran its course.

Endnotes for Interpretation B

[1] Essex County (Massachusetts) Archives, *Salem Witchcraft, 1692*, vol. 1. [Report by Ezekial Cheever, secretary for this examination], p. 6.

[2] Hutchinson, *History of Massachusetts*, pp. 21–23. For example, the girls claimed they saw the devil whispering in Goody Cloyse's ear at her examination. At Martha Cory's examination, Ann Putnam, Jr., one of the afflicted girls, said she saw Cory's specter in the rafters.

[3] Essex County Archives, *Salem Witchcraft*, vol. 1, p. 117.

[4] Calef, "More Invisible World," pp. 358–60.

[5] Essex County Archives, *Salem Witchcraft*, vol. 1, pp. 29–31.

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Endnotes for Interpretation B

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[6] Elliot W. Woodward, *Records of the Salem Witchcraft Trials*, vol. 1 (Roxbury, MA: W. Elliot Woodward, 1864; reprinted New York: DaCapo Press, 1969), p. 14. [Reprinted manuscript documents from the trials.]

[7] Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, vol. 2, pp. 253 ff. (and following).

Salem Witchcraft Trials: Interpretation C

(1) The fantastic events of Salem Village in 1692 seem to defy rational explanation. Historians have dismissed a large part of the trial evidence as imaginary, yet the testimony suggests that there was a rational cause for the hysteria: rye bread. Many of the descriptions of visions seen by the young girls, along with their disorderly speech, odd gestures, and convulsions are symptoms of "convulsive ergot poisoning"—caused by eating rye bread which contains the ergot fungus.

(2) First of all, the time of year fits the timing for ergot poisoning. The rye was harvested around Thanksgiving for the winter and spring. The children's symptoms first appeared in December 1691 and continued through the spring of 1692. There is no further mention of anyone being afflicted the next year, probably because only the one harvest was infected.

(3) Secondly, women (especially pregnant women) and children have been more susceptible to the disease in some epidemics. For example, 56 percent in one epidemic were under ten years of age, and 60 percent in another were under the age of fifteen. Most of those afflicted in 1692 in Salem Village were teenaged females.

(4) According to tree rings in eastern New England, the growing seasons of 1690, 1691, and 1692 were cooler than normal.[1] Furthermore, people in Boston wrote in their diaries that the winters of 1690–1691 and 1691–1692 were very cold.[2] These conditions are ideal for ergot fungus growth.

(5) A closer look at the afflicted girls reveals even more evidence favoring the ergot theory. Three of the afflicted lived in the Putnam residence. A large part of the Putnam land was swampy meadows, an ideal location for ergot in great abundance. It is highly likely that the rye the Putnams grew was infected. Two of the other afflicted girls were in the household of the Reverend Parris. Two-thirds of Parris's salary was paid in provisions and, since Putnam was the largest landholder and an avid supporter of Reverend Parris, it seems reasonable to conclude that a good deal of the rye he received came from the Putnams' fields.

(6) Another of the afflicted girls, Elizabeth Hubbard, was a servant in the home of Dr. Griggs. As the town's only doctor, Dr. Griggs would probably have had many occasions to treat the often-sick Ann Putnam, Sr. Since doctors were usually paid in provisions, Dr. Griggs would probably have had some Putnam rye. All twenty-two of the afflicted people in Salem Village lived in households located on or at the edge of soils ideally suited to rye cultivation: moist, acid, sandy loam.

(7) The symptoms the afflicted girls complained of are symptoms of ergot poisoning. Choking is a sign of the disease's effect on the involuntary muscle fibers. Biting, pinching, and pricking sensations, of which the afflicted complained, may allude to the under-the-skin crawling, tingling sensation experienced by ergotism victims. Vomiting

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Interpretation C

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and bowel difficulties are also symptoms of ergotism.[3]

(8) The visions of specters—seen by the afflicted, but no one else—had all the characteristics of hallucinations brought on by lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), of which ergot is the source. It should be noted that several people who reported these visions were otherwise reliable, respectable people.

(9) Ergot poisoning can be a serious health problem, in some cases resulting in death. In Fairfield, Connecticut, in 1692, several people complained of symptoms similar to those in Salem Village. Two afflicted persons died.[4] No one can explain this away as faking or spite against neighbors; it was likely to have been ergot poisoning.

(10) Although several theories have been advanced to show why the adults acted the way they did in the Witch Hysteria of 1692, no theory has adequately explained why the girls became afflicted in the first place. The weather, the crops grown, and the symptoms complained of by the afflicted all lead to the conclusion that rye bread was the demon that possessed Salem Village in 1692.

Endnotes for Interpretation C

[1] E. DeWitt and M. Ames, eds., *Tree Ring Chronology of Eastern North America* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978). The width of a tree ring gives a clue to the average temperature for that year. The tree rings for 1690, 1691, and 1692 are narrower, indicating less tree growth and, by implication, lower average temperatures.

[2] "Diary of Lawrence Hammond, 1891-92," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society,* 7:160.

[3] B. Berde and H.O. Schild, eds., *Ergot Alkaloids and Related Compounds* (New York: Springer, 1987).

[4] J. M. Taylor, *The Witchcraft Delusion in Colonial Connecticut, 1647–1697* (Stratford, CT: J. E. Edwards, 1908). In addition, seven infants in the Salem area either developed or died of symptoms of ergot poisoning.

Salem Witchcraft Trials: Interpretation D

(1) Other historians are wrong in how they have viewed the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. They assume: (a) no witchcraft was practiced in Salem; (b) the girls lied when accusing other people; (c) the ministers caused the Trials by whipping the people into "mass hysteria" with their sermons. The facts show that these common assumptions are wrong.

(2) First, witchcraft *was* practiced in Salem, as it was throughout the world in 1692. About fifty people in the Salem Trials confessed to being witches. Tituba, the slave who probably started the girls going crazy and accusing other people of witchcraft, confessed to being a witch. She said that the devil had come to her in the shape of a man—a tall man with white hair and dressed in black. This man had shown her a book, and she had made a mark in it, a mark that was "red like blood." Sometimes the man in black had brought four witches with him—Sarah Good, Sarah Osburn, and two women from Boston whose names she did not know—and

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Interpretation D

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they had forced her to go with them to afflict the girls.[1]

(3) Bridget Bishop was another person in Salem who practiced witchcraft. Many Village people believed she did, and two men testified in court that they found several puppets made of rags and hogs' bristles in a house where she had lived.[2] The puppets had headless pins in them with the points sticking outward. This was a common witchcraft procedure in the 1600s. Bridget Bishop could make no reasonable reply to these court charges. The slave Candy also confessed to being a witch and brought her puppets to court when asked how she afflicted the girls.[3]

(4) At least six people testified that Margaret Rule, who was afflicted in 1693, was lifted from her bed "by an invisible force" so that none of her body rested either on the bed or on any other support.[4] That is, she levitated, which could be viewed as a sign of supernatural power.

(5) Thus, there is no question that witchcraft was practiced in the Salem of 1692. More importantly, almost everyone in Salem, and in the world at that time, believed in witchcraft. People who believe in witchcraft can be afflicted by it.

(6) Second, although some of the girls may have lied in accusing other people, most of them did not. The girls were actually hysterical, in the medical sense of that term. ("Hysterical" means that a person is in a mental state of mind which causes certain symptoms, like pain or convulsions. People really suffer from the pain, but because of their mental, rather than their physical, state.)

(7) Witnesses repeatedly said that the girls' fits were so grotesque and so violent that they could not possibly have been acting. For example, the Reverend John Hale of Beverly wrote, "Their arms, necks, and backs were turned this way and that way so as it was impossible for them to do of themselves, and beyond the power of any epileptic fits, or natural disease to effect."[5] Moreover, the girls' symptoms were the same as those identified by psychologists as typical for hysterics; for example, pain in the legs, then in other organs, then choking.

(8) Third, the ministers, rather than whipping the people into a "mass hysteria" which then led to the Trials, tried to control the Trials from the beginning. It is well to remember that the Trials were held by governmental authorities, not by ministers. Before anyone had been executed, Cotton Mather, a leading Massachusetts clergyman, suggested that the afflicted people be cured by prayer and requested that the court be very careful about allowing spectral evidence, so that no innocent people would be executed.[6] Later, a letter from several Boston ministers questioned the evidence used by the court to convict people.

(9) It is clear that historians have been wrong in their views of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. First, the evidence shows that witchcraft really was practiced in Salem and it really affected people. Second, the girls did not lie in accusing others; but rather they were medically hysterical and actually thought they were being attacked by witches. Third, the ministers, far from causing the Trials, tried to correct the abuses of the Trials.

(10) This new evidence helps us understand the Salem Witchcraft Trials as they really were.

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Endnotes for Interpretation D

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[1] Woodward, *Records*, pp. 6–8.

[2] Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (London: John Russell Smith, 1862), reprinted in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648–1706*, ed. G. L. Burr (New York: Scribners, 1914), p. 228. Mather is not an objective observer, but a comparison of his account to the trial records shows him to be very accurate in recording facts.

[3] Ibid., pp. 215–22. Rev. George Burroughs also had a reputation for the occult. He tricked his wife and brother-in-law into thinking he knew of one of their conversations by reading their minds through occult supernatural powers, although he may have been eavesdropping. He said, "My God makes known your thoughts to me." Both his wife and brother-in-law understood from this that his god was the devil, since the Christian God doesn't deal in occult powers about family gossip, but the devil does. Rev. Burroughs also was caught lying at his trial, and he hadn't taken communion for a long time.

[4] Calef, *More Invisible World*. Cotton Mather obtained signed confirmations of this and other instances of levitation. Also, Sarah Good, when requested by Rev. Noyes at her execution to confess to being a witch, replied, "I am no more a witch than you are a wizard. If you take my life away, God will give you blood to drink." She was executed. Tradition has it that when Noyes lay dying twenty-five years later, he did, indeed, choke on blood in his mouth.

[5] George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 338. As another example, Mary Warren was reported on September 2 as having "a pin run through her hand and blood running out of her mouth." [Recorded in Woodward, ed., *Salem Witchcraft*, vol. 2, p. 155.]

6 Cotton Mather to Judge John Richards, May 1692, Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, 4th series, vol. 8, pp. 391–7.

Salem Witchcraft Trials: Interpretation E

(1) Until now, historians of the Salem witch hysteria of 1692 have focused on why the girls originally accused others of witchcraft. This focus on the girls has drawn attention away from a much more important question, which is why the adults listened to the girls. It was the parents who could have squashed it, but it was the parents who listened to, and even encouraged, it. Indeed, it was adults who first asked, "Who is it that afflicts you?" Only at this point did the girls begin to accuse people.

(2) There were some important psychological reasons for people in Salem Village to lash out at others. It wasn't that the accusers consciously used the Trials to get even with their enemies; it was more that they saw in the accusations an explanation for why things were not working out the way they wanted. They were not reluctant to believe that their enemies were allied with the devil; it gave them a reason for their feelings.

(3) It is toward Salem Village, then, that study should be directed. If divisions within the village were the main cause of the witch hysteria, accusers and defenders of the witches should be on opposing sides of issues. By examining divisions within the village, an understanding of the hysteria may be gained.

(4) The main issue dividing the people of Salem Village was whether its government should be independent from Salem Town. Salem Village of the 1690s was mainly agricultural; Salem Town was becoming more commerce-centered and more dominated by merchants.

(5) Farmers in Salem Village who did not trade much with Salem Town

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Interpretation E

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gained little from being part of the Town; worse, they had to pay Town taxes. This problem was especially bothersome for farmers in the northwest section of the Village, which was remote from Salem Town. These farmers saw increased commercialization in Salem Town as a symbol of commercialization within their whole society, something the Bible warned against.

(6) These farmers, pressing hard for independence from Salem Town, were opposed by a second group. This opposing group, composed of farmers who sold their crops through Salem Town and merchants who lived along the Ipswich Road, had many contacts with people from the Town. Since this group gained by the Village's contact with the Town, they opposed separation.

(7) The central issue in the struggle over independence for the Village was the Church. Those who favored a separate government for the Village also favored a separate church and a separate, ordained minister. Again, they were opposed by the group who wanted to stay as part of the Town. The Village had achieved a somewhat independent church in the 1670s, but this led to numerous disputes over the next twenty years.

(8) Several petitions, some in opposition to the ministers, others supporting them, were sent to the Massachusetts legislature (called the General Court). In 1689 Reverend Samuel Parris was ordained, giving the Salem Village Church its independence.[1] Opposition arose again against the new minister,[2] and at this difficult point the witch accusations of 1692 began.

(9) The pattern of accuser and accused shows very well how divisions within the Village help account for the hysteria. Almost all accusers lived in the western part of the Village, more remote from Salem Town; most defenders lived in the eastern part of the village, closer to Ipswich Road and to Salem Town.[3] Most accusers later signed a petition supporting Reverend Parris; defenders mostly signed a petition opposing him.[4] Accusers were, on a whole, from the middle and lower classes; defenders tended to be more prosperous. (Almost all of the richest families in the village were defenders.)

(10) It is important to note that two of the afflicted girls were from Reverend Parris's own household—one his daughter, the other his niece. Three of the other afflicted females were from the household of Thomas Putnam, Jr. Although Putnam was from a wealthy family, he opposed close ties with Salem Town, possibly because his family felt they had been cheated of their rightful inheritance by his father's second wife, Mary Veren of Salem Town, and Israel Porter, a villager who supported closer ties with Salem Town.

(11) These patterns show that the accusers had real motives, stemming from divisions within Salem Village, to attack certain people. This does not, however, entirely explain what transpired in 1692, since many leaders of the anti-Parris group were not accused of witchcraft. It seems that the girls accused whomever they decided to accuse. Adults in the pro-Parris group, however, encouraged the accusations because most of the accused were in the anti-Parris group.

(12) Another factor which must be considered is that, of the 142 persons named as witches in 1692, 82 percent lived outside Salem Village. This sug-

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gests that the people of Salem Village were striking out at external forces—forces of commercialization and evil which threatened, and indeed were changing, their village life. Reverend Parris identified those forces in a sermon in 1690 as a "lamentable harmony between wicked men and devils, in their opposition of God's kingdom and interests."[5]

(13) Because the people of Salem Village felt drawn away from their pure religion by a commercial orientation, they felt guilty. In their guilt and efforts to resist change, they fueled the flames of the witch hysteria of 1692.

Endnotes for Interpretation E

[1] Ordination of a minister to lead a village church gave that church recognition of independence.

[2] Some people in the village did not pay their taxes to support the minister. They objected to the terms under which Reverend Parris was hired and disputed the villagers' obligation to take Reverend Parris firewood.

[3] See Figure 4, page 48.

[4] Information on pro-Parris and anti-Parris petitions are from church records, following the entry for April 3, 1695. Data on accusers and defenders are from "Verbatim Transcripts of Salem Witchcraft Papers," compiled under the supervision of Archie N. Frost, Salem Clerk of Courts (1938). Of the twenty-seven who supported the Witchcraft Trials by testifying against one or more of the accused witches, twenty-one later (in 1695) signed the pro-Parris petition; six signed the anti-Parris petition. Of the twenty who registered their opposition to the trials, one signed the pro-Parris petition; nineteen signed the anti-Parris petition.

[5] Reverend Samuel Parris, *Sermon Book,* January 12, 1690.

Interpretation F

The causes of the Salem witch hysteria of 1692 are difficult to figure out. A clue, however, is provided by a look at the persons accused. Tituba was a slave; Sarah Osborne was a bedridden old women; Sarah Good was a beggar who didn't get along well with other people. All of these people were outcasts from society. They were easy to pick on. Society gained from the trials by showing the limits of antisocial or deviant behavior. Therefore, the trials were probably attempts to control social behavior and insure conformity.

Interpretation G

(1) Many historians have focused on the reasons for the original outbreak of the witch hysteria of 1692 and on the conditions in the society which inflamed it. Why 1692? Why then, in a society which had believed in witchcraft all along?

(2) A look at conditions in 1692 shows that many factors caused instability at the time. There was Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, Leisler's Rebellion in New York, and a Protestant revolt in Maryland. Puritanism was declining

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in Massachusetts. People feared God's wrath and the possibility of resulting inroads by the devil's agents. This was compounded by the fact that the colony lost its charter in 1684, with a royal governor, Sir Edmond Andros, coming to rule Massachusetts, along with the rest of New England.

(3) With the outbreak of civil war in England in 1688, the people of Boston threw Andros out of office and into jail. The colony did not receive a new charter until 1692. Throughout this period the colony had an air of tentativeness and indecision in political affairs. Besides the political and religious unrest, the colony in 1691–1692 was torn by a great number of arguments, the threat of Indian attack, war with the French, high taxes, a severe winter, threats of smallpox, and local disagreements over land claims.

(4) Collectively, these many unstable conditions are the reasons why the original accusations in Salem Village ended in a full-scale hysteria and witch hunt. The situation was so tense that, when there was a spark, it exploded.