witch hunt

TERROR REIGNED AS ACCUSATIONS FLEW DURING THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS OF 1692

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

AMERICANS USUALLY speak of the Pilgrim fathers as independent-minded, hardworking and pious people who helped settle the land. We like to believe that we are imbued with their virtues. But the Pilgrims left another legacy as well, and it's a shameful one—for the Puritan heritage also includes the Salem Witch Trials.

In 1692, the province of Massachusetts Bay, as the state was then known, had a population of 56,000 English colonists. Strict, puritanical Protestants, they had come to the New World to build a society that reflected their values. The Puritans believed in hard work, and regarded a good crop or a profitable year as a mark of God's approval. They also encouraged literacy, particularly for reading the Bible. In 1636, just eight years after the first Puritans had arrived there, the colony established a college that was named for its benefactor John Harvard.

But their creed also imbued them with a morbid, fearful view of the world. It was the Devil's dominion, and Satan was after them. They did not accept the idea of luck or accident: the poor crop, the dead calf or the fall from a ladder were likely the work of the Fiend. And just as God had his beloved congregation, so too did Satan: witches. These minions of hell, having sold their souls to know the black arts, used magic to afflict the godly.

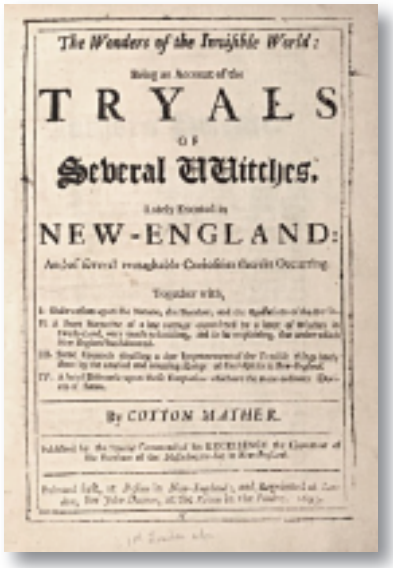
These were not merely the superstitious babblings of the ignorant, but the firm convictions of the educated as well. The Rev. Cotton Mather, a Harvard graduate and one of New England's most promising young leaders, had made a study of demonic possession of the mentally ill. His "Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions" was regarded as a medical textbook.

Indeed, the book would soon be used as evidence in Salem, Mass. In early 1692, 11-year-old Elizabeth Parris, the daughter of the town's minister, and her 11-year-old cousin Abigail Williams began running about in a violent frenzy and speaking

Some 200 years after the Salem Witch Trials, antique collectibles from the era remain popular.

witch hunt: an intensive effort to discover and expose disloyalty, subversion or the like, usually based on slight, doubtful or irrelevant evidence.

—WEBSTER'S UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY


The Wonders of the Invisible World:

Being an Account of the

TRYALS

OF

Several Witches,

Lately Executed in

NEW-ENGLAND:

And of Several Remarkable Curiosities therein Occurring

Together with,

By COTTON MATHER.

gibberish. Modern-day experts have offered several theories as to cause of such behavior: food poisoning, attention-deficit disorder or children being children. Seventeenth-century medicine had a more occult diagnosis. The local magistrates were alerted and, with the coercing help of the Rev. Parris, the two children were coaxed into naming three witches who had cursed them.

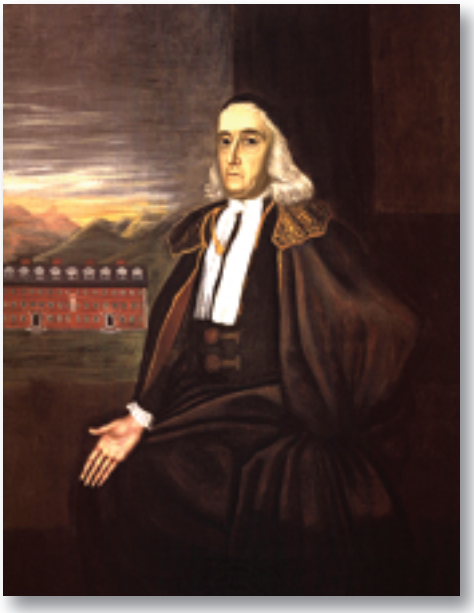
Tituba was the slave of the Parris family, Sarah Good was a beggar and Sarah Osborne had been suspected of immorality and quarreled with the reverend. The three women were arrested. When accused of witchcraft, Good and Osborne maintained their innocence but Tituba confessed. The slave from Barbados was already incriminated by her exotic background; the folk tales of the Caribbean she had told the children now were cited as evidence against her. Hoping to save herself, Tituba testified, "The Devil came to me and bid me serve him," accusing Good and Osborne of forcing her to sign the Devil's book.

Presumably the Parris family now had been exorcised, but then other young women proclaimed their bedevilment. Ann Putnam was the daughter of one of Salem's most prominent and ambitious families, and the teenager and her immediate circle of friends all claimed to be tortured by witches. Historians have noted that Ann and her clique accused people who had feuds with the Putnams. The Rev. George Burroughs was dragged from Maine to face the charge of witchcraft; by coincidence, he also had an unpaid debt to Ann's family. Land disputes with the Putnams also were settled by a charge of witchcraft.

Other young women in neighboring towns came forth with accusations of witchcraft. In Ipswich, servant Mary Warren accused her bad-tempered employers of witchcraft; they were arrested. More and more people were accused. Within two months, 400 people had been investigated, and 200 were jailed. Most claimed their innocence. Some 40 confessed, however, expecting clemency for their cooperation. Of course, that cooperation required them to incriminate others. When Abigail Hobbs was arrested, she soon accused her mother, Deliverance. After her arrest, Deliverance accused her husband, William. Breaking with the family tradition, William maintained his innocence and accused no one else.

The jails were overcrowded and getting worse, but there were no trials. The local magistrates did not have the authority. A special court was required to try witches, one established by the royal governor, and Massachusetts was awaiting his arrival from London. On May 14, 1692, Sir William Phips landed in Boston and in the middle of a crisis. He was born in New England and certainly was used to the Puritan personality, but he did not expect to judge 200 cases of witchcraft. Phips was not even a lawyer, but a shipbuilder who had grown rich in the salvage business. But acting quickly, Phips established the special court on May 27. William Stoughton, an ordained minister, was named the chief justice. The trials began in early June. Only Puritan males were eligible to be jurors. Since Salem had a population of 600, the accused and the jurors would have known each other.

In trying a witch, there were a number of precedents and tests. A spinster was always suspicious. Any physical blemish could be considered a mark of Satan. A mole or a wart was incriminating; a birthmark was practically a death warrant. Any mishap that occurred to a neighbor might be weighed against the accused. However, the accused could



A drawing depicts the execution of Ann Hibbins; the title page of the 1693 work "Wonders of the Invisible World," by Cotton Mather; a lithograph by artist Joseph E. Baker, titled "The witch no. 1"; portrait of William Stoughton, chief justice of the witch trials and acting governor of Massachusetts, ca. 1700; stone cenotaph for Sarah Good at the Salem Witch Trials Memorial.

prove their innocence by reciting—without a mistake—the Lord's Prayer. Justice Stoughton would also consider an additional form of evidence: dreams and visions. When Elizabeth Parris claimed that she saw Sarah Good flying on a broom, this court accepted that as proof.

The trials themselves became a stage for hysterics. English justice required that the accuser face the accused, and the nine afflicted women sat in the court. In the presence of the accused, the "bewitched" would react with fits, shrieks and accounts of spectral attacks. In court, Ann Putnam would claim that she was being strangled by the evil powers of the accused, the 71-year-old Rebecca Nurse. Of course, the attack was invisible, but the court accepted it as evidence. However, the jury initially did not, and acquitted Nurse. Justice Stoughton did not accept that verdict, and told the jurors to find her guilty. The intimidated panel complied. English law, the Puritan disposition and the Old Testament concurred: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Rebecca Nurse, certainly guilty of a land dispute with the Putnams, was hanged.

She would be one of 19 to die on the gallows. An 80-year-old man was executed by being crushed to death by stones. As many as 13 died in prison. A 4-year-old child, imprisoned for witchcraft, went mad. But the real crime was the trials themselves: the absurd "evidence," the courtroom hysterics and Justice Stoughton's obvious bias. This court tried 26 cases, and all the accused were found guilty.

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The public, at least those safe from Stoughton's immediate jurisdiction, protested the scandal. Increase Mather, president of Harvard and father of Cotton Mather, wrote in a public letter, "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person be condemned." Governor Phips agreed. Finally, in October 1692, he dissolved the special court, halted the executions and forbid further arrests. Those imprisoned without formal charge were released. The remaining 56 cases of witchcraft were transferred to the Superior Court. In those proceedings, without the spectral evidence and courtroom hysterics, 53 of the accused were found innocent. Of the three people found guilty, even they were released from prison by May 1693.

However, there was no punishment for the genuinely guilty … other than what their conscience dictated. On Jan. 14, 1697, the legislature of Massachusetts ordered a day of fasting and repentance for the Salem hysteria. The proclamation was written by Samuel Sewall, who had been a judge at the trial. In 1706, Ann Putnam publicly repented. None of the other "afflicted" did. As for Justice Stoughton, he actually rose in government and became chief justice of the colony. The town of Stoughton, Mass., is named for him, as is a dormitory at Harvard. He remained unrepentant.

But we remember the Salem Witch Trials—a haunting metaphor of bigotry, hypocrisy and hysteria. It remains a warning, but one we don't always heed. There have been times in modern history when, through politics and fears, we have again succumbed to blind persecution.

And that frenzy is still called a witch hunt.