

# Conflict in Salem: Use of Spectral Evidence in the Witchcraft Trials

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The Salem Witchcraft Trials have withstood the test of time in drawing interest and curiosity. Over 300 years later, generations from around the world are still fascinated by this topic. Historians have used many theories to rationalize the behaviors of the accused witches as well as the accusers. One such theory relates the Salem Witchcraft Trials to a disease caused by Ergot poisoning, which starts with a fungus that grows on grain used to make rye bread (Pearl). Another theory to rationalize witchcraft behaviors was the fear of Wabanaki Indian attacks which was thought to be the work of the devil (Landau). The practice of witchcraft has been around since the third century evolving from an outbreak in a region, to an epidemic in a country, and then to a worldwide pandemic (Van der Linde). The notorious Salem Witchcraft Trials created conflict as the use of spectral evidence in the form of an imaginary, unseen animal “specter” allegedly forced the accused person to inflict pain on a victim, which caused many accused to compromise the truth in order to survive. The Witchcraft Trials ultimately led to improved courtroom trial procedures, involving judges such as Samuel Sewall, which led up to our modern judiciary system of innocent until proven guilty.

The origin of the Salem Witchcraft Trials in present day Salem, Massachusetts began long before 1692. A witch is defined as a person believed to have magical powers designed to harm people or damage their property (Wilson). The roots of witchcraft are tied to early farming communities around the world that depended on the gods, more specifically, “The Great Mother,” for magical powers (Van der Linde). The magical powers became feared as Christianity spread in the 5th century with a focus on one God.

A conflict of religions emerged and a compromise of religious ceremonies combined old rituals with new ones. This would not last as religion played a role in missionaries colonizing new lands especially in Europe.

The idea of witchcraft spread in Europe in 1484 as Pope Innocent VIII, the head of the Catholic Church, sent out a proclamation outlawing the practice of witchcraft (Slavicek). In order to help identify witches, Innocent's proclamation was used to write a book. In 1487, two monks against the approval of the Pope published a guidebook called *The Malleus Maleficarum* or *The Hammer of Witches* (Martin). The handbook would help witch hunters, examiners, torturers, and executioners to identify witches. The book contained false information appearing as facts which was based on fairy tales, magic stories, and nightmares. It also contained rules on how to investigate, try, and judge cases of witchcraft. By 1542, the English parliament had made the practice of witchcraft punishable by death (Blackwood). By the late 1600s, Puritans, Catholics, and Quakers were seeking religious freedom and fleeing from the Church of England by sailing to Colonial America (Ciment).

Puritans believed in a pure form of religion following the Bible strictly as the law and attended church twice a day (Boraas). The Puritans were among early settlers who established Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. In this same area, a small, Puritan farming village already existed on the coast, Salem. The area grew over the next ten years to 20,000 Puritan settlers (Holub). Merchants settled a seaport near the Salem farming village called Salem Town. A conflict would arise between the poor farmers in Salem Village and the rich merchants in Salem Town. The conflict began over money. Tax

money was raised by the Puritans to pay the salary of their Puritan minister, Samuel Parris, who was shared between the two communities. Samuel Paris was upset that Salem Village did not pay him enough. The compromise came as Paris made comments against the farmers in his sermons about Satan conspiring against them in order to get paid more (Blackwood).

Ironically, the hysteria of witchcraft was ending in Europe as the Puritans were arriving in Colonial America. “But the most insidious threat they faced was one they brought with them from Europe -- an ancient superstition that flourished in the religious climate of New England and grew into a sort of mass hysteria that destroyed the lives of hundreds of innocent people.” (Blackwood 22). The colonists had blamed their misfortunes such as: disease, crop failures, and drought on witchcraft. It was an easy way to justify their misfortunes. However, the main event involving the daughter of Reverend Samuel Parris, Betty, and her cousin, Abigail, would set off a mass hysteria based on Tituba’s influence on the girls in Salem Village and Salem Town.

Betty and Abigail lived together and were cared for by Tituba, a native of Barbados and Parris’ slave who shared stories of magic with the girls. In January of 1692, the girls began acting strangely, thrashing their arms around and screaming as if under attack. Dr. Griggs examined the girls and observed their bizarre behavior diagnosing them as victims of witchcraft (Stern). Other girls in the community began experiencing similar symptoms, and by February the girls accused Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborne. By March, the magistrates questioned the women in an early courtroom style where people were guilty until proven innocent. People were afraid to speak up, as they

would be accused of witchcraft. The girls also made it difficult for those accused, as they would act out in the presence of the accused. This made it appear to the witnesses as though the “witches” were actually harming them in front of their own eyes.

By May, the newly appointed Governor from England, Sir William Phips, appointed an emergency Court of Oyer and Terminer to regain control of the witchcraft epidemic. Oyer meant to “hear” and terminer meant to “decide”. Phips wrote in *A Delusion of Satan* “When I first arrived I found this province most miserably harassed with a most horrible witchcraft or possession of devils.” Phips appointed William Stoughton, chief magistrate or head judge along with nine others to try hundreds of charged witches sitting in jails (Uschan). The judges were wealthy, untrained men, while many accused were poor, out casted women. The judges used the handbook, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, in the courtroom to question the accused and confirm that they were witches. According to the book, “It has never yet been known that an innocent person has been punished on suspicion of witchcraft, and there is no doubt that God will never permit such a thing to happen” (Stevens). In court, people were guilty until their innocence was proven by a judge (Dunn). Furthermore, the girls claimed that the specters, spirits, of these women had tortured them.

The handbook recommended torturing the accused people until they confessed (Orr). The accused were not allowed to defend themselves and often confessed to avoid torture. When others attempted to speak up on their behalf, they were immediately found guilty. For instance, Thomas Brattle, a Boston merchant and scientist, argued that the touch test was not scientific; that a devil’s power could not flow through someone by

touching them (Burgan). One victim, Giles Corey, was pressed to death with stones after refusing to speak to the court (Stern). He knew he would die either way. Corey had pointed out to his family that no one tried by the Court of Oyer and Terminer was ever freed (Hill). The English method of pressing someone to death was a way to force them to shout out “guilty” or “innocent” under the weight of the stones. Finally, on October 29, 1692, Governor Phips ended the trials at the Court of Oyer and Terminer (Pipe). Unfortunately, the remaining 150 people in jail would not be freed until late 1693. Overall, about 20 people died in less than a year based on the use of spectral evidence.

The conflict was the use of spectral evidence in the Salem Witchcraft Trials. “Puritans believed that witches could send out their specters, spirits, from the inside of their bodies. These specters had human powers of sight, hearing, and touch, and could fly through the air at will” (MacBain). The chief magistrate, Judge Stoughton, insisted on the use of spectral evidence in the trials. As a superstitious Puritan, he believed that God was speaking through the actions of the accused. To make matters worse, “Under Stoughton, procedures in the courtroom deviated from the norm: He tolerated private discussions between the judges and the accusers, and he forbade any defense for the accused” (MacBain 16). As time passed the number of accusers spread to more adolescent girls who were gaining power and control. Puritans gradually became skeptical of the spectral evidence as more prominent, well respected, and holy people were accused. There was no scientific evidence to back up the spectral evidence. You could not see the spirit that was forcing the girls to act out. As a result, it was difficult for the guilty to be proven innocent in this kind of trial.

The compromise came in the form of ministers speaking up against the use of spectral evidence in the Salem Witchcraft Trials. Even ministers were being accused of witchcraft as the claims from the girls became more far fetched. Ministers had to recite the Lord's prayer perfectly to prove they were not a witch. More specifically, Increase Mather, a prominent minister and judge stated, "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned" (Williams).

Governor Phips commissioned Mather's son, Judge Cotton Mather, to write a sympathetic story explaining the reason that the court used spectral evidence in an attempt to smooth things over with the colonists (Goss). Cotton Mather published *The Wonders of the Invisible World: Being an Account of the Tryals of Several Witches Lately Executed in New England* (1693). Mather saw the task as an honor, but it only made the situation worse by describing the horrific torture of the falsely accused.

Many accused had compromised the truth by falsely accusing others or pleading guilty in order to delay death by sitting in jail. Furthermore, the Massachusetts legislature on November 25, 1693, had set up a new judicial system with a new leader, Superior Court of Judicature, Samuel Sewell, that would try all future witchcraft cases without the use of spectral evidence (Goss). As another compromise, the court was moved from Salem to Boston, with five of the original nine judges being dismissed. Additionally, Governor Phips released a proclamation pardoning all accused witches after they paid their debt for food and lodging while in prison. England later recalled Phips as Governor in 1696 leaving Justice William Stoughton as acting Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He issued a proclamation on December 17, 1696 as a day of fasting, prayer, and

forgiveness for the Salem Witchcraft Tragedy (Goss). Lastly, the colony paid money to 23 families of the accused as an apology for the wrongdoing.

The short term impact of the Salem Witchcraft Trials led to changes in the court. The use of spectral evidence, the touch test, and reciting the Lord's prayer were no longer allowed as evidence to determine if someone was a witch (Currie). With a new court system in place, the judges used eyewitnesses who actually saw people practicing witchcraft. The courts would rely only on the testimony of the eyewitness, changing the process from guilty until proven innocent to innocent until proven guilty (Currie). This time the majority of those jailed were found innocent. Even though the girls continued to make accusations, no one believed them. Their drama and acting faded. All of sudden, the girls were having fewer seizures and outbursts, since they were not getting attention. Many of the newly freed prisoners tried to return to their farms, but discovered that their land had been sold while they were in jail. Furthermore, only one judge, Samuel Sewall, apologized for his wrongdoing in the Salem Witchcraft Trials in 1697. Sewall stated, "being sensible as to the guilt contracted on the opening of the late commission of Oyer and Terminer at Salem (to which the order of this day relates) he is upon many accounts, more concerned than any he knows of, Desires to take the Blame and Shame of it, asking pardon of men, and especially desiring prayers that God, who has unlimited authority, would pardon that sin and all his other sins, personal and relative" (Rice 99). Sewall devoted the rest of his life as a judge to social causes such as anti-slavery and equality for women (Laplante). Lastly, Ann Putnam, one of the main accusers, apologized thirteen years later. At age 26, she confessed to the in Salem Village



church stating, “I desire to be humbled before God. It was a great delusion of Satan that deceived me in that sad time. I did it not out of any anger, malice, or ill will...I desire to lie in the dust and earnestly beg forgiveness of all those I have given just cause of sorrow and offense, and whose relations were taken away and accused” (Kent 40). Lastly, an Act in 1711 cleared the names of many people who had been accused of witchcraft as the stigma had made life difficult for them (Benoit).

The long-term impact of the use of spectral evidence in the Salem Witchcraft Trials is traced back to Samuel Sewall’s diary. Sewall’s diary which began in 1674 recounts the trials and is considered one of the most important historical documents of the time period (Baker). The witchcraft judges had represented the wealthy. Today, the judges represent everyone equally. Courtroom trials and procedures have evolved over time, and the use of scientific evidence continues to improve. People on trial are considered innocent until enough real evidence proves they are guilty; people have the right to a fair trial and a lawyer (Waxman). The term “witch hunt” is still used today against people suspected of wrongdoing. In 1953, Senator Joseph McCarthy accused 205 members within our government as Communists. He led a modern day “witch hunt” that created panic and fear across the United States (Benoit). In 1992, three hundred years after the trials, a memorial wall was dedicated to the Salem Witchcraft Trial victims in Danvers, Massachusetts formerly known as Salem. In 2001, the Massachusetts governor cleared the names of five executed witches who were wrongly put to death after their descendants protested (Benoit).

The use of spectral evidence in the Salem Witchcraft Trials created a conflict that still affects us today. These early courtroom trials were based on speculative evidence as the accused were guilty until proven innocent. Outlawing the use of spectral evidence improved courtroom trial procedures to ensure that eyewitness evidence was used. Many compromises were made in letting go some religious beliefs and superstitions. In our modern judiciary system, people are considered innocent until proven guilty and provided a lawyer to defend themselves. Even today, the Salem Witchcraft Trials matter as accused people have a right to a fair trial. In conclusion, the Salem Witchcraft Trials have withstood the test of time as people are still fascinated by the conflict and compromise of this topic.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Goss, K. David. *The Salem Witch Trials: A Reference Guide*. Greenwood Press, 2008. This book was helpful in understanding the compromise. Governor Phips ordered Mather to write a sympathetic narrative. As public opinion was changing, Governor Phips had to defend his poor judgment in allowing the trials to occur with spectral evidence.

MacBain, Jenny. *The Salem Witch Trials: A Primary Source History of the Witchcraft Trials in Salem, Massachusetts*. Rosen Publishing, 2003. Primary Sources in American History. This book explains how Judge Stoughton did not follow the normal court rules while in charge of the Court of Oyer and Terminer. It also shows how the judges acted as bullies.

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about a Judge who resigned from the court over the procedures and use of spectral evidence. He did not believe in it but chose to quit instead of standing up to everyone.

### **Secondary Sources**

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Boraas, Tracey. *The Salem Witch Trials*. Mankato, Capstone Press, 2004. This book contains real photographs showing a 1992 memorial dedicated to those who died in the Salem Witchcraft Trials in Danvers, Massachusetts which shows the long lasting impact this has had over time. It is a compromise in a way in dealing with needless loss of lives. A court record shown of Tituba's statement led historians to believe there was no evidence that she practiced voodoo which was helpful to prove.

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Landau, Elaine. *Witness the Salem Witchcraft Trials*. Enslow Publishers, 2006. Explore Colonial America with Elaine Landau. This book highlights the use of spectral evidence and how people began to doubt it as wealthy, prominent people were now being accused. It also argues that land rights had something to do with the trials as well as Ergot poisoning. Many people who were accused had their land taken away from them.

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