The Salem Witch Trials

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| **Recommended Sites and Books** | **Sites:**   * See the links at [Ogram's 17th-century Colonial New England site.](http://www.17thc.us) * [Witchcraft in Salem Village site](http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/) at the University of Virginia's Crossroads site includes verbatim transcripts, maps, Increase Mather's *Cases of Conscience concerning Evil Spirits,* and other documentary evidence. * [The Salem Witchcraft Papers](http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/texts/) provides the full three-volume text of Salem Witchcraft Papers: Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692, ed. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum. * [Douglas Lindner's site](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/salem.htm) on the trials includes letters and Cotton Mather's *Memorable Providences*, among other documents. See especially his [overview of the events](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/SAL_ACCT.HTM) with links to information on the judges and other participants. * [Witchcraft Accusations](http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/~bcr/salem/salem.html). This well-done interactive site provides a map and a timeline as well as information on accusers and the accused. * Margo Burns's page on ["Arthur Miller's *The Crucible:* Fact and Fiction"](http://www.17thc.us/docs/fact-fiction.shtml) provides a historical perspective on the play. See also her helpful [annotated bibliography](http://www.17thc.us/bibliography.php) on the witch trials. (New URL and expanded bibliography) * [PBS site examining the theory that ergot poisoning](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/case_salem/index.html) (similar to the influence of LSD ) from fungus on rye caused the outbreak.   [**Books: history**](http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/witch.htm#history) [**Books: creative works inspired by the trials**](http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/witch.htm#fiction) |
| **Background** | Although the accusations of witchcraft at Salem described by Cotton Mather in *The Wonders of the Invisible World* have become the most notorious example of the hysteria about witches, the events of 1692-1693 were neither the first nor the only instances of such accusations in New England. Individual cases include that of Mistress Ann Hibbens, a Boston widow hanged for witchcraft in 1656 In *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, Carole F. Karlsen comments that Hibbens had been excommunicated from the Boston church sixteen years before her witchcraft trial but was not formally charged until her neighbors accused her of maleficium (killing cattle and so forth) as well as evil actions such as knowing that other people were talking about her. A previous outbreak of witchcraft hysteria had occurred thirty years earlier in Hartford, Connecticut, during which thirteen people were accused of witchcraft, four of whom were duly convicted and executed. An outbreak at Fairfield, Connecticut, occurring at the same time as the Salem outbreak, resulted in seven accusations and one conviction, but no executions.  According Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's account in *Salem Possessed*, the outbreak at Salem began in the winter of 1691 when the girls of the village, aided by Tituba and John Indian, a West Indian slave couple, attempted to tell their futures by using a makeshift crystal ball. On February 29, 1692, warrants were issued for three women: Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and Tituba, the former two proclaiming their innocence while the latter confessed. As events unfolded, 185 people were accused at Salem, 141 women and 44 men. Of that number, 52 women and 7 men were tried; 26 women and 5 men were convicted; and 14 women and 5 men were executed, the last group on September 22, 1692. The true end to the trials of the Court of Oyer and Terminer, however, came on October 3, 1692 when Increase Mather, father of Cotton Mather, preached a sermon that was soon published as [*Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits Personating Men*.](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/speccol/) Condemning without qualification the spectral evidence upon which several cases had relied, Increase Mather declared that "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned" (Boyer and Nissenbaum 10). |
| .**The Accused** | Examination of a WitchWho were the witches? Karlsen's demographic analysis of the available data shows that not those accused but those convicted of witchcraft in Salem and elsewhere were overwhelmingly women over the age of forty, with women over sixty being at an especially high risk for both accusation and conviction. The men convicted tended to be the family members of convicted female witches. Further, although those convicted of witchcraft in England tended to be poor, those accused of witchcraft in Salem were frequently relatively wealthy or powerful; for example, in addition to the wives of selectmen and some wealthy widows, two sons of former Governor Simon Bradstreet were accused but not tried, as was Captain John Alden, son of the legendary John and Priscilla Alden of Plymouth Colony.  *Examination of a Witch*, by T.H. Matteson 1853. Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum and [The Salem Witch Trials Memorial](http://www.salemweb.com/witches.htm) |
| **Reasons** | Explanations differ as to the underlying causes of the outbreak at Salem. Boyer and Nissenbaum argue that what happened at Salem was the outgrowth of conflicts between the rising mercantile class and the people who were tied to a land-based economy--that is, that the wealth and power of the merchants "were achieved at the expense of the farmers" (Karlsen 212). Claiming that Boyer and Nissenbaum's theory does not account for the overwhelming proportion of women accused, Karlsen interprets the economic issues somewhat differently. In addition to the sexual and doctrinal threat posed by independent women, Karlsen contends that the many accused who were women with property and no male heirs constituted a threat to an economic system based on the "orderly transfer of property from father to son" (217); in short, that such women were viewed as tying up the colony's wealth without performing the essential functions of bearing and raising male children. Too, a widow who inherited the traditional "widow's third" from her husband was competing with her sons and stepsons for scarce resources. A similar case is that of Abigail Faulkner, who took charge of the family estate when her husband became incapacitated and was almost immediately denounced as a witch.  Although several of those accused were wealthy widows, [Martha Carrier](http://www.curriculumunits.com/crucible/background/1692-Carrier.html) was not. Born Martha Allen, Carrier had married beneath her station and relied on the town for support. She seems to have been regarded as unduly outspoken throughout her life, although unlike some of the accused she was not considered to be sexually wayward as well. When she and her family came down with smallpox in 1690, according to Karlsen, "the town responded as if she had deliberately created an epidemic" (99). The Carrier children who confessed did so under provocation: Richard and Andrew, Martha Carrier's sons, had been "tyed . . . Neck and Heels till the Blood was ready to come out of their Noses" and retracted their confessions once their lives were no longer endangered by pleas of innocence (Karlsen 101). In the account excerpted in our anthology, Cotton Mather does not add that he attended Carrier's execution on August 19, 1692. |
| **Further Reading** | **Books: History**   * Booth, Sally Smith. *The Witches of Early America*. New York: Hastings House, 1975. BF 1573 B 66 * Boyer, Paul, and Stephen Nissenbaum. *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974. BF 1576 B6 * Boyer, Paul, and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds. *Salem Village Witchcraft*. Northeastern, 1993. * Demos, John. *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft And The Culture Of Early New England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. * Hansen, Chadwick. *Witchcraft at Salem*. New York: Braziller, 1969. BF1576.H26 1970 (2 copies available) * Hoffer, Peter Charles. *The Devil's Disciples: Masters of the Salem Witchcraft Trials.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996. * Karlsen, Carol F. *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England.* New York: Vintage, 1987. BF 1576 K37 1989. * Rosenthal, Bernard. *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692*. New York: Cambridge U P, 1993. * Starkey, Marion L. *The Devil in Massachusetts*. 1949. Reprint. New York: Anchor, 1989. |