

Topic Page: [Salem witch trials](#)

Definition: **Salem Witch Trials** from *Chambers Dictionary of World History*

An outbreak of hysteria in colonial Massachusetts in which accusations were made that witchcraft was being practised. The situation quickly outran the control of the town authorities. Arrests were made on the unsupported testimony of young girls and 19 people were executed. Judge Samuel Sewall later publicly confessed that the trials had been in error and that he believed no witchcraft had been practised. The ramifications of the episode have been attributed to the breakdown of Puritan control, the tensions of economic and social change focused on conflict between Salem Village and Salem Town, and wider provincial fears (awakened by the recall of the charter) as to its future after the Glorious Revolution.

Summary Article: **Salem Witchcraft Trials**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

In the summer of 1692 all of eastern Massachusetts trembled in fear as neighbors and kinfolk accused one another of practicing witchcraft. Hundreds were jailed, and in the first round of the ensuing trials from June 2 to September 21, 1692—the most extensive mass trials of suspected criminals in the colonial period of American history—all of the defendants were convicted. Fifteen women and four men were hanged, and one eighty-year-old male defendant was pressed to death with heavy stones for refusing to accept the authority of the court. Four of the detained suspects had died, and many more were sick.

The trials have become a watchword for unthinking panic and religious excess, but historians have recovered the broader context of the trials. This includes widespread belief in magic and countermagic, strong currents of anti-Catholicism in the dominant Protestant theology of the region coupled with fear of the Catholic missionaries and their Indian allies on the northern and western frontiers, and a brutal Indian war that sent refugees into the Salem area.

Historians have also uncovered the inception of the crisis in a tangled web of mistrust and animosity in the Salem Village section of the town of Salem. Some in the village wanted to retain the services of Minister Samuel Parris; others were opposed to Parris's retention. Quarrels over the retention of ministers were common in New England towns, but this one was carried on with great venom because it overlay a struggle between the two most powerful families in Salem Village, the Putnams and the Porters, over disputed property and political office.

In the winter of 1692 (one of the most brutally cold winters of the age) the inexplicable illness of Parris's daughter and niece seemed to afflict other girls in the village. Adults were fearful but baffled until the girls accused three local women, one of them the Parris's slave Tituba, of bewitching them. The prodding of parents and ministers had also played a role in focusing what might have been a combination of adolescent anxiety and play-acting into accusations of crime. One historian has likened the criminal hearings at which these accusations were made to modern child abuse cases, in which incautious or overly enthusiastic prosecutors may have encouraged children, who were eager to please adults, to make false accusations. Historians also have suggested that the young accusers may have been suffering from psychological traumas, food poisoning, and a sense of sinfulness fostered by religious teachings.

For the legal authorities called in to hear the cases, Salem's troubles became a microcosm of the ills of the colony, for the colony itself seemed under a malign spell. As a consequence of rising up against its royally imposed government in 1689, Massachusetts had lost its old charter of government and feared for its continued existence. To many, including such leading Puritan ministers as Cotton Mather, it seemed that the Devil was abroad and doing mischief.

Thus, when in May the newly appointed governor, William Phips, returned from England with a new charter of government, he did not wait for the assembly to meet and create regular courts but rather fashioned a special court. To its bench were named laymen who had experience on high courts under the old charter, including the merchant Samuel Sewall and the farmer Nathaniel Saltonstall, as well as ambitious politicians such as William Stoughton, the lieutenant governor, and local Salem justices John Hathorne (whose descendant Nathaniel Hawthorne would movingly re-create the terror of the trial) and Jonathan Corwin.

Despite their familiarity with courts and legal pleading, none of the judges was trained in law. All believed that there was a Devil and that he contracted secretly with men and women to do evil in the colony. Witches thus had, at least in theory, the power to leave their bodies and in spectral form assault their victims. By the late seventeenth century learned English jurists had become skeptical of testimony about spectral assaults, but the judges sitting in Salem, led by Stoughton and influenced by a letter from Mather, decided to admit into testimony spectral evidence, in particular the uncorroborated testimony of adolescent girls regarding visitations (and torments) by otherwise invisible wraiths. Presiding judge Stoughton also allowed into evidence the confessions of witches about flights through the air on poles to midnight masses in open fields. Juries, browbeaten by the bench and terrified by the apparent anguish of the girls, convicted all the defendants.

Saltonstall was so appalled at the work of the court that he quietly resigned from the bench. The leading ministers (except for Mather, who publicly approved the conduct of the trials) protested against the proceedings and convinced minister Increase Mather, Cotton's father, to turn their criticism into a tract on the dangers of believing spectral evidence. He agreed that spectral visitations might be the Devil's instrument to fool the credulous and cast blame on the innocent. Increase Mather's essay convinced Phips to stop the trials. They would reconvene in the winter, but this time spectral evidence was not allowed. In the winter and spring of 1693, juries acquitted all but three of the fifty defendants, and these, along with all others still in jail, Phips pardoned in May 1693. Stoughton resigned from the new court in fury.

The end of the Salem witchcraft trials brought to an end prosecution for witchcraft in New England. Although the ghosts and demons of the spirit world remained a staple of folk culture and folk tales, judges rejected Stoughton's precedent. Neighbors still complained to the magistrates that so-and-so was a witch, but officials did not credit the stories. Indeed, in the early 1700s ministers and magistrates cooperated to expose an episode of fraudulent and spiteful accusations. Even Cotton Mather became convinced that mistakes were made.

Behind the changing conduct of the English and New England courts lay a more sweeping and potent shift in the way that educated elites (including judges) viewed the world. The new consensus about evidence at trial was part of the growing importance of experimental science in Western thought. In England, the work of such scientists as Isaac Newton, William Harvey, and Robert Boyle did not banish the invisible world—Boyle believed in witches and Newton was a mystic—but they and their followers

relied on experimentally verifiable results, not phantoms and mysteries.



Examination of a Witch. 1853. Thompkins H. Matteson, artist. Possibly inspired by John Greenleaf Whittier's Supernaturalism of New England (1847): 'Mary Fisher, a young girl, was seized upon by Deputy Governor Bellingham in the absence of Governor Endicott, and shamefully stripped for the purpose of ascertaining whether she was a witch, with the Devil's mark upon her.' Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

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Peter Charles Hoffer

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