

The Salem Witch Trials: The Impact on the United States Society

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Over three centuries ago, the horrific event we now know as the Salem witch trials began. The Salem witch trials are seen as a cautionary tale about the dangers of mass hysteria, paranoia, religious extremism, and abuse of power and how that has influenced legal procedures, political discourse, and popular culture.

Today, Salem is known as the Halloween capital by many news channels. The vibrancy of all the festivities light up the city throughout the entire month of October. Due to its gruesome history and cultural significance, it gained a lot of attention and traction. There are many museums, hauntings, festivities, and attractions that boost the tourism and commercialization of the city. But underneath all the tourism, we can dig deeper and look at the history and its true influence.

Let's start at the beginning. Salem Massachusetts was established and founded in autumn of 1626 by a Puritan man, known as Roger Conant. He came from a fishing settlement known as Cape Ann and brought along the Protestant faith that the English crown adopted. To commemorate his memory, there is a 9-foot-tall statue that sits between Brown Street and Washington Square near Salem Commons. Many people confuse this statue with a male witch, but it is Roger Conant depicted as a Puritan man with a broad-brimmed hat, flowing cape, and grasping the trunk of an oak tree.

During this time, new and prosperous land was very difficult to come by. There were threats of war from the native american tribes, struggles with healthy crops, and new charters to be taken into account for.

In 1486, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, also known as the "Hammer of Witches," was published in Europe as an influential witchcraft and demonology text. This text contributed to the fear and belief of witches that came to the New England colonies. It expressed the evilness of

witchcraft and to spread the message to kill all witches. The *Malleus Maleficarum* stated that “When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil.” This essentially points the finger at women. Although, as time progressed, more people started to consider and believe that anyone was capable of practicing witchcraft. This included people close to them, including men and children.

In 1689, Samuel Parris became the minister of Salem village. Reverend Samuel Parris desired strict control over Salem to reestablish the political and religious control over Salem. This resulted in his actions of cracking down on the townspeople to stay in their line and do as they should. This intensity would create tension to build within the community. While there were not many that agreed with Parris, Thomas Putnam did and would become great friends. The home of the Parris family consisted of Samuel Parris, his wife Elizabeth Parris, his 9-year-old daughter Betty Parris, his 11-year-old family member Abigail Williams, and an enslaved woman known as Tituba.

One night in January of 1692, the quiet peace of the Parris home would be disrupted by screaming and writhing coming from Betty and Abigail. They investigated, but their convulsions were deemed to occur without explanation. The Parris family would continue to investigate and analyze as much as possible to attempt to cure this disease with at-home remedies. Uneasy, Samuel Parris would call on the village physician and he would come to the final conclusion of the girls being “under an evil hand,” this kick-starting the first concept of witchcraft. Because of the culture that Salem adopted, the concept of witchcraft ignited like wildfire and was quickly the talk of the town.

With this widespread cry of witchcraft throughout Salem village, more girls started to claim that they also were experiencing fits. These afflicted girls would consist of not just Abigail Williams and Betty Parris but also Ann Putnam Jr., Mercy Lewis, Mary Warren, and Elizabeth

Hubbard. These 6 girls started the grueling process of accusations and would prosecute many in court by screaming, contorting, and claiming to “see” things. The performance that these girls played created an ominous and suffocating anxiety in the town. By 1693, the last accusation, totaling over 200 people ranging from 4 years old, Dorothy Good, to 81 years old, Giles Corey.

The accusations would start with the enslaved woman of the Parris household, Tituba. Under extreme pressure and vicious questioning tactics, Tituba would confess that she had been practicing witchcraft. Through her extreme remorse for the practice, she was pardoned. When questioned as to who else could be practicing witchcraft, she accused Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, solidifying their fates in the trials. As more and more accusations started to surface, more prominent members of the community would be accused such as Rebecca Nurse and Martha Corey. In Danvers, Massachusetts, Rebecca Nurse’s Homestead replica stands next to a replica of what type of communal area would have been utilized in the time of the Salem witch trials. This area could be where they may have had church in the morning and prosecutions in the evenings due to resources and funds that were available.

Throughout the trials and prosecutions, 25 innocent women, men, and children were condemned to their fate. But the question remains of “why did so many suffer?” There are many theories and ideas that attempt to explain the phenomenons, but they aren’t so difficult to believe. Majority of the accused were people in the town that didn't have the most upstanding reputations. If someone were to miss church for any extended period of time, did something out of line, or even wore the wrong clothes, they were deemed guilty. These stereotypes often led directly to accusations against these townspeople.

In the trials, there was a consistent lose-lose situation that would occur. If you were unfortunate enough to be accused of witchcraft, you had to testify to prove your innocence. But,

the most challenging part of this was no matter how you testified, you would suffer. Thus, when being arrested, your fate was essentially sealed. If one were to testify that they were not a witch, they would be tested in torturous and vigorous ways, possibly even to their death. If one “confessed” to practicing witchcraft, they were exploited to attempt to find other witches and possibly even being killed in the end.

A well respected, practical, and forward-thinking landowner, John Proctor went through this gruesome process himself at 60-years old. When the Salem Witch Trials occurred, Proctor was skeptical of the whole ordeal. Mary Warren, one of the accusers, lived with John Proctor as a maid at the time of the witch trials. John Proctor forced Mary Warren to confess about her lies and deceit and claimed to “beat the devil out of her” in May of 1692. This did not go over well with the other accusers and essentially condemned the Proctor family. John Proctor became the first male accused of witchcraft. Though he claimed not to practice witchcraft, he would still be tried and sent through the cycle of questioning. Throughout the questioning, John Proctor would eventually grow tired of the painful questioning and “confessed”, sentencing him.

When one was arrested, they would be deprived of everything that they owned and it would go to the authorities according to the law. This would help cover the pay of the prisoner’s jail costs and to support their family. When it comes to the land, it would go to the state of Massachusetts, but would essentially be up for grabs. Greed and envy became a major difficulty within the village. With the struggle of having fertile soil for thriving crops, people would dispute or argue over land. Some theories even led to the conclusion that the girls were being utilized by their families to accuse others of witchcraft to take their land and wealth. With this, some may have utilized this chance to accuse others to harm them for their personal grievances or quest for power.

These convictions and accusations all stood on and were backed up by spectral evidence. According to the Salem Witch Museum, “Spectral evidence refers to a witness testimony that the accused person’s spirit or spectral shape appeared to him/her witness in a dream at the time the accused person’s physical body was at another location...” This essentially states that if you see someone in your dream, you have grounds to accuse them and no physical evidence was used for any of the convictions. On top of accusations built on non-physical evidence, everyone accused would have to represent themselves and testify in court without support. There was an absence of lawyers and defense attorneys and it became a “he said, she said” type of trial.

Ways that the accused would claim their innocence through the trials would be heinous and vile torture methods. While behind bars with no one to listen, their trials would extend to be long and vigorous. There were multiple ways that people would be questioned in court. They would even be given an ultimatum that if they confessed, they had the chance of being let go. The courts would also use their confession as a chance to figure out who else may be a witch.

When Rebecca Nurse had to represent herself in court, she was around 71 years old. Because of her age, she struggled to hear. Her defense was “I have nobody to look to but God.” But as a rebuttal, the judges would ask her about her earlier statements in the trials and she unfortunately did not hear the question, therefore, she did not answer. Her silence was seen as guilt and was labeled as a witch. Susannah Martin was no stranger to witch accusations but chose to prove her innocence by doing something that no witch is able to do. She freely quoted the bible, but that was deemed an “innocent and godly show” by the judges.

While accusations occurred, some authorities conducted physical examinations to look for a “witches' mark.” This invasive search would analyze their bodies, specifically nipples and breasts. The “witches' mark” is a physical mole, wart, or blemish that was believed to be where a

witch's familiar, imp or devil, would come suck blood from. Familiars are a supernatural spirit that embody an animal that is closely associated with witches or magicians. They are seen to assist with spiritually, guidance, and protection, but in 1692, they were seen as low-ranking demons who took the form of animals. This was seen as collaboration with the devil. A major belief of the witchcraft community is that this practice was genetic among women. Part of what the accusers would say and symbolize the devil with was a yellow bird. There would also be moments where the young girls would say that a tall black man would be standing behind or beside someone. This was also seen as justifiable evidence that could be used against the accused.

Anyone who battled and took a plea refusal would be faced with extreme and forceful punishment known as Peine Forte et Dure. Giles Corey, at 81-years old, was a victim of this treatment. Sheriff George Corwin would oversee this unlawful incident that would start on September 17. Giles Corey would be stripped down to his bare skin and had a wooden board placed on his chest. On top of these boards, stones would be placed as time proceeded. When asked about his innocence, Giles Corey would respond with the simple phrase of "more weight." Because of the mass amount of weight that was put on top of him, his tongue would be pressed out of his mouth. Corwin saw this as an opportunity to shove Corey's tongue back inside his mouth with his cane. On September 19th, Giles Corey was asked for the last time, "How do you plea?" and his final words were simply "more weight" and was pressed to death.

There were many officials that were a part of the proceedings. According to the archives, the Chief Judge was William Stoughton. Associate Judges consisted of Jonathan Corwin, Thomas Danforth, Bartholomew Gedney, John Richards, Nathaniel Saltonstall, Peter Sargent, Samuel Seawell, Stephen Sewall, Wait Winthrop, and John Hathorne. The Attorney-Generals

were Thomas Newton and Anthony Checkley and finally the Sheriff was George Corwin. One of the three to publicly apologize alongside Ann Putnam Jr. and the Massachusetts General Court was Samuel Sewall in 1697. The other apologies came much later.

John Hathorne was a prominent figure in the Salem witch trials but he never expressed remorse or gave a public apology for the deaths he caused. In 1702, he was promoted to the Superior Court where he later resigned in 1712, followed by his death in 1717. He died at the age of 76. He never once was faced with the consequences of his participation in the Salem witch trials. John Hathorne is not just a judge, but also the great-great-grandfather of the renowned author, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Because of the shame and distress John Hathorne caused Nathaniel Hawthorne did not want to associate himself with his ancestor. He changed his name from Nathaniel Hathorne to Nathaniel Hawthorne, including a “w.” Nathaniel Hawthorne is noted for his works like the *Scarlet Letter* and the *House of the Seven Gables*. 1851 novel, the *House of the Seven Gables* was inspired from this particular house. In 1668, ship owner and merchant, John Turner built this house on the Salem Harbour. This home is one of the beloved historic homes in the United States. In 2007, it became a National Historic Landmark because of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel.

It was June 10th, 1692. Salem village was a quiet and quaint town that struggled to make it through the different seasons of life. A place where the sun used to beam brightly is now fogged with the hazy and grim cloud of paranoia, uncertainty, and anger. On the ladder at Gallows hill, Bridget Bishop, at 60-years-old, would look at the crowd of people who would witness her hanging. During her life, she gained a bad reputation from having multiple marriages, dressing provocatively, and being known from being in and out of many taverns. Fighting for her life and innocence, the crowd yelled for her execution to commence.

Proctor's Ledge Memorial that was built in 2016. In 1692 between June 10th and September 22nd, 19 people would be convicted of witchcraft and hanged. According to the Salem Witch Museum, this memorial may not be the accurate place that represents "Gallows Hill." This information has been lost due to the people of Salem attempting to bury this information because of the shame that suffocates the event. It is currently still being debated as to where these executions took place.

The Salem Witch Trials memorial is a sacred area in the city of Salem that holds the lives and stories of those who lost their lives to the prosecution of the trials. Many souls were taken due to lies, deceit, greed, and envy. Each person executed through the trials has a designated memorial bench for them. People will come and leave offerings and gifts on these benches in respect of those whose lives were taken.

June 10th, the only person to hang was Bridget Bishop. On July 19th, Rebecca Nurse, Sarah Good, Susannah Martin, Elizabeth Howe, and Sarah Wildes would hang. On August 19th, Rev. George Burroughs, Martha Carrier, John Willard, George Jacobs Sr. and John Proctor would all hang. On September 19th, Giles Corey was the only person to be pressed to death. On September 22nd, Martha Corey, Mary Easty, Ann Pudeator, Alice Parker, Mary Parker, Witmot Redd, Margaret Scott, and Samuel Wardwell would all hang.

At the entrance of this beautiful memorial, there are sentences engraved in the stone that these victims may have stated on the day of their execution. On top of these executions, there is an estimate of 21 people who died in prison alone through the span of the trials and afterwards. One of these victims being Dorothy Good, was the 4-year-old daughter of Sarah Good who was hanged at Gallows Hill.

In October of 1692, the situation was deemed unmanageable and Governor William Phipps finally intervened and prohibited the use of spectral evidence. In 1702, the Massachusetts General Courts declared the Salem witch trials unlawful. In 1706, Ann Putnam Jr. became the only accuser to show remorse for her role in the trials and apologized. In 1711, the Massachusetts legislature annulled the convictions of 22 accused persons. The colony proceeded to pay the families of the victims 600 pounds. In 1957, over 2 centuries later, the state of Massachusetts issued a resolution apologizing for the trials formally. In 2001, Governor Jane Swift signed a bill exonerating five women accused during the trials. In 2017, a formal memorial was unveiled for the victims of the trials. In 2022, Governor Charlie Baker signed a bill exonerating the last convicted Salem witch, Elizabeth Johnson Jr.

There are many different theories that have emerged around the origins of the Salem Witch Trials. One theory that has been essentially debunked is based on the girls consuming a fungus called ergot. Ergot is a type of fungus that can cause hallucinations, convulsions, and other symptoms. Ergot would have lived on the rye in bread at the time of the trials. This theory would make sense, but the accusations were very on command and not out of control and would be debunked when Mary Warren and Ann Putnam Jr. would apologize and claim that they were lying. Another theory is based on a particular type of mass hysteria known as Mass Psychogenic Illness. This epidemic hysteria grasped Salem and pushed paranoia and uncertainty through anxiety. Because of the beliefs that the Puritans held, the concept of the devil running rampant throughout the community was a very logical threat and overall terrifying. The devil was a very real creature to the Puritans and they felt afflicted with its presence.

Today, Salem is a city filled with diverse culture on top of its horrid history. Salem is home to the vibrantly rich Peabody Essex Museum which is full of American, Asian, and

maritime art. While the Salem witch trials are one of the most notable historical events, Salem is also known for being one of the most successful harbors. With that, they have a historic site and museum dedicated to maritime history. If you are interested in pirates, like Blackbeard, you'll be able to find something here in Salem to be interested in. On many of the older houses, there are plaques that depict some of its history and who resided there.

The Ropes Mansion may look familiar if you have seen the 1993 fantasy comedy, *Hocus Pocus*. This freeform favorite follows a witch trio that was resurrected by a teenage boy on Halloween night. Because of this movie, tourism rates skyrocket in Salem and essentially lead to Salem being designated as the "Halloween capital." While it may not have been the only contributing factor to its tourism, it was definitely a good kick-start at the beginning. There is a 6-foot-tall bronze statue of Elizabeth Montgomery from the 1964 tv show, *Bewitched*, that sits at the corner of Essex Street and Washington Street. This statue was given to Salem in 2005, around the time the 2005 *Bewitched* movie aired.

In 2023, I was lucky enough to attend a walking tour around Salem. The tour guide honed in on the impact that the *Bewitched* statue had on the Salem locals. When this statue was built, it rocked the boat with the Salem community and was vandalized in 2022 with red spray paint. While some saw the statue as a positive connection to the show and boosted tourism, others criticized it for commercializing and even bringing up the topic of the city's history. As tourists continued to learn more about the city's horrid history, some tourists would even vandalize the city itself. In big red spray painted letters, the word "SHAME" would be spelt out across a section of buildings. This most likely contributed to the vandalism in 2022.

Now that the history is understood and there is an understanding of how the city is today, we are able to look at the aspects it has contributed to within our society. The legal system is one

of the most obvious differences that we are able to navigate and see. At the time of the trials, the Magna Carta was the guidelines for legal practices. The Magna Carta was signed into law in June of 1215 by King John of England. This was significant in stating that the King was not above the law and also built a foundation for non-royalty citizens. The Magna Carta guaranteed rights for “all free men” including protection from arbitrary imprisonment, the right to a fair trial, and the right to property. This only allowed the deprivation of life, liberty, and property according to the law. But if we fast forward to 1775, the Declaration of Independence separated the United States from England. In 1787, the U.S. Constitution was signed into law, establishing the foundation for the United States government and its principles. The Salem witch trials really highlighted the need for due process. They allowed spectral evidence and many were able to see why spectral evidence is inherently flawed due to its lack of physical evidence. The due process clause is highlighted and stated in the fifth amendment, “No person can be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.” This protects all citizens in the process of trials.

Along with the idea of due process, we also stumble upon the presumption of innocence within the fifth amendment. While it is never explicitly stated in the constitution, there are many policies, clauses, and amendments that support the claim of “innocent until proven guilty.” Within the Salem witch trials, when one was accused, they were immediately considered guilty and had to prove their innocence.

On June 13th, 1966, the U.S. Supreme Court made their decision for *Miranda v. Arizona* case, establishing that all criminal suspects must be advised of their rights before interrogation. These rights are known as “ You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law, you have the right to talk to a lawyer and have him/her present with you while you are being questioned, if you cannot afford to hire a lawyer, one will be

appointed to represent you before any questioning if you wish, you can decide at any time to exercise these rights and not answer any questions or make any statements.” There is also a waiver of rights if one continues the interrogation. This protects the right of citizens to avoid any possibilities of self-incrimination. When looking back at the Salem witch trials, we easily notice that the accused were forced to represent themselves and prove their innocence and were never given an option otherwise. There were no opportunities for help within the trials and were only accused with no questions about how they were possibly innocent, many were even discarded and turned down when attempting to express their innocence. If this process occurred today, the case would immediately be thrown out due to the zero tolerance for violation of citizen and human rights and this would be grounds to fire anyone involved in this prosecution.

There were many periods of political and social unrest which established a similar kind of paranoia in society. In 1950, this was shown in the Red Scare which was a period of public anxiety and fear over the rise of communist and socialist ideologies. In 1953, Arthur Miller published the *Crucible*. A dramatized and partially fictional depiction of the 1692 Salem witch trials. Not only was this to express the story of Salem, but also served as an allegory for McCarthyism which was known as the Second Red Scare which is essentially part 2 of the Red Scare. Since then, the *Crucible* has been considered as part of many different education systems as text that would be explored in public schools. In 2022, Kimberly Belflower created a playwright known as “John Proctor is the Villain.” This play follows a group of students battling for the right to be narrators of their own lives and they break down the *Crucible* and John Proctor’s character.

Religion was also a major factor within the trials, especially due to the fact that church and state were not separate. Witchcraft was a legal accusation that people were prosecuted for.

When honing in on the religious narrative of the Salem witch trials, we approach the idea of the origins of the universe, meaning of life, and afterlife. With Puritans adopting Protestant beliefs, they believe that salvation is achieved through faith alone in Jesus Christ. The Bible has the ultimate authority and everyone is able to have direct access to God. With religion having a hold on the political system, this creates a sense that you must abide by the laws of the Bible. If one was seen practicing witchcraft or “making deals with the devil,” this would be grounds to prosecute them. This created a political and religious dogma in the 17th century surrounding the Puritan beliefs. While the U.S. is densely packed in Christianity, there must also be a respect for the first amendment rights that are freedom of speech, press, assembly, petition, and religion. When establishing freedom of religion, the first amendment includes all religions unless there is a violation of freedom of speech, such as threats, or if someone is intentionally harming another. If the U.S. were to continue to rely heavily on the rule of the Bible, this would violate the constitutional rights of citizens and push the separation of church and state.

In modern-day, we are able to approach the idea of “witch” in a different light. Because of the term and how it is related to the trials, modern-day wiccans or witches “take back” the term and recreate it as their own. Wiccans base their practice off of personal empowerment, connection to nature, and positive purposes. Because of the extreme fear, paranoia, and uncertainty surrounding witches in the past, it has been embedded into our culture as a subconscious fear. This was not the only witch trial that was conducted, there are many records of other witch-hunts that occurred throughout history in different parts of the world. This spread the controversy surrounding witches, not just an “American” shift in culture, but more international as well.

So, how do we do better from now on? We are already making massive progress with fixing our legal system, allowing freedom of religion and utilizing critical thinking and problem solving skills. But, in order to fully do better, we must remember history because it is a vital aspect of progression. As time continues and progresses, more unusual or different practices and beliefs will emerge and it is important to adopt the trait of acceptance and curiosity rather than being afraid or shaming someone because of something that we deem “different.” Pushing the norms of acceptance and embracing our differences and breaking down stereotypes will keep everyone safe and happy. The self-awareness of understanding that in other cultures, we are considered different.

Why is this so important? Think back to the last exoneration of the final person accused of witchcraft. It occurred in 2022, 330 years after it occurred. 11 to 13 generations later there was finally justice for someone in the past. This happened because of a false accusation because someone was “working with the devil.” There are also assumptions about the witches and the fact that they were never properly buried or mourned over because of these accusations.

In today’s society many issues that we encounter are due to the fact that somebody is seen as “different” or doesn't align with the social norms adopted within society. This is the same reason that so many people were condemned in the trials. When we stigmatize people based on their ideas and self-expression, we condemn them to isolation and leave room for resentment to build. These differences can range from football teams to religion or political parties.

Football teams don’t seem like they would play a major part in debates in arguments, and they usually don’t unless there is an encounter with a die-hard fan. But when it comes to politics and religion, there are so many differences and attempts at control that there are many instances where lectured, heated debates, and even death threats become normal. This concept of

threatening someone becoming normal is something that should never occur, especially over something that is built to divide us.

Religion is bound to create differences in society, but that makes it ten times more vital and valuable to understand and utilize traits of acceptance and embrace. Religion is a very versatile topic. Even defining religion is something that becomes a topic to debate.

Understanding that there are topics that we will not agree with and may not even understand becomes important when learning to respect others. Respect is one of the most vital aspects of someone but also the most misunderstood aspects at the same time.

In summary, it's extremely important to respect one another, even if we don't understand some of their beliefs. At the end of it all, we can loop around to the concept of the golden rule, "treat others the way you want to be treated." Respect isn't rocket science, it's a basic human value. Some people may need to reevaluate the way that they show respect to others. It's not just important to respect others but also, the past, and utilizing this information to make the future a better place for everyone.

The Salem witch trials are not something that should ever be swept under a rug. While some ancestors are the reason it happens, it's important for us to embrace the raw and unfiltered history lesson that lies within it. Thank you to the Salem witch trials for explaining what manipulation, deceit, and disrespect can look like and how it can shift cultures and ideas.

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