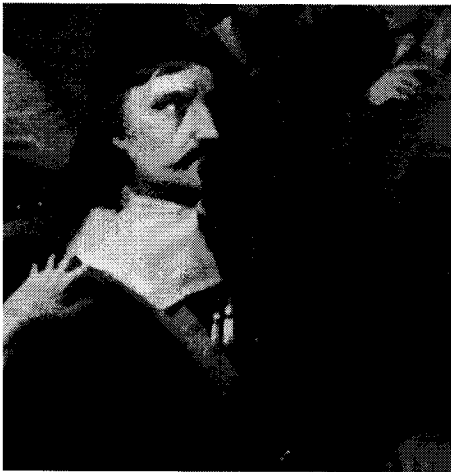


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# What Caused The Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)



# What Caused the Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?

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On September 19, 1692, 81-year-old Giles Cory lay beneath several rough-sawn boards piled high with rocks. A tough old man, Giles had refused to testify on his own behalf in the Salem witchcraft trials. As another stone was added, his last words are believed to have been "More weight!" Something had gone terribly wrong. Why in the summer months of 1692 was Giles Cory pressed to death and 19 other Salem, Massachusetts, residents hanged?

Perhaps for this reason, Puritans set a very high standard for themselves. In their own words, they were creating "a city upon a hill," a model of right belief and good conduct for the world to follow. It was like living in a glass house; every naughty word, every secret kiss, every angry gesture was there for God, if not the world, to hear and see. There was pressure in just being alive.

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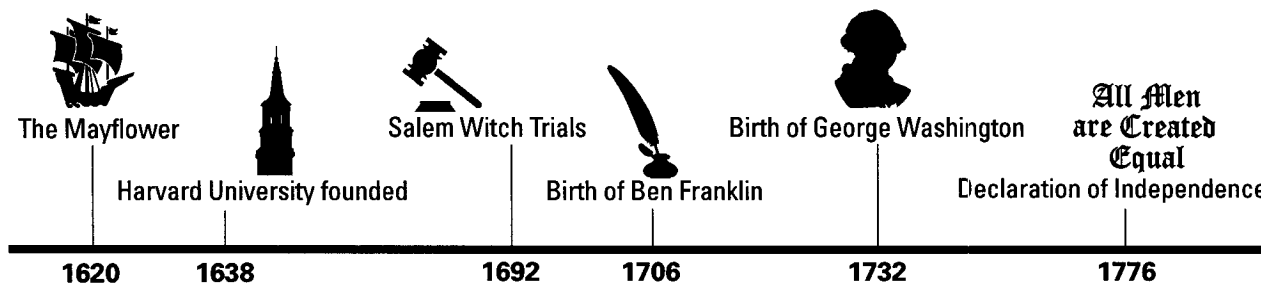
Beginning in 1620 and continuing throughout the 1600s, a large number of English immigrants arrived in that part of North America known as New England. The leaders of these settlers were **Puritans**. Puritans were Protestant Christians who were unhappy with their mother church in England. They came to the new world so they could practice their Christianity in its purest form.

To help guide them through this difficult life, Puritans turned to the Bible. Puritans were **fundamentalists**; they believed that every word in the Bible was the true word of God and was to be followed to the letter.

But God was not the only supernatural power in this Puritan world. There was a darker force lurking in the wilderness. This force was the Devil, also known as Satan. The Devil was as sneaky as he was real. He could enter the body of a weak-willed person and recruit that person to become a witch. (In more precise terms, a woman who made a pact with the Devil was called a **witch**; a man was called a **wizard**.) Once under Satan's power, the witch or wizard could cause all kinds of trouble – shipwrecks, illness, even murder.

The New England landscape and the Puritan belief system fit naturally together. Both were stern taskmasters. The New England climate was harsh with cold, unforgiving winters. New England soil was rocky and gave grudgingly of its corn, wheat, and leafy vegetables. Puritanism was equally demanding. Puritans believed in **predestination**, the idea that God elects before birth who will go to Heaven and who will not. Puritans lived with the possibility that they were damned to Hell. The Puritan ethic of hard work was partly an attempt to prove to themselves and others that they were among the elect.

Throughout 17th century New England, witchcraft was a crime punishable by death. Because the stakes were so high, evidence had to be solid. This was not easy, because the contract between the Devil and the soon-to-be witch took place inside the witch's mind. The most sought-after type of evidence by the courts was admission of guilt. Admissions of witchcraft did



sometimes occur when a person believed he or she was practicing it. Such an admission often got the accused off the hook and out of the noose.

According to Salem historians Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, the next most reliable form of evidence was supernatural strengths, weaknesses or unusual physical characteristics. A man who could hold a rifle, arm extended, with his finger in the barrel, was suspect. A woman who botched the words when saying the Lord's Prayer might be the Devil's agent. A person with an unexpected flap of skin growing on the body, the so-called "witch's tit," was a candidate for the gallows.

Two other kinds of evidence of witchcraft were considered less persuasive, although they seem to have influenced certain New England magistrates. One was anger followed by mischief – a sidelong glance by the suspected witch followed quickly by an accident to the victim. The last and most fragile evidence was **spectral evidence**, testimony by the afflicted that they were "visited" by some demonic form.

Because the victim's story of a spectral visitation was impossible to verify, it was regarded as flimsy evidence when taken alone.

How common were witchcraft trials in the American colonies? In his book *Entertaining Satan* (1981), John Demos says that, not counting Salem, there were 93 cases in New England in the 17th century in which someone was tried in a court of law for being a witch. Sixteen people were put to death. At this same time witch trials were occurring in England, but the rates were lower.

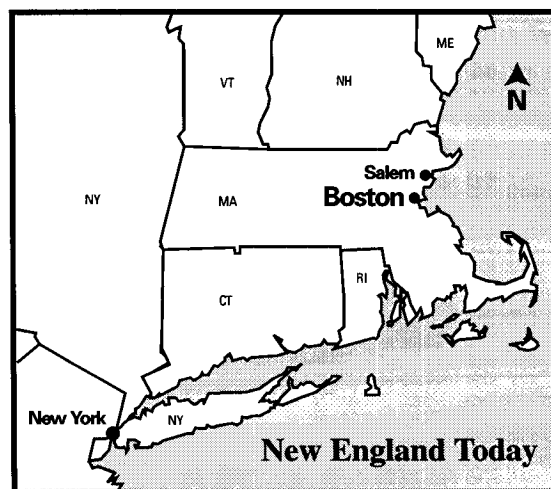
Sixteen witch hangings outside of Salem between 1620 and 1700 is a striking fact, but it seldom makes the history books. What put

witchcraft front and center in American colonial history were the events of one year, in one town. These were the famous Salem, Massachusetts, witch trials of 1692.

In a 15 week period from June 10 through September 22, 1692, 19 men and women from the Salem area were hanged for witchcraft. Another, an 81-year-old man, was pressed to death by stones in an unsuccessful effort to force him to testify. More than 100 other suspected witches remained in Massachusetts jails when the trials and hangings were finally called to a halt by Governor Phips. The fact that the governor's own wife had recently been accused may have been the deciding factor in stopping the killing.

The surface events leading to the trials have become part of American folklore. Two young

Salem Village girls, Betty Parris, age nine, and her eleven-year-old cousin Abigail Williams, engaged a West Indian slave woman named Tituba to help them know their fortunes. They were especially interested in what their future sweethearts would be like. To find this out they used an old trick of suspending an egg-white in a glass of



water and looking for telltale shapes. Disturbingly, one of the girls thought she saw the shape of a coffin. Over the next several weeks and months the two girls began to exhibit strange behavior. Betty's father, the Reverend Samuel Parris, was the Salem Village minister and had for sometime been puzzled by the girls' "getting into Holes, creeping under Chairs and Stools,... (and) uttering foolish and ridiculous speeches..." Reverend Parris somehow learned about the magic seances with Tituba and concluded that this was no simple physical sickness, but the work of more sinister forces. The malady spread and other young girls were afflicted. Under pressure from Reverend Parris and other adults,

on February 29, 1692, the girls identified two local white women and the slave Tituba as the witches who were causing them such pain. The Salem witch hunt was under way.

The three accused women were carted off to jail in Boston. Only Tituba confessed to practicing witchcraft, an admission that saved her life. Over the next few weeks, despite fasting and prayer, the odd behavior of the girls continued. Then in late March the first adult supposedly fell victim to the witches' spell. Accusations increased and even included a four-year-old girl, who, though never hanged, would spend nine months in irons.

Throughout March, April, and half of May the jails continued to fill, but no trials were held because Massachusetts at this time was without a legal government. Finally, on May 14, 1692, the new Governor Phips arrived from England. A special court was quickly set up and the first trials were held June 2. On June 10, Bridget Bishop from Salem Village was hanged. On July 19, five more people accused of witchcraft met the same fate. And so it continued until September 22, when a mass hanging of eight accused witches ended the executions.

The tragedy at Salem was finally playing itself out. A key reason the hangings stopped was a sermon and manuscript written by the Puritan church leader Cotton Mather in early October. Mather acknowledged that witches

could rightfully be put to death, but he argued that the evidence had to be very carefully weighed. Perhaps the key sentence in his sermon was the following: "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned." Mather's caution reflected a shifting mood in Salem. By May of 1693, the jails had been emptied and all the accused acquitted or pardoned.

The hangings had ended, but the big question remains to this day: Why were 19 people put to death for witchcraft in Salem and another pressed to death by stones? Was it just bored pre-teen girls caught in their own fantasies and forced to play their story out? But if so, why did it not stop sooner? Why did it go beyond the accusations of Betty Parris and Abigail Williams? How could it extend, for example, to a several days' walk into Maine to implicate Rev. George Burroughs, a man who had left his ministry in Salem nine years before and was among the 19 hanged for witchcraft?

Examine the 14 documents that follow and formulate your answer to the question: *What caused the Salem witch trial hysteria of 1692?*

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## Document A

Source: Exodus 22:18, King James version of the Bible.

*“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”*

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## Document B

Source: Adapted from Salem Court Records.

| SALEM WITCHCRAFT HANGINGS 1692                  |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| June 10   | Bridget Bishop                |
| July 19   | Sarah Good                    |
| July 19   | Elizabeth Howe                |
| July 19   | Susannah Martin               |
| July 19   | Rebecca Nurse                 |
| July 19   | Sarah Wildes                  |
| August 19                                       | George Burroughs              |
| August 19                                       | Martha Carrier                |
| August 19                                       | George Jacobs                 |
| August 19                                       | John Proctor                  |
| August 19                                       | John Willard                  |
| September 19                                    | Giles Cory (pressed to death) |
| September 22                                    | Martha Cory                   |
| September 22                                    | Mary Easty                    |
| September 22                                    | Alice Parker                  |
| September 22                                    | Mary Parker                   |
| September 22                                    | Ann Pudeater                  |
| September 22                                    | Margaret Scott                |
| September 22                                    | Wilmot Redd                   |
| September 22                                    | Samuel Wardwell               |
| ACCUSED WHO DIED IN JAIL                        |                               |
| Sarah Good's child died prior to July 19, 1692. |                               |
| May 10, 1692                                    | Sarah Osborne                 |
| June 16, 1692                                   | Roger Toothaker               |
| December 3, 1692                                | Ann Foster                    |
| March 10, 1693                                  | Lydia Dustin                  |

## Document C

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**Source:** Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions*, Boston, 1689.

These evil spirits are all around. There is confined unto the atmosphere of our air a vast power or army of evil spirits under the government of a Prince (Satan) who employs them in a continual opposition to the designs of God.... Go tell mankind, that there are devils and witches.... New England has had examples of their existence...and that not only the wigwams of Indians...but the houses of Christians, where our God has had his constant worship, have undergone the annoyance of evil spirits.

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**Note:** Cotton Mather was one of Colonial New England's leading ministers and intellectuals. His words were read and taken very seriously by much of the Puritan population.

## Document D

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**Source:** "Examination of a Witch," painting by T.H. Matteson, 1853. Reprinted by permission of the Peabody Essex Museum.



## Document E

**Source:** John Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of 17th Century New England."  
*American Historical Review*, June, 1970.

### The Accused (Salem, 1692)

#### Marital Status

|              | <i>Single</i> | <i>Married</i> | <i>Widowed</i> | <b>Total</b> |
|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Male         | 8             | 15             | 1              | 24           |
| Female       | 29            | 61             | 20             | 110          |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>37</b>     | <b>76</b>      | <b>21</b>      | <b>134</b>   |

#### Age

|              | <i>Under 20</i> | <i>21-40</i> | <i>41-60</i> | <i>Over 60</i> | <b>Total</b> |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| Male         | 6               | 6            | 11           | 7              | 30           |
| Female       | 18              | 15           | 41           | 14             | 88           |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>24</b>       | <b>21</b>    | <b>52</b>    | <b>21</b>      | <b>118</b>   |

### The Accusers (Salem, 1692)

#### Marital Status

|              | <i>Single</i> | <i>Married</i> | <i>Widowed</i> | <b>Total</b> |
|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Male         | 5             | 0              | 0              | 5            |
| Female       | 23            | 6              | 0              | 29           |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>28</b>     | <b>6</b>       | <b>0</b>       | <b>34</b>    |

#### Age

|              | <i>Under 11</i> | <i>11-15</i> | <i>16-20</i> | <i>Over 21</i> | <b>Total</b> |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| Male         | 0               | 1            | 1            | 0              | 2            |
| Female       | 1               | 7            | 13           | 6              | 27           |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>1</b>        | <b>8</b>     | <b>14</b>    | <b>6</b>       | <b>29</b>    |



## Document F

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LV

**Source:** The examination of Bridget Bishop at Salem Village, 19 April, 1692, recorded by Samuel Parris.

*As soon as she came near, all (the afflicted girls) fell into fits....*

**(Examiner)** (Speaking to afflicted girls) Hath this woman hurt you?

**(Bridget Bishop)** I never saw these persons before....

**(Examiner)** They say you bewitched your first husband to death.

**(Bishop)** If it please your worship, I know nothing of it.

*She shook her head, and the afflicted were tortured.*

**(Examiner)** Why you seem to act witchcraft before us by the motion of your body, which seems to have influence upon the afflicted?

**(Bishop)** I know nothing of it. I am innocent to a witch.  
I know not what a witch is.

*Then she turned up her eyes, and the eyes of the afflicted were turned up.*

## Document G

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**Source:** Charles W. Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, Boston, 1867.

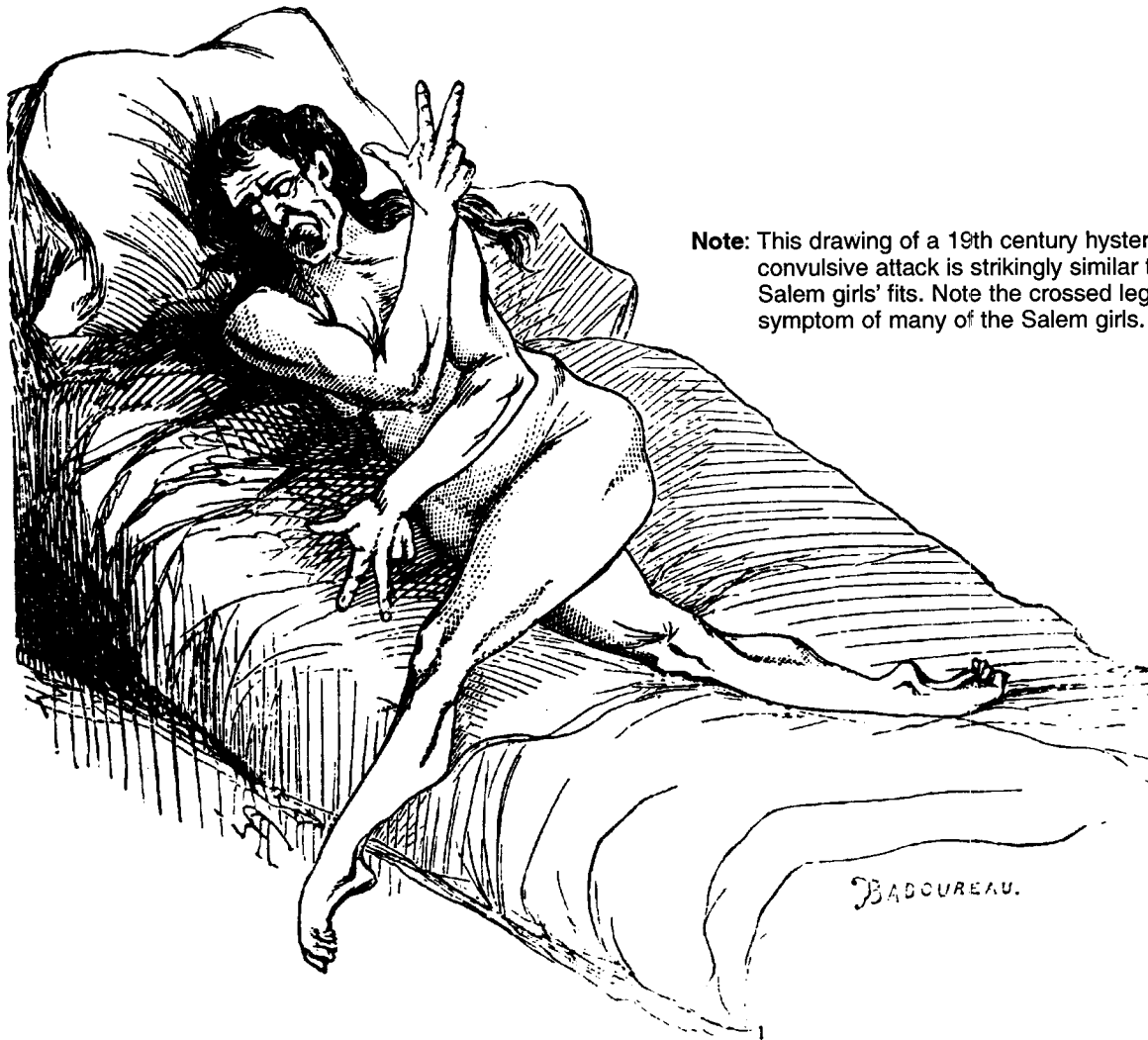
What are we to think of those persons who commenced and continued the accusations – the “afflicted children” and their associates?... It was perhaps their original design to gratify a love of notoriety or of mischief by creating...excitement in their neighborhood.... They soon, however, became intoxicated by the terrible success of their imposture, and were swept along by the frenzy they had occasioned.... Once or twice they were caught in their own snare; and nothing but the blindness of the bewildered community saved them from disgraceful exposure and well-deserved punishment. They appeared as prosecutors of every poor creature that was tried.... It is dreadful to reflect upon the enormity of their wickedness ... there can be no doubt that they were great actors.

## Document H

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**Source:** James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact*, 1982.

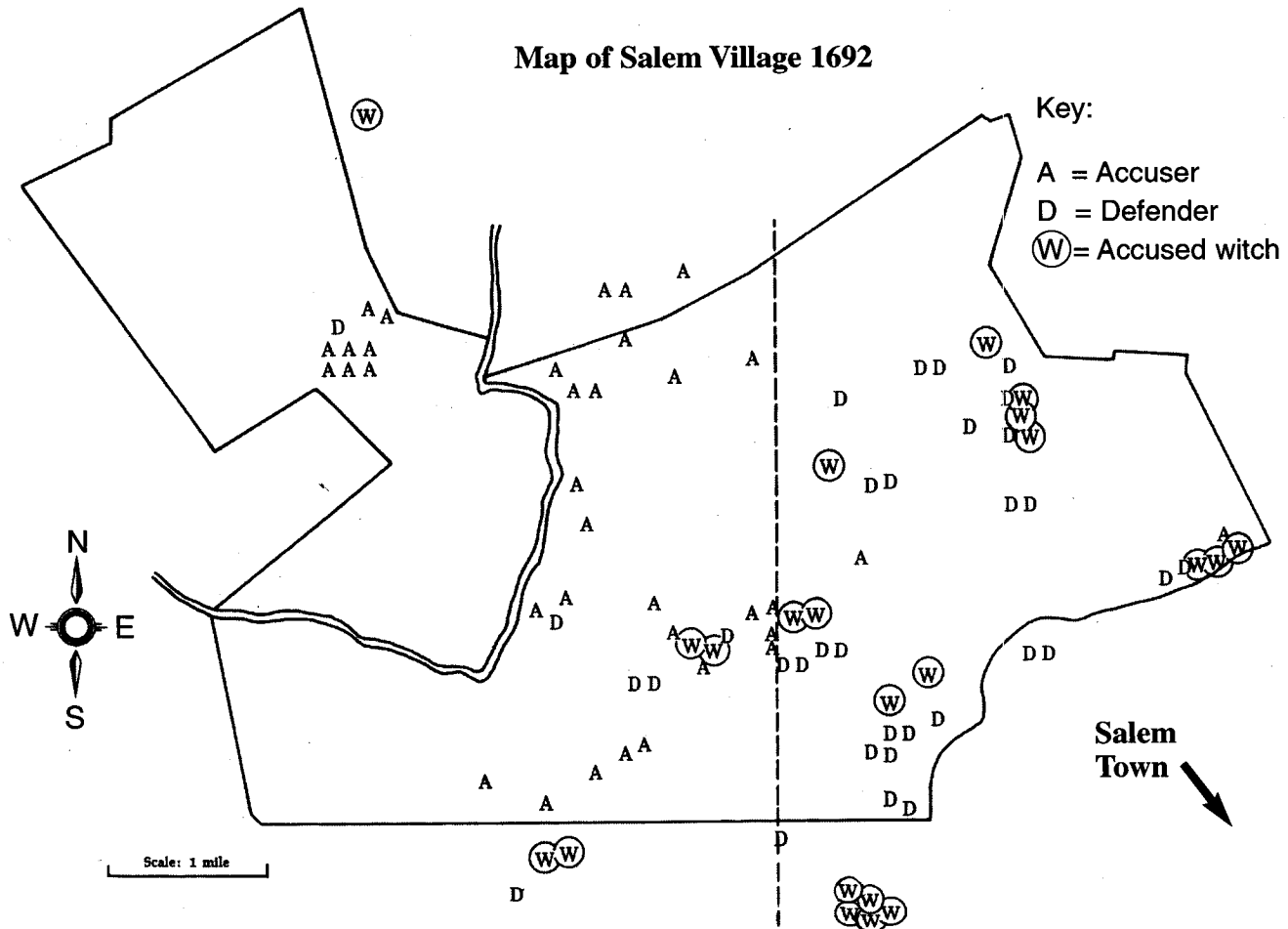
The diagnosis of hysteria goes a long way toward resolving the historical debate over the afflicted girls' motivation. Adolescents, especially in the presence of Tituba, might very well have succumbed to the suggestion of bewitchment. The fits they experienced were very likely genuine, born of anxiety over a magic that threatened to overpower them. The diagnosis also explains many of the adult fits experienced by those who were convinced that their neighbors were conjuring against them. This is not to say that there was no acting at all; indeed, hysterics are notably suggestible, and no doubt the girls shaped their performances, at least instinctively, to the expectations of the community.



**Note:** This drawing of a 19th century hysterical convulsive attack is strikingly similar to the Salem girls' fits. Note the crossed legs – a symptom of many of the Salem girls.

## Document I

**Source:** Reprinted by permission of Harvard University Press from *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright (c) 1974 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.



## Document J

**Source:** Boyer et. al., *The Enduring Vision*, 1992.

A sharp distinction emerged between the port's (Salem Town) residents...and outlying farmers (Salem Village). Prior to 1661 the richest 10 percent of Salem residents owned 21 percent of the town's property, but by 1681 the richest tenth possessed 62 percent of all wealth. (Salem Village) was divided between supporters of the Porter and Putnam families. Well connected with the merchant elite, the Porters enjoyed political prestige in Salem Town and lived in the village's eastern section, whose residents farmed richer soils and benefited somewhat from Salem Town's prosperity. In contrast, most Putnams lived in Salem Village's less fertile western half, had little chance to share in Salem Town's commercial expansion, and had lost the political influence that they once held in town.

## Document K

**Source:** Deposition of Ann Putnam, Jr., 11 years old, daughter of Thomas and Ann Putnam Sr., June 4, 1692.

...on the 13th March, 1692, I saw the apparition of Goody (Rebecca) Nurse, and she did immediately afflict me, but I did not know her name then, though I knew where she used to sit in our meetinghouse. But since that, she hath grievously afflicted by biting, pinching, and pricking me, (and) urging me to write in her book.

## Document L

**Source:** Deposition of Ann Putnam, Sr., the wife of Thomas Putnam, June, 1692.

...on the first day of June, 1692, the apparition of Rebekkah Nurse did fall upon me and almost choke me, and told me that now she was come out of prison she had power to afflict me, and that now she would afflict me all this day long and would kill me if she could, for she told me she killed Benjamin Holton and John Fuller and Rebekah Shepard....

**Note:** The Putnams were one of the most powerful families in Salem Village. Rebecca Nurse, although born to a wealthy family, had lost everything by 1692 and lived on the fringes of town.

## Document M

**Source:** Reprinted by permission of Harvard University Press from *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. Copyright (c) 1974 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

To be sure, there were a number of reasons, on the conscious and “rational” level, why Ann Putnam (Sr.) may have resented and even feared Rebecca Nurse. Rebecca was from Topsfield, whose town authorities had for years been harassing the Putnam family by claiming that parts of their lands actually lay in Topsfield rather than in Salem Village. And her husband Francis had been involved during the 1670s in a protracted dispute with Nathaniel Putnam (Ann’s father-in-law) over some mutually bounded acreage.

## Document N

LV

**Source:** Linda Caporael, "Ergotism: the Satan Loosed in Salem?" *Science*, April 2, 1976.  
Reprinted by permission of author.

Ergot (a parasitic fungus) grows on a large variety of cereal grains – especially rye.... (Ergot) has 10 percent of the activity of LSD, (and) is also found in morning glory seeds, the ritual hallucinogenic drug used by the Aztecs.... Warm, damp, rainy springs and summers favor ergot infestation.... (O)ne field may be heavily ergotized while the adjacent field is not. The fungus may (damage) a crop one year and not reappear again for many years....

Ergotism, or long-term ergot poisoning, was once a common condition resulting from eating contaminated rye bread. In some epidemics it appears that females were more liable to the disease than males. Children and pregnant women are most likely to be affected by the condition.... Ergotism is characterized by a number of symptoms. These include crawling sensations in the skin, tingling in the fingers, vertigo, ...hallucinations,...mania, melancholia, psychosis, and delirium. All of these symptoms are alluded to in the Salem witchcraft records.

Rye...was a well established New England Crop.... Seed time for the rye was April and the harvesting took place in August.... The timing of Salem events fits this cycle.

Threshing probably occurred shortly before Thanksgiving, the only holiday the Puritans observed. The children's symptoms appeared in December 1691. Late the next fall, 1692, the witchcraft crisis ended abruptly....

Certain climatic conditions, that is, warm, rainy springs and summer, promote heavier than usual fungus infestation. The pattern of weather in 1691 and 1692 is apparent from brief comments in Samuel Sewall's diary. Early rains and warm weather in the spring progressed to a hot and stormy summer in 1691. There was a drought the next year, 1692, thus no contamination of the grain that year would be expected.

...(A) large measure of the Putnam farm, which was located in the western sector of Salem Village, consisted of swampy meadows... (and) may have been an area of contamination.... Three of the (afflicted) girls...lived in the Putnam residence .... Two afflicted girls, the daughter and niece of Samuel Parris, (a minister), lived in...the center of the village .... Two thirds of Parris' salary was paid in provisions.... Since Putnam was one of the largest landholders and an avid supporter of Parris...an ample store of ergotized grain would be anticipated in Parris' larder.