

SALEM VILLAGE

The year 1692 was perhaps one of the most gloomy and depressing periods in the history of colonial America. It was a period of guilt, suspicion, conspiracy and hostility. The infant Puritan communities like Boston, Cambridge, and Salem were struggling to survive in the hostile New England environment. The tombstones in these early Puritan towns bear mute testimony to the high rate of mortality, especially among children. There were relentless conflicts between settlers and Native Americans with bloody massacres on both sides. Some of Salem Village's children were orphans of this conflict. It was a time in which religion was an important force in the everyday life of the people, and belief in God and his adversary, the Devil, was genuine. A leading Puritan minister said in a sermon that "no place...that I know of, has got such a spell upon it as will always keep the Devil out. The meetinghouse wherein we assemble for the worship of God, is filled with many holy people and many holy concerns continually; but, if our eyes were so refined as the servant of the prophet had his of old, I suppose we should see a throng of devils in this very place." It was in this atmosphere that the small Puritan town of Salem Village, less than ten miles from Boston, allowed a group of allegedly "afflicted" adolescent girls to control their lives, cause the execution of nearly thirty innocent people, and set a precedent for a series of political and criminal "witch hunts" that have marred our criminal justice system to this day.

The Salem Witch Trials of 1692-1693 originated with a West Indian slave named Tituba, a servant in the home of a leading Puritan minister, Reverend Samuel Parris. She began telling stories from her native Barbados of voodoo, magic, superstition, and fantasy to a group of impressionable young girls from Salem Village including Elizabeth Parris, Ann Putnam, Jr., Abigail Williams, Elizabeth Hubbard, and Mercy Lewis. Her bizarre tales perked the girls' imaginations. They began to have nightmares and hallucinations. They would suddenly drop to the floor writhing in agony. Dr. Griggs, the town physician, was called to examine them. He could find no physical explanation for their afflictions. He declared them "bewitched." The young girls were asked: "Who hurts you?" They named two Salem women, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne. On March 1, 1692 Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborne were arrested and the witch hunt began. The hysteria and accusations spread and soon hundreds of accused witches and wizards including Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse—were in jail awaiting trial and possible execution.

A special court was set up in Salem to try the witch cases. It was called the Court of Oyer and Terminer. The terms "Oyer" and "Terminer" come from two words of French origin meaning "to hear" and "to decide." A Court of Oyer and Terminer, then, was one created especially to try cases involving a particular crime. The crime in Salem was witchcraft. In glaring contrast to our modern legal system, the accused were never allowed representation by a lawyer or other counsel. Since witchcraft was a capital offense, the sentence was always death.

Throughout 1692-1693 the Court met and tried the various individuals accused of witchcraft. The Court accepted as indication of guilt direct physical evi-

dence that the accused had cast a spell, given an evil eye, referred to the Devil by name, or other observable evil actions. Witnesses came into the court and presented all kinds of malicious gossip against the accused and this was accepted as genuine evidence. The Court also accepted as proof of guilt "spectral evidence" in which the accused appeared as a "shape" of some sort (like a monster or distorted animal) and afflicted the unfortunate victim. This kind of evidence was particularly difficult to discredit since the accused would be said to have "afflicted" a person even when it could be proved that they had never had any real physical contact.

Evidence against the accused could even be established during the trial. When the accused glanced at the afflicted girls, they instantly succumbed to their afflictions including twisted necks, writhing contortions, and strange agonies. They would call out the names of their tormentors, swearing that the witches were sending their specter to attack them.

The Puritans believed the Bible gave clear instructions about how to deal with witches. It said: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Nevertheless, out of the hundreds of persons jailed during the witchcraft terror, not a single confessed witch was executed. In fact, many women who confessed to being witches were never even tried. Only those individuals who steadfastly refused to admit guilt were tried and executed. One man, Giles Corey, refused to even answer the Magistrates' questions. He was "pressed" to death with huge stones in an effort to get him to admit guilt. He refused. Many other unconfessed witches went to their deaths on Gallows Hill.

You will now have a chance to recreate the strange events of Salem Village in the spring of 1692. Remember, trust no one.



The House of the Seven Gables in Salem, MA. Nathaniel Hawthorne's grandfather changed the family name—adding a "w" to the name so as not to be confused with the Salem magistrate. Photo by author.

Name _____ Period _____ Date _____

Witch Hysteria in Salem

Use information from the attached article and from what you learned in class today to answer the following prompts

1- Explain what caused the witch hysteria to begin in Salem-

2- Which geographic region of England's North American colonies did the Witch Hysteria take place in?

3- What about this region made the Witch Hysteria more likely than the other regions?

4- Describe the procedures of the Court of Oyer and Terminer?

5- In your opinion, were the proceedings of the Court of Oyer and Terminer fair? **Site examples that support your opinion.**

6- What were the results of the Salem Witch Trials?