

The Salem Witch Trials, 1692

US History - Unit 2: Colonial America

Learning Targets

- ★ Explain what happened at Salem in 1692, and why it began.
- ★ Describe how one accusation became an arrest and a trial.
- ★ Explain what spectral evidence was, and why judges later barred it.
- ★ Judge how fear and gossip shaped who was accused.
- ★ Explain how the trials ended, and what officials later admitted.

A Community Already on Edge

Old grievances

- Farm families had feuded for years over land lines and fences.
- The village had split bitterly over paying its own minister's salary.

New pressure

- A frontier war with France and Native allies raged to the north.
- War refugees were crowding into the village and nearby towns.

Note: None of this caused the trials by itself - it made the village primed to believe the worst.

Two Words for the Place and Its People

Goodwife

The everyday title for a married woman of ordinary rank, often shortened to Goody

Salem Village

The inland farming community north of Salem Town where the 1692 accusations began

Tip: Both words appear again on the reference guide, so spell them exactly as shown here.

It Started in a Minister's House

- Two girls in the minister's household began having fits in January 1692.
- Betty Parris, nine, and Abigail Williams, eleven, felt pain no one else saw.
- A doctor examined the girls and could find no physical illness to explain it.
- Once medicine came up empty, neighbors began suggesting an unnatural cause.
- By late February the girls were naming names, and accusations spread out.

Did You Know: A neighbor had Tituba bake a 'witch cake' from rye meal and the girls' urine, fed to a dog, to try to identify who was harming them.

Two Words for What the Accusers Said

Spectral evidence

Testimony that an accuser saw the shape of a person hurting them when no one else present could see it

Afflicted

The word used in 1692 for the accusers who said they were being tormented

Key Concept: Spectral evidence is always a claim someone made in court, never a fact anyone else could check.

The First Three Accused

Tituba

- An enslaved woman in the Parris household.
- Questioned on March 1, 1692, the same day as Good and Osborne.
- She confessed and named others as fellow witches.

Sarah Good

- A homeless woman who survived by begging door to door.
- She denied every charge against her.
- She was later convicted and executed.

Sarah Osborne

- An older woman in a bitter inheritance dispute with neighbors.
- She denied the charges and rarely attended church.
- She died in jail before any trial was held.

Note: All three accused were already on the edges of the community before a single accusation was made.

Two Words for the Questioning

Examination

The public questioning of an accused person, held in front of the whole town, to decide whether the case went on to trial

Magistrate

A colonial official with the power to question suspects, order arrests, and send a case on to trial

Remember: Magistrates asked the questions - the accused had no lawyer present to object.

Inside the Meetinghouse

The room

- Hundreds of spectators packed the village meetinghouse.
- The session opened with a prayer led by a minister.

The procedure

- The accused was refused permission to pray in her own defense.
- Hathorne and Corwin asked the questions, one after another.

Watch out: This was a public hearing to decide on a trial, not the trial itself.

A Question That Assumed the Answer

- The opening question asked why you hurt these children - never whether you did.
- It asked for a reason, not for proof that anything had happened at all.
- An accused person who denied everything was, to the room, only lying about it.
- Historians call this a presumption of guilt built into the process itself.
- A modern court proves guilt first; this process assumed it from the start.

Key Concept: A leading question can convict before any evidence is heard.

What Lawson's Account Can and Cannot Show

What it can show

- Lawson was an eyewitness who published his account before that year ended.
- It can show what witnesses said and how the room reacted.

What it cannot show

- Lawson was a minister writing to make a case, not a neutral clerk.
- It is not the court's own official written record.

Note: Every primary source can answer some questions and not others - name which is which before you trust it.

Two Words for the Trials

Court of Oyer and Terminer

The special court created in 1692 to hear and decide the Salem witchcraft cases

Confession

An admission of guilt; in 1692 those who said the charge was true and named others were not among those executed

Tip: 'Oyer and terminer' is legal French for 'to hear and to decide.'

The Jails Are Already Full

- Massachusetts had gone years without a valid charter or a settled court system.
- Governor Phips arrived in May 1692 to jails already crowded with the accused.
- He created a special court that same month just to hear and decide these cases.
- William Stoughton led the new court, and its first hanging came within weeks.
- The court existed for one purpose: clear the backlog the examinations created.

Warning: A court built to clear a backlog is a court built to move fast, not to move carefully.

Confess and Live, Deny and Hang

Confessed and named others

- Held in jail, but not among those executed.
- Some later took their confessions back.

Maintained innocence

- Convicted and sentenced to death.
- All nineteen who were hanged had denied the charges to the end.

Key Concept: The court built a real incentive to confess, whether or not the confession was true.

The Numbers

What was counted	The number
People hanged, June to September 1692	19
Person pressed to death for refusing to plead	1, Giles Corey
People who died in jail awaiting trial	At least 5
People jailed on witchcraft charges that year	Well over 100

Watch out: These are documented counts, not a measure of who was truly guilty of anything.

Two Words for Taking It Back

Petition

A signed written request asking officials to take a specific action

Recant

To publicly take back a statement you made earlier

Note: Both words describe what people did once the trials began to turn.

Ministers Object, and the Court Shuts Down

The objection

- Increase Mather wrote in October 1692 against the court's methods.
- He argued one innocent condemned was worse than ten suspected witches escaping.

The shutdown

- Phips dissolved the special court in late October 1692.
- A replacement court barred spectral evidence; most cases were acquitted.

Remember: The trials did not end because everyone agreed the accused were innocent - they ended because the standard of evidence was thrown out.

Saying It Was Wrong

1697

- Massachusetts held a colony-wide day of fasting over what had happened.
- Judge Samuel Sewall's public confession was read aloud in his own church.

1706

- Ann Putnam Jr., one of the original accusers, publicly apologized.
- She told her church she had been deluded into accusing innocent people.

1711

- The colony's legislature restored the names and rights of many convicted.
- It approved payments to survivors and to families of the dead.

Note: These apologies came years apart, and some of the accused never received either one.

How Later Americans Pictured It

- Nobody present in 1692 recorded these examinations in a drawing or painting.
- In 1853, 161 years later, painter T. H. Matteson imagined what it looked like.
- He added a body search for a witch's mark, not part of this lesson's account.
- He also painted accusers collapsing in fits at the front of a crowded room.
- The next slide shows the painting itself - identify what the artist invented.

Warning: A famous picture of an event is not the same thing as evidence of that event.

Examination of a Witch, Painted in 1853



Painted in 1853, 161 years later. The artist invented this scene.

Key Takeaways

- ★ A minister's household, old grievances, and a frontier war left Salem on edge.
- ★ Spectral evidence let an unseen, unprovable claim count as proof in court.
- ★ The court rewarded confession: name others to live, or deny it and hang.
- ★ Nineteen were hanged, one man pressed to death, and several more died in jail.
- ★ Objections from ministers, not new evidence, made the governor end the court.