
Salem Witches: Great Suspicions and Misconceptions

Throughout history, suspicions of witchcraft have torn communities apart as they cast doubt into the minds of friends and neighbors among the community in question. In 1692-1693, Salem, Massachusetts was struck by the signs that witches were walking among the good Christian people of the town. At that time, witchcraft was believed to be the Devil giving certain people special powers to harm people in exchange for their loyalty (Blumberg). Different groups of colonists were fighting with each other because of the ties to wealth in England and France, which created strain on their resources, and villagers believed that the Devil was the cause of all of the quarrelling (Blumberg). All over Massachusetts, people learned of the witch trials in Salem, and they began to understand that witchcraft could not have been the cause of all the fits that the girls were reported to have. When the trials were through, the truth of the accusers' motives came out, and they were left feeling guilty for the remainders of their lives. Some went on to marry and have families of their own, but some were affected severely by the havoc that their behavior wreaked upon the community (Foulds).

Samuel Parris began his life as the son of a cloth merchant and left that life as soon as he could to go study at Harvard in the 1660s. In 1673, his father passed away, leaving him a sugar plantation and an inheritance in Barbados, where he traveled to take over running the whole plantation. Eight years later he traveled back to Boston with his family and three slaves, where he began to travel among local churches to preach his religious ideals, and accepted the position as a minister in Salem in 1689. Parris and his wife also adopted his niece when her parents passed away, but she became a family servant more than a member of the family, and her grief was left to fester when her uncle could not be bothered with her emotional state. His wife was not much comfort to her niece either, because she was sick so much of the time (Foulds 39). As the people of Salem began to get to know Parris better, they also began to dislike him. He didn't treat his slaves well, and "he consistently placed his own personal interests over those of his parish" (Foulds 174). When it came to money, Parris was used to having it because of his family's history as merchants, and demanded a higher salary from the townspeople even though they were already giving his family all the firewood they needed as well as a decent amount of money, considering his profession. He also felt that because he was the minister for the town and therefore the head of the church, he should have the title to the parsonage, no matter the consequences to the town if he left like the previous ministers. As time went on, Parris and his opposition had broken into conservative supporters in his congregation, and the more prosperous opposition among the community. After a while, his opposition stopped paying their shares of the minister's salary, causing him to worry about the state of his financial debts and obligations, as well as his sick wife and dwindling supplies (Foulds 174).

The strange happenings in the town began with his daughter, Betty, and his niece, Abigail, in February of 1692. Their actions were those of a soul possessed, which was the conclusion of the doctor, William Griggs, who was called and was unable to find another explanation. It began with the girls doing things like convulsing as if they were epileptic, throwing hot coals around the room, and even barking like dogs (Foulds 174). As the doctor was searching for an explanation, the strange happenings spread through the community of Salem Village, causing the minister to take matters into his own hands. He and his wife tried things like "parsnip seeds or asafetida in

wine, soot or blood with heartshorn, and sprits of castor with oil of amber” (Roach 1075). He was so disturbed by the girls’ actions that he demanded to know who was making them do such outlandish things, and after several urgings, Abigail told Parris that one of his slaves, Tituba, was causing them to do these things, though Tituba denied all involvement when pressed for information (Foulds 174). Tituba did, however, try a remedy including the girls’ urine in a cake fed to the family dog, which the girls used as an excuse to begin to see specters (Roach 1096). Other ministers, including Cotton Mather, stopped to look in on Abigail and Betty as their afflictions continued to plague the home of the reverend, until he sent Betty off to stay with a family friend, Stephen Sewall, in order to place his focus on documenting the trials and accompanying interrogations.

Abigail and Betty were the first of the women and girls who were affected by the “witches” and were active in placing blame on whoever they could. The girls began the witch hunt with one of the family slaves because they had already gone so far as to act bewitched, so they placed blame on the first person they could. Upon further questioning, they placed additional blame on two women who were considered “local misfits” (Foulds 18), Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne. Rumors of the afflictions spread like wildfire, and before long the convulsions spread alongside the rumors. Betty and Abigail were leading the “chorus of afflicted women and girls” (Foulds 18) through the town. While the true reason the girls began this act remains a mystery, it is thought that the fits began after a particularly angry outburst from Parris, or perhaps from a horrific story that Abigail told Betty, or Tituba may have been persuaded to tell the girls’ fortunes (Foulds 39). Abigail flourished as the accusations flew, and as she “incriminated nine innocent people” (Foulds 39), because she was suddenly finding herself the center of attention, and she was no longer just a “homeless, forgotten little girl” (Foulds 39).

Ann Putnam Jr. was another of the girls who became afflicted, and she was “one of the most obsessive accusers” (Foulds 21) of the trials. She was friends with the other girls, and was quick to develop symptoms when she discovered that she could accuse people instrumental in the town. With the help of her father, she filed almost half of the twenty-one formal complaints against suspected witches. One of the specter’s that Ann claimed to see was that of Dorothy Good, and she claimed that the little girl had thrust the Devil’s book at her to try to make her sign it, and the little specter had also bitten, pinched and choked Ann when she refused (Roach 1362). She also actively accused nineteen of the convicted witches, and watched eleven of them hang. Putnam’s family was one of the supporters of Reverend Parris, and many of her accusations were against those who disagreed with or opposed Parris, although Putnam’s efforts did not make a difference in the long run, since in 1697 he was forced to resign his post as minister (Foulds 21).

Mary Walcott met with the former minister of the town, Deodat Lawson, in order to discuss the reports of witchcraft. During their conversation, Walcott announced that she had been bitten by a specter, and had the bite marks on her wrist to prove it. At that moment, she revealed her true reason for meeting with the reverend, and joined the group of girls that were accusing the people of the town of witchcraft. Her father supported her decision to make accusations, the way her uncle had done for Ann Putnam, and together Mary and Ann’s fathers filed a total of sixty-nine complaints against the people of Salem. Unlike most of the other accusers, Walcott’s home life was relatively stable, and she chose to make accusations in order to further her own ambitions (Foulds 32).

In contrast to Mary Walcott, Mary Warren had virtually nobody in her life to lend her any support,

because after she fled Indian warfare with her deaf-mute sister in Maine where her parents were killed, she became a servant in the Proctor household. John Proctor often had too much to drink and argued with his wife, Elizabeth, so when Warren began to have fits, he refused to take her to town to be checked out. The very first specter that Mary Warren saw during her ravings was that of Martha Corey (Roach 1461). She was, however, taken to Rebecca Nurse's examination in town with the other girls, where she joined them "in dramatic bouts of wailing and fainting" (Foulds 34). When the Proctor couple was later accused of being witches, Warren was of course the victim they connected with John and Elizabeth, and she used his drunken rantings as evidence against him in her testimony. Later still, Mary Warren herself was arrested, and she was torn between losing the closest people she had to parents, or being accused and convicted of being a witch herself. She confessed her dilemma to other women who had been arrested, and they attested to that after the trials were over and done. Since she was thought to both be a witch and a victim, her fits of convulsions served as an excuse to avoid questions she did not wish to answer (Foulds 34).

Indian warfare was a big part of the lives of many of the girls who had accused people of witchcraft, and the same was true for Mercy Lewis. Her family had been attacked by an Indian war party when she was only three, and with the help of their local minister, her parents fled the scene in Maine and were eventually brought to safety by English troops, after which they moved south to Salem. When the Indian attacks had greatly decreased, her family moved back to the location of the original attack, but her parents were killed in a later attack in 1689. Lewis became a servant in her minister's home, and eventually migrated back to Salem, where she was hired as a servant for the Putnam family. Since she was close in age to the children of the household, it is probably that her story was shared with them, and she was seized by convulsions similar to Ann's not long after Ann began to accuse others of witchcraft. Lewis's accusations did not always agree with those of Ann, and also disagreed with those of the other girls at times. Based on her life experiences, many of the symptoms she described were similar to the Indian attacks that had plagued her family (Foulds 15).

Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne were among the first of the falsely accused women to have fingers pointed at them, simply because they were outcasts and did not fit into the town as easily as most did. Sarah Good was not much more than a disgusting annoyance that roamed the town with her young daughter, begging for whatever the townspeople were willing to part with. She was cheated out of her inheritance when her mother remarried after her father's death, and despite the lawsuit that was filed, her new stepfather was granted almost everything her father had accumulated. He married and was quickly widowed, leaving her in debt, which left her no choice but to sell her hard-won meadow from her family's land (Foulds 73). Once again she married, but the debts she had to pay off led them to begging on the streets, leaving her bitter and angry with her situation. Many blamed her eccentricity on witchcraft, because it was easier than finding a 'normal' person to blame for the strange actions of the afflicted victims. It was however documented that when Reverend Parris was kind enough to give something to her daughter, Good was upset with him, and walked away muttering something unintelligible under her breath, but he believed that Abigail's and Betty's conditions were worse after his encounter with Sarah Good (Roach 979). Her husband and five-year-old daughter, Dorothy, were manipulated into testifying that Good was a witch, although later Dorothy was also arrested for witchcraft (Foulds 74). Good was hanged in Boston on July 19 because the prison in Salem was full, and she was given one final opportunity to 'come clean' and confess she sins, but she stood by her innocence, even when faced with the rope around her neck. Sarah Osborne's life wasn't an easy one either, and much of her life in Salem was spent ill or

being beaten by her second husband (Foulds 90). Her first husband died and left her alone with two young children to maintain a one-hundred-and-fifty-acre farm. When the opportunity to marry again arose, she had been living with a man, unmarried, long enough for the townspeople to label her scandalous, which made her name spring to the lips of the afflicted when they needed someone else to accuse of witchcraft. Osborne was the first victim of the witch hunt on May 10 when her already frail heart gave out in her cold cell after nine weeks and two days (Foulds 90).

Rebecca Nurse was a model citizen in the town of Salem, but despite taking in a foster child to live with her and her eight children of her own, and being a loyal wife and mother, she was accused of witchcraft and arrested. Before her hanging, she was pulled from her sickbed to be questioned, she was strip-searched, and she was excommunicated, even though petitions had been signed on her behalf (Foulds 87). Nurse had been happily married for years, and had leased-to-buy a three-hundred-acre property with her husband, which upset the Putnams when the sale was final, because they did not agree with the property boundaries. When she joined the church to help while it was struggling, it was the final straw for the Putnams. Their daughter Ann, was actively making accusations against suspected witches, and she added Rebecca Nurse to her victim list. She was much older than most of the accused, and had led a full life, and continued to proclaim her innocence. Her age and her illness made her too tired to do much more than that, so she expressed confusion and innocence (Foulds 87-88). Rebecca Nurse was hanged on July 19 and her body was "heaved into a shallow grave" (Foulds 88), though her body was rumored to have been stolen away at night by her family and given a proper burial on the farm, where there is now a headstone, and the farm itself is now a museum.

Giles Corey and his wife Martha were both among the accused, and Giles was the only person who was executed, but not by hanging. He had watched several women get accused of witchcraft and proclaim their innocence, but they were still hanged for sins they did not commit. He decided that no matter the evidence compiled against him, he would not make a formal plea of either innocence or guilt, because he could not be tried in court or executed by hanging without a formal plea. In an attempt to force a plea, he was laid on the ground with a board placed over him; large rocks were placed one at a time on the board, pressing him into the ground. The final words from Giles Corey were "More weight" on September 21. Giles was accused of witchcraft by the same people who had believed him to be guilty of the murder of his farm hand almost twenty years prior to the witch trials, but his officially documented accuser was Mercy Lewis, who had also been his wife's accuser (Foulds 58-59), along with Ann Putnam. Martha had a damning secret when she married Giles, but it was forgotten along with the charges of murder against her new husband when they were married. Martha had been angry with Giles for expressing interest in bearing witness to the first portion of the trials, and she displayed her anger in an outburst, throwing the saddle from his horse. When he got to town and shared her outburst, it gave the accusers reason to see "her specter" (Foulds 62) and therefore reason for the town to believe her to be a witch. The townspeople came to arrest her on charges of witchcraft, and she knew they were coming and proclaimed her innocence. Matters were made worse for her, when other accusations against her were made by other girls, and when her husband testified against her during her trial after he had been arrested himself. She was officially hanged on September 22 (Foulds 63-64).

When John Proctor expressed his disgust at the concept of witchcraft and the demonic possession that had taken over his servant, Mary Warren, the man he had told related his conversation to others, and both John and his third wife, Elizabeth, were arrested on suspicions

of witchcraft. Together, they ran a tavern in town, and they were known as firm business people because they did not allow themselves to be cheated out of anything, and when customers were short on cash, their tabs needed to be paid with pawned goods, but this did not make the people of the town like them very much. John was the first man to have been accused of witchcraft, so his trial was well-publicized, and was held in Salem instead of in Salem Village. Several of the girls who were doing the accusing turned on John Proctor, including Mary Warren and Abigail Williams, and there were convulsions and specter appearances at his interrogation, which was enough evidence to have him hanged on August 19, but his wife was pardoned because she was found to be pregnant during the trials.

During Mercy Lewis's accusations, she was sure she saw the specter of Mary Easty who had sworn to kill her, and during one of her fits, she called out to "Goody Easty" (Foulds 15). Mary Easty was the younger sister of Rebecca Nurse and Sarah Cloyce, who had both been accused and convicted of being witches, so that alone left her doomed to the same fate. After her arrest, the girls were mimicking her every move, and shrieking that she was trying to kill them just by lowering her head to her chest. Easty told the judge that she did not think her sisters were witches either, but his sarcasm at her response to his questions was enough to condemn her to certain death. Her official trial was on September 9, and her hanging on September 22, throughout which she was praying for the end of the witch hunt (Foulds 67-69).

As the trials came to an end, the judges and remaining townspeople began to see the error in their ways. After a time, they had learned that the girls who had accused the 20 people who had died were simply trying to seek revenge on people for doing things that there was no other way to punish them for. In the words of Cotton Mather, "it will be a thing ... short of a miracle if, in so spread a business as this, the devil should not get in some of his juggles to confound the discovery of the rest" (Mather), meaning that anything unexplained is always the work of the devil, especially when the reality is simply making up a problem where there isn't really one at all. The town of Salem was a little town with nothing more interesting going on than a seventeen-year-old murder, and the scandals that are considered the normal things today (Foulds). Today, people know that things like spells and specters are just the product of an overactive imagination, but there are also things that cannot be explained. There have been documented sightings of ghosts, or specters if you will, but even those can't be proved or confirmed. Spells are nothing more than the combination of different herbs and chemicals, and today that is considered science. Fortune telling is nothing more than an intuitive person picking up on subtle changes in the room, and isn't magic at all. Of course, there are the people of wiccan religion that believe they can really do magic, and unexplainable things can always happen, but in terms of witches, they have been widely accepted as nonexistent.