

THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS OF 1692:
BEWITCHMENT AND BELIEF IN 17TH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

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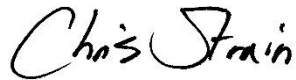
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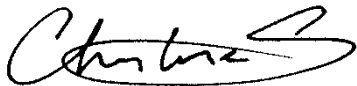
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ABSTRACT

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The Salem Witch Trials have perplexed historians for years. The true causes of these events remain uncertain. Causal theories have developed; around religious and occultist beliefs, ergotism, the Indian Wars, and village factionalism. This thesis explores each theory and concludes that religious and occultist beliefs were the main cause behind the hysteria that led to the bloodshed of the trials. Puritan theology involved belief in a literal Devil, which led to other occultist beliefs related to witches and witchcraft. Therefore, witchcraft and witch lore are a part of these occultist beliefs which were alive and well in Salem in 1692.

Far from welcoming the early settlers, the New World severely challenged those who founded Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629. The Puritan's goal was to see the Church of England cleansed of its Catholic roots and become a truly Protestant church. The society they created in Massachusetts made this their guiding principle. Most historians are in agreement as to how the Salem Witch Trials happened, but the question remains, 'why?' This thesis will explore and analyze different theories and perspectives of what may have caused the Salem Witch Trials, including: religious and occultist beliefs, ergotism, the Indian Wars, and village factionalism. This thesis does recognize that this list of theories is not exhaustive. The goal is to identify one or more theories listed here that explains the true cause of the persecution that led to the trials. This thesis will include an introduction to set the time and place and give a brief description of the events leading up to and the trials themselves. The section following includes each successive theory of what may have caused the persecution leading to the trials and provide evidence for each. The conclusion will then include a scholastic dialogue between those in favor of said theory and those that disagree.

It is New England, 1692. The Puritans look at America with both wonder and fear. Witchcraft is real to the Puritans at this time. It is a pervasive belief that is not only built into law but also punishable by death. Many of these beliefs were brought over from England and other parts of Europe where witchcraft was also seen as work of the Devil. In Puritan thought, the witch-figure was a symbol of the struggle between God and Satan for human souls.¹ In order to understand where these beliefs came from a closer examination of European witch-lore is necessary.

¹Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 119.

Long before Christianity spread across Europe different types of Pagan religions dotted the continent. Pagan religions were found amongst Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic tribes to the north, and to the south both ancient Greek and Roman civilizations held their own Pagan beliefs. However, it was tribes to the north, specifically the Celtic ones where Puritan views of the witch would eventually arise from. Witchcraft existed in these Pagan cultures as something that not only performed evil but also performed good. Only after contact with Christianity did the distinction between those witches who were evil and those who were socially useful become blurred.² In Christendom witches solely became a force for evil. Many early Pagan gods were portrayed as half man – half goat and in the medieval period Christian monks would take this imagery and add wings. This new creature on paper was to become what the West would forever see as the Devil himself.

The Devil would become highly associated with witchcraft and witches as he was seen as their master. The Devil would make deals with women and sometimes men to gain their eternal soul in exchange for sexual pleasure or other Earthly favors. Puritans believed that “since there was a Devil, it followed that some wicked or foolish mortals would pay allegiance to him in return for *maleficium* (the power to work evil magic).³ When deals were struck with the Devil it was believed to be documented in his book where a witch would leave her mark in blood. In general, witches were thought to be capable of any sorts of devilish trickery. Including: spoiling supplies, killing livestock, hurting or killing people, traveling invisibly, having the ability to fly, shape-shift, cast charms, give the “evil-eye”, and use “imps” as familiar spirits in animal guise.⁴ The “evil-eye” was when a witches’ glance could transmit spectral poison. “Imps” were seen as

² Elaine Breslaw, “Witches in the Atlantic World.” *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 4 (2003): 44.

³ Marilynne K. Roach, *The Salem Witch Trials: a Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community under Siege* (New York, New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), xix.

⁴Ibid.

small, mischievous devils or sprites. Witches were also thought to obstruct reproductive processes by causing miscarriage, childbirth fatalities, and even “monstrous” deformed births.⁵ The capacity to injure in supernatural ways was the most common of the powers attributed to witches.

Beginning in the 1490s, the Catholic Church began removing any remnants of paganism from Christian symbolism, liturgy, and from European culture itself. Over the next 150 years an estimated 50,000 people would be accused, tried, and executed for witchcraft. The main form of execution at the time was not only by hanging but also by being burned at the stake. By the late 17th century the worst of the European witch hunts were over as the world was entering a new era based on Enlightenment principles and secularized governments. The Scientific Revolution would allow Europeans to view nature and the world around them in a more rational manner than they ever had before. Of course, not all Europeans were glad to see these changes in the culture as some conservative movements wished to hold onto the past. One of these movements was known as Puritanism in England.

Puritans rose to prominence in England in the early 1600s as they saw the recently formed Church of England not staying as true to the Protestant Reformation as it should have. They called themselves Puritans due to the fact they wished to see the Church of England “purified” of its Catholic roots. When the church was founded by King Henry the VIII, he essentially left the church exactly as it was except for no longer recognizing the authority of Rome. This led many believing that if England was to become and remain Protestant they must embrace more of the Reformation’s principles. These “Puritans,” as the country soon called

⁵ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 7.

them, were Calvinists in temperament if not entirely in policy and shared a deep distrust of the Anglican hierarchy and its elaborate ritual apparatus. For all the differences among them, these early Puritans represented a hard new strain in English thought: strict in practice, intolerant in principle, austere in manner, they had seen the vision of a true church and were in no mood to let the Reformation come to a halt at this premature stage.⁶ In the early 17th century, England's political atmosphere was one of a powder keg ready to explode into what would become the English Civil Wars and Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth. It was in this atmosphere that John Winthrop and his associates first considered a voyage to America.⁷ Once in America their goal was to create a society free from the shackles of Old World ideology; one where they could create a headquarters of the Protestant Reformation and make New England the spiritual capital of Christendom. When Puritans first formed in the 1500s many in England felt that they were too extreme at the time. Queen Elizabeth herself had complained that Puritans "were over-bold with God-Almighty, making too many subtle scannings of His blessed will, as lawyers do with human testaments."⁸ Puritans required a strict interpretation of the Bible. The Holy Bible would not only be used to help create this new Eden in America, but it was also the foundation for Puritan legal thought which would greatly affect how they viewed witchcraft. For many Englishmen of the period Puritanism represented an annoying exaggeration of conventional values, much like the fundamentalism of our own day.⁹ This fundamentalist thought Puritans took with them to the New World and use it to establish their godly kingdom on Earth.

A flotilla of ships sailed from England in April of 1630, sometimes called the "Winthrop Fleet". They arrived at Salem in June and carried more than 700 colonists including Governor

⁶ Kai Theodor Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, London, Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), 36.

⁷ Ibid, 37.

⁸ Ibid, 44.

⁹ Ibid, 45.

Winthrop and the colonial charter. Sometime either before or during the voyage John Winthrop gave his famous “City on a Hill” sermon where he said:

we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all the people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in his work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.¹⁰

It was through this speech that John Winthrop forever would encapsulate exactly what the Puritans were to create in New England: a frontier settlement run on strict religious principles.

The Salem Witch Trials would not occur for nearly sixty-two years after that sermon was given. In that time the Massachusetts Bay Colony would stand out amongst the British overseas territories as it was one of the first to be settled for reasons of religion. Of the main events that occurred between the foundation of the colony and the Salem Witch Trials was that of the trial of Goody Glover. It was her trial that set the foundation for what would occur only a few years later in Salem. In Boston 1688, Goody Glover was accused by the four Goodwin children of performing witchcraft on them, as she was the housekeeper for their father John Goodwin. This occurred after an argument broke out between Goody and the children during which they became ill and began acting strangely. When the doctor came and found no other explanation he declared them bewitched. Glover was then arrested and put before a trial. They found Goody Glover guilty of witchcraft when she could not recite the Lord’s Prayer in English, despite speaking Gaelic Irish as her mother tongue. Not being able to recite the Lord’s Prayer was one of the many ways in which Puritans believed you could determine if someone was a witch, for no one in league with the Devil could recite something so holy. Goody Glover was hung on November 16th, 1688, in Boston, Massachusetts. She would be the last person executed in Boston for witchcraft. Now the stage was set, and Salem was about to be bewitched.

¹⁰ Kai Theodor Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, London, Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), v.

In July, 1689, Salem Village received a new Reverend named Samuel Parris. He was a failed business man who decided to become a minister and for most of his first sermons he would berate his congregation into paying his salary. In January of 1692, Betty Parris, daughter of Reverend Parris, and Abigail Williams, his niece, both 9 and 11 years old respectively, began acting quite strangely. They seemed to be bitten and pinched by invisible agents. At different times they couldn't eat, sleep, or speak. When the doctor came to visit them they seemed to thrash about "hither and thither" and when no other explanation was known, he diagnosed them as bewitched. The courts, of course, accepted that magic could happen, even if it did not in every suspected case, because it was accepted by the culture.¹¹ Witches were believed to be able to send an invisible shape or specter to torture someone. Betty and Abigail acted as though they were being hit by invisible forces. Only one question remained for the Puritans: who was bewitching them? The hunt began.

For Puritans the Bible is quite clear on the subject of witches.

They would hardly be good Calvinists if they did not seek out witches, for Calvin stood explicitly by the Old Testament book of Exodus which declared "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" and this decree was written into the laws of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Haven and Plymouth. Upon witchcraft itself Calvin had declared: "now the Bible teaches that there are witches and that they must be slain. God expressly commands that all witches and enchantresses be put to death, and this law of God is a universal law." For this reason the early colonists of New England were good Calvinists precisely because they did search out witches. Witchcraft was not only a "temptation" to resist; it was an evil requiring positive eradication before God.¹²

From these beliefs the first casualty of the witch trials would commence. Reverend Parris had a slave woman named Tituba from the Island of Barbados. Much is not known about her other than her "dark complexion" as described by many in the village. Most historians believe that she

¹¹ Marilynne K. Roach, *The Salem Witch Trials: a Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community under Siege* (New York, New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), xxiii.

¹² Frederick C. Drake, "Witchcraft in the American Colonies, 1647-62." *American Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1968): 711.

was in fact of South American Indian descent. After the Reverend's daughters were afflicted Tituba recommended a home remedy to find the witch. Without the knowledge of Reverend Parris Tituba made a cake from one of the girl's urine and fed it to a dog. This dog would then be able point the way to the witch in Tituba's eyes. This, of course, is not proper Puritanism; it is simply popular magical culture, most likely brought by Tituba from the Caribbean. Reverend Parris is outraged when he found out what she did.

There are three main theories as to why Abigail and Betty first showed signs of bewitchment. The first theory is that the girls were 17th century children and simply a product of their time. They would not have been given affection but would have been taught they were sinners and that piety was foremost their goal. Puritans at this time would have lived by the mantra "undutiful children are the children of Satan." As for Salem Villagers, Satan was a living, supernatural being who could and did appear to people, either in his own form or that of another.¹³ The second theory says that the girls' fits were triggered by poison. Ergotism has been known to lead to hallucinations. Ergotism is the exposure or consumption of the fungus ergot known to infect crops such as wheat, barley, and rye, all of which the colonists would have been growing. Ergot is one of the main components used to make the drug LSD; however, this theory has been refuted by scientists due to the fact that no one died from this supposed "poisoning." They also transitioned too quickly from fits of rage to complete normalcy. Ergot would not have that kind of affect and so these symptoms are inconsistent with convulsive ergotism. The third and final theory says that the girls went into their fits because they simply faked it. The main argument for this is due to the fact that the girls only went into their fits at highly convenient

¹³ James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection Volume I* (New York, Etc.: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1992), 27.

times such as when guests and other visitors would come to see the Reverend. The girls also must have known that had they not named anyone as suspect they themselves would have been deemed suspect. The first person they accused was Reverend Parris's slave Tituba.

In, *In the Devil's Snare*, Mary Beth Norton contends that the witchcraft crisis of 1692 can be comprehended only in the context of nearly two decades of armed conflict between English settlers and the New England Indians in both southern and northern portions of the region.¹⁴ The Wabanaki are a tribe that occupied land just north of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Puritans thought they worshipped the Devil and felt they did not have a right to the land due to the fact that they did not cultivate it. The Wabanaki, on the other hand, hated the Puritans because they had captured some of their people before and sold them into slavery. In 1676, on the Maine frontier, the Wabanaki attacked the colony at Falmouth. Mercy Lewis survived that attack and eventually moved to Salem and became a servant to one of the households there. In January of 1692 the people of Salem learned that York, a village just north of them, had been raided by Indians and that some of the settlers had been captured. The people of Salem must have been terrified that bitter cold morning when they learned the fate of York. It is then that something interesting happened, after learning of the attacks Mercy Lewis, who worked as a servant then for the Putnam family, began to have fits just like the other girls. She had fits along with Ann Putnam, Ann Putnam Jr., and Mary Walcott. All of them began acting bewitched. Each of them accused Tituba and once adults made accusations against her she was able to be legally tried. This set in motion what would result in nineteen executions and one person pressed to death.

¹⁴ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devils Snare: the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 12.

The fields would have been frozen at this time and so no one would have been working; the courthouse must have been filled. Two magistrates from nearby Salem Town came to Salem Village to conduct preliminary examinations to see if a trial was warranted. Their names were John Hawthorne and Jonathan Corwin. Hawthorne was experienced, and his goal was to get a confession. Tituba would eventually confess to being a witch, as such her confession would make witchcraft a reality for many doubters. Tituba would then accuse four others of witchcraft including: Sarah “Goody” Osborne, Sarah Goode, someone she did not know, and a tall dark man. Tituba claimed to have seen the “Devil’s Book” with their signatures in it. A common theme that linked all those accused by Tituba, beyond denying said accusations, was that they were all women on the fringe of society. By many in the village, Sarah Goode was considered a beggar with a bad temper and Goody Osborne a woman of supposedly loose morals.

In his examination Hawthorne relied heavily on spectral evidence – that is, a statement by a witness who saw a specter of a witch doing strange things. Cotton Mather, a New England Puritan minister, pamphleteer and author, was given the job of recording the trials by the Governor of the colony. His summary of acceptable evidence also encompassed certain spectral phenomena, including a witch’s seemingly innocuous movements injuring the afflicted, and wounds appearing on the body of a suspect after an apparition had been struck by a weapon.¹⁵ In other words, any seemingly abnormal behavior that the girls with fits were showing was used as “spectral evidence” against the accused standing nearby in the courtroom doing absolutely nothing. Tituba’s claim that she saw Sarah Goode’s and Goody Osborne’s signatures in the Devil’s Book was used as spectral evidence. It was believed that when you signed the Devil’s

¹⁵ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 204.

Book, you gave permission for the Devil to assume your shape and torture others, and this invisible shape was in the form of a specter.

Eventually even respectable members of the community were being targeted. The most notable example was Martha Corey who was sixty years old at the time. During her trial she continuously denied the accusations leveled against her. In doing so she entangled herself more into the court proceedings. As April and May of 1692 come to pass more and more people are being accused now not only in Salem Village but also Salem Town and the surrounding communities. This moment was when the incident became a panic. Eventually, the jail in Salem became full and, as it was made of wood, had horrible hygiene and sanitary conditions. It was described as being a freezer during the winter and an oven during the summer months. At this point the risk of accusation for women increased with age and worsened in widowhood or desertion.¹⁶ When someone was accused, it was also safe to assume that the rest of the family could be involved. It truly was a time when one was guilty until proven innocent, especially when the accusation was witchcraft. So far no one had been convicted yet. The women in custody were being stripped naked to look for telling marks called a witches' teat.

A witch could be identified by the presence of the "Devil's mark" or the "witches' teat" on her body. Theoretically at least, the two terms meant different things. Puritan doctrine had it that the mark was placed on the witch's body by the Devil at the signing of the covenant, to seal their bargain and allow him to recognize her as one of his followers. Traditional belief held that the teat was where animal familiars sucked on her body. In New England, these two beliefs converged, and the two terms became interchangeable. Although the mark or teat could be located anywhere, it was most often found on or around a woman's breast or vagina. Any "Excrescence of flesh," however, could be taken as a sign that someone was witch. "Juries of women" were impaneled by local authorities to search the bodies of the accused for this sign of a witch's familiarity with the Devil (or with lesser demons).¹⁷

¹⁶ Marilynne K. Roach, *The Salem Witch Trials: a Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community under Siege* (New York, New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), xx.

¹⁷ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 12-13.

Beyond these violations of the body, and to add insult to injury, everyone thrown in Salem jail was charged room and board. There was money to be made off this witch hunt

New Englanders, especially the Puritans, had a tradition of taking each other to court. The Puritans viewed English culture as violent involving fist fights and street brawls in order to settle disputes. Their goal was to rid this violence from their model community. Puritans instead encouraged their people to sue one another in the court of law. Some historians claim that many of the accusations made during the Salem Witch Trials were due to different rivalries trying to settle old scores. Thomas Putnam Jr., age 40, appeared as plaintiff in many lawsuits of the time. Both he and his wife Ann were supporters of Reverend Parris and the Putnam clan was known for dominating Salem Village politics. For years, many in Salem Village supported the building of a new church there so that they did not have to walk five miles every Sunday to Salem Town to go to church. However, opponents to this did not wish to pay double in taxes as having both a church nearby in the Village and one in the Town would cause this. From this, two factions were born in Salem Village; those who supported building a church, who lived mainly on the west side of Salem Village and those who opposed building a church, who mainly lived on the east side of Salem Village. A startling revelation can then be made from this situation. It was discovered by historians Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum that there was a correlation between east and west Salem Village referring to the accusers and accused into what they referred to as “village factionalism.” The accusers mainly occupied the church-supporting west side of Salem Village while the accused mainly occupied the church-opposing east side of Salem Village.¹⁸

¹⁸ James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection Volume I* (New York, Etc.: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1992), 34-41.

Another factor for accusations soon begins to emerge. People who had done the Putnam's wrong in the past were being dragged in on charges of witchcraft. Reverend George Burroughs, age 42, was accused of witchcraft. The story goes that he became unpopular among his churchgoers and so they stopped paying his salary. Burroughs owed debt to a Putnam and would be taken to court by this Putnam in order to see his debt repaid. However, Burroughs successfully argued in court that if his churchgoers simply paid his salary he would not owe money. Eventually, Burroughs received his pay and repaid the debt, however, the Putnam's do not forget their humiliation at court.

On the evening of April 20th, 1692, Ann Putnam Jr. claimed that a specter of George Burroughs came and spoke to her. She claimed that he confessed to her that he was the leader of the witches, he killed his first two wives, he killed the wife and daughter of his predecessor, and that he bewitched the soldiers who were fighting the Indians on the Maine frontier. In May, 1692 the trials became a crisis for the entirety of Massachusetts Bay Colony. George Burroughs' arrest captured everyone's attention as he was considered a renegade minister because he was never formally ordained into the Puritan church.

Due to his beliefs in witchcraft, Cotton Mather wrote poorly of George Burroughs. In Mather's account of the trial he wrote, "Glad should I have been, if I had never known the Name of this Man; or never had the occasion to mention so much as the first Letters of his Name."¹⁹ Throughout the rest of this firsthand account, Cotton Mather would only refer to George Burroughs as "GB." By this time, increased hysteria had taken hold and all of the local jails

¹⁹ Cotton Mather, *On Witchcraft: Being The Wonders of the Invisible World, First Published at Boston in Octr. 1692 and Now Reprinted, with Additional Matter and Old Wood-Cuts* (New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1974), 99.

surrounding the greater Salem area became crowded with accused witches, including men, women, and children.

On May 27th, 1692, Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor, Sir William Phips, ordered that a special court was to convene in Salem Town. This court was to include a jury of men from around the county and a panel of distinguished judges. At this time, of course, judges rarely had if at all any formal legal training. These men typically were distinguished locals who were usually merchants or other leaders in the colony. The chief justice of the trial was a man named William Stoughton who also served as Lieutenant Governor of the colony.

Under 17th century English common law, the accused had no right to an attorney, therefore, an accused witch had to defend herself. Marilynne Roach wrote how a witch's nature was turbulent, and women, then as later, needed to do far less than men to seem so.²⁰ From the beginning the system itself was set up against the accused in more ways than one, especially if the accused was a woman. The first case to be heard by the court was that of fifty year old Bridget Bishop (who was also tried for witchcraft twelve years earlier and found innocent). During the trial women in the courtroom accused Bishop of tormenting them and these outbursts lead the trial to be disrupted. These women and their outbursts dominated the rest of the court proceedings, as there was no defense attorney to object. In the courtroom a girl claimed that Bishop has put pins into her hands and began to frantically remove the imaginary objects from her skin which horrified onlookers. Mass hysteria soon ensued in the courtroom. In psychology the phenomenon is known today as mass psychogenic disorder where people are caught in a wave of mass hypochondria. In other words the afflicted begin to mimic the symptoms they see

²⁰ Marilynne K. Roach, *The Salem Witch Trials: a Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community under Siege* (New York, New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), xxii.

in each other. If one girl began removing imaginary pins from her hands while screaming, another may have started shouting at a specter she claimed was hovering above her head, all while non-afflicted spectators felt more and more terrified at the situation unfolding before them.

Soon after on June 2nd, 1692, Judge William Stoughton issued the first death sentence of the trials. Bridget Bishop was found guilty of witchcraft and her sentence was to be carried out on June 10th, 1692, making her the first witch to be executed during the Salem Witch Trials. The method of execution was hanging. A small stool or chair would be placed under them in order to have slack for the rope attached to the branch of a large tree. The noose would be placed around the neck and cinched firmly against the skin. The chair or stool was then kicked out from underneath and one of two scenarios then ensued. Either the neck broke and death came quickly, or as in most cases, due to the drop being almost nonexistent, those hung swung side to side as the neck did not break and they would slowly strangle to death depending upon their weight. These executions were seen as a spectacle of sorts and many from around the colony came to see these public executions. Disgusted by the hanging, one judge, Nathaniel Saltonstall, resigned in protest; however, the trials carried on without interruption.

On July 19th, 1692, five more women were executed in Salem Village: Rebecca Nurse and Sarah Goode from the Village and three more women from neighboring towns. They were executed by hanging because they did not confess nor did they name others as witches. Despite the consistent belief at the time that, “many of those indicted from witchcraft were judged to have failed in withstanding the sin...of seduction by the devil,” a strange pattern began to

emerge: if the accused confessed and repented, then she would not be executed.²¹ Not everyone, of course, accepted that plea bargain.

When it came time for George Burroughs' trial many from all around the colony would come to see and watch it, especially from the colony's largest city Boston. The prominent Putnam family sat directly up front in the courtroom during his trial to make sure Burroughs knew they were there. Mercy Lewis, the Putnam family maid was the first to testify. She told of her encounter of how she saw George Burroughs' specter. Cotton Mather described in his account how many of the accused described seeing the devil as, "the Black Man, (as the Witches call the Devil; and they generally say he resembles an Indian)".²² From this several inferences may be made: the Devil looks like an Indian, Indians have a darker skin complexion compared to the English colonists, and George Burroughs was described as being of a darker skin complexion himself. Therefore it may have been easier for the jury to find Burroughs guilty simply because of the way he looked. They may have associated him with both Indians and the Devil. Throughout the trial Burroughs maintained his innocence and even tried to disprove the existence of witches entirely. This, of course, was in open defiance of Puritan Theology.

August 19th, 1692, was the day of George Burroughs' execution. Cotton Mather would make the long journey from Boston to witness his hanging. Soon after Mather arrived something extraordinary happened: with the noose around George Burroughs' neck he recited the Lord's Prayer in a perfect oration. Cotton Mather, however, was the man who wrote that witches cannot do this; he claimed it to be an impossible act. Reports say that the crowd surged forward to try

²¹ Frederick C. Drake, "Witchcraft in the American Colonies, 1647-62." *American Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1968): 709.

²² Cotton Mather, *On Witchcraft: Being The Wonders of the Invisible World, First Published at Boston in Octr. 1692 and Now Reprinted, with Additional Matter and Old Wood-Cuts* (New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1974), 103.

and prevent the hanging. However, Cotton Mather was able to quiet the crowd and remind them that this execution was a just act; Burroughs was left to swing slowly. Cotton Mather's public approval led to the bloodiest part of the trials.

As the trials continued, accusers returned to the old idea that, "any action or work that inferreth a covenant with the Devil...sufficiently proved a witch."²³ The September, 1692 executions would be the final chapter of the witch trials as nine more people were executed before the bloodshed ended. Giles Corey was the husband of the accused witch Martha Corey, and due to his association he soon found himself accused as well. He proclaimed himself not guilty of anything accused of him and even refused to partake in the court proceedings. A mob then confronted him and attempted to force him to plead by laying him down onto the ground and placing an ever-increasing amount of weight upon his chest. They piled on stones for two days and when they returned on the second day and asked him to plead he responded with his final breath, "More weight." Giles Corey is the only known case in American history of someone who was pressed to death. Giles Corey died having never been convicted of witchcraft. His wife Martha Corey also refused to admit to any wrongdoing or witchcraft and was hung (three days after her husband died) on September 22nd, 1692. She was executed along with seven others who refused to confess to a crime they did not commit or to accuse their fellow neighbor in order to be spared the noose. They become martyrs of a growing trend of resistance to the witch hunt.

Throughout the trials many had felt that what was being done was unjust. They simply needed to wait for a proper opening in order to voice their opinion for had they spoken up prematurely they themselves could have been subject to accusation and execution. Mary Beth

²³ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 10.

Norton notes in her book, *In the Devil's Snare*, something quite notable about the trials was the relative speed with which opinions of the investigation and prosecutions reversed themselves.²⁴ Debate became louder throughout the colony.

When Margaret Jacobs was only seventeen years old, her accusations helped to hang Minister George Burroughs and her own grandfather; the eighty-year-old George Jacobs. The day after her grandfather was executed, Margaret Jacobs began to write a letter addressed to the judges upon whom she would confess by admitting that what she said was altogether false. This act began a wave of people throughout the greater Salem area recanting their confessions. The judges then attempted to try those who cooperated in these matters. Something surprising then occurred, just as soon as people stopped confessing so too did the wild accusations cease. They seemed to all come to an abrupt halt in late 1692. Cotton Mather's own father, the Reverend Increase Mather, wrote a plea to the court and warned of false accusations.

At the end of October 1692, the governor would dissolve the special court and when the witch trials resumed in regular courts spectral evidence was no longer allowed. Much of the heart ache and bloodshed that occurred was due to the fact that spectral evidence was used in the first place during the trial. According to Kai Theodore Erikson, the problem came mainly from the fact that,

the legal structure of Massachusetts Bay was unusual in several important respects: It contained an odd assortment of ingredients, gathered from many different corners of the Puritan world and blended together in a very brief period of time. The law of Massachusetts had no time to mature gracefully, as had the common law of England, because it was designed for immediate use and because it combined elements which did not fuse easily at all: a dogma which drew most of its vigor from the militancy of the Old Testament and a political theory already sensitive to the traditional safeguards of English Law. The legal apparatus which emerged from this unlikely

²⁴ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devils Snare: the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 10.

union, then, can tell us a great deal about the Puritan's sense of discipline and his attitude toward the law.²⁵

The proceedings in regular court still had a massive back log to go through as many of the accused still waited trial as they sat in jail. Now that it was back in the hands of regular court, the entirety of English common-law procedure was to be used; otherwise the judicial process would need to start over. In fact, three more accused witches would be convicted in regular court, but Governor Phips would reprieve all of them. When Judge William Stoughton heard that Governor Phips reprieved the last three witches accused he raged and would go to his grave a true believer.

The final portion of this introduction will serve as a sort of epilogue to what occurred at and around Salem just after the infamous part of the trials ceased. Despite the fact that at this time in history most people or “much of the general populace engaged in fortune-telling and counter-magic”, logic and rationality would prevail.²⁶ Many lives were lost before this way of thinking took root, but it eventually happened. In and around Salem the trials would leave a major scar on the people. They never wished to repeat those terrible events of 1692. In total it would take another three months before the remaining forty-nine accused witches were released. By this point three already died while in jail as they waited for a trial. Margaret Jacob's release was delayed because she did not have money for her jail fee. In 17th century fashion those who were accused and then thrown in jail were expected to pay for such wretched lodgings. Tituba was released a year after the trials ended to a new master because her old master, the Reverend Samuel Parris, refused to pay her jail expenses.

²⁵ Kai Theodor Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, London, Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), 54.

²⁶ Marilynne K. Roach, *The Salem Witch Trials: a Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community under Siege* (New York, New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), xvi.

In 1697 one of the judges, Samuel Sewell, asked for the public's pardon in their prayers that God would prevent his past sins from further damaging the country. In 1703 the general court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony threw out most of the evidence used in the witch trials. Then in 1706, at the age of 24, Anne Putnam Jr. made a formal apology to her church and to the families of those, through her accusations, she helped execute. In 1711, the government of the colony also realized its role and the legislature voted to compensate both survivors of the trials and the descendants of people who had been jailed or executed.²⁷ The end of this introduction will borrow from the ending of Paul Boyer's and Stephen Nissenbaum's book, *Salem Possessed*, as they claimed:

In 1692, of course, events...slipped downward into shuddering disaster. Some of the accused would not confess to deeds they knew they had not committed, and for their honesty, they died. The ironies are staggering. In this act of collective expiation aimed at affirming a social order based on stability and reciprocal loyalty, the only participants to suffer death were those who insisted on remaining faithful to the essential requirement for stable social relationships: simple honesty. And the event which might have brought a kind of peace to Salem Village brought instead a period of conflict so bitter that even the generation of struggle that had led up to 1692 paled by comparison. The pin that was to have pricked Madame Bubble had somehow turned into a flailing, bloody sword.²⁸

After 1692, there were no more prosecutions for witchcraft in Salem; this fact, however, does not mean that people stopped believing. The legal system simply stopped dealing with accusations of witchcraft. Later in life, Cotton Mather, the man who instigated the bloodiest part of the trials, said he regretted if any innocent lives were taken.

²⁷ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 10-11.

²⁸ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: the Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), 216.

The Theories:

I. The Puritanical Faith Theory

At this time in Massachusetts Bay Colony almost all inhabitants were of the Puritan faith. Puritans were, of course, non-Separatists who simply wished to “purify” the Church of England of its Catholic roots. Those who were Puritans were considered to be quite strict in their daily lives as they had to restrain from wearing fancy clothes, smoking, and drinking in excess. As they did believe in God so too did they believe in the Devil and much of the occult practices that are associated with him. When Tituba gave her confession, “she not only implicated Sarah Goode and Sarah Osborne...but announced that many other people in the colony were engaged in the Devil’s conspiracy against the Bay.”²⁹ This confession was told at a time when a very small group of religious fundamentalists lived on a land already physically hostile to them and so it was easy for Puritans to believe that New England was truly the land of the Devil.

With religion being the main focus in their lives, one can imagine just how impactful it was for the first afflictions to be associated with a reverend’s family. Reverend Samuel Parris’ status as a man of the cloth would have made the Devil’s war on the Bay far more real for a people who believed so strongly in these matters. To the Puritan colonists it would make sense for the Devil to attack someone from the priesthood for it is he who tells one the good word every Sunday. The Devil, therefore, may be able to influence what the Reverend says, aiding in his deceitful and treacherous ways.

The court proceedings were themselves steeped in religious thought and procedure. As Kai Erikson put it:

²⁹ Kai Theodor Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, London, Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), 144.

All in all, five separate kinds of evidence had been admitted by the court during the first round of hearings. First were trials by test, of which repeating the Lord's Prayer, a feat presumed impossible for witches to perform, and curing fits by touch were the most often used. Second was the testimony of persons who attributed their own misfortunes to the sorcery of a neighbor on trial. Third were physical marks like warts, moles, scars, or any other imperfection through which the Devil might have sucked his gruesome quota of blood. Fourth was spectral evidence, of the sort just noted; and fifth were the confessions of the accused themselves.³⁰

Here we can clearly see just how much both religious and occult beliefs are found throughout the trial. Belief in God, equated to belief in the Devil, which equated to belief in the occult.

According to Erikson, the idea or root cause of “witchcraft mania” has generally taken place in societies which are experiencing a shift in religious focus – societies, we would say, [that had confronted] a relocation of boundaries.³¹ This explanation, of course, perfectly described the situation in Salem at the time. The greater Massachusetts Bay Colony, Salem Town and Village included, was in a state of flux. As just a few years earlier, during the English Civil War, in which religion played a major part, witchcraft hysteria struck the British Isles with great magnitude. During the chaos of the English Civil War, many people were accused of witchcraft because they either held the wrong political stance or the wrong Christian faith. There is no reason why the chaos that transpired in Old England didn't eventually make its way over to New England. The idea that a changing and dynamic society, especially one with a religion as strict as the Puritans, saw an increase in witchcraft hysteria is not impossible. With this background in mind, we should not be surprised that New England, too, should experience a moment of panic; but, it is rather curious that this moment should have arrived so late in the century.³² In other words, New England remained relatively calm during the worst of the troubles in England, yet

³⁰ Kai Theodor Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, London, Sydney: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), 151.

³¹ Ibid, 154.

³² Ibid.

suddenly erupted into a terrible violence long after England lay exhausted from its earlier exertions.³³

One way in which the argument that religion was the main spark that ignited the Salem Witch Trials can be furthered is to examine how the Massachusetts Bay Colony inhabitants viewed themselves after the trials occurred. Before the trials, the Puritans saw themselves as a model community, one which the entire world should look upon and wish to emulate. They also saw themselves as part of something bigger, not only as subjects of an expanding British Empire, but also as members of an international faith. Author Kai Erikson called it the, “Puritan experiment in Massachusetts.”³⁴ By this Erikson is referencing to what the Puritans original mission was: to be participants in a great adventure, to be residents of a “city on a hill,” and to be members of that special revolutionary elite who were destined to bend the course of history according to God’s own word.³⁵ After 1692, Massachusetts Bay Puritans no longer saw themselves as any of these great things. They began to realize just how isolated and puny their existence was. From these assumptions it should be made clear as to just how much religion played a role in the lives of the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay colony. As Erikson put it:

New England had been built by people who believed God personally supervised every flicker of life on Earth according to a plan beyond human comprehension, and in undertaking the expedition to America they were placing themselves entirely in God’s hands.³⁶

Many sermons from the period were full of dreadful prophecies about the future of the Bay; as many were filled with tales of devilish Indians and other horrors lurking just beyond the frontier. As humans, we have a predisposition to fear what we don’t know. The Puritans were no

³³ Erikson, *Wayward Puritans*, 155.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 156.

³⁶ Ibid.

exception. From these fears they used religion in order to make sense of the hectic and hostile world around them. The congregational churches they built were their only means of stability and comfort.

Cotton Mather's account of the trials also point to just how much religion played a role in not only starting but also advancing, accelerating, and even ceasing the trials all together. In his treatise, *On Witchcraft*, Cotton Mather opens the first section by saying:

If any are Scandalized, the New-England, a place of as serious Piety, as any I can hear of, under Heaven, should be troubled so much with Witches; I think, 'tis no wonder: Where will the Devil show most malice, but where he is hated, and hateth most: And I hope, the County will still deserve and answer the Charity so expressed by that Reverend Man of God.³⁷

From this excerpt we can conclude that Cotton Mather saw the Massachusetts Bay Colony as not only a pious place, but as one of the most pious places. Puritan theology, therefore, permeates throughout Mather's thought process and writing as he puts faith front and center throughout his account of the Salem Witch Trials. Cotton Mather even goes so far as to say "New-England was a true Utopia."³⁸ He, of course, is referring to the way in which Puritans used their faith to employ a strict set of morals and rules to live by while living in the colony. Just as many colonists believed back when the Bay was first settled, so too did Cotton Mather claim the untamed wilderness of Massachusetts as the Devil's territory. He said:

The New-Englanders are a People of God settled in those, which were once the Devil's Territories; and it may easily be supposed that the Devil was exceedingly disturbed, when he perceived such a People here accomplishing the Promise of old made unto our Blessed Jesus, That He should have the Utmost parts of the Earth for his Possession.³⁹

³⁷ Cotton Mather, *On Witchcraft: Being The Wonders of the Invisible World, First Published at Boston in Octr. 1692 and Now Reprinted, with Additional Matter and Old Wood-Cuts* (New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1974), 11-12.

³⁸ Mather, 13.

³⁹ Ibid, 14.

In other words, Cotton Mather is essentially saying that they, as good Christian Puritans, settled that region of the world for Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior. They did so knowing full well that the territory they settled was that of the Devil's and he would perceive them doing the Lord's work. This is why, Mather believed, all the terrible events that revolved around witchcraft occurred in Massachusetts Bay colony at the time. He was not the only Puritan to hold this belief, as many in the Bay colony were inclined to agree.

By religion playing such a crucial role in the lives of the Puritans, both before and during the trials, it's no wonder that this may have been the cause of the hysteria that directly led to the trials. Fanatical belief mixed with mass mania created disaster. Belief in religion and faith was not enough; however, it was the next step of belief in occult practices that would further cause much of the bloodshed to occur. Belief in God equated to belief in the Devil which equated to belief in the occult. These firm beliefs then directly led to the start of the Salem Witch Trials.

II. Heightened Paranoia from Threat of Indian Hostilities

The next theory examined suggested that as the settlers continued to encroach on the land of Native Americans they began to encounter further and continual hostilities. This constant threat from Indian attacks on and near the frontier put the colonists at great risk both physically and, in this case, mentally as well. In Mary Beth Norton's book, *In the Devil's Snare*, she entertains the theory that constant and brutal frontier warfare left an impact on the collective mentality of an entire region as the book explicates those links through what has evolved into a dual narrative of war and witchcraft.⁴⁰ Norton found that when the colonists had a constant heightened sense of always being ready for battle or attack from Indians it caused them to make

⁴⁰ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devils Snare: the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 5.

rash decisions sometimes. Despite Salem no longer being under immediate threat in 1692, many second-generation colonists still alive remembered what life was like earlier in the century and the collective mentality remained and was passed on. This would eventually cause the Salem Witch Trials to occur as they did.

The First Indian War, also known commonly today as King Philip's War, was fought from 1675 to 1678. In late October of 1675, a militia officer reported that "It is hardly imaginable the pannick fear that is upon our upland plantations and [people in] scattered places [are] deserting their habitations."⁴¹ Inferences, therefore, can be made to assume the mass fear that struck the region. The officer himself described people up and leaving their homesteads and private possessions behind in order to avoid the attacking Indian tribes. Norton described scenes of horror with colonists fleeing from oncoming attacks as:

A few days after the assault on Falmouth, other Wabanakis raided the trading post at the mouth of the Kennebec. Frightened settlers abandoned settlements all along the coast north of Black Point. Thomas Gardner and other residents of Pemaquid, for instance, sought to escape from the "barbarous heathen" by fleeing to Monhegan Island, whence they wrote to Boston to request a ship to carry away their many "distressed families."⁴²

Despite an end to the War, the settlers and Native Americans did not get the long-lasting peace they so wished for. Hostilities between the Anglo-Americans and the Wabanakis erupted again just ten and a half years later sparking the Second Indian War.⁴³ War, however, was inevitable as neither side abided by the treaty to which they signed and the settlers continued to encroach on Wabanaki land.

The region of Maine's frontier where fighting broke out during the First Indian War continued to experience population growth even after hostilities ceased. Colonial settlers refused

⁴¹ Norton, *Devil's Snare*, 87.

⁴² Ibid, 88.

⁴³ Ibid, 93.

to pay the “yearly Tribute of Corn” and they refused to respect the Wabanaki’s fishing rights.⁴⁴ All of these acts would create a hostile environment ripe with tension and a readiness for war. The first deaths of settlers, though, occurred in Western Massachusetts, when in mid-August Indian raiders from French Canada slew some members of English families living in the upper Connecticut Valley...Taken together, the two evidently unconnected and widely separated incidents in August 1688 set off a panic in Massachusetts and on the Maine frontier.⁴⁵ The Second Indian War would cause more deaths and destruction throughout the New England countryside. When Sir Edmund Andros at last returned to Boston from New York in mid-October, he found “a Pannick feare” prevailing throughout northern New England.⁴⁶ This, of course, would have a greater effect over the collective mentality of those colonial settlers who lived in the region, many of whom moved to Salem, Massachusetts. Those same settlers were more than likely affected from living along the Maine frontier during the Second Indian War. As more and more settlers were directly impacted by the war, more and more moved back to coastal towns. This is exactly what happened to Salem.

Both the town and village saw an influx of refugees from the Maine frontier during and after the war. According to Norton, “From the Maine frontier came nothing but discouraging news: of settlers leaving by the score...village after village [was] “in a miserable and shattered condition”.”⁴⁷ The exact people who came from this war-torn area were also the same ones affected most by the Salem Witch Trials. Their mental state was affected by the events they had witnessed and the constant stress of being on high alert from attack by local Native tribes. Some even left the Maine frontier after the First Indian War (King Philip’s War).

⁴⁴ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devils Snare: the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 94.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 96.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 99.

Mercy Lewis, who was a Putnam family servant, began to have her fits in Salem in January of 1692 just after she learned that the Town of York just north of Salem was raided by Indians. What makes this account fascinating was that Mercy Lewis was a child refugee of the First Indian War (King Philip's War). Her mental state, therefore, may have been compromised due to her history on the Maine frontier. With Mercy Lewis' experience as a child she was more easily prone to get caught up in the mass hysteria. Her story was not unique to the Salem area, as many other people were also refugees from both the First Indian War (King Philip's War) and the Second Indian War. Knowing that so many people were personally affected by the tragedies that took place during these wars and that they all contributed to the collective mentality in Salem makes Mary Beth Norton's theory more plausible. Norton concludes: "The wartime context could well have influenced the onset of those fits – that the afflicted first accused an Indian of tormenting them certainly suggests as much."⁴⁸ With this in mind, one can see just how all of these different factors converge on one single idea: Indian wars caused settlers mental distress which in turn affected their judgment during the Salem Witch Trials. The First Indian War (King Philip's War) and the Second Indian War, taken into account with the refugee problems caused by them along the Maine frontier, showed clearly just how impactful threat of Indian attacks were to the colonial settlers in this region.

A mixture of war with witchcraft is what this chapter has found to be the main idea threaded throughout. The wars fought in this region of New England would help to directly cause an environment ready for trouble; in this case, it came in the form of the Salem Witch Trials.

Norton argues:

Assaults from the visible and the invisible worlds became closely entwined in New Englanders' minds. Those connections permeated the witchcraft examinations and trials, as repeated spectral sightings of the "black man," whom the afflicted described as resembling an Indian; and in the

⁴⁸ Norton, *Devil's Snare*, 296.

threats that the witches and the Devil - just as the Wabanakis had – would “tear to pieces” or “knock in the head” those who opposed them.⁴⁹

Mercy Lewis’ story was a perfect example of the kind of person who would have been affected in this manner. Her story of being a refugee from the Maine frontier and then forging the long journey to Salem was a harrowing one. Mercy Lewis was affected first hand by the mixture of war and witchcraft, all of which added to the collective mentality of the region. Therefore, it has been found that settlers under constant stress from threat of Indian attack, especially those who lived along the Maine frontier during the First Indian War (King Philip’s War) or the Second Indian War were more prone to cause and then perpetuate the hysteria that occurred at the Salem Witch trials in 1692.

III. Ergotism, the Poison of Salem

This theory suggested that the main cause of the hysteria that led directly to the Salem Witch Trials was in fact something far more tangible than a belief in God and the Devil or a fear of Indian attacks. It instead suggested that the inhabitants of Salem were poisoned by ergot. Ergot is a type of fungus that “grows on a large variety of cereal grains – especially rye – in a slightly curved, fusiform shape with elements of D-LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) found within it.”⁵⁰ The author Linnda Caporael first made this argument back in 1976 in an article titled, *The Satan Loosed in Salem?*, in which she suggested that females were more liable to the

⁴⁹ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 297.

⁵⁰ Linnda R. Caporael, “Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?” *Science* 192, no. 4234 (1976): 23.

disease than males and children and pregnant women were most likely to be affected by the condition.⁵¹

There are two different types of ergot poisoning: convulsive and gangrenous. Gangrenous ergotism is characterized by dry gangrene of the extremities followed by the falling away of the infected areas of the body.⁵² Usually areas of the body most affected by this type of ergotism include the fingers, toes, and other parts of the arms and legs. However, for this theory convulsive ergotism must be explored in further detail. Caporael wrote:

Convulsive ergotism is characterized by a number of symptoms. These include crawling sensations on the skin, tingling in the fingers, vertigo, tinnitus aurium, headaches, disturbances in sensation, hallucination, painful muscular contractions leading to epileptiform convulsions, vomiting, and diarrhea. The involuntary muscular fibers such as the myocardium and gastric and intestinal muscular coat are stimulated. There are mental disturbances such as mania, melancholia, psychosis, and delirium. All of these symptoms are alluded to in the Salem witchcraft records.⁵³

When one takes into account the symptoms of convulsive ergotism and recalls just how the afflicted girls in Salem acted one can clearly see a pattern emerge. This pattern of course points to the idea of ergot poisoning.

Most evidence for ergot poisoning comes from two factors: the agricultural growing conditions found in New England and the localizations of the afflicted and accused. Caporeal argued that ergot grew in the New World before the Puritans arrived as the common grass found along the Atlantic Coast from Virginia to Newfoundland was and is wild rye, a host plant for ergot.⁵⁴ Early colonists were dissatisfied with it as forage for their cattle and reported that it often

⁵¹ Linnda R. Caporael, "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?" *Science* 192, no. 4234 (1976): 23.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

made the cattle ill with unknown diseases.⁵⁵ Therefore, the potential for infection was already present for both humans and animals alike.

The cycle of when the grain was harvested also adds to the evidence. In spring the seeds would be planted in order for them to be harvested by August. However, according to Caporaal, “the grain was stored in barns and often waited months before being threshed when the weather turned cold. The timing of Salem events fits this cycle.”⁵⁶ The climate also played a major role as warm and rainy springs and summers promoted more fungal growth, specifically ergot. The summer of 1691 was unusually warm and stormy according to Samuel Sewall’s diary.⁵⁷ Followed by drought in 1692, there would have been no further contamination of the ergot infested rye.

The next argument used to justify ergotism is that of localization. This is the idea that certain persons were infected more so because of where they were located in the village itself. Caporaal argued that;

The Putnam farm, and more broadly, the western acreage of Salem Village, may have been an area of contamination. This contention is further substantiated by the pattern of residence of the accusers, the accused, and the defenders of the accused living within the boundaries of Salem Village. Excluding the afflicted girls, 30 or 32 adult accusers lived in the western section and 12 of the 14 accused witches lived in the eastern section, as did 24 of the 29 defenders. The general pattern of residence, in combination with the well-documented factionalism of the eastern and western sectors, contributed to the progress of the witchcraft crisis.⁵⁸

The lands upon which many of the colonists used as farmland were owned by the Putnam family. Therefore, Caporaal made the argument that those who came into contact with the rye, which would have been growing on the Putnams’ swampy farmland, were infected with ergotism. From this an interested pattern emerges. Nearly two-thirds of Samuel Parris’s salary was paid in

⁵⁵ Linnda R. Caporaal, “Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?” *Science* 192, no. 4234 (1976): 23.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 24.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

provisions; as the villagers were taxed proportionately to their landholding and since Putnam was one of the largest landholders and an avid supporter of Parris in the minister's community disagreements, an ample store of ergotized grain would be anticipated in Parris's larder.⁵⁹

Another afflicted was one Elizabeth Hubbard who was a servant of Dr. Griggs. Dr. Griggs also happened to frequent the Putnams and, as such, Griggs may have traded his medical services for provisions or bought food from the Putnams.⁶⁰ Much of this is circumstantial evidence; however, one cannot argue that as the richest family in the Village, the Putnams' form of payment (rye provisions) for various services would have circulated through the Village at some point either through trade or purchase.

The final bit of evidence that points towards ergotism was that of the testimony during the courtroom trials. Caporael writes:

The trial records indicate numerous interruptions during the proceedings. Outbursts by the afflicted girls describing the activities of invisible specters and "familiar" (agents of the devil in animal form) in the meeting house were common. The girls were often stricken with violent fits that were attributed to torture by apparitions. The spectral evidence of the trials appears to be the hallucinogenic symptoms and perceptual disturbances accompanying ergotism. The convulsions appear to be epileptiform. Accusations of choking, pinching, pricking with pins and biting by the specter of the accused formed the standard testimony of the afflicted in almost all the examinations and trials...The physical symptoms of the afflicted and many of the other accusers are those induced by convulsive ergot poisoning.⁶¹

From the evidence found in favor of the theory of ergotism being the cause, historians must now reconsider that much of the trial's testimonies were not "delusional testimony" or "imaginary testimony" but were in fact evidence of ergotism.

⁵⁹ Linnda R. Caporael, "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?" *Science* 192, no. 4234 (1976): 24.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid, 25.

However, Caporael does concede that, “there can be found no hard proof of the presence of ergot in Salem in 1692, but a circumstantial case can be demonstrated.”⁶² Evidence was found in everything from agricultural practices, to physical manifestations of the condition, and the fact that other factors such as psychological and sociological could have given substance and meaning to the symptoms.⁶³ Caporael concluded, “without knowledge of ergotism and confronted by convulsion, mental disturbances, and perceptual distortions, the New England Puritans seized upon witchcraft as the best explanation for the phenomenon...[and perhaps] One Satan in Salem may well have been convulsive ergotism.”⁶⁴ The circumstantial evidence, therefore, all points to the conclusion of poisoning by ergotism.

IV. Salem Village Factionalism

Salem Town and Salem Village were rocked by in-fighting from the start. Historians Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum discovered a fascinating correlation in the 1970s between East and West Salem Village in their book, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*. For years those in Salem Village had advocated the building of a church nearby so they did not have to make the long five mile trek to Salem Town every Sunday to that church. Opponents argued that if two churches were build in such close proximity they would have to pay double in church taxes. From this dilemma two factions were born in Salem: those who wanted a new church built and those who opposed it. Boyer and Nissenbaum found that those who wanted the church built tended to live on the west side of the Village because they were farther from the Town while those on the east side felt that the new church was unnecessary. Those in the “pro-church” west

⁶² Linnda R. Caporael, “Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?” *Science* 192, no. 4234 (1976): 26.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

also tended to follow the pattern of accuser while those in the “church-opposed” east were mostly the accused. Boyer and Nissembaum dub this phenomenon “village factionalism.”

Village factionalism was also brought about by many other factors beyond the issue of building a new church in Salem Village. Boyer and Nissembaum wrote:

The problems which confronted Salem Village in fact encompassed some of the central issues of New England society in the late seventeenth century. The resistance of back-country farmers to the pressures of commercial capitalism and the social style that accompanied it; the breaking away of outlying areas from parent towns; difficulties between ministers and their congregations; the crowding of third-generation sons from family lands; the shifting focus of authority within individual communities and society as a whole; the very quality of life in an unsettled age.⁶⁵

All of which would coalesce into the wider village factionalism described earlier in this chapter.

Each separate factor would add to the problems already associated with both Salem Town and Salem Village.

Overall the village factionalism experienced by Salem can be described as socio-economic in a way. This issue involved not only the culture of the Puritans such as their religion, but also the more practical economic matter of taxation. To further their claim Boyer and Nissembaum also found correlation regarding village factionalism based whether or not one was a supporter of reverend Parris and the Putnam clan. Boyer and Nissembaum claim: “That part of Salem Village was an anti-Parris stronghold in 1695 (the part nearest Salem Town) had also been a center of resistance to the witchcraft trials, while the more distant western part of the Village, where pro-Parris sentiment was dominant, contained an extremely high concentration of accusers in 1692.”⁶⁶ An entire chart is dedicated in their book to showing the interconnected web of people who all were opposed to Parris. It shows not only familial, but also economic and marriage relations. Boyer and Nissembaum’s evidence used states:

⁶⁵ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: the Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), 180.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 185.

There were forty-seven Villagers whose position could be determined both in 1692 (by their testimonies or other involvement in the witchcraft trials) and in 1695 (by their signatures on one or the other of the two key petitions) Of the twenty-seven of those who supported the trials by testifying against one or more of the accused witches, twenty-one later signed the pro-Parris petition, and only six the anti-Parris document. Of the twenty who registered their opposition to the trials, either by defending an accused person or by casting doubt on the testimony of the afflicted girls, only one supported Parris in 1695, while nineteen opposed him. In short, supporters of the trials generally belonged to the pro-Parris faction, and opponents of the trials were overwhelmingly anti-Parris.⁶⁷

These numbers further add to the evidence of the interconnected web presented by Boyer and Nissenbaum. The correlation of who signed the petitions as anti or pro-Parris and those who opposed or supported the trials could be considered by some to be quite damning evidence. However, correlation does not equal causation and even Boyer and Nissenbaum acknowledge this later in their book's chapter as it is impossible to determine the position of every Salem Villager toward the witchcraft episode.⁶⁸ Another difficulty posed was by those Villagers who did take a side in 1692 against their will: the accused witches.⁶⁹ Due to this bias they cannot technically be placed into the anti-Parris faction.

Beyond village factionalism, Boyer and Nissenbaum did attempt to show a more human side of what sparked this issue. They argued that "Parris and Putnam and the rest were, after all, not only Salem Villagers: they were also men of the seventeenth century; they were New Englanders; and, finally, they were Puritans."⁷⁰ When one puts all of these factors into perspective it becomes easier to see just how different a world this truly was and how the slight differences between two factions of people may have caused one of the most devastating events to occur in

⁶⁷ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: the Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), 185.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 186.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 187.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 179-180.

American colonial history. The human aspect, therefore, becomes integral to the interconnected web as this was a web involving humans and their personal beliefs.

Boyer and Nissenbaum argued the factions they theorized caused a psychological change in the way villagers viewed each other; especially right before, during, and after the trials. Boyer and Nissenbaum claimed:

Faced with this formidable psychological barrier, the witchcraft accusations soon began to generate a powerful dynamic of their own, a dynamic which rapidly heightened the sense of general conspiracy already pervading the Village by 1692. We have earlier suggested the kinds of “networks” that linked many of the accused witches to the anti-Parris leadership. Indeed, all it takes is a slight shift in our angle of vision to perceive the victims of the witch trials in 1692 the way they must have appeared to the pro-Parris people: as the well-organized minions of those immune figures who stood poised to take over and destroy Salem Village.⁷¹

It is this “shift in our angle of vision” that allows one to see just how village factionalism would have self-perpetuated itself as each side of the faction would have viewed the other with heightened hostility as the trials moved forward creating a viscous cycle of accuser and accused.

The Boyer-Nissenbaum theory of village factionalism included both hard and circumstantial evidence. This, however, is one of the more compelling arguments as it includes both social and economic factors that make sense for a seventeenth-century coastal colonial village. This theory took into account everything from familial ties, to pro- and anti-Parris factions, and even pro- and anti-church-building factions – all of which coalesced into a grander scheme of overall village factionalism that led to cracks in the community allowing for accusations of witchcraft to seep in.

⁷¹ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: the Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), 188.

Conclusion

After examining four compelling theories that may explain the cause of the hysteria that led to the Salem Witch Trials – religious and occultist beliefs, Indian frontier attacks, ergot poisoning, and village factionalism – one stands out as far more plausible than the others.

Despite the fact that Indian frontier attacks did affect the lives of some of those who lived in Salem Village, this theory has far too little hard evidence to be given more serious thought. As so few people were affected by these events only a handful of examples can be used as evidence for this theory. John McWilliams, another prominent historian who wrote heavily on this theory does make the strong argument that, “Without the contexts of the northern Indian war and the turmoil over the new charter, Salem witchcraft is thus historically inconceivable.”⁷² However, even McWilliams, with as strong a claim he makes concedes to the fact that, “the northern Indian war should [not] be regarded as the cause of the Salem witch trials. Such mono-causal explanations, though we continue to seek them, are the bane of all historical understanding.”⁷³ Mercy Lewis’s story is presented as the best example of how the idea of “collective mentality” could have affected the villagers and in turn caused heightened hysteria at the trials. This however is not enough. One good example of a person who survived the Indian Wars, was then psychologically affected by it, and then brought their Indian-fearing mentality back to Salem is not enough. There needs to be more examples, but in this case the others are nowhere near as solid as Lewis’. For this reason the argument that the Indian Wars caused heightened paranoia for those involved in the trials is not as strong as the religious and occultist belief theory.

⁷² John McWilliams, “Indian John and the Northern Tawnies.” *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 69, no. 4, (1996): 582.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 603.

The main problem with the ergot poisoning theory is very simple and one that was already addressed in this paper and even admitted by the author who first theorized it. This, of course, is the idea of circumstantial evidence. The entire theory is completely based on circumstantial evidence regarding soil, foliage, agriculture, and some firsthand accounts describing circumstantial ergot-favored weather. This is not enough for it to be a theory that can stand on its own. There is also the fact that other authors have come forward with evidence that counter-argued the ergot theory entirely. According to the authors Nicholas P. Spanos and Jack Gottlieb, “while the afflicted girls exhibited rather dramatic behavior, none of them displayed the syndrome of convulsive ergotism. Instead, they showed symptoms of “demonic possession,” a phenomenon that was fairly common among 16th- and 17th-century Puritans in both England and colonial America.”⁷⁴ When the ergot theory was presented, it was explained using the best possible arguments based on circumstantial evidence. The problem here is that there is absolutely no hard evidence whatsoever for this theory. There is also no archaeological evidence to support the claims of ergotism in Salem in 1692 and there is no written record that would definitively prove that ergot poisoning occurred in Salem. These could have included parchments such as journals or diaries and even almanacs describing the agricultural environment of the time. Spanos and Gottlieb even counter-argue Linnda Caporael’s original argument directly by claiming, “Caporael reason[ed] that the village was exposed to ergotized rye by December 1691. Putnam reported having his fits in April 1692. It is unlikely that he would have been so late in succumbing to its affects.”⁷⁵ This is due to the fact that ergot poisoning’s symptoms would be noticeable soon after ingestion. Caporael’s original theory solely relies on two things: favorable weather accounts for ergotism and that the hallucinogenic effects ergot poisoning causes

⁷⁴ : Nicholas P. Spanos and Jack Gottlieb, "Ergotism and the Salem Village Witch Trials." *Science* 194, no. 4272 (1976): 1392.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

supposedly explained the girls' fits during the trials. With no hard evidence, the religious and occultist belief theory present a better argument once more.

The theory of village factionalism did provide great insight into the economic and social factors of the Village and Town; however, this theory along with ergotism is far too circumstantial because it considers the relations of people to be the absolute cause, and even Boyer and Nissenbaum themselves admit how circumstantial this evidence is. They claim, "the networks we have postulated are difficult to pin down, for instance, because they rested on the kinds of ties and associations often reflected only in the most fragmentary way, if at all, in the written record."⁷⁶ The problem with this theory is that it completely relies upon the idea of social relations and hearsay. Actual village gossip was used by Boyer and Nissenbaum in order to construct their village social web. Author Franklin Mixon offers his own insight on the Boyer-Nissenbaum theory and claimed:

They [Boyer and Nissenbaum (1974)] suggested that the ministers exploited the young girls (the accusers) for personal and corporate gain. Parris, a former businessman who had often preached of the importance of economics and commerce, had been experiencing difficulty in filling the village meetinghouse for weekly worship and even in persuading the congregation to pay his salary. However, most villagers turned to him for explanation and guidance during the witchcraft episode, and church attendance and Parris's stature in the village soon soared. According to Boyer and Nissenbaum, Parris drew on the energies of the population to shore up his own leadership.⁷⁷

In other words, Mixon argued that Boyer and Nissenbaum were themselves arguing for a different theory all together. Due to the fact this theory was reinterpreted so easily it is not as solid as it should be. This leaves the religious and occultist belief theory standing as the sole logical answer.

⁷⁶ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: the Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), 186.

⁷⁷ Franklin G. Mixon, "Homo Economicus" and the Salem Witch Trials." *The Journal of Economic Education* 31, no. 2 (2000): 182.

So far as the lives of colonial Puritans were concerned, religion was of utmost importance. Their entire way of life revolved around their Christian beliefs. Whether or not they would be going to heaven or suffer eternal damnation when they died depended upon how they acted in their day-to-day lives. Evidence abounds in diaries, journals, books, bibles, and many other such written records of the time. One prominent example is the primary source account of Cotton Mather, the man given the task of collecting and writing the court testimonies of the Salem Witch Trials. Much of his account is spent decrying the region as that of the Devil's and using it to repeat biblical scripture over and over justifying the executions and paying penance for such evils he had to write about. This fact alone tells one just how much religion affected the overall mentality of Salem Village and the greater colony. Author Richard Latner offered his own interpretation of the events at Salem. He argued that after, "examining the bitter disputes that wracked Salem Village and Andover [it] suggest[ed] that we should accord religion – that is, matters involving religious doctrine, church organization, and actions by individual ministers – greater weight as an explanation for the witchcraft frenzy."⁷⁸ Puritans believed in God which meant they also believed in the Devil. Through belief in the Devil, they were more capable of believing occultist practices such as witchcraft. In other words, their religion made witches real. To many who were there in 1692, those afflicted girls were actually being tossed about by an unholy specter controlled by the witch on trial at that moment in the courtroom. Justified by faith in God, witches accused were always guilty until proven innocent. Latner argued that heightened hysteria via religion could be attributed to Reverend Parris as:

Parris's religious preparation is significant because it indicates that he was familiar with contemporary doctrine and practice, and, although he "would not qualify as one of the great preachers of colonial New England," he was a serious, dedicated minister. The upheaval in Salem

⁷⁸ Richard Latner, "Here Are No Newtters": Witchcraft and Religious Discord in Salem Village and Andover." *The New England Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (2006): 93.

Village that he helped instigate resulted not from incompetence, ignorance, or opportunism, as some critics have suggested, but rather from a noxious mix of psychological rigidity and religious enthusiasm that ill served a divided community. His evangelical piety drove him to lead a campaign to revitalize and purify religion in Salem Village.⁷⁹

These beliefs, instigated by Reverend Parris, directly led to an increase in hysteria and furthered the trials into their bloodiest period. Overall nineteen people were executed, and one was pressed to death; the only such example of which that occurred in colonial America. These people died because of fervent beliefs that made what others were witnessing real. As Latner wrote, “To Parris, witchcraft involved a religious battle between Christ's church and its enemies, within and without, and as the crisis grew, he projected the divisions within his own church and community onto the broader New England landscape.”⁸⁰ The despicable actions that took place in Salem in 1692 occurred because it was real for so many of those involved. For these reasons I conclude in my thesis that beliefs in Puritan religious doctrine and occultist witch lore directly caused the hysteria that led to the tragedy at Salem in 1692 through the form of a mass witch trial and subsequent executions.

⁷⁹ Richard Latner, "Here Are No Newtters": Witchcraft and Religious Discord in Salem Village and Andover." *The New England Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (2006): 97.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 106.

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