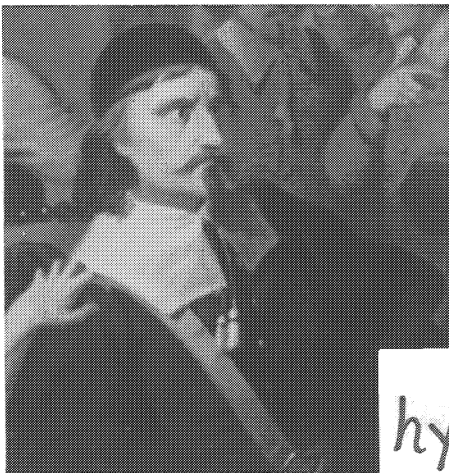
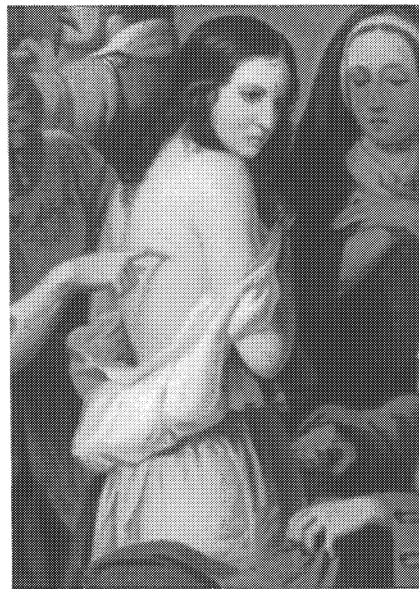

What Caused The Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?

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*hysteria - nervous
disorder marked
by defective
emotional control,
outburst of emotion*

STUDENT GUIDE SHEET

What Caused the Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?

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Directions: In the warm summer months of 1692, twenty women and men were put to death in Salem, Massachusetts, for practicing witchcraft. Why this happened has been the subject of historical debate for many years. Witchcraft hangings on this scale had never happened before in America and have never happened since. This document based exercise asks you for your educated opinion as to why they occurred.

There are several steps to forming this educated opinion.

1. Read the Background Essay. It gives an overview of the Salem story.
2. Quickly skim through the 9 documents to get a sense of what they are about.
3. Read the documents slowly. For each, use the margins or Document Analysis Sheet to record:
 - a. What or who is the source? Is it primary or secondary?
 - b. What is the main idea (or the main ideas) in the document?
4. Organize the documents into theories or reasons by adding brackets and short labels in the list below. Sometimes one document by itself presents a theory. Sometimes two or three together present a theory.
5. Prioritize your reasons. What is the most important reason? What is second?
6. Explain your priorities. Why is one reason more important than another?

The Documents:

- Document 1: Exodus 22:18
- Document 2: Salem Death Toll
- Document 3: Cotton Mather: "These evil spirits are all around."
- Document 4: Painting: Examination of a Witch
- Document 5: Chart: The Accused and the Accusers
- Document 6: Examination of Bridget Bishop
- Document 7: Charles Upham: A Historian's Opinion
- Document 8: Drawing and Commentary: A Hysterical Attack
- Document 9: Map: The Geography of Witchcraft

What Caused the Salem Witch Trial Hysteria of 1692?

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

In the 1600s, a large number of English immigrants arrived in New England. The leaders of these settlers were **Puritans**. Puritans were Protestant Christians who were unhappy with their church in England. They came to New England so they could practice Christianity in a pure way.

The land of New England and Puritan beliefs fit together well. Both were tough. The New England climate was harsh with long cold winters. New England soil was rocky and not easy to farm. But the Puritans were determined. Hard times were simply God’s test.

Puritans believed in **predestination**, the idea that God elects or chooses before birth who will go to Heaven and who will not. Puritans lived with the possibility that they were damned to Hell. The Puritan ethic of hard work was partly an attempt to prove to themselves and others that they were among the chosen.

To guide them through this difficult life, Puritans had help – the Bible. Puritans were **fundamentalists**. They believed that every word in the Christian Bible was the true word of God and was to be followed to the letter. What

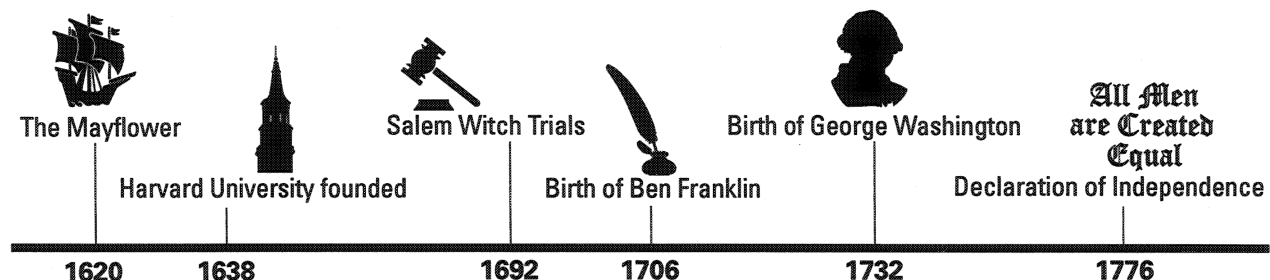
the Bible said, Puritans believed, and the Bible spoke of the Devil and of witches.

The Devil was indeed clever with the ability to enter a normal person’s body and turn that person into a **witch**. Once under the Devil’s power, the witch could make all kinds of trouble. A witch might cause a neighbor’s bread to burn or cow to run away. A witch might cause a young girl to cry out in church, or a faithful husband to commit adultery.

In 17th century New England, witchcraft was a serious crime. Convicted witches could be put to death. The problem was how to prove a person was a witch. Courts accepted several kinds of evidence:

1. Admission of guilt. This made it easy.
2. An unusual power or physical trait. A man who could hold a rifle, arm extended, with his finger in the barrel, was a suspect. A woman who confused the words when saying the Lord’s Prayer might be a witch.
3. Anger followed by mischief. If a suspected witch shouted hateful words at someone and later that person broke a leg, this was evidence of witchcraft.
4. **Spectral evidence**. This was testimony by a victim that they were “visited” by some demon, perhaps while sleeping. Courts did not like spectral evidence because it was hard to prove.

In the 80-year period from 1620 to 1700, 16 colonists outside of Salem were put to death for witchcraft. But this was a small number com-



pared to the number executed in Salem. In just a 15-week period from June 10 through September 22, 1692, 19 men and women from the Salem area were hanged for witchcraft. Another, an 81-year-old man, was pressed to death by stones.

The trouble in Salem began when two young girls, Betty Parris, age nine, and her 11-year-old cousin Abigail Williams, asked a West Indian slave woman named Tituba to help them know their fortunes. They were interested in what their future sweethearts would be like. To find this out they used an old trick of suspending an egg-white in a glass of water. Then they looked for telltale shapes. Disturbingly, one of the girls thought she saw the shape of a coffin.

Over the next several months the two girls began to show strange behavior. Betty's father, the Reverend Samuel Parris, was puzzled by the girls' "getting into Holes, creeping under Chairs and Stools, . . . uttering foolish and ridiculous speeches. . . ." Reverend Parris learned about the sessions with Tituba. He decided that the girls were under the Devil's spell. Soon the strange behavior spread to other young girls in town. Under pressure from Reverend Parris and other adults, on February 29, 1692, the girls identified two local white women and the slave Tituba as the witches who were causing them such pain. The Salem witch hunt was under way.

The three accused women were carted off to jail in Boston. Only Tituba confessed to practicing witchcraft, an admission that saved her life. Over the next few weeks, the odd behavior of the

girls continued. Then in late March the first adult fell victim to the witches' spell. Accusations increased and even included a four-year-old girl who spent nine months in leg irons before being released.

Throughout March, April, and half of May, the jails continued to fill. A special court was set

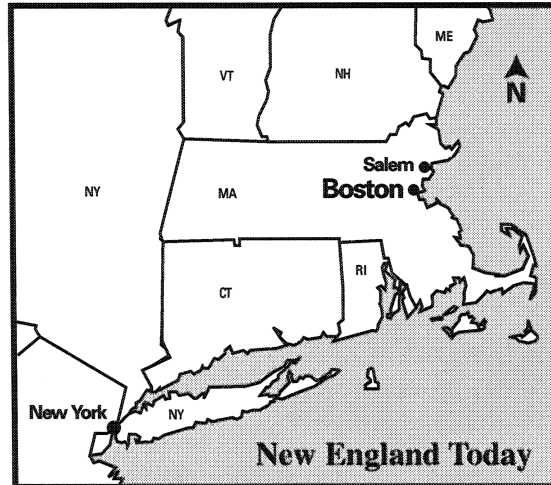
up and the first trials were held June 2. On June 10, Bridget Bishop from Salem Village was hanged. On July 19, five more witches met the same fate. And so it continued until September 22, when a mass hanging of eight accused witches ended the executions.

The tragedy at Salem was nearly over. The trials

were called to a halt by Governor Phips. The fact that the governor's own wife was accused helped to stop the killing. The Puritan church leader Cotton Mather agreed things had gone too far. Mather said, "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned." By May of 1693 the jails had been emptied. One hundred accused witches still in jail were either declared not guilty or pardoned.

The hangings had ended, but the big questions remain. Why were 19 people put to death for witchcraft in Salem and another pressed to death by stones? Why were more people hanged for witchcraft in Salem in one summer than were put to death in all of New England in nearly 100 years? Who or what was to blame?

Examine the 9 documents that follow and formulate your answer to the question: *What caused the Salem witch trial hysteria of 1692?*



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Document 1

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

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

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Document 2

Source: Adapted from Salem Court Records.

SALEM WITCHCRAFT HANGINGS 1692

June 10	Bridget Bishop
July 19	Sarah Good
July 19	Elizabeth Howe
July 19	Susannah Martin
July 19	Rebecca Nurse
July 19	Sarah Wildes
August 19	George Burroughs
August 19	Martha Carrier
August 19	George Jacobs
August 19	John Proctor
August 19	John Willard
September 19	Giles Cory (pressed to death)
September 22	Martha Cory
September 22	Mary Easty
September 22	Alice Parker
September 22	Mary Parker
September 22	Ann Pudeater
September 22	Margaret Scott
September 22	Wilmot Redd
September 22	Samuel Wardwell

ACCUSED WHO DIED IN JAIL

Sarah Good's child died prior to July 19, 1692.

May 10, 1692	Sarah Osborne
June 16, 1692	Roger Toothaker
December 3, 1692	Ann Foster
March 10, 1693	Lydia Dustin

Document 3

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

These evil spirits are all around.... Go tell mankind, that there are devils and witches.... New England has had examples of their existence...and that not only the wigwams of Indians...but the houses of Christians...have undergone the annoyance of evil spirits.

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

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Document 4

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



Document 5

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

The Accused (Salem, 1692)

Marital Status

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

Age

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

The Accusers (Salem, 1692)

Marital Status

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

Age

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

Document 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

She shook her head, and the afflicted were tortured.

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

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

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

Document 7

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

What are we to think of those persons who...continued the accusations – the “afflicted children” and their associates?... They soon...became intoxicated...by the terrible success of their imposture (acting), and were swept along by the frenzy they had occasioned.... Once or twice they were caught in their own snare; and nothing but the blindness of the bewildered community saved them from...well-deserved punishment.... It is dreadful to reflect upon the enormity of their wickedness.... there can be no doubt that they were great actors.

Document 8

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

Adolescents, especially in the presence of Tituba, might very well have succumbed (given in) to the suggestion of bewitchment. The fits they experienced were very likely genuine, born of anxiety over a magic that threatened to overpower them. The diagnosis also explains many of the adult fits experienced by those who were convinced that their neighbors were conjuring against them.

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

Document 9

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

Map of Salem Village 1692

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