

## Salem Witch Trials

“On March 1, 1692, Salem, Massachusetts authorities interrogated Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and an Indian slave, Tituba, to determine if they indeed practiced witchcraft. So began the infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692. Over the following months, more than 150 men and women in and around Salem were jailed on charges of exercising ‘Certaine Detestable Arts called Witchcrafts & Sorceries.’ Nineteen people, including five men, were eventually convicted and hanged on Gallows Hill; and an additional male suspect was pressed to death. Others died in prison. Today they are seen as victims of a tragic mistake.

Cousins Abigail Williams and Elizabeth Parris, ages eleven and nine, respectively, began to enter trance-like states and to suffer from convulsive seizures in January 1692. By late February, prayer, fasting, and medical treatment had failed to relieve their symptoms, or to quiet the blasphemous shouting that accompanied their fits. Pressured to explain, the girls accused the three above-named women of afflicting them.

A recent epidemic of smallpox, heightened threats of Indian attack, economic uncertainties, and small-town rivalries may have all primed the people of Salem and its surrounding areas for the mass hysteria that fueled the witchcraft trials. Although social status and gender offered little protection from accusations, historians note that single women particularly were vulnerable to charges of practicing witchcraft, while pre-adolescent girls were likewise most vulnerable to affliction. Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and Tituba, for example, all lacked male protectors” (Google).

Prior to these witch trials in Salem, “across the pond,” two specific trials in 1645 and 1662 became historically well known. “The 1645 trial ‘facilitated’ by the Witchfinder General saw 18 people executed in one day. The judgment by the future Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, Sir Matthew Hale in the 1662 trial acted as a powerful influence on the continuing persecution of witches in England (Bury Edmunds Witch Trials).

What’s the point? Concerning the character of Matthew Hale, he was said, “to be considered the most eminent judge who ever filled the office, and we view with admiration and reverence the rules which he laid down for his conduct. They ought to be inscribed in letters of gold on the walls of Westminster Hall, as a lesson to those entrusted with the administration of justice” (Great Lawyers).

“There is but one lamentable blot upon the character of this most excellent man. The trial of the (so called) witches at Bury St. Edmunds, and the execution of the poor creatures accused of the crime, is still remembered with a shudder. That Sir Matthew should have been so blinded by superstition as to pass the awful sentence with satisfaction, supposing that he was thereby serving the cause of religion, appears incredible, and we can only marvel that such ignorance should have been found combined with so great excellence and learning” (Ibid.).

*And now, brethren, I know that in ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers, Acts 3:17: these also thought they were righteous. Seeking to establish a righteousness of their own (Rom. 10:3). ret*