



# Salem Witch Trials Crisis Committee



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## **History of and Beliefs on the Salem Witch Trials**

### **What are the Salem Witch Trials?**

The Salem Witch Trials, beginning in 1692 in Salem Village, Massachusetts, were sparked by a group of young girls who claimed to be possessed by the devil and were accused of practicing witchcraft. Many people believed to be practicing witchcraft were prosecuted and often killed. A great hysteria grew, but later weakened, leading citizens to turn against the trials.

### **Who was involved in them?**

The colony of Massachusetts was the main party involved in the trials, being a religiously strict area who held superstitions against sinners. The first “witch”, Bridget Bishop, was the first hanged for her convictions. This was later followed by about 150 more men, women, and children also being accused. Among these were George Burroughs, Martha Carrier, Giles Corey, and many more. Later on, the General Court of Massachusetts annulled guilty verdicts of accused witches and gifted their families, but bitterness continued to resonate.

### **What was going on at the time that made them start?**

During the late seventeenth century, economic deterioration from food shortages could have caused a widespread scapegoat, manifesting in the persecution of so-called “witches”. Witchery tampered with natural forces, so people during this time could have blamed them for the economic downturn.



It is also possible that they split the Salem Village into two opposing groups, western and eastern, and struggled for power to control the community. This had led western villagers to accuse their eastern neighbors of practicing witchcraft.

Other theories suggest that undiagnosed cases of encephalitis and fungal poisoning could have inspired the mass hysteria. Also, other conditions (such as convulsive ergotism, producing hallucinations, muscle contractions and vertigo) may have lead courts to believe that the young women were witches. All of these underlying causes could have contributed to the start of the persecutions, but are only theorized.

### **Different beliefs on witchcraft at the time?**

During the late seventeenth century, the Puritan Lifestyle heavily influenced society, including its religious views. Puritan law was extremely rigid and followed a moral code. They braced themselves for the wrath of God and did what they could to prevent themselves from receiving it. The first women who were accused as witches had strayed from the Puritan lifestyle and were considered social deviants and outcasts. Because they were sinners, it made sense to everyone in society that these women would be the ones practicing witchcraft, and likewise, it made sense for everyone else to feel responsible to remove them from society.

### **Different stereotypes of witchcraft?**

Witches were often sinners or outcasts, being convicted because of their transgressions from the strict moral code at the time. Witchcraft is often related to sorcery or dark magic, making the practice ungodly, and therefore punishable by the law. They were stereotyped as devil-worshippers with lust for conversions, power, and control.

### **Different punishments for witchcraft at the time?**



For someone to be accurately convicted beyond mere rumors, a witch could be given tests, or trials, that were disarming and inhumane. For example, a convicted witch would be stripped, bound to stones and then released in the nearest body of water; an innocent person would sink, while a witch would float (see “Salem Witch Trial Investigation Methods and Sentences” for elaboration). Witches would also be tortured into revealing the names of fellow believers/practitioners. After such tests, witches were punished by death. These punishments varied from being burned at the stake, beaten, hanged, beheaded or drowned.



## **Salem Witch Trial Investigation Methods and Sentences**

The Salem Witch Trials consisted of deceptive, gruesome, and absurd behaviors and accusations. Unsurprisingly, the investigation methods and sentences issued were no different. Here are a few of the most common practices used to determine if one was guilty of witchcraft and their sentences:

### **Swimming Test (Ducking Stool)**

This is perhaps the most infamous test of the Salem Witch Trials. Because witches were believed to have rejected the sacrament of baptism, it was believed that their bodies would reject the water and float to the top. Accused witches were dragged to the nearest body of water, stripped to their undergarments, restrained by ropes, and tossed into the water to see if they would sink or float. According to their logic, an innocent person would sink to the bottom, while a witch would remain floating at the top. More often than not, there was a rope tied around the waist of said witch for the testers to immediately pull them back up once completing the test; however, it was not uncommon for accidental drowning to occur. (This implies that most, if not all, of them sank).

### **Prayer Test**

The belief at the time was that witches were incapable of reciting scripture, thus the accused were asked to read passages of the bible, typically the Lord's Prayer, aloud without error. While there were many explanations as to why a suspect may have made errors, this was typically a critical form of evidence. Any error suggested that the accused were in allegiance



with the devil and, thus, were witches. Two famous cases where this was used are the cases of Jane Wenham and George Burroughs.

### **Touch Test**

Touch tests suggested that the physical contact between the accused and the accuser would warrant a physical reaction from the accuser. If the victim did not warrant a reaction, it was seen as innocence. However, if the victim did warrant a reaction, it was seen as proof that the accused put the accuser under a spell. Touch tests played an important role in the case of two women: Rose Cullender and Amy Denny.

### **Witch Cakes**

Being perhaps the most bizarre form of an incrimination test to date, witch cakes were another popular form of evidence. In cases of mysterious illness or possession, investigators would take a urine sample from the accused witch, mix it with rye-meal to form a cake, and then feed it to a dog. Dog's were said to be the "animal helpers"<sup>1</sup> of witches. If the dogs exhibited the same illness as the victim, it was taken as evidence of witchcraft. The slave Tituba played an important role in the Salem Witch Trial, as she is most remembered for baking a witch cake for the case of Betty Paris.

### **Hanging at Gallows Hill**

Through the entirety of the Salem Witch Trials, this was the most common form of execution. Once convicted and given the death penalty, the accused witches would be given an execution date and remain in jail until such time. When the date arrived, the accused were taken to Gallows Hill and hanged.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/7-bizarre-witch-trial-tests>



## **Witch's Cradle**

Similar to the hanging at Gallows Hill, accused people were given an execution date and taken to Gallows Hill to be hanged. However, the witch's cradle was much less humane. The accused would be put in a burlap sack, hung upside down, and swung back and forth. This would cause hallucinations and rambling from the victims. The rambling was often used as more evidence against them.

There were many other forms of executions and testing, these just happen to be some of the most common and humane. Looking into the story of Giles Corey may also be beneficial to you.

**Format:** The format for this committee will be a little different. The first session will function like it does at a normal MUN conference. The chairs expect you to know your historical figures well enough to present their views on the trials and improvise when necessary. The crisis will be thrown in some time during the second or third session, and committee will be run similar to a salem trial. The chairs will further explain how committee will work during the session.





## **Things/Questions to Consider and Useful Links**

### **Questions**

Make sure you know your character inside and out. This is key to doing well in committee.

Looking into the history of the Salem Witch Trials and what led to them occurring might be beneficial to strengthen your argument and understanding your case.

Who are the other key figures of the Salem Witch Trial time period, and what have they said/done that is notable?

Was your character heavily involved in any of the specific trials?





What pieces of evidence do you have to support your character's claims (look into what people were using to justify claims of witchcraft)?

What were some of the causes of "witch like behavior" (look into what historians and scientists have said)?

Regarding the last question, what can your character say or do to make someone exhibit this?

**Note: This committee will be set in the time period of 1692, slightly prior to the establishment of the Court of Oyer and Terminer.**

### Links

<https://www.salemweb.com/guide/witches.php?i=2>

<https://historyofmassachusetts.org/the-salem-witch-trials/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6FXHg7cQAw>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJLy5\\_DlqY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJLy5_DlqY)

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanbergara/we-explored-the-city-of-salem-to-understand-the-salem-witch>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pr782MGD-sc>

<https://www.famous-trials.com/salem/2078-sal-acct>



<https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/salem-witch-trials>

<https://daily.jstor.org/caused-salem-witch-trials/>

<https://msu.edu/~shahfaiz/Salem/religion.html>

<http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/people/>

<https://www.syracusenewtimes.com/debunking-stereotypes-witchcraft/>

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"Punishments for the Accused - Salem Witch Trials." *Google Sites*, sites.google.com/a/mymmps.us/1thomassalemwitchtrials/punishments-for-the-accused.

"History of the Salem Witch Trials." *History of Massachusetts Blog*, 23 June 2019, historyofmassachusetts.org/the-salem-witch-trials/.

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