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Finding the True Cause of the Salem Witchcraft Trials

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Finding the True Cause of the Salem Witchcraft Trials

Historians have been studying the Salem witchcraft trials for centuries. Few other events in colonial American history have drawn as much fascination and intrigue as the Salem witchcraft trials. Countless papers, articles, and books have been published expressing different points of view as to what caused the reign of horror in Salem. The truth is that blame for the witchhunt can not be placed on one issue alone. Like many other disasters, the Salem witchcraft trials resulted from an unfortunate combination of various factors and circumstances. Although superstitions and prejudices of the Puritan Massachusetts community laid the foundation for the witchcraft trials, the mass hysteria in Salem also developed from the turmoil of the wars with the Indians and the French, along with the complex social and political conditions of the time.

Before one can comprehend the cause of the Salem witchcraft trials, the facts of the event must be known. The hysteria began sometime in February of 1692 when Betty Parris, the daughter of Reverend Samuel Parris, became strangely sick.[1] She writhed in feverish pain and had hallucinations. Talk of witchcraft started when several friends of Betty began to show similar strange behavior. A doctor named William Griggs was called in to examine the girls. When his medicine failed, he suggested that the girls' problems may have a supernatural origin. Soon, many other girls became afflicted. In a very superstitious town, the affliction of the girls became an obsession.[2] When Betty Parris and Abigail Williams named their afflictors, the witch hunt began. Between June and September of 1692, 19 men and women were hung on Gallows Hill after being convicted of witchcraft. Another man was pressed to death under heavy stones. Dozens of others suffered in jail for months without trials, and hundreds more faced accusations of witchcraft.[3]

Understanding the attitude of the Salem community is imperative to understanding how the witch trials happened. The Massachusetts town was overwhelmingly Puritan, and they were fairly observant too.[4] The average townsperson believed in the existence of witches, so the idea of witchcraft was nothing new to them. People thought that God intervened in their everyday lives, and they believed that everything was a message from God. Since life had become very tough in the relatively new colony with an Indian war raging less than seventy miles away,[5] people believed the devil was close at hand.

In his essay, Professor Douglas O. Linder discussed the importance of the flawed legal system during the witchcraft trials. Hundreds of people were brought to trial for witchcraft in 1692, and the legal system in Salem did not give the defendants the same rights as they have today.[6] People could be convicted on spectral evidence, meaning that if someone claimed to have been attacked by your specter, or ghost, you would end up in jail. Also, evidence that present-day courtrooms normally ignore, such as hearsay, gossip, surmises, and unproven assertions, were taken into consideration in colonial America. To make matters even worse for defendants in Salem, accused witches could not call upon witnesses to testify on their behalf, nor could they seek legal counsel. Convicted witches also had no way to appeal the court's decision.[7]

As if the legal system was not bad enough, incriminated witches had one more thing going against them. The court of oyer and terminer, which was created to hear the witchcrafts trials, had William Stoughton appointed as Chief Justice. As the most powerful member of the court, Stoughton was an enthusiastic witch hunter.[8] Linder argues in his essay that the faulty legal system allowed something as horrendous as the witchcraft trials to occur.[9] If Salem had a better and more proper judicial system in place, they hysteria never would have been able to spread through the courts and gain the legitimacy that it did.

In his essay, Dr. Alan Woolf explains how ergot poisoning could have caused the behavior of the afflicted girls. The previous harvest in 1691 had been a very poor harvest year, causing food shortages throughout the area.[10] The low food supply forced Salem villagers to use rye grain in their bread, since it was not as affected by the bad harvest. The ergot fungus grows on the rye flour, replacing the grain with a hard, purplish bundle of fungus that contains ergot alkaloids.[11] Abigail Williams and her friends, who regularly consumed rye grain, became ill and started writhing in pain. When they accused fellow townsfolk of being the witches who tormented them, they famously started the witch hunt.

While it is not the most widely accepted theory, Dr. Alan Woolf makes excellent points as to why ergot poisoning could have caused the Salem witchcraft trials. First, 1691 was a cold winter followed by a humid spring and summer, making the conditions ideal for ergot growth. The crop failure forced the New Englanders to turn to the freshly harvested, infected rye. Most importantly, the symptoms of ergotism, such as hallucinations, burning sensations, headaches, and muscular contractions, resemble the symptoms of the accusers.[13] However, even though Woolf has a compelling argument, chances are that ergotism is not responsible for the witchcraft trials. Symptoms of the accusers could be turned on and off depending on the audience, unlike other proven cases of ergotism. Also, while the afflicted had some of the ergotism symptoms, they never had the full slate of symptoms, which include strictures, weakness, and dementia. Lastly, many other witchcraft trials have occurred in places where ergotism can not grow. So when the evidence is weighed, ergotism most likely did not lead to the madness in Salem.

Mary Beth Norton offers yet another viewpoint on the Salem witchcraft trials in her book *In The Devil's Snare*. She explains how in the early 1690's, Salem was very close to the front lines of an armed conflict.[14] While the conflict may be little known today, at that time it

consumed the people's lives and thoughts, and this can be seen through the letters and diaries of the time.[15] The Second Indian War was a struggle with the French and the Native Americans for New England's northeastern frontier.[16] Mary Beth Norton argues that the witchcraft trials of 1692 can be fully comprehended only by looking at them as intricately related to the simultaneous military affairs of northern New England.

The First and Second Indian Wars significantly changed the lives of the northern settlers for the worse. Prospering communities were ruined and people and their property holdings destroyed. Families that had lived in Maine for two or three generations were either killed or forced to leave their homes, cultivated fields, livestock, and valuable possessions.[17] To make matters even worse, this happened twice in quick succession. The First Indian War in 1676 forced many people in Maine to abandon their houses and communities. Just after refugees successfully reestablished themselves and were once again expanding their settlements, the Second Indian War broke out. In the 1690's, colonial forces suffered one defeat after another, and it took decades for parts of Maine to be fully resettled.[18]

The proximity of Salem to the frontier involved their inhabitants in both Indian wars. Many refugees from the fighting relocated in Salem. Militiamen from the area often fought in these wars. The local military and political officials transferred messages from the front lines to Boston. All of these made Salem very much affected by the fighting.[19] And as it turns out, many people involved in the witchcraft crisis had intimate involvement with the Indian Wars.[20]

While it is clear that Salem was impacted by the Indian Wars, Norton also explains how the wars lead to the witchcraft trials. The wars caused people to constantly think of death, and the fearful attitude of the town allowed the hysteria to spread like wildfire.[21] Additionally, the Puritan community believed that the devil could punish them in the real world. So when the wars

made life extremely tough, people assumed the devil was actively disciplining them. Since they already thought they were being penalized with horrid wars on the frontier, the people of Salem could believe that the devil was hurting them right in their own community.[22]

Franklin G. Mixon Jr. explains some of the economic factors that lead to the Salem witchcraft trials. Mixon portrays the witchcraft trials as an example of scapegoating provoked by deteriorating economic conditions brought on by a harsh winter and a food shortage.[23] The idea of economic scapegoating can be seen through statistical data. A vast majority of the accused witches resided in East Salem, which was wealthier and more prosperous than West Salem, where most of the accusers lived.[24]

Many people in the United States search for one simple cause of the Salem witchcraft trials. However, the truth is that a mixture of different events and circumstances allowed the witchcraft trials to occur. First, the town was overwhelmingly Puritan, which meant that the villagers believed in witches. The flawed legal system also gave almost no rights to the defendant, making it very easy for the accused to be convicted. Self-centered motives of West Salem villagers made some people support the witchcraft trials. The Indian Wars put the whole community in turmoil, along with making colonial life extremely difficult. The food shortage and severe weather made colonial life even worse, and it made the people even angrier. Lastly, the poor economic conditions made life even harder for Salem residents. With these various conditions lowering the quality of life for Salem villagers, the people became angry and upset. Naturally, they looked for a way to release their anger, and maybe even release some of their jealousies or personal resentments. They began to blame others and to scapegoat, leading to one of the most tragic events in colonial American history.

Endnotes

1. Douglas O. Linder, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692* (University of Missouri Kansas City, 2009)
2. Deodat Lawson, 1692, *The Salem Witch Trials*, The University of Virginia. Letter.
3. Linder, *Salem Witchcraft Trials*.
4. Marion Gibson, *Retelling Salem Stories: Gender Politics and Witches in American Culture* (European Journal of American Culture, 2006) 2.
5. Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002) 3
6. Linder, *Salem Witchcraft Trials*.
7. Ibid
8. Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 299.
9. Linder, *Salem Witchcraft Trials*.
10. Alan Woolf, *Witchcraft or Mycotoxin? The Salem Witch Trials* (Journal of Toxicology, 2000) 457.
11. Woolf, *Witchcraft or Mycotoxin?*, 458.
12. Ibid 458
13. Ibid 459-460
14. Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 4.
15. Samuel Sewall, April 1624 to May 1729, *The Salem Witch Trials*, The University of Virginia. Diary.
16. Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 5.
17. Ibid 5-7
18. Ibid 11
19. Ibid 5-7
20. Ibid 12
21. Ibid 298
22. Gibson,*Gender Politics and Witches*, 2.
23. Franklin G. Mixon Jr., *Weather and the Salem Witch Trials* (Journal of Economic Perspectives, 2005) 241
24. Ibid 241