

# “Under an Evil Hand”

*Three hundred years ago the largest witch hunt in American history gripped Salem, Massachusetts. Before the hysteria finally subsided, nineteen people were executed and more than a hundred others convicted of or charged with practicing witchcraft.*

## Larry Gragg

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arly in 1692, several young girls in Salem Village, Massachusetts were “led away with little sorceries,” according to Cotton Mather, Boston’s eminent man of God. Their experiments, which involved the more than divining what their future husbands would be like, began in the household of the village minister, the venerated Samuel Parris. Elizabeth, Parris’s nine-year-old daughter, and Abigail Williams, his eleven-year-old niece, under the guidance of Tituba, the family’s West Indian slave, fashioned a crude crystal ball by dropping an egg into a bowl of water. To the impressionable girls, the undulating egg white appeared to float in the shape of a coffin.

Confronted with this horrific image, the frightened youngsters began to act in peculiar ways. Neighbors were shocked by their “afflictions,” which seemed to worsen each day. One clergyman claimed that the children “were bitten and scratched by invisible agents; their arms, necks, and backs turned this way and that way, and returned back again, so as it is impossible for them to do of themselves, and beyond the power of any leptic fits, or natural disease to affect.”

Unable to determine a physical cause for their “distemper,” William Griggs, the village doctor, confided to Parris that

the children were “under an Evil Hand”—the blanket seventeenth-century diagnosis for maladies physicians were unable to understand.

Anxious to ease the girls’ suffering and to prevent further spread of the afflictions (several teens who lived near the parsonage had begun to exhibit similar symptoms), Parris consulted with neighboring ministers. Upon observing the girls, the clergymen confirmed the physician’s diagnosis—“the hand of Satan was in them.” The reactions of the Reverend Parris and civil authorities to these assessments led to the largest witch hunt in American history.

To the modern mind, the tragic epic of the Salem witch trials seems virtually incomprehensible. But to the seventeenth-century mind, sorcery and the occult were very real. With few exceptions, everyone—even the most highly educated individuals—believed in witchcraft and feared the evil associated with it.

WHEN PARRIS AND THE OTHER MINISTERS repeatedly asked the girls who was afflicting them, they finally obliged by naming Tituba and two other village women, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne—both likely candidates fitting the stereotypical witch “mold.” The destitute pipe-smoking Good wandered from house to house begging food, while Osborne was a semi-invalid old woman known for depression and erratic behavior. Salem magistrates Jonathan Corwin and John Hathorne swiftly issued warrants for the arrest of the accused, and on March 1 constables took them into custody for questioning.

The large crowd that filed into the

village meetinghouse to witness the “examination” of the suspects brought with them their profound belief in the occult. Well educated and poorly educated alike gleaned from almanacs the astronomical data needed to practice astrology, relied on charms, and heeded the words of fortune tellers. They considered comets, lightning, and thunder as omens of catastrophe and gossiped about prophecies, visions, and disembodied voices.

Cotton Mather claimed many “would often cure hurts with spells, and practice detestable conjurations with sieves, and keys, and peas, and nails, and other implements, to learn the things for which they had a forbidden and impious curiosity.” What most worried the Puritan divine was his conviction that this interest inevitably led to a greater fascination with the more insidious practice of witchcraft.

Mather had good reason for his concern. Many seventeenth-century immigrants to New England brought with them their Old World belief that witches or wizards, through curses, charms, or the evil eye, could cause harm in their villages. While ordinary folk worried about witches damaging their crops, harming their livestock, or making someone in their family ill, Mather and some of his clerical colleagues had a much greater fear. They had come to believe that a well-organized witch conspiracy existed in New England, bent upon the overthrow of Christianity.

While the community’s members might disagree on the threat posed by witchcraft, most agreed on the means employed by Satan to recruit witches. Preying upon those with financial difficulty, marital problems, or religious ca-

res, the devil offered happiness and material success for their allegiance.

Two aspects of this alleged pact became important in the witch prosecutions of 1692. Puritans believed that the devil gave to witches natural and unnatural creatures known as "familiar" to aid them in carrying out their evil deeds. Some also contended that the witch, in turn, granted Satan permission to use her shape or her "specter" to afflict others. Indeed, testimony of someone's specter doing harm became the most crucial form of evidence in the 1692 trials.

For four days during the first week of March, Salem Villagers heard magistrates Corwin and Hathorne interrogate the first three suspects about familiars, specters, and incidents in their past that might shed light on the afflictions of the suffering girls. Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne denied complicity in the affair, but Tituba, impressed by the spectacle and fearful of reprisals, confessed to a number of malicious actions. The devil had forced her to harm the girls on several occasions and to sign a pact, she testified. As she wrote in the devil's book, Tituba claimed she saw numerous names, including Good's and Osborne's. Moreover, she offered detailed descriptions of the two villagers' familiars. Good had a yellow bird, a wolf, and a cat. Osborne had one with "wings and two legs and a head like a woman" and the other "all over hairy."

While the magistrates questioned Good and Osborne in the meetinghouse, the afflicted girls, who listened during their testimony, suffered numerous fits—convincing proof to the judges of the accused witches' frightful powers. Even Sarah Good's husband and daughter offered evidence against her; William Good admitted that he thought his wife was a witch, and six-year-old Dorothy claimed to have seen her mother's familiars—three birds of various colors.

Sarah Good's examination led some villagers to recall past confrontations with her, and a few of them came forward later in the year to offer damning evidence in her trial. Sarah Gadge, for example, remembered an argument that had ended with Good threatening that "she should give [Gadge] something." The following day, one of Gadge's cows had mysteriously died—an occurrence she attributed to Good's evil powers.

On March 7, magistrates Corwin and Hathorne, convinced they had assembled enough evidence to justify an indictment,

ordered the three women held in a Boston jail to await their day in court.

To seventeenth-century eyes, there had been little extraordinary about this particular episode of accusations. The three women fit contemporary ideas on witches and the practice of witchcraft. Almost eighty percent of the roughly one hundred people accused of witchcraft in New England prior to 1692 were women; most of them were poor and more than forty years of age. Several had sullied reputations, being known for supposedly having magical powers, criminal backgrounds, or simply disagreeable dispositions. Robert Calef, in one of the contemporary accounts of the Salem trials, explained that because the accused in this case included a confessing slave, as well as "Sarah Good, who had long been counted a melancholy or distracted woman, and one Osborne, an old bed-ridden woman; which two were persons so ill thought of, that the accusation was the more readily believed."

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Initially, then, the accusations of early March seemed little different from previous ones. As Salem's John Higginson recalled a decade later, the situation was "looked on at first as an ordinary case which had fallen out before at several times in other places, and would be quickly over."

USUALLY, AFTER SUSPECTS IN WITCHCRAFT episodes were jailed, the afflicted recovered. In 1692 Salem Village, however, not only did the girls' symptoms worsen, the number of those suffering afflictions increased. When fasts and prayer meetings failed to afford relief, villagers concluded that additional, as-

yet unidentified witches must be in their midst. Widespread panic, which would soon escalate into mass hysteria, set in.

On March 11, the afflicted youths named Martha Corey, and days later they accused Rebecca Nurse of harming them. Because both of these women were members of the Congregational Church, their arrest posed a fundamental crisis of faith for the people of Salem Village.

For three generations, ministers had taught settlers in Massachusetts that even though man was born in sin and deserving of damnation, God had chosen to save a few "elect" souls. In most congregations, membership was based largely upon the applicant's explanation of his or her conversion experience. In churches accepting this evidence of God's gift of grace, few believed that an elect person could fall from grace after having once been saved. But now two of God's apparent elect stood accused of witchcraft. Confused Salem Villagers looked to their spiritual leader for guidance.

On March 27, the Reverend Samuel Parris responded with a sermon entitled "Christ Knows How Many Devils There Are in His Churches and Who They Are." This discourse became the key to the rapid acceleration in accusations that made the Salem episode unique in American history. "Let none then build their hopes of salvation merely upon this," Parris explained, "that they are church members this you and I may be, and yet devils for all that." Church members may have once considered their congregation a sanctuary safely out of the devil's reach, but no more. "Christ knows how many devils among us," said Parris, "whether one or ten or twenty."

When Parris said that the devil had breached the walls of the church and entered into covenants with two of the elect, he was arguing that virtually anyone could be suspect. Parris's dismal prospect that the church no longer offered refuge from evil heightened the atmosphere of distrust enveloping Salem Village. As one minister described the mood during the examination of Rebecca Nurse, "they were afraid that those that sat next to them were under the influence of witchcraft."

There is little question that Parris's sermon changed the pace and character of the accusations. During the following two months more than sixty people stood accused of practicing witchcraft. Increasingly the "specters" of people from

## THE NEW LAND

cross the social spectrum harmed the afflicted. Farmers, merchants, artisans, and clergymen, or more often their wives and daughters, as well as the deviants of the villages surrounding Salem, now faced the prospect of a witchcraft trial. By late May, Thomas Newton, who received a commission to handle the prosecution of the witches, marveled that the afflicted spare no person of what quality soever."

ON MAY 14, AS THE JAILS BETWEEN Salem and Boston filled with suspects, William Phips, the new royal governor of Massachusetts, arrived from England. He was greeted with frightful stories of the sufferings of the increasing number of afflicted. Their relatives told him of family members "taken with preternatural torments some scalded with brimstone some had pins stuck in their flesh others carried into the fire and water and some dragged out of their houses and carried over the tops of the trees and hills for many miles together."

Phips faced a legal dilemma. The Massachusetts Bay colony had made the practice of witchcraft a felony under the authority of a charter granted by Charles in 1629. That document, however, had been revoked in 1686. Two years later, the colony became part of the Dominion of New England. Since the 1689 overthrow of Edmund Andros, the Dominion over Massachusetts had existed in a legal limbo while its agents negotiated with William III for a new charter. Technically, then, no law against witchcraft existed. Governor Phips, who had arrived with a new charter, was unable to convene another provincial legislature to confirm the old statute until June 8.

Not wanting to wait that long, Phips appointed a special Court of Oyer and Terminer (a judicial body to hear and determine) on May 27. He selected Deputy Governor William Stoughton and eight leading merchants and landowners to serve on the court. All but one of the nine had some experience with witchcraft cases.

The judges spent the brief time between their appointment and the first trial consulting clergymen, reviewing the transcripts of the preliminary examinations, reading accounts of earlier trials, and studying English guidebooks on proper procedures in witchcraft cases.

Out of their deliberations, the judges agreed to admit three types of evidence.

Accepting the proposition that a witch had to nourish her familiars, the judges ordered a physical search of suspects for a "witch's teat," a peculiar growth or "preternatural excrescence." Acknowledging the tradition that the devil gave witches the power to harm people by thrusting pins into or twisting images of them, the judges also ordered constables to search suspects' homes for puppets or dolls. Beyond this physical evidence, the judges decided to accept testimony from any who recalled confrontations with the accused and then experienced some misfortune.

Most importantly, however, they concluded that "specter evidence" would be the key to convictions. If the afflicted or other villagers came forward with testimony of the accused's shape or specter doing harm, the judges saw that as the best evidence of complicity with Satan on the grounds that the devil could not use humans' shapes without their permission.

In all, twenty-seven individuals in Salem underwent jury trials for witchcraft between June 2 and September 17. Because prosecutors Thomas Newton and Anthony Checkley were able to introduce specter evidence in all of the trials, the juries rendered guilty verdicts in each case.

Among the convicted were George Burroughs, a former Salem Village minister, and church members Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse. The latter's trial drew particular attention because of the high regard most people held for her. Perhaps no one had been more surprised by the charges against her than Nurse herself. Upon learning of her impending arrest, the pious seventy-one-year-old Nurse asked, "what sin hath God found out in me unrepented of that he should lay such an affliction upon me in my old age?"

For Nurse's June 30 trial, almost forty people signed a petition attesting that "her life and conversation" had always been that of a Christian and they "never had any cause or grounds to suspect her of any such thing as she is now accused of."

When the jury, on the strength of this overwhelming affirmation of Nurse's character, found her innocent, the afflicted "made an hideous outcry." Justice Stoughton then asked the jury to reconsider their verdict. Jury foreman Thomas Fisk agreed to do so on the basis of a puzzling remark Nurse had made upon seeing accused witch Deliverance Hobbs

and her daughter being led into the courtroom. "What, do these persons give in evidence against me now?" Nurse asked, "They used to come among us." The jury wanted to know if Nurse's "us" meant a group of suspects or a group of witches. When Fisk asked the accused to clarify the statement, the nearly deaf, distracted woman made no reply. Taking the suspect's failure to respond as an admission of guilt, the jury reversed its verdict.

By September 22, nineteen of the convicted, including Rebecca Nurse, had been wheeled in carts up Gallows' Hill in Salem and hanged. In addition, the judges had ordered that one suspect, Giles Corey, be "pressed." Corey, in an apparent protest against the trials, had pleaded not guilty but then refused to put himself on trial "by God and my country." This strategy prevented the court from trying him before a jury. Under English law, however, the judges were permitted to impose the sentence of *piene forte et dure* (hard and severe punishment) to coerce a change of mind. Consequently, they ordered Sheriff George Corwin to pile great weights upon Corey. The seventy-two-year-old man refused to relent and died after two days of this torture.

MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED SUSPECTS awaited their trial when Governor Phips returned to Boston in early October from a military campaign against Native Americans on the frontier. Appalled at the scope and spectacle of the trials and upset because even his own wife was named by the afflicted, Phips forbade any more arrests and, at the end of the month, dismissed the Court of Oyer and Terminer. His decision reflected a rapidly developing opposition to the trials.

Ever more people had grown skeptical of the testimony and actions of the afflicted. In his May examination, John Alden had called them "wenches . . . who played their juggling tricks, falling down, crying out, and staring in peoples' faces." During Elizabeth Proctor's June 30 trial, Daniel Elliott testified that he had overheard one of the afflicted claim "she did it for sport they must have some sport." Mary Warren, one of the afflicted who accused more than a dozen people, even admitted to several villagers that "her head was distempered" when she had made those allegations. Moreover, "when she was well again she

could not say that she saw any of [the] apparitions at the time aforesaid."

By early October many also came to realize that several of the more than fifty people who had confessed to familiarity with the devil had done so under great duress. They had been intimidated by the afflicted or by the persistent questions of the magistrates and sometimes even family members who thought a confession might spare their lives. (Only those who refused to confess were hanged; confession was one way to avoid death.)

Those who later recanted their confessions had explanations similar to that of Margaret Jacobs, who told the judges, "I was cried out upon by some of the possessed persons, as afflicting them; whereupon I was brought to my examination, which persons at the sight of me fell down which did very much to startle and affright me. The Lord above knows I knew nothing in the least measure how or who afflicted them; they told me, without doubt I did, or else they would not fall down at me; they told me, if I would not confess, I should be put down into the dungeon and would be hanged, but if I would confess I should have my life, the which did so affright me, with my own vile wicked heart, to save my life; made me make the like confession I did, which confession, may it please the honored court, is altogether false and untrue."

As well as harboring doubts about the testimony of the confessors and accusations of the afflicted, many Salem villagers were impressed by the deportment of the condemned. Shortly before her execution, Rebecca Nurse's sister Mary Esty petitioned the court not for her own life but "that no more innocent blood be shed." The five victims executed on August 19 had likewise expressed the hope that "their blood might be the last innocent blood shed." The Reverend George Burroughs left a particularly vivid impression. According to one contemporary, the former Salem Village minister's protestation of innocence and recitation of the Lord's Prayer (that witches were allegedly unable to utter) "drew tears from many" who had attended the public execution.

The people of Salem Village and surrounding communities demonstrated their opposition to the trials most forcefully by coming forward to support the accused. Before Governor Phips halted the trials, almost three hundred family members, neighbors, clergymen, and

even jailers either had signed petitions or testified on behalf of the accused. As Cotton Mather reported on October 20, the "humors of this people now run" against a continuation of the trials.

Although important, this shift in public opinion was not as significant to Phips as the opinion of the colony's leading minister, Increase Mather, (Cotton's father). Phips had an obvious reason for his high regard for Increase. The minister not only had been instrumental in securing the new charter for Massachusetts but also in persuading the king to select Phips as the new governor.

In late September, several clergymen persuaded Mather to draft a treatise detailing the problems with the evidence used in the trials. In a work he called *Cases of Conscience*, Mather presented a synthesis of what several ministers had been arguing privately since late May. He maintained that specter evidence, the most critical in all convictions, was seriously flawed. Satan could assume any shape. Consequently, testimony of a person's image doing harm did not provide conclusive proof that the individual had made a pact with the devil. Although specter evidence could be used to raise suspicion, it was insufficient for a conviction. If the court accepted his argument, Mather acknowledged that there was little chance it could gain any more convictions, and some witches might escape justice. That was a price, however, that Mather and most of the province's clergy were willing to pay. "It were better," he wrote, "that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned."

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In explaining to officials in London his decision to suspend the trials, Phips em-

phasized his reliance upon Mather and other ministers who "did give it as their judgment that the Devil might afflict in the shape of an innocent person and that the look and touch of the suspected persons was not sufficient proof against them." In December, Phips appointed a new court to deal with the remaining cases. Because the judges agreed to use specter evidence only as presumptive evidence, only three individuals were convicted; Phips subsequently pardoned them.

DURING THE NEXT TWO DECADES, MASSACHUSETTS colonists struggled with the consequences of the witchcraft crisis. Several people who had been instrumental in the accusations and trials acknowledged that they had committed grievous errors. In 1694, for example, the Reverend Samuel Parris admitted to his congregation that his sermons two years earlier had contributed to the crisis atmosphere in Salem Village. While he maintained that he had sought "to avoid the wronging of any," Parris apologized to the families who had "unduly suffered in these matters." Twelve years later, Ann Putnam, Jr., who had accused twenty-one individuals of witchcraft, sought membership in the Salem Village congregation. She pleaded with the congregation to forgive her 1692 actions "particularly, as I was a chief instrument of accusing Goodwife Nurse and her two sisters."

Samuel Sewall, a judge on the Court of Oyer and Terminer, likewise publicly acknowledged his role. In 1696, as Sewall stood in front of his Boston congregation, he had his pastor read a confession in which the judge accepted "the blame and shame" of agreeing to the executions of nineteen of the convicted. Twelve of the jurors joined Sewall in expressing their sorrow in the "condemning of any person" during the great witch hunt.

Indeed, the entire colony sought to pay penance for the suffering of 1692 when the provincial legislature ordered all to observe a day of prayer and fasting in January 1697. Civil and religious leaders hoped this special day would bring a pardon from God for "all the errors of his servants and people" in the witchcraft episode.

Slowly, civil and religious leaders came to the conclusion that true reconciliation could not be achieved until the government reversed the convictions of 1692 and compensated the victims or their surviving family members.

## “Under An Evil Hand”

1. What did it mean to be “under an evil hand”?
2. When pressed to give names of the people causing their sickness, the girls named 3 people. Who were they? Why were they named as witches?
3. How did people think Satan “recruited” witches?
4. How did Tituba testify in court? Why did she testify as she did?
5. After the “witches” were jailed, the sicknesses continued and even got worse. What did the villagers conclude?
6. How could a court find these women guilty of witchcraft? What types of “evidence” did the judges agree to admit in court?
7. How were witches put to death?
8. Increase Mather wrote a paper detailing the problems with the “evidence” used in the trials. What did he say were the problems?
9. Even years later, when the people of Salem began to realize that the trials had been a mistake, they never punished any of the girls who testified against the witches. Nor did any of the relatives of the executed witches. Can you think of any reason why?

