

After Tituba—accused of being a witch in 1692—testified that she saw the names of other people in the “Devil’s book,” the residents of Salem Village wondered who those other “witches” were.

The Puritans in the village were worried. If something this terrible could happen in the home of a pastor—Samuel Parrish—who could possibly be safe from such evil?

Early accusations involved women like Sarah Good and Sarah Osburne. Very soon, however, accusations were also leveled at women of higher status in Salem Village.

Rebecca Nurse, a woman of about 71 years, was highly respected. Yet she was also accused of witchcraft (even though she was unwell and nearly deaf).

When Rebecca was arrested, people in Salem Village were split on their views of witches in their midst. Most of the accusers were from poor farming families who lived in the western part of the village. Most of the accused held more liberal views and lived in the eastern part of the village.

Thirty-nine people signed a petition supporting Rebecca Nurse’s good character. In a Puritan village, like Salem, taking such action was risky. Might that lead to accusations against one or more of the signers, or their family members?

By the late spring of 1692, more than 100 people were arrested as suspected witches. People from Salem to Boston were caught-up in the madness. Even people who were related to the accusers were arrested.

Hysteria seemed to reach a low point when four-year-old Dorcas Good—the daughter of Sarah Good—was arrested. Because she was such a little girl, “the authorities” had to order a special set of chains for her. The child confessed, perhaps to be with her mother who was in prison.

Then Sarah Good’s sisters were accused and joined their sibling, and her daughter, in jail. Nearly anyone who expressed concern about this escalating situation was immediately a suspect.

Even Rev. George Burroughs, who had served as the pastor of Salem Village between 1680-1683, was arrested and held for trial. Living in Maine, in 1682, Burroughs was having dinner at his home when he was pulled from the table and hauled back to Salem Village.

Thirty-two of Salem’s most-respected citizens signed a petition supporting their former pastor. Burroughs had an unblemished reputation, but that was seemingly worthless in the midst of Salem’s witch-hunting furor.

Trials of the accused “witches” began on June 2, 1692. The governor—William Phips—appointed seven judges and twelve jurors who would decide the fate of the defendants.

The procedures, employed during the Salem Witch Trials, typically followed this protocol:

1. *The afflicted person makes a complaint to the Magistrate about a suspected witch. The complaint is sometimes made through a third person.*
2. *The Magistrate issues a warrant for the arrest of the accused person.*
3. *The accused person is taken into custody and examined by two or more Magistrates. If, after listening to testimony, the Magistrate believes that the accused person is probably guilty, the accused is sent to jail for possible reexamination and to await trial.*
4. *The case is presented to the Grand Jury. Depositions relating to the guilt or innocence of the accused are entered into evidence.*
5. *If the accused is indicted by the Grand Jury, he or she is tried before the Court of Oyer and Terminer. A jury, instructed by the Court, decides the defendant’s guilt.*
6. *The convicted defendant receives his or her sentence from the Court. In each case at Salem, the convicted defendant was sentenced to be hanged on a specified date.*
7. *The Sheriff and his deputies carry out the sentence of death on the specified date.* (See “[Salem Witch Trials](#),” by Professor Douglas O. Linder, online via the University of Missouri - Kansas City School of Law.)

At the first trial, the first witness called was Bridget Bishop. A property owner, she was a prominent citizen of Salem Village who had been married several times. Her biggest problem, amidst the hysteria of Salem, was that she had been accused of witchcraft earlier in her life.

Tried on the 2nd of June, in 1692, Bridget was found guilty. Part of the evidence against her was the “spectral evidence” which the court took as fact.

Eight days after the verdict, Bridget was hanged.

One way to escape the threat of death, before (or following) a guilty verdict, was to confess. If a woman confessed, she was a witch. If a man confessed, he was a wizard. A confessed witch or wizard would be spared death by hanging.

What was the reason for treating a confessed witch/wizard differently than an accused who did not confess? In the mind of a Puritan, it was up to God to forgive a sinner. A confession placed the confessor in the hands of God.

About 55 of the nearly 200 people who were accused of witchcraft used confession as a way out.

The accusers were in a unique position, given the usual customs and traditions of Puritan society. Seventeenth-century females had subservient roles, but these finger-pointing “afflicted” girls not only received widespread attention, they had control over who was accused of witchcraft.

As months passed, the words of the girls sent more and more people to their deaths. On the 19th of July, 1692, five women were hanged, including Rebecca Nurse and Sarah Good, who told Rev. Nicholas Noyes:

I am no more a witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my life God will give you blood to drink. (Quoted by Marilynne K. Roach in *The Salem Witch Trials: A Day-by-day Chronicle of a Community Under Siege*, at page 202.)

Twenty-five years later, as Noyes lay dying of a hemorrhage—apparently caused by a burst blood vessel in his head—he reportedly choked on his own blood.

On the 19th of August, 1692, five more people were hanged. This group of executed individuals included Rev. George Burroughs.

Standing firm, Burroughs calmly faced everyone and recited The Lord’s Prayer from beginning to end—without any mistakes. That fact is important because, according to Puritan beliefs, practitioners of witchcraft were unable to recite Biblical passages and prayers.

Whatever doubts Rev. Burroughs’ final act may have raised in the minds of Salem’s residents, another eight people were hanged, on Gallows Hill, on the 22nd of September, 1692.

The girls’ accusations had spread well-beyond Salem to other towns, including Boston and Andover. People throughout the colonies, and as far-away as London, heard about the events.

With their widespread notoriety, the “afflicted” girls from Salem Village had become as famous as 21st-century rock stars.

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