Of the Salem Witch-Trial defendants who were executed, nineteen were hanged and several more died in prison. Giles Corey died hideously when he was pressed to death. He had refused to plead either guilty or not guilty, knowing that the court could not proceed without it.

His plan to stop the proceedings failed when "the authorities" followed an old English tradition. To get the truth from Corey, they pressed him with large stones. As more and more large stones were placed on him, Giles Corey died of a crushed chest.

Those who died as convicted witches or wizards were expelled from the church. As a result, their remains could not be buried on "holy" or "consecrated" land. Cut down from the hanging tree, bodies of the accused were placed in shallow graves, and their deaths were not even recorded.

By the fall of 1692, the accusations of the "afflicted" girls were becoming more and more outlandish. It seemed as though virtually anyone was a witch or wizard in their eyes.

As the girls started accusing more and more religious ministers, prior believers began to seriously doubt the girls' "spectral sight." Even the previously supportive authorities were finding it hard to accept such claims.

When rumors started to swirl that the wives of prominent community leaders Increase Mather and Governor Phips were about to be accused, the girls had gone way too far. The Governor dissolved the special court which tried the witchcraft cases—known as the Court of Oyer and Terminer—on October 29, 1682.

Remaining cases would be handled in the Superior Court where spectral evidence——which had condemned all the prior defendants tried in the Court of Oyer and Terminer—would not be allowed. Increase Mather wrote this about the concept of spectral evidence:

> *It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than that one innocent person should be condemned.*

It is fair to wonder if he finally spoke-out against the madness because of the rumor that his own wife was about to be accused.

Forty-nine of the fifty-two remaining prisoners were acquitted and released from prison. Three individuals remained in jail until the spring of 1693. Tituba, who had been imprisoned following her confession, was sold back into slavery (to pay for the expenses incurred in trying and jailing her).

Five years on, the people of Salem Village began to rethink what they had done. Had they made grievous mistakes? Had they unthinkingly allowed themselves to be deluded by a group of girls who were making-up their allegations? Had the community condemned good people to death? Why had they put their faith in something as specious as spectral evidence?

> *Samuel Parris, who acknowledge in 1694 that he "may have been mistaken" in the way he conducted himself during the witchcraft hysteria, was gone from Salem Village two years later. The people wanted him to leave and replaced their former pastor with Thomas Green (who spent most of his tenure at Salem trying to repair the damage and the reputation of the church).*

On the 16th of January, 1697, the people held a day of fasting to ask God's forgiveness for their past sins. Judge Samuel Sewall publicly expressed his remorse for his role in the witch trials. In his confession, he used the words "Blame" and "Shame" for his role in condemning innocent people to death.

Although he was the only Judge to publicly acknowledge his mistakes, all twelve jurors joined Sewall in his public show of repentance. Those jurors had condemned all the defendants who were executed.

Five years later, Rev. John Hale published a book with a very long title - A Modest Inquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft and How Persons Guilty of that Crime may be Convicted: And the Means Used for Their Discovery Discussed, both Negatively and Affirmatively, according to Scripture and Experience - which contains a famous and poignant apology for the Salem Witchcraft trials:

...such was the darkness of that day, the tortures and lamentations of the afflicted, and the power of former presidents, that we walked in the clouds, and could not see our way. (Quoted by Lori Lee Wilson, in The Salem Witch Trials, at page 51.)

When she was 26 years old, Anne Putnam, Jr. also apologized for her behavior and actions. She was the only accuser to do so.

In 1711, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts reversed the verdicts of 22 of 31 defendants. Restoring their civil rights meant nothing to dead people, but a restoration of their reputations made a difference to their surviving (and successive) family members.

The State paid 600 British pounds to the survivors, and their families, as restitution for the unjust treatment they had endured. It was not until 1957, however, that the government of Massachusetts finally reversed the guilty verdicts of the remaining 9 (of 31) defendants.

The reversal of guilty verdicts begs a question: Why did these girls, from Salem Village, level these accusations in the first place? Were they just acting? Did they really believe what they were claiming?

People have debated these points for hundreds of years. The majority opinion is that the girls were making-up

their tales. Since the 1960s, however, a different school of thought has put forward the idea that the accusers genuinely believed they were possessed.

Another theory, explaining the madness, is that the families of accusers may have profited from the claims against their neighbors. The crime of witchcraft was treated with powerful sanctions including not just the death of the accused but also the loss of the accused's family fortune.

When fortunes were forfeited, they became the property of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Thereafter, the fortune was sold at public auction.

There were some benefits which flowed from the Salem Witch Trials, once the people came to their senses. Defendants in the Salem court, for example, had been presumed guilty until they were proven innocent. Thereafter, defendants charged with crimes were - and still are - presumed innocent until they are proven guilty. This marked a profound change in the developing country's system of justice.

Alas, however, this was not the only time in America where common sense and good judgment were replaced by fear and hysteria. And ... despite best efforts to maintain the rule of law - and to presume that people charged with crimes are innocent until proven guilty - we must remember something else. Laws themselves, while they may be legal, are not always moral.

Credits:

Studio:
A&E Home Video

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Run Time:
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Full documentary available, in DVD format, though Amazon.com and other retailers.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Salem-Witch-Trials-Apologies-and-Aftermath

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