

# Salem Witch Trials

## A CSI Investigation



### The Crime

There were hundreds of people accused of being witches in Salem, MA in 1692. 19 were hanged for being witches. One person was pressed to death.

### Your Mission

You are to figure out why this crime happened.

1. Read through the background information.
2. Review the different theories
3. Write a report to the head of your Crime Scene Investigation (CSI) Unit persuading them that your theory best explains why the witch trials happened.

## Salem Witch Trials Background

This is how a person living in Salem in 1692 described The Salem Witch Trials:

“And now Nineteen persons having been hang'd, and one [prest to death](#), and Eight more condemned, in all Twenty and Eight, of which above a third part were Members of some of the Churches of N. England, and more than half of them of a good Conversation in general, and not one clear'd; about Fifty having confest themselves to be Witches, of which not one Executed; above an Hundred and Fifty in Prison, and Two Hundred more accused; the Special Commision of Oyer and Terminer comes to a period.”

—[Robert Calef](#)

The trouble in Salem began during the cold, dark Massachusetts winter, in January of 1692. Eight young girls began to take ill, beginning with 9-year-old Elizabeth Parris, the daughter of Reverend Samuel Parris, and his niece, 11-year-old Abigail Williams. But theirs was a strange sickness: the girls suffered from delirium, violent convulsions, incomprehensible speech, trance-like states, and odd skin sensations. The worried villagers searched desperately for an explanation. Their conclusion: the girls were under a spell, bewitched -- and, worse yet, by members of their own pious community.

And then the finger pointing began. The first to be accused were Tituba, Parris's Caribbean-born slave, along with Sarah Good and Sarah Osburn, two elderly women considered of ill repute. All three were arrested on February 29. Ultimately, more than 150 "witches" were taken into custody; by late September 1692, 20 men and women had been put to death, and five more accused had died in jail. None of the executed confessed to witchcraft. Such a confession would have surely spared their lives, but, they believed, condemned their souls.

William Phipps finally put an end to The Witch Trials in 1693. This is what he said:

“When I put an end to the Court there ware at least fifty persons in prision in great misery by reason of the extream cold and their poverty, most of them having only spectre evidence against them and their [mittimusses](#) being defective, I caused some of them to be lettout upon bayle and put the Judges upon consideration of a way to reliefe others and to prevent them from perishing in prision, upon which some of them were convinced and acknowledged that their former proceedings were too violent and not grounded upon a right foundation ... The stop put to the first method of proceedings hath dissipated the blak cloud that threatened this Province with Destruction.”

— Governor [William Phips](#), February 21st, 1693

When the dust cleared, the townsfolk and the accusers were at a loss to explain their own actions. In the centuries since, scholars and historians have struggled as well to explain the madness that overtook Salem. Was it neighbor unfairly accusing neighbor, mass hysteria, or could a simple fungus called ergot have been to blame?

## **Theory #1: Ergot**

PBS Secrets of the Dead:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/witches-curse-clues-evidence/1501/>

## **Theory #2: Division in Salem**

Discovery education: Economic and Social Divisions.

<http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schooladventures/salemwitchtrials/life/divisions.html>

## Theory #3: Mass Hysteria

Mass hysteria is a condition affecting a group of persons, characterized by excitement of anxiety, irrational behavior or beliefs, or inexplicable symptoms of illness. Some historians believe mass hysteria in Salem was caused by a strict religious faith all fueled by superstition, panic, and rumor. Tituba, A West Indian indentured servant recently imported to a household in Salem, had been telling stories and folklore about demons and spells to several young girls who, in turn, spread the stories through the neighborhood. Such stories of witches and demons and spells to ward them off or attract them had always been in circulation, but under the influence of an “authority” like Tituba, they took root in the minds of some very impressionable adolescent girls and spread.

Betty Parris' reported 'afflictions' began in January 1692. She began to forget errands, was unable to concentrate, and was said to have seemed wrapped in some secret obsession. She was reported to be unable to concentrate at prayer time and barked like a dog when her father would rebuke her. She screamed wildly when she heard the Lord's prayer and was once said to have hurled a Bible across the room. Initially, Rev. Parris believed that prayer could cure her odd behavior, but his efforts were ineffective.

The 'affliction' manifested itself as odd postures, foolish and ridiculous speech, distempers, and fits. John Hale described the women as looking like they "were bitten and pinched by invisible agents; their arms, necks, and backs turned this way and that way, and returned back again, so as it was impossible for them to do of themselves, and beyond the power of Epileptick fits, or natural disease to effect." Sometimes they were taken dumb, their mouths stopped, their throats choked, their limbs wracked and tormented so as might move a heart of stone to sympathize with them." The local physician, William Griggs, diagnosed Betty Parris as being afflicted by the "Evil Hand," commonly known as witchcraft, considered a crime in Salem at this time.

At first only a few people were accused, but then the accusations spread like wildfire. At the height of the hysteria, over 200 people were in jail, with many more accused. There was even a 5 year old girl who was jailed for 8 months and had to watch as her mom was led to off to the gallows and hanged. A dog was also accused of being an imp, or witches helper.

During the trial, the girls acted strangely. They would scream out and yell, fall on the ground in fits of convulsions, and say they saw birds and people flying around trying to demonize people. Other villagers came forward to describe how milk and butter went mysteriously bad or how animals were born with deformities after a suspected witch had visited.

## Salem Witch Trial Theories

CSI Officer Name \_\_\_\_\_

Theory Name	Evidence for Theory	Do you believe it? Why or why not?
	1.  2.  3.	
	1.  2.  3.	
	1.  2.  3.	

### Salem Witch Trial Questions to Consider

Questions to consider. These do not have to be answered and turned in BUT your final CSI report should include some/most of these in your explanation for the :

1. Why did the Salem Witch Trials happen? What evidence do you have to defend your opinion?
2. Who made the laws in Salem? Who were the judges? Do you think that was a problem? Why?
3. How did things change in Salem as a result of the Witch Hunt? What constitutional right came about partially from the Salem Witch Trials?
4. If the girls in Salem admitted to playing a trick on the people they accused, what penalty should they get? Why?
5. Have you ever acted different in a group than you would by yourself? Why? What was the situation?
6. What is a witch hunt? Has anything like a “Witch Hunt” or “mass hysteria” happened in the last 100 years, where one group has been blamed for the problems of another? Where? When? Why did it happen? What was the result of the “witch hunt”?
7. Does the media (newspaper, TV) have anything to do with making “witch hunts” worse?
8. Have you ever been blamed for something you didn’t do? How did you react? How is that the same or different as how people accused of witchcraft in Salem reacted?
9. List at least three questions you still have about the Salem Witch Trials.

## Secrets of the Dead: Witches Curse

CSI Officer Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. What did Puritans think were symptoms of "bewitchment"?
2. Why were there no scientific explanations for the affliction?
3. Write down 1 pro and 1 con of confessing to be a witch.
4. What are 2 effects of LSD have on a person?
5. What is ergot?
6. How did Albert Hoffmann discover the effects of ergot's extracts?
7. How do you think the residents of Salem could have come in contact with ergot?
8. Do you think that the evidence presented by Linda Caporael is proof that the illness that prompted the witch trials was caused by a fungus? Explain.

## Crime Scene Report

**Question:** Which theory or theories best explain why the Salem Witch Trials happened?

**Opinion:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Reason #1:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Evidence:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Reason #2:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Evidence:** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Reason #3:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Evidence:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Conclusion:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## CSI Investigation: Why did the Salem Witch Trials happen?

CSI Officer Name \_\_\_\_\_

CATEGORY	5 - Above Standard	4 - Meets Standard	3 - Approaching Standard	2 - Below Standard	Score
Focus or Thesis Statement	The thesis statement names the topic of the essay and outlines the main points to be discussed.	The thesis statement names the topic of the essay.	The thesis statement outlines some or all of the main points to be discussed but does not name the topic.	The thesis statement does not name the topic AND does not preview what will be discussed.	
Support for Position	Includes 3 or more pieces of evidence (facts, statistics, examples, real-life experiences) that support the thesis/focus statement.	Includes 2 or more pieces of evidence (facts, statistics, examples, real-life experiences) that support the thesis/focus statement.	Includes 1 piece of evidence (facts, statistics, examples, real-life experiences) that support the thesis/focus statement.	Includes 0 pieces of evidence (facts, statistics, examples, real-life experiences).	
Closing paragraph	The conclusion is strong and leaves the reader solidly understanding the writer's position. Effective restatement of the position statement begins the closing paragraph.	The conclusion is recognizable. The author's position is restated within the first two sentences of the closing paragraph.	The author's position is restated within the closing paragraph, but not near the beginning.	There is no conclusion - the paper just ends.	