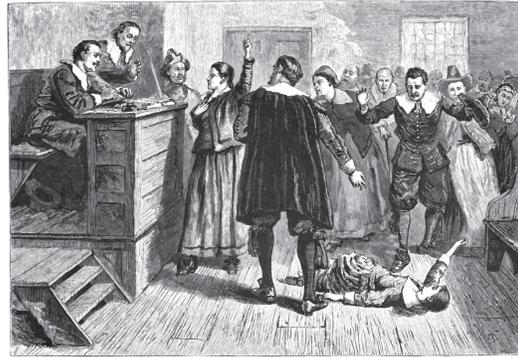


Seeds of Paranoia: The Salem Witch Trials

By Sarah Collinge

The infamous Salem Witch Trials began in 1692 when a few girls, who had become friendly with a slave woman named Tituba, began acting very strangely. They fell into hysterical screaming, body convulsions, and barking like dogs. Soon, other girls began to act in a similar manner.



WITCHCRAFT AT SALEM VILLAGE

A local doctor diagnosed the girls as being bewitched and the town accused Tituba, and two other women, of witchcraft. This started a chain-reaction of confessions, denunciations, and arrests.

With the seed of paranoia and hysteria planted, a stream of accusations followed for the next few months. Over 150 men, women, and children were accused, many of whom were considered troublesome or disorderly outsiders.

Eventually, the trials began to overwhelm the local justice system and so a special court convened in Salem to hear the cases. Spectral evidence (testimony about dreams and visions) was recognized by the court and used as evidence.

In total, nineteen people were executed during the Salem witch trials, both male and female. The court later deemed the trials unlawful.

Historians now believe that the accused were victims of mob mentality, which describes how people can be influenced by their peers to adopt certain behaviors on a largely emotional, rather than rational basis. Mob mentality leads to mass hysteria, and scapegoating.

Today, the town of Salem continues to tell the story of the hysteria of 1692. The Peabody Essex Museum houses the original court documents, and the Salem Witch Museum houses 13 life-size stage sets retelling the emotional events of the trials. The story of the Salem Witch Trials now stands as a symbol of what can go wrong when people become suspicious of and fearful of their neighbors.

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