

Salem Witch Crisis: Summary

The Salem witchcraft crisis began during the winter of 1691-1692, in Salem Village, Massachusetts, when Betty Parris, the nine-year-old daughter of the village's minister, Samuel Parris, and his niece, Abigail Williams, fell strangely ill. The girls complained of pinching, prickling sensations, knifelike pains, and the feeling of being choked. In the weeks that followed, three more girls showed similar symptoms.

Reverend Parris and several doctors began to suspect that witchcraft was responsible for the girls' behavior. They pressed the girls to name the witches who were tormenting them. The girls named three women, who were then arrested. The third accused was Parris's Indian slave, Tituba. Under examination, Tituba confessed to being a witch, and testified that four women and a man were causing the girls' illness.

The girls continued to accuse people of witchcraft, including some respectable church members. The new accused witches joined Tituba and the other two women in jail.

The accused faced a difficult situation. If they confessed to witchcraft, they could escape death but would have to provide details of their crimes and the names of other participants. On the other hand, it was very difficult to prove one's innocence. The Puritans believed that witches knew magic and could send spirits to torture people. However, the visions of torture could only be seen by the victims. The afflicted girls and women were often kept in the courtroom as evidence while the accused were examined. If they screamed and claimed that the accused witch was torturing them, the judge would have to believe their visions, even if the accused witch was not doing anything visible to the girls.

Between June and October, twenty people were convicted of witchcraft and killed and more than a hundred suspected witches remained in jail.



Salem Evidence A: “Discourse on Witchcraft” (Modified)

In the speech below, Cotton Mather, an influential leader of the Puritans, argues for the existence of witchcraft:

I will prove that Witchcraft exists. Those who deny it exists argue that they never saw any witches, therefore there are none. That would be as if you or I said: We never met any robbers, therefore there are none.

I have two pieces of evidence that witchcraft exists: First, the Scripture mentions witchcraft. Secondly, many people have experienced the horrors of witchcraft.

Source: Cotton Mather, “Memorable Providences relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions,” from *A Discourse on Witchcraft*, (Boston, 1689), pp. 4-9. Cotton Mather was one of the most influential religious leaders in America at the time.

Salem Evidence B: Testimony of Abigail Hobbs (Modified)

Below is the testimony of a teenager accused of witchcraft, Abigail Hobbs, on April 19, 1692.

Judge: Abigail Hobbs, you are brought before Authority to answer to various acts of witchcraft. What say you? Are you guilty, or not? Speak the truth.

Abigail Hobbs: I will speak the truth. I have seen sights and been scared. I have been very wicked. I hope I shall be better, if God will help me.

Judge: What sights did you see?

Abigail Hobbs: I have seen the Devil.

Judge: How often, many times?

Abigail Hobbs: But once.

Judge: What would he have you do?

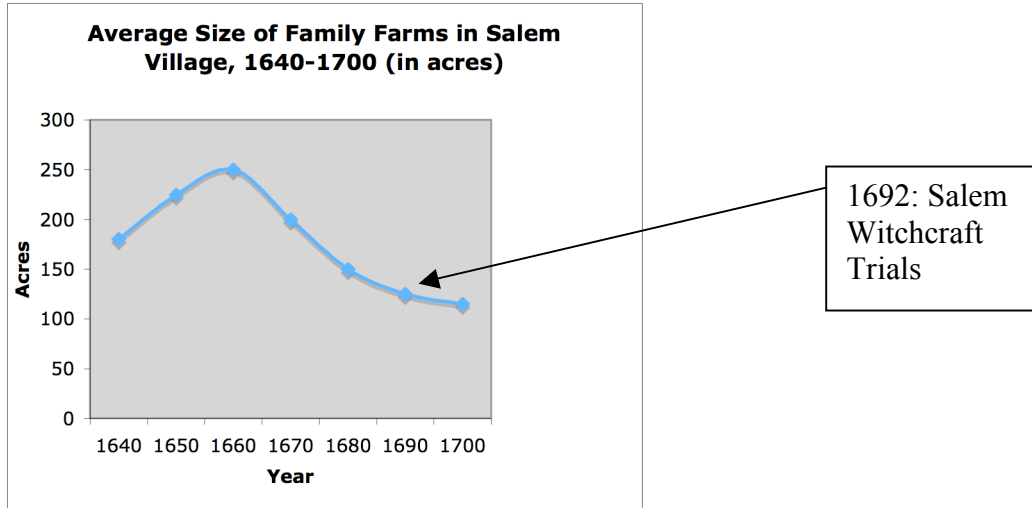
Abigail Hobbs: Why, he would have me be a witch.

Judge: Would he have you make a covenant with him?

Abigail Hobbs: Yes.

Salem Evidence C: Chart of Family Farms

Average Size of Family Farms in Salem Village, 1640-1700



Salem Evidence D: Map of Salem Village

The map below depicts Salem Village (on the left/west) and Salem Town (on the right/east). Most people in Salem Village were farmers, whereas most people in Salem Town were merchants and townspeople. The residents of Salem Village had to pay taxes to Salem Town. The map shows that most of the people who made accusations were from Salem Village.

