

What Caused the Salem Witch Hysteria?

Interpretation A

Author: Dr. E. Toxin

While the events of the Salem Witch Hysteria of 1692 may seem to defy explanation, there is a clear cause – ergot poisoning, which is caused by eating rye bread with ergot fungus. Victims of ergot poisoning might suffer paranoia and hallucinations, twitches and spasms, and cardiovascular trouble. Ergot also seriously weakens the immune system.¹ Many of the visions described by the afflicted girls, along with their disorderly speech, odd gestures, and convulsions, could be explained by ergot poisoning. The choking feelings they mentioned are signs of the disease’s effect on the involuntary muscle fibers. The girls testified about feeling biting, pinching, and pricking sensations, which may allude to the under-the-skin crawling, tingling sensations experienced by ergotism victims.²

In 1976 Linda Caporael offered the first evidence that the Salem witch trials followed an outbreak of rye ergot. Ergot thrives in a cold winter followed by a wet spring. People in Boston wrote in their journals that the winters of 1690-1691 were especially cold.³ The rye was harvested around Thanksgiving for the winter and spring. The children’s symptoms first appeared in December 1691 and continued through the spring of 1692.⁴ Probably only one harvest was affected because no further mention of affliction took place the following year.

Three of the afflicted girls lived in the Putnam residence. It is highly likely that the rye the Putnams grew in their swampy meadows was infected. The afflictions of the two other girls who lived in the household of Reverend Parris can be explained by the fact that two-thirds of Parris’ salary was paid in provisions, some of which likely came from Putnam.⁵ In addition, Elizabeth Hubbard, who was also afflicted, was the servant of Dr. Griggs, who also would have been paid with Putnam rye.

Other evidence to suggest the presence of ergot is the color of the bread. Sacramental bread (used in religious ceremonies) was notably red and it is known that flour with a 3 percent content of ergot is reddened.⁶

Except for ergot poisoning, no other theory explains why the girls became afflicted in the first place. The weather, the crops grown, and the symptoms exhibited by the girls all point to rye bread and ergot fungus.

¹ Betty Smith, “Symptoms of Ergot Poisoning” *New England Journal of Medicine* 45: 92-93, 1974.

² “Records of the Court of Oyer and Terminer, 1692” *Commonwealth of Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court*, 2: 10.

³ “Diary of Lawrence Hammond, 1691-92,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 7:160.

⁴ Linnda R. Caporael, “Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?” *Science Magazine* 192:21-26, 1976.

⁵ “The Papers of Thomas Putman” *Massachusetts Historical Society*, 9:123.

⁶ B. Beard and Ralph Schild, eds., *Ergot Alkaloids and Related Compounds* (New York: Springer, 1987)

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Interpretation B

Author: Dr. Theo Logee

The religion of the American colonists was infused with ancient attitudes and practices. For example, people nailed up horseshoes to protect themselves. Puritans believed in witches and their ability to harm others. They defined witchcraft as entering into a compact with the devil in exchange for certain powers to do evil. Puritans believed in witchcraft and those who believe in witchcraft can be afflicted by it. While some historians call the events of 1692 “hysteria,” they ignore the evidence that actual witchcraft was taking place. Chadwick Hansen’s study, *Witchcraft at Salem*, documented varied magical practices among the accused. About fifty people in the Salem Trials confessed to being witches. Tituba, Reverend Parris’ slave who was involved with the original fortune tellings, confessed to being a witch and that there was a conspiracy of witches at work in Salem. Bridget Bishop was another person in Salem who practiced witchcraft. John and William Blye of Salem testified that while they were employed by Bishop to take down her cellar wall in her old house, they came across “Severall popitts made up of Raggs And hoggs Brusells with headless pins in Them with the points out ward.”¹ This was a common witchcraft procedure in the 1600s. A black or Indian slave named Candy produced rags, grass, and cheese that she used as ways to harm others.

Therefore, there is no question that witchcraft was practiced in Salem in 1692. Witnesses repeatedly said that the afflicted girls’ fits were so violent and outrageous that they could not have possibly been pretending. For example, the Reverend John Hale of Beverly wrote, “Their arms, necks, and backs were so turned this way and that so as it was impossible for them to do of themselves, and beyond the power of any epileptic fits, or natural disease to effect.”²

Historian Richard Godbeer, in his book *The Devil’s Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* wrote how New Englanders used magic to overcome the barriers of time and space, heal the sick, protect against harm, and to inflict harm.³ Historians that ignore the evidence of actual witchcraft in Salem when examining the Salem Witch Hysteria overlook an important point. Accused witches had reputations as wise men or wise women which made them immediate suspects when unexplained or disastrous events occurred.

¹ etext.lib.Virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/texts/transcripts.html as found in Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds., *Transcripts of the Legal Documents of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1977).

² George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 338.

³ Richard Godbeer, *The Devil’s Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 30.

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Interpretation C

Author: Ian Stable

The Salem Witch Hysteria can be clearly linked to the political instability of the time period. Residents focused on the witch hunt as a way to explain the unstable conditions. Many political factors caused instability in the American colonies in the early 1690s. Political unrest was shown in Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, Leisler's Rebellion in New York, and a Protestant revolt in Maryland. The Massachusetts Bay Colony had lost its charter in 1684, thrown out its royal governor in 1688, and received a new charter in 1692. In addition, all colonists feared Native American attacks.

Local conditions were no more stable. There were approximately 600 residents of Salem Village, divided into those who wanted to separate from Salem Town and those who did not. Many of the Salem Village farming families believed that Salem Town's flourishing economy made it too individualistic. The Putnams were the leaders of the separatist group and felt that Salem Town was out of touch with the rest of Salem Village. In 1689, the Putnams formed a separate congregation led by Reverend Samuel Parris. Members of the congregation were more devout and less worldly. They were concerned with the piety of residents of Salem Town. In addition, they saw the increased commercialization of Salem Town as a symbol of commercialization in the community, which was in direct conflict with Biblical teaching.

This was a time of extreme and pervasive anxiety in New England. Along with the previously mentioned political unrest, the early 1690s witnessed severe electrical storms, crop failures, and a smallpox epidemic. As a people of God, Salem villagers questioned why God was punishing them. They looked in their community for evidence of evil, but they were influenced by local politics.

Almost all of the accusers lived in the western part of the Village, which was further from Salem Town. In contrast, most defenders of the accused lived in the eastern part of the village closer to Salem Town.¹ Two of the afflicted girls, Betty Parris and Abigail Williams, lived in Reverend Parris' household. Two others, Mary Wolcott and Susanna Sheldon, were close neighbors of the Parris family. Two members of the Putnam family were also among the afflicted.

This evidence shows that the accusers had real motives stemming from divisions within Salem Village. Additionally, difficult and abnormal regional conditions led to a desire to identify scapegoats to explain the community unrest. Therefore, people were accused as practitioners of witchcraft. Residents wanted to believe that identifying and executing witches would free their community from the turbulence and strife that had marked it for a decade.

¹ Kevin O'Reilly, *Critical Thinking in United States History Series, Book One: Colonies to Constitution* (Pacific Grove, CA: Critical Thinking Press & Software, 1990), p. 46.
