

The Salem Witch Trials: Facts vs. Myths

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It is the Salem Witch Trials, 1692. You are about to witness some witches being burned at the stake. Or are you? There are many myths that have been related to the topic of the Salem witch trials that need to be debunked. Many people believe that witches were burned at the stake. They also say that the witches were all women, that the witch trials were only from religious paranoia, and that all of the witches were innocent. People also believe that they were not cleared of the false accusations of witchcraft until recently. People do not realize how many myths they hear about the Salem witch trials but the facts should be examined instead of blindly believing untruths. The truth of what happened is quite different from what most people believe.

The Salem Witch Trials started with two girls who started having symptoms such as making strange noises, contorting their bodies into weird positions, talking gibberish, and having fits. This led to a doctor diagnosing these and other girls with witchcraft (Pavlac, 2021). The Salem Witch Trials were hearings and prosecutions of people who were accused of witchcraft during the time period of 1692-1693. The people who were accused would try to convince the other people that they were not witches. Sometimes they would confess to something they never did so they wouldn't get killed (Markarian, 2018). There were over 200 people accused of witchcraft, and about 25 people were killed.

The first myth people believe is that witches were being burned at the stake. The accused witches were not ever burned at the stake or drowned. Instead, almost all of them were hanged or died in jail except for one man who was crushed by stones (Chowdaheadz, 2017). Hangings were the main way to execute people during this time period. The man who was crushed by stones refused to stand trial, so he was given a different, and more painful, death sentence (Guha, 2021). The reason this myth is so widely believed is because the French and other European countries

burned witches, because it fell under the same crime as heresy (Salem Witch Museum, 2019), but the English did not, therefore burning at the stake did not happen in America, as America was a British colony in the 1600s.

In addition, believing that the victims were all women is a very big myth. Five of the accused witches in Salem that died were men. There were many more accused men in other areas of Massachusetts too. The first man to be accused was the husband of a woman accused of witchcraft named John Proctor. His support of her led to suspicion of him. He was hanged and his wife supposedly died in prison (Salem Witch Museum, 2019). Humans were also not the only ones accused of witchcraft. There were two dogs accused and killed because some children claimed that the dogs gave them convulsions. When the dogs were shot, the local pastor said that if the dogs were really possessed, they would not be killed easily with just a bullet (Guha, 2021).

In modern times, people believe that the accused people were all innocent. Some of the people that were accused actually were practicing witchcraft and were so-called real witches. One person who claimed to be possessed by the devil was Tituba. She said different animals controlled by the devil forced her to sign her life over to the devil. She accused other people of being witches who were trying to destroy the Puritans (National Geographic, 2017). Some of the people that confessed to being witches in Salem were just trying to save their own life (Purdy, 2009). Sometimes when a person confessed to witchcraft they would be spared if they promised they would not do it again. They also had to ask for forgiveness and accuse others (Pavlac, 2021). This made many people confess even though they did not do anything wrong, and it also caused the accusations and paranoia to spread. Regardless of whether people were practicing witchcraft, they were not actually committing crimes. These people would all be protected now under the 1st Amendment of the Constitution (Purdy, 2009). In addition, the Constitution

provides for a fair trial and representation, which the accused did not have. Nowadays, there are plenty of people who use Ouija boards, seances, or mediums to “contact the dead” and they are not being put on trial.

Some sources state it was all started because of religious paranoia. Religion played a big part in Salem, Massachusetts’ history. The people in the village got the right to start their own church and definitely had strong religious beliefs, but the pastor was very rigid in his views of what people should have to sacrifice for the church, causing a lot of friction around the town. That friction, along with a breakout of smallpox and fears over neighboring tribes caused many suspicions and superstitions, but not religious paranoia (Salem Still Making History, n.d.). The connection between religion and the witch trials is that the pastor’s daughter was one of the first girls to start having fits (National Geographic, 2017). Abigail Williams and Betty Parris (the minister’s niece and daughter, respectively) were the first girls who started accusing people of witchcraft. One theory that people have is about the girls who claimed that the accused were giving them Visions when it was all actually a type of rye bread fungus that was affecting them. The rye bread was most likely contaminated causing people in the area to get Ergot poisoning (Chowdaheadz, 2017).

The last myth is the myth that the witches were not cleared of false accusations until recently. Even though the state government of Massachusetts didn’t officially apologize for the Salem Witch Trials until 1957, all of the people accused of witchcraft were cleared just a year after the trials began (Markarian, 2018). After the hangings, the Superior Court said that people could not be tried in a court of law because of “spectral evidence” which is the “belief in the power of the accused to use their invisible shapes or specters to torture their victims”. With this ruling, the hangings and accusations stopped, and the witch trials ended. In 1711, families of the

dead were compensated with various settlements (Guha, 2021). In more recent times, the Salem witch trials have been studied for patterns of human behavior. The state of Massachusetts formally apologized in 1957.

In this essay there were a lot of myths that were exposed and then the truths of the Salem witch trials were uncovered, some of which were that witches were burned at the stake, witches were all women, the witch trials were all from religious paranoia, all of the witches were innocent, and they were not cleared of the false accusations until recently. I always believed that the witches of Salem were burned at the stake but now realize that is not true. After researching and writing this essay, I learned how many myths a person can learn from the internet and other sources and take them as facts. It is also interesting how many people blindly believed these myths, when, if researching scholarly articles, can be debunked. I also learned many new facts about the Salem witch trials that I never knew before such as how many people were accused of being witches simply because they were trying to save themselves from being killed or jailed until death. I had also believed that they were all innocent until I did more research on the topic. Some people were guilty of practicing witchcraft, which, in modern days, is not a crime nor is it punishable by imprisonment or worse. The Salem witch trials are a captivating part of American history. Being burned at the stake is such a vivid picture in peoples' minds, so they want to believe it. The facts are not this fantastical, but the topic is still very interesting.

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