

# The Salem Witch Trials: The Dark Truth Behind Talking Animals and Flying Broomsticks

by RV staff writer JCH

In 1692, events that took place in Salem Village, Massachusetts would embed themselves in American history, serving as a dark reminder of what can happen when people let fear take control of them. It all started with two little girls, a slave, and a fear that the Devil was lurking around every corner. These three things, when brought together in this fateful year, gave birth to what we now call the “Salem witch trials.”

Nestled in the forest, Salem Village was a quiet community. The people who lived there were mostly farmers or tradesmen, like blacksmiths and carpenters, and they mainly practiced a religion called “Puritanism.” The Puritans were an extremely religious group of people. They believed that God had chosen them to help turn others away from sin by strictly following the teachings of the Bible. In Salem, if you didn’t follow these teachings, it was considered a punishable offense. Some offenses included sleeping during church services and not obeying one’s parents. One of the most serious offenses in this community was practicing witchcraft. This crime was punishable by death. The villagers believed that witches and wizards were those who worked with or worshiped the Devil.

One day in 1692, two young girls, Elizabeth Parris and her cousin Abigail Williams, began acting strangely. They started twisting their bodies, throwing objects, twitching, and making strange noises. When their parents brought them to a doctor, the doctor said there could only be one explanation: witchcraft. The little girls were asked to point out the witch or wizard afflicting them. They named three women: Sarah Good, a homeless woman; Sarah Osborne, a poor, elderly woman; and Tituba, a Caribbean slave in the Parris household.

The Salem witch trials had officially begun.

Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne both pleaded innocent. Tituba, after much questioning, pleaded guilty. She told elaborate stories of talking evil animals, flying on broomsticks, and writing her name in a mysterious man’s book. She said there were other names in the book as well, including Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne’s. The book was the Devil’s book, and the names were the names of other witches and wizards in Salem Village and beyond, Tituba confessed. All three women were imprisoned, but the trials didn’t stop there. This list of names sparked the hunt for the other witches and wizards.

Over the course of the next year, the group of afflicted girls grew and inspired others to accuse people of working with the Devil. When in court, the girls would scream, fall over, and hurt themselves to convince the jury that the accused person was guilty of hurting them with magic. The girls claimed that they could see the accused people as spirits hurting them even though nobody

else could. The person might even be seen physically at another location. This type of testimony was called “spectral evidence,” and the courts in Salem took this very seriously. They believed that these phantoms were actually the Devil, and a person had to give the Devil permission to look like them and commit violent acts. This, the courts thought, proved the accused person’s guilt.

Soon, the fear of witchcraft and violent specters consumed the town. Neighbor turned against neighbor, friend against friend, and family member against family member. People who publicly denounced the trials often found themselves as one of the accused. Those who confessed to witchcraft were often imprisoned. Those who did not confess were often hung. The obsession to cleanse the town of witches got so absurd that even a four-year-old girl was accused. Her mother had been accused of witchcraft, and the courts worried that she might have taken part in her mother’s dealings with the Devil. The little girl was interrogated in court, found guilty, and imprisoned with her mother.

In early 1693, several events came together to help bring an end to the Salem witch trials. First, Increase Mathers, a Puritan minister and the President of Harvard University at the time, insisted that spectral evidence be thrown out of court. He believed that a witch’s specter could take the form of an innocent person, so spectral evidence could not be trusted. Then, Massachusetts Governor William Phips’ wife was accused of witchcraft. These two events convinced Governor Phips to dissolve the old court that took spectral evidence so seriously and replace it with a new court that would not.

Once spectral evidence was no longer considered in court, 28 of the last 33 accused witches were found innocent. The remaining accused witches were later pardoned. By May of 1693, Phips released all convicted witches from prison.

Although the trials were largely put to an end, much damage had already been done; almost 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft, 19 people were hung, one person was tortured to death, four people died in prison, and two dogs were executed for participating in witchcraft.

Eventually, some of the villagers, including one of the “afflicted” girls, apologized for accusing innocent people of witchcraft. Even now, over 300 years later, the Salem witch trials remind America of the destructive power a group can have when they let fear take over and turn them against another group of people.

**Questions**

1. Describe the Salem community.
2. What is spectral evidence?
3. What year did the Salem witch trial begin?
4. In your own words, explain what the Salem witch trials teach us.