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Institution

Salem Witch Trails

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Date

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Introduction

The Salem Witch Trials were the legal court hearings which took place in the province of Massachusetts in 1692-1693. The town of Salem became the battle field where all examinations, legal procedures, trials, and executions took place. It is worth stressing that other provinces were involved in this so called 'Witch Hunting Process' and not only the town of Salem and the province of Massachusetts.

There were other outbreaks which had taken place before the Salem Witch Trails. For example, in the town of Hartford, the state of Connecticut, thirteen citizens were accused and executed. In Fairfield, seven people were convicted but not executed in the same year; while Salem was possessed by this terrible hysteria. Many people were convicted of taking up witchcraft in the towns of Andover, Salem, and Ipswich as well as Salem Village. The Salem Witch Trials are one of the best-known cases of mass hysteria that America has ever experienced.

In order to clear out main reasons that led to the Salem Witch Trials, some available sources and data are supposed to be used. After having analyzed the available data, it has become possible to conclude that main reasons which provoked the outbreak of witchcraft hysteria in Salem were:

1. Superstitions concerning Devil and its supporters;
2. Political reasons;
3. Local disputes and misunderstandings between the accused and the accusers;
4. Religious reasons;

5. Some specific symptoms of 'possessed.'

This paper will focus on the detailed analysis of the aforementioned causes which contributed to the Salem Witch Trials.

Superstitions Concerning Devil and its Supporters

It should be mentioned that it is natural for people to believe in something supernatural, either good or evil. When they cannot find an adequate and appropriate explanation of something unusual, they do begin connecting it with something supernatural or even Devil.

Many people of the seventeenth century, the people of Salem were not exceptions, did believe in the existence of Devil, evil spirits, magic, and other supernatural things. The idea that Devil exists in the real world came to America from Europe. In fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the hunt for witchcraft and witches was proclaimed and supported by the Catholic Church. It is worth noting that the well-known tractates on witchcraft were published by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Spengler in 1486. These tractates are known as *Malleus Maleficarum* or *Hammer of the Witches*. Their authors gave evidence and characteristics on how to recognize witches and advised judges and authorities on the procedures of finding, accusing, and executing them.¹

There are some historical documents left which prove that some single cases connected with witchcraft and witches took place in America during 1656-1685 as well. Some people were

¹ Hamilton, Alastair, "Review of *Malleus Maleficarum*." Edited and translated by Christopher S. Mackay. *Heythrop Journal* 48 (3) (May 2007): 477-479.

accused of witchcraft but their cases were not heard in the court, as in case with the Salem Witch trials.

Many people did believe that all their troubles and misfortunes, such as a death of a child or cattle, a disease, hail, rain, or drought, were caused by Devil, its supporters, or some supernatural things. Many of people get used to shifting blame for other things or individuals. The same phenomenon occurred in Salem. For instance, in 1690, Martha Carrier was accused of created an epidemic of smallpox. In 1692, she was executed after her children having given testimony against their mother.²

Boyer and Nissenbaum state that Tituba, a Indian slave, tried to tell the future using a crystal ball in 1691. Tituba and two other women were charged of practicing magic. Tituba confessed, and two other women did not accept any accusations.³

Political Reasons

In 1691, according to the new charter approved by England, Massachusetts was supposed to enlarge its territory. As a result of this decision, William Phips was appointed a new governor of the province of Massachusetts. It is a usual practice in the world history that new authorities aim to establish new laws and rules in order to demonstrate their power and influence. Phips introduced new laws and appointed new county justices of peace who were supposed to fulfill their duties. In my opinion, in order to show their power, Phips and justices looked for any demonstrative case which could influence the people of Massachusetts. As it turned out, the

² Karlsen, Carol F., *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 99.

³ Boyer, P, & Nissenbaum, S. eds., *Salem Village Witchcrafts*, (Northeastern, 1993).

following demonstrative cases were successfully found and taken into consideration, and further execution. In 1692, the Court of Oyer and Termines was established in order to deal with a huge float of complaints concerning witchcraft.⁴ According to the available data, 185 citizens of Salem were accused, 141 women and 44 men. Fourteen women and seven men were executed.⁵ In 1693, this court was dismissed by the governor, and all accused were realized. The Salem Witch Hunt ended very unexpectedly as it had broken out.

Local Disputes and Misunderstandings between the Accused and the Accusers

Richard Lanter points out that the people of Salem had constant disputes on land, property, and were at war with Indians.⁶ Boyer and Nissenbaum suggest that land and a new class were key factors which provoked the outbreak. During that period, a new class began its establishment. The class of merchants got its wealth very quickly, and farmers became poorer. It led to the disbalance between wealthy merchants and poor farmers who worked at their land and got nothing in return.⁷

⁴ Salem Witchcraft Trials 1692. <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/SALEM.HTM> (accessed April 2, 2012).

⁵ "A Guide to the On-Line Primary Sources of the Salem Witch Trials," <http://www.17thc.us/primarysources/> (accessed April 3, 2012).

⁶ Salem Witchcraft Trials 1692 (accessed April 2, 2012).

⁷ Jacqueline Boyer, Paul, & Nissenbaum, Stephen, eds., Salem Village Witchcraft. Northeastern, 1993.

Carol Karsen states that, at Salem, there were many women who had private property and were considered wealthy. They were treated as a real threat to the old established rules that only men could lead business, and the property could be transferred from father to son only. According to the law, a widow could demand her so called 'widow third' even from her son or stepson.⁸ As a result, many of these well-off women were accused of cooperating with Devil.

Religious Reasons

According to Richard Lanter, the people of Salem had some misunderstandings on religion and wanted to have some privileges of the church. The population of Salem Village preferred to have their own minister and to be separate from the town minister.⁹

According to different documentary sources, in Salem, the life of all community was highly dependent on the church and religion. The church minister forbade any entertainments, such as dancing, sinning, music. Even Easter and Christmas were not allowed to be celebrated as they were considered to be pagan holidays. Only hymns were permitted to be sung at the church and community meetings. The young children were forbidden to play with toys or dolls. Children who attended a church school learnt only the Bible and the established religious dogmas. It is very difficult to imagine that all life was devoted to the church and the Bible. There is no doubt that the people of Salem were slowly getting insane and began to look for Devil and witchcraft

⁸ Karlsen, C. F., *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, (New York: Vintage, 1987), 217.

⁹ The Salem Witchcraft Cite. <http://www.tulane.edu/~salem/Conclusions.html><http://www.tulane.edu/~salem/> (accessed April 3, 2012).

everywhere. The local minister, Cotton Mather, did truly believed in witchcraft and convinced his congregation that it did exist. He gave people different pamphlets where he got used to writing about Devil and its followers.

Some Specific Symptoms of 'Possessed'

People of Salem believed that some of them could be influenced by a witch or Devil could possess them. During 1691-1692, in Salem, several cases of unknown disease with peculiar symptoms were observed and documented. For instance, in his book *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions*, Cotton described the children who were supposed to be possessed by Devil or influenced by witches as they began experiencing some bizarre fits. Children felt pain in all parts of their bodies, cried very savagely, their tongues were drawn out from their mouths. These children could not control their bodies and harm themselves as well as other people. It is obvious that it was a disease whose symptoms people could not explain and treat accordingly. The only way what left for them was to connect this disease with witchcraft. This outbreak of unknown disease was the last reason that led to the Salem Witch Trials.¹⁰

Conclusion

The Salem Witch Trials belong to the historical heritage of the United States of America. Nowadays, it is difficult to clear out all reasons of these trials because many documents have been lost. Taking into account all available data and sources, the main reason of 'Witch Hunting'

¹⁰ Salem Witchcraft Trials 1692. (accessed April 2, 2012).

that took place in Salem have been distinguished and discussed in detail. It is obvious that the reasons of these trials were, are, and will be discussed and researched by scholars.

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