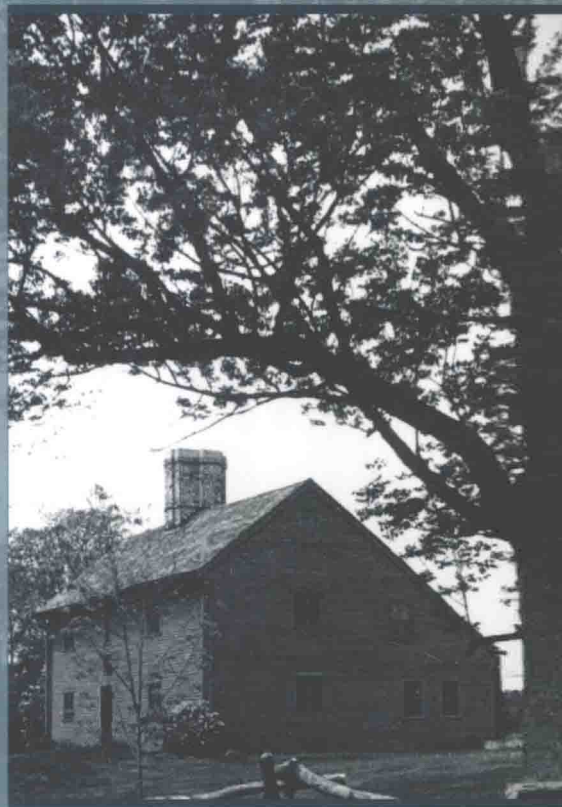


# SALEM

*P O S S E S S E D*

THE  
SOCIAL  
ORIGINS OF  
WITCHCRAFT



PAUL BOYER & STEPHEN NISSENBAUM

# **Obsessed**

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The Social Origins of Witchcraft

**Paul Boyer** and **Stephen Nissenbaum**

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and London, England

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# Salem Possessed

We resolve uprightly to study what is our duty, & to make it our grief, & reckon it our shame, whereinsoever we find our selves to come short in the discharge of it, & for pardon thereof to betake humbly to betake our selves to the Blood of the Everlasting Covenant.

And that we may keep this Covenant, & all the branches of it inviolable for ever, being sensible that we can do nothing of our selves,

We humbly implore the help & grace of our Mediator may be sufficient for us: Beseeching that whilst we are working out our own salvation, with fear & trembling, He would graciously work in us both to will, & to do. And that he being the Great Shepherd of our souls would lead us into the paths of Righteousness, for his own Names sake. And at length receive us all into the Inheritance of the saints in Light.

1. Samuel Parris. Pastor.

2. Nathaniel Putnam

3. John Putnam

4. Brerly Wilkins. 79.

5. Joshua Rea.

6. Nathaniel Jones

7. Peter Clarys

8. Thomas Putnam

9. John Putnam Junr.

10. Samuel Putnam

11. Jonathan Putnam

12. Montemio Putnam

13. Ezeiel Chubb

14. Henry Wilkins

15. Benj. Wilkins

16. William Zay

17. Peter Smith

18. Peter Smith

The women which embodied

with us are by their severall

1. Eliz. Names as followeth &ig.

2. Rebeck (wife to John) Putman.

3. Anna (wife to Bray) Wilkins.

4. Sarah (wife to Joshua) Rea.

5. Hannah (wife to John Junr.) Putman.

6. Sarah (wife to Benj.) Putman

7. Sarah Putman.

8. Deliverance Walcott

9. Peiray (wife to William) Way.

10. Mary (wife to Sam.) Abbie.

Illi quorum nominibus hoc signum præfigitur  
+ e vivis cesserunt.

For

**Max Willner**

**W. H. Boyer**

*Grandfathers*

# Preface

This book, too, has its history. It began in the autumn of 1969, when the two of us introduced at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst a course, "New Approaches to the Study of History," designed to give undergraduate students the opportunity to explore a single event in depth through the careful and extended use of primary sources. As our first unit of study we chose a topic which had been used successfully for this teaching purpose by Stephen Nissenbaum and others at the University of Wisconsin: Salem witchcraft.

We began our teaching with the usual body of sources which scholars have combed over the years: the depositions submitted at the trials and the spate of publications, both narrative and polemical, which the trials provoked. But what had started purely as an interest in experimental teaching soon assumed a scholarly dimension, as we became aware of an immense body of unexplored documentation about Salem Village, the community in which the witchcraft outbreak first erupted. For example, in the archives of the First Church of Danvers, Massachusetts (the direct descendant of the "witchcraft" parish of 1692), we found extensive records for both Salem Village and its church from the founding of each in 1672 and 1689 respectively—records which included community votes, tax assessments, and lists of local officials. Here, we soon realized, lay buried far more information about the civil and ecclesiastical history of the Village and its inhabitants than was to be

found in any existing historical account of the background of Salem witchcraft. These data, in turn, were illuminated for us by a large sheaf of petitions—the residue of decades of Village conflict—which provided almost a roll-call breakdown of divisions within the community. Some of these petitions, with their lists of signers, we found transcribed in the church records, others in the Massachusetts Archives at the State House in Boston. Further enriching these community records was an even larger body of family materials—wills, deeds, estate inventories, lawsuit testimony—in the Essex County courthouse. A previously ignored manuscript volume of sermons by the Reverend Samuel Parris, the Village minister from 1689 to 1696, which had come into the possession of the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford, proved to be an intensely personal commentary on the community's problems—and Parris's own.

All in all, we realized that here was probably as large a body of first-hand documentation as existed for any seventeenth-century community in British America. Our first impulse was simply to try to bring some of these materials together in a form more accessible to our students and to scholars in general—an impulse which resulted in our jointly edited book, *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England*, published in 1972 by Wadsworth Publishing Company of Belmont, California.

But our pleasure at the richness of all this local and personal documentation was exceeded by our surprise at how casually and rarely any of these materials had been tapped by historians. Only one writer, we found, had made any direct use of them, and that more than a century ago. In 1867, Charles W. Upham, a Salem minister, mayor, and U.S. Congressman, who had steeped himself in the inner history of Salem Village, published *Salem Witchcraft*, a two-volume study which, by dealing with many of the sources we had found, began the difficult job of deciphering that inner history.

Even Upham's analysis, however, impressive as it is, remains incomplete and ultimately unsatisfactory. Like most nineteenth-century local historians, Upham idealized the sturdy colonial yeomen who figure in his narrative, dwelling almost affectionately on their petty disputes but often drawing back from confronting the larger patterns implicit in these disputes or from analyzing them in serious political terms. Ever sensitive to the colorful vignette or the quaint detail, he often left out or obscured more significant



matters. For example, while lavishing careful attention upon a protracted but ultimately peripheral land dispute between the Nurse family and the eccentric son of a former colonial governor, he barely hinted at the far more crucial rivalry between the two principal families of Salem Village, the Putnams and the Porters. Similarly, he relegated to a small-type supplement his account of the efforts of Samuel Parris's opponents to force the minister from his pulpit, and he neglected (perhaps deliberately) to include the two key petitions which reveal the names of the antagonists and the full scope of the factional battle they were waging.

Of the modern historians of Salem witchcraft, the few who have discussed the pre- or post-1692 situations at all have continued to rely uncritically on Upham's imperfect narrative and analysis. They have ignored not only the manuscript records but also those sources which over the years did find their way into print, including the Salem Village parish records and the Essex County probate and court records for most of the seventeenth century. So far as we can tell, Charles Upham has been the only historian of Salem witchcraft to have read through any of these sources, published or unpublished. Even Marion L. Starkey's engaging 1949 narrative of the witchcraft trials, *The Devil in Massachusetts* (which despite its occasional imaginative embellishments remains the best researched and certainly the most dramatic account of the events of 1692) draws exclusively—and superficially at that—upon Upham for its "background" sections.

Why is it that twentieth-century historians of Salem witchcraft have not bothered to explore the history of Salem Village, or the lives of the men, women, and children who peopled it, apart from that fleeting moment when the community achieved lasting notoriety? In the first place, there have always been other contexts, seemingly more significant, into which the witchcraft outbreak could easily be placed without going beyond the events and documents of 1692: the history of the occult, the psychopathology of adolescence, the excesses of repressive Puritanism, the periodic recrudescence of mass hysteria and collective persecution in Western society. (*The Devil in Massachusetts*, for instance, was consciously written in the shadow of the Nazi holocaust, while Arthur Miller's 1953 play about Salem witchcraft, *The Crucible*, was of course a parable about McCarthyism.)

But beyond this, it is only recently that historians (ourselves among them) have begun more fully to realize how much information the study of "ordinary" people living in "ordinary" commu-

nities can bring to the most fundamental historical questions. For too long, such studies were patronizingly dismissed as fit only for antiquarians and genealogists whiling away their declining years amidst the comforting reminders of a fading ancestral heritage.

Today, all this is changing. Employing many different methodologies and exploring many different problems and time periods, historians have begun to discover the richness of the ordinary. This is particularly true in the area of American colonial studies, where a cornucopia of fascinating books—all published within the last dozen years—have shown how the day-by-day lives and problems of people in early New England towns can illuminate precisely those matters which have traditionally been the concern of historians: the essential character of a culture and the dynamics of social change.

As we thought about these matters, it became increasingly clear to us that except for a brief moment, the inhabitants of Salem Village were "ordinary" people, too, living out their lives in an obscure seventeenth-century farming village. Had it not been for 1692, they would most probably have been overlooked by "serious" historians. But—as we have also come to see—it is precisely *because* they were so unexceptional that their lives (and, for that matter, the trauma which overwhelmed them in 1692) are invested with real historical significance. When "Salem witchcraft," like some exotic cut flower, is plucked from the soil which nurtured it—or, to change the image, when the roles assigned to the actors of 1692 are shaped by a script not of their own making—then this terrible event cannot rise above the level of gripping melodrama. It is only as we come to sense how deeply the witchcraft outbreak was rooted in the prosaic, everyday lives of obscure and inarticulate men and women, and how profoundly those lives were being shaped by powerful forces of historical change, that the melodrama begins to take on the harsher contours of tragedy.

We have not explored the larger history of Salem Village merely as a means of understanding the witch trials more fully, nor have we treated the witch trials merely as an additional source for chronicling the ups and downs of a single village's history. Rather, we have tried to use the interaction of the two—the "ordinary" history and the extraordinary moment—to understand the epoch which produced them both. We have, in other words, exploited the focal events of 1692 somewhat as a stranger might make use of a lightning flash in the night: better to observe the contours of the landscape which it chances to illuminate.

As that historical landscape emerged, we discovered some surprising features. All our reading about the events of 1692 had prepared us to view the witch-hunters as a dominant and ruthless group that had taken the offensive against a set of weak and powerless outcasts. What we actually found, as the trials fell into a longer historical perspective, was something quite different: the witch-hunters may have been on the offensive in 1692, but it was a fleeting offensive—counter-offensive, really—in the midst of a general and sustained retreat. Reading about the witchcraft trials without being aware of their pre- and post-history, as we came to realize, was somewhat like reading about the “Battle of the Bulge” of late 1944 without knowing that it was a desperate German counter-thrust in the face of a sweeping Allied advance—an advance which had begun half a year earlier and which would end a few months later in total German defeat. Similarly, the men and women who have gone down in history as the witch-hunters of 1692 were already in retreat by that time, and though it was a matter of years rather than months, they, too, would soon be defeated.

To trace in detail the stages by which we arrived at our present view of late-seventeenth-century society would require an essay at least as long as this entire preface. That essay would surely include the names of Bernard Bailyn, who as our teacher and as the author of *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (1955) introduced us to the social and economic roots of conflict in colonial New England, and of Michael Walzer, whose seminal essay “Puritanism as a Revolutionary Ideology” (*History and Theory*, 1963) illuminated for us some of the psychological dimensions of that conflict. And such a foray into intellectual autobiography would also have to include the experience of living through the 1960’s; the decade of Watts and of Vietnam helped us realize that the sometimes violent roles men play in “history” are not necessarily a measure of their personal decency or lack of it. These perceptions deepened our sense of the ambiguities inherent in the events we were studying, as we watched Salem Villagers for whom we had developed real sympathy driven to instigate the deaths of their own neighbors.

A word about our collaboration. In the fullest sense, this book represents an equally shared labor. From the original outline (scribbled on a lunch bag one afternoon in September 1970) on through the long process of writing, revising—and revising again

—we have worked together. There remain no chapters, no paragraphs, hardly a sentence even, that one or the other of us would be able to claim as his “property.” We would like to consider the book the product of an exploration into the possibilities of cooperative scholarship, an attempt to reduce somewhat the intellectual and emotional toll so often exacted by solitary academic labor. *Salem Possessed* would probably never have been written except as a collaboration; in any case, we believe it to be a better book than either of us could have produced alone.

Our debts, however, extend far beyond what we owe to each other, for friends and colleagues have played a valuable and valued role at every stage: Jack Wilson provided us with our first public forum, a Smith College Humanities Seminar in November 1970, and he has remained a constant source of clarity and good will; John Demos initiated the train of events which led to the publication of our book in its present form, and he has encouraged us at several points along the way; Max Hall, as editor for the social sciences at Harvard University Press, sought us out after a colloquium at the Essex Institute in Salem in the summer of 1971 and, within a mile of Gallows Hill, invited us to submit our as yet unfinished manuscript for consideration by the Press. His confidence, support, and assistance have been forthcoming ever since, and we hope, for his sake as well as our own, that they have not been misplaced.

Several fellow laborers in the field of early American social history have read our entire manuscript and offered extremely helpful critiques: Nell Baum, Richard Bushman, and John Demos. Other colleagues have provided important suggestions on the basis of shorter versions or oral presentations: David Allmendinger, Paul Faler, David H. Fisher, Stanley Katz, Leonard Richards, David N. Smith, and Maris Vinovskis. Kai T. Erikson and Michael Zuckerman commented helpfully on a Salem witchcraft paper we presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in April 1972. Hugh Bell and Robert J. Wilson shared specific research findings with us. We never did get to read Richard Gildrie’s doctoral dissertation on Salem Town in the pre-1670 period, but in conversation he has confirmed several of our conclusions. Ann Boyer and Judy Nissenbaum brought a skeptical and sympathetic eye to their reading of the manuscript; on questions of style and structure, they were often our court of last resort. Our graduate-student colleagues in the “New Approaches” course sustained an environment of informed interest in the book which

proved most favorable to our productive efforts. Two of them, Kate Douglas Torrey and Patricia Tracy, rendered invaluable assistance in checking the accuracy of our citations, maps, and statistical data. We have mined the research projects of several of our undergraduate students in the same course; their work is acknowledged at appropriate points in the text.

We should also like to thank the Connecticut Historical Society for permitting us to use the manuscript sermon book of Samuel Parris; the Reverend Edward H. Glennie and the Prudential Board of the First Church of Danvers for allowing us to use the Salem Village church records; Leo Flaherty, curator of the Massachusetts Archives, and his wife; the staff of the Essex Institute in Salem; our typist Mrs. Eleanor Starzyk; our gracious editor Joan Ryan; and the University of Massachusetts Research Council for a grant which helped us bring the manuscript to completion.

Finally, a word about our policy in quoting seventeenth-century sources: for manuscripts, we have modernized spelling, punctuation, and capitalization to make the prose more accessible to modern readers. For printed sources, we have generally modernized capitalization while retaining the original punctuation and spelling.

Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum

## Salem Village in the Seventeenth Century: A Chronology

- 1626** Founding of the town of Salem.
- 1630's** Settlement begins in the "Salem Farms" region of the town.
- 1653** Thomas Putnam, Jr., born to Lieutenant Thomas and Ann Holyoke Putnam.
- 1669** Joseph Putnam born to Lieutenant Thomas and Mary Veren Putnam.
- 1672** "Salem Farms" becomes the separate parish of Salem Village; James Bayley hired as its first preacher.
- 1679** Bayley resigns amidst criticism by some Salem Villagers.
- 1680** George Burroughs hired as the new Village preacher.
- 1683** Burroughs leaves Salem Village.
- 1684** Deodat Lawson hired to succeed Burroughs as preacher.
- 1686** Death of Lieutenant Thomas Putnam; a challenge to his will fails.
- 1686-87** Futile effort to ordain Lawson and form a Village church.
- 1688** Deodat Lawson leaves the Village; Samuel Parris arrives.
- 1689** April: Governor Edmund Andros overthrown in a *coup* at Boston.  
November: Formation of the Salem Village church and ordination of Samuel Parris as its minister.
- 1690** Marriage of Joseph Putnam to Elizabeth Porter.
- 1691** October: Opponents of Parris win control of the Salem Village parish Committee.
- 1692** January to May: Witchcraft afflictions, accusations, arrests.  
June to September: Witchcraft trials and executions.
- 1693** Parris's supporters and his opponents jockey for position.
- 1694** March: The pro-Parris group regains control of the parish Committee.
- 1695** April: An ecclesiastical council, meeting at Salem Village under the leadership of the Reverend Increase Mather, hints that Parris should resign; eighty-four of Parris's Village opponents petition the council members to take a stronger stand; death of Mary Veren Putnam.  
May: The council members recommend more forcibly that Parris resign; 105 of Parris's Village backers sign a petition in his behalf.

June: The Salem Village church endorses Parris, who agrees to stay on; Thomas Putnam, Jr., unsuccessfully challenges Mary Veren Putnam's will.

**1696** July: Resignation of Samuel Parris.

**1697** Parris leaves the Village; Joseph Green replaces him.

**1699** Deaths of Thomas Putnam, Jr., and his wife.

**1752** Salem Village becomes the independent town of Danvers.

# Salem Possessed

The city of heaven, provided for the saints,  
is well-walled and well-gated and well-guarded,  
so that no devils, nor their instruments,  
shall enter therein.

The Reverend Samuel Parris  
September 1692



## Abbreviations Used in the Notes

### EIHC

*Essex Institute Historical Collections*, Essex Institute, Salem.

### EQC

*Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, Massachusetts, 1636–1683*, 8 vols. Salem, 1911–1921.

### County Court Records

Manuscript volumes of unpublished county court records, Essex County Courthouse, Salem.

### PR

*The Probate Records of Essex County, Massachusetts, 1635–1681*, 3 vols. Salem, 1916–1920.

### Essex Prob.

Unpublished probate records, Essex County Registry of Probate, Courthouse, Salem.

### Essex Deeds

Registry of Deeds, Essex County Courthouse, Salem.

### Mass. Arch.

The Massachusetts State Archives, State House, Boston.

### Sermon Book

Samuel Parris, Manuscript volume of sermons preached in Salem Village, 1689–1695. Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford.

### Village Records

“A Book of Record of the Several Publique Transactions of the Inhabitants of Salem Village, Vulgarly Called the Farms.” Bound with Volume One of the Salem Village Church Records in the library of the First Church, Danvers, Mass., and reprinted in the *Historical Collections of the Danvers Historical Society*, XIII (1925); XIV (1926); and XVI (1928).

### Church Records

The records of the Salem Village Church, 1689–1696, as kept by the Reverend Samuel Parris, comprising Volume One of the church records in the Library of the First Church, Danvers, Massachusetts.