

# The Salem Witch Hunt

A Brief History with Documents

Richard Godbeer



THE BEDFORD SERIES IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

# The Salem Witch Hunt

## A Brief History with Documents

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## Foreword

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The Bedford Series in History and Culture is designed so that readers can study the past as historians do.

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Lynn Hunt  
David W. Blight  
Bonnie G. Smith  
Natalie Zemon Davis  
Ernest R. May

*for my students*

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## Preface

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The Salem witch hunt of 1692 ranks among the more infamous events of American history. Indeed, it may be one of the few incidents from colonial history that students have heard of and think they know something about. It has inspired an enormous and varied literature, ranging from novelistic treatments and Arthur Miller's acclaimed play *The Crucible* to an ever-growing body of scholarship in which historians seek to explain the occurrence of the witch hunt. Given the enduring popular fascination with this subject, it is not surprising that the scholarship on Salem has reached a much broader audience than academic books on most other topics. Some of these books are regularly assigned in undergraduate courses. Yet instructors who want to use primary documents to bring the witch hunt to life for students have had few options. There are two scholarly editions of the surviving court records from 1692, but until now there has been no volume of documents on the Salem panic presented within an explanatory framework designed to help undergraduates understand the documents and appreciate their significance. This volume fills that gap.

The witch hunt of 1692 is a gripping and fascinating story in its own right. That Salem has proven to be so compelling to readers over the centuries is hardly surprising, given the sheer scale and intensity of the hysteria that spread throughout eastern Massachusetts that year, the mounting fears of a demonic conspiracy to undermine New England, and a colorful cast of characters, including the group of apparently terrified girls who wielded, through their accusations, the power of life and death over their neighbors. Yet as this book immerses students in that story, it also situates the 1692 witch hunt within a broad historical context. It introduces students to the supernatural world that colonists inhabited. It examines the influence of Puritanism on their worldview, the social structure of early New England, the workings of the legal system, and the transatlantic context in which colonists operated. It addresses the colonists' increasingly fraught relations with local Indian nations and



the broad changes taking place in the region toward the end of the seventeenth century. This volume is designed not only to teach students about the Salem witch hunt but also to place it within the larger context of New England's colonial experience. As such, it will prove an effective teaching tool for survey courses as well as more specialized courses on colonial America, religious history, legal history, and witchcraft.

The introductory essay in Part One encourages students to think about the crisis from a range of perspectives: religious, cultural, gendered, psychological, social, economic, political, and legal. It discusses the supernatural beliefs that influenced those involved in the panic. It introduces students to the history of witch trials in New England and across the Atlantic in England and Europe, discussing the challenges involved in prosecuting an invisible crime. It examines the kinds of tensions among neighbors that produced witch accusations and the characteristics that made some people—particularly some women—more vulnerable to accusation than others. And it describes the specific crises in the region during the years prior to 1692 that help us understand the timing of the panic.

Part Two is divided into five groups of documents, each with its own brief introduction that helps students understand and contextualize that specific set of documents. The first introduces students to supernatural beliefs in early New England and the mounting sense of crisis in the region during the years leading up to 1692. The second group includes two contemporary accounts of the initial accusations, as well as the crucial response of the local minister, Samuel Parris, to what was happening. The third and longest group contains legal documents from six sample cases that were chosen to highlight particular themes and issues that played a significant role in the crisis. These vivid selections from the court records enable students to consider why particular women and men were accused and the kinds of evidence with which the court had to work. The fourth group details growing opposition to the trials. The fifth contains anguished attempts by those involved in the witch hunt to come to terms with what they had done. To help students as they read, gloss notes throughout the documents explain the meaning of words no longer in common usage.

The documents are followed by a chronology of events, a list of questions for consideration, a selected bibliography, and an index. Taken together, this collection enables students to immerse themselves in the events of 1692 and to develop explanatory frameworks for the witch hunt that are sensitive to the colonists' own beliefs, assumptions, and fears. It treats the witch hunt not as a peculiar aberration that burst out

of nowhere but as a product of seventeenth-century attitudes and problems. The ultimate goal of this book is to introduce students to a colonial world in which the natural and supernatural were tightly interwoven.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is now a quarter century since I first started as a doctoral student to explore witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England. One of my professors at the time warned me, with a rueful smile, that once you begin writing about witchcraft, there is no escape. He was right. Since then I have produced books and articles on other topics in colonial and revolutionary history, but again and again I find myself returning to witchcraft. Over the decades, I have accumulated many intellectual debts that would take a long time to itemize in full. Many of these are acknowledged in my previous books and essays, but I would like to mention three individuals who played a central role in making this subject such a rich part of my intellectual life. John Demos was my first adviser at Brandeis University; it was his provocative scholarship that drew me into early American history. John's ability to tease out individual stories and their larger significance has remained an important inspiration ever since. Benson Saler introduced me to anthropological scholarship on witchcraft and broadened my perspective in ways for which I am deeply thankful. I hope that Benson realizes what a profound influence he had on my work. Soon after John Demos left for Yale, Christine Heyrman arrived at Brandeis and became my dissertation adviser. This turned out to be an amazing stroke of luck: Christine's combination of uncompromising rigor and unerring support has been, as the Puritans would say, a remarkable providence. Sustained as I was by the unfailing kindness and wisdom of these three mentors, my life as a young scholar was never a solitary endeavor.

Many years later, I continue to accumulate debts. Virginia DeJohn Anderson, University of Colorado, Boulder; Wendy Lucas Castro, University of Central Arkansas; Erika Gasser, California State University, Sacramento; Richard Johnson, University of Washington; Daniel Mandell, Truman State University; Elizabeth Reis, University of Oregon; Daniel Blake Smith, University of Kentucky; and James H. Williams, Middle Tennessee State University, provided invaluable comments on a draft of this book. The final version owes much to their insights and suggestions. I am grateful to the Boston Public Library, the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, the Connecticut Historical Society, the Danvers

Archival Center, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Massachusetts Archives at Columbia Point, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Archives, the New York Public Library, and the Peabody Essex Museum for permission to include in this volume documents from their collections. My undergraduate research assistant, Christian Cameron, provided important help at an early stage of the project as he entered the documents into computer files. At Bedford/St. Martin's, Mary Dougherty has been a sage and supportive presence throughout this project's gestation. Debra Michals, my project development editor, has been consistently thoughtful, constructive, and sensitive to the challenges of making this topic accessible to students. Debra's acuity, good cheer, and wit make her a delight to work with. Jennifer Jovin has been gracious and efficient in shepherding the project through turnover to production.

But my principal debt is to my students. I have been teaching courses on witchcraft for over twenty years as well as discussing the subject more briefly in survey courses. How I teach this rich but challenging material has changed significantly over the years as I experiment with ways of making a world that produced witch accusations comprehensible to modern students. Most teachers come to realize that they learn as much from their students as their students learn from them, and I am no exception. I hope that I never stop appreciating their enthusiasm and insights, which go a long way toward explaining my sustained interest in this topic. It is to my students—past, present, and future—that I dedicate this volume.

Richard Godbeer

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## A Note about the Documents

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The documents that survive from the Salem witch hunt are rich and varied. They include published accounts by observers, sermons in which ministers commented on the crisis, letters and journal entries in which contemporaries responded more privately to what was happening, and of course the official trial records. Most of these sources reflect the views of literate and educated men from the upper ranks of New England society. Yet the legal records also include hundreds of depositions from less privileged townsfolk and villagers who came forward to testify, whether against or in support of the accused. Many of those who did so could not write for themselves, but court officials recorded their oral testimony for future reference—and for posterity. Those transcriptions enable us to move beyond a reliance on theological treatises, sermons, legal manuals, and court judgments (important though these are), giving us access to the beliefs, experiences, and fears of ordinary people who played a central role in what happened that year.

When preparing documentary collections for use in undergraduate courses, historians have to decide whether it is more important to provide a literal transcription, even if that is sometimes at the expense of intelligibility, or whether some degree of adaptation is worthwhile as a helping hand to students unversed in the vagaries of premodern spelling and grammar. In preparing this volume, my priority has been to make the documents accessible and comprehensible. Some of the documents included in this volume were published in the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, in a few cases while the witch hunt was still going on; others were not originally intended for publication but were later transcribed and published. Even those documents that were produced for a public audience and made their way immediately into print require some adaptation. Early American printers often capitalized the first letters of words in ways that can seem to us and often were quite arbitrary. I have eliminated those capital letters in accordance with modern practice; I have also modernized spellings, filled out occasional contractions, and eliminated unnecessary commas.

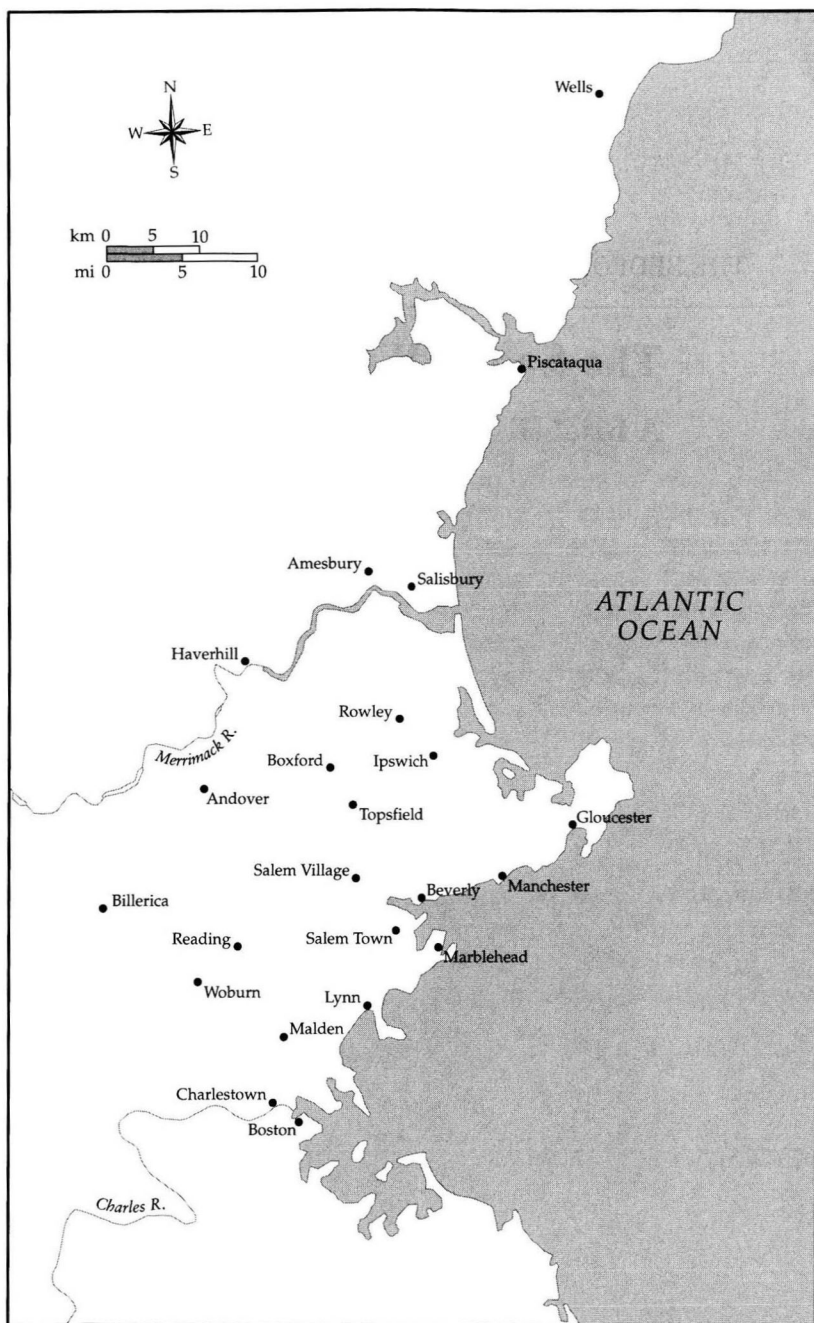
Documents that were not originally meant for publication and that survive as handwritten manuscripts tend to be much more erratic in their spelling, grammar, and use of capitalization. This is particularly true of legal documents from the trials, many of which were written in haste and under considerable stress. The spelling, punctuation, and syntax used by those who recorded the claims, counterclaims, and decisions of those involved in the witch hunt are often breathtaking in their lapses and idiosyncrasies. Misspellings, contractions, and sentences that run on for many lines with little or no punctuation can make these documents seem at times quite incomprehensible. For these handwritten documents I have corrected misspellings, inserted the missing letters in contractions, and provided some minimal punctuation to guide the reader. I have also provided clarification in square brackets when it may not be immediately clear which person is indicated by a pronoun such as *he* or *she*. The result looks quite different from a literal transcript of the original document. (Instructors or students who wish to compare the versions included in this book with the original, unmodified documents can consult the recent scholarly edition of the court records edited by Bernard Rosenthal. See the Selected Bibliography.) These editorial interventions may disturb some purists, but it has been my experience that students find unmediated versions of these documents utterly perplexing. The corrections and clarifications that I have inserted will hopefully ensure that students and general readers stick with the documents and become gripped by the amazing story that they have to tell us.

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