

An Introduction to the History of Witchcraft from the Mary (Bliss) Parsons Project

Some Theories about Witchcraft

Theories about what happened at Salem, and in other witchcraft cases in the colonies and England abound. Following are a few theories suggested by various researchers in their publications over the years, as well as some thoughts on how these theories might be applied to the Northampton case of Mary Parsons. There are significant differences between what happened in Northampton and later in Salem, the most important of which is the fact that the Mary Parsons case is a single isolated case, whereas the Salem cases must be read as an "outbreak" of numerous cases. While the results of the accusations in each town were quite different, it may be useful to see how Mary Parsons' case is similar to as well as different from the cases that would eventually arise in Salem. Few of the Salem studies consider the Northampton case, but certainly useful connections can be drawn that shed light on both situations.

Cultural Reading of New England Witchcraft

John Putnam Demos' *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (1983), is an excellent resource, covering a wide variety of trials from the early New England settlements. Demos uses the study of witchcraft not as an end in itself, but as a window through which to understand the whole of Puritan life and culture. The book is divided into four sections of study, focusing on "Biography," "Psychology," "Sociology," and "History." These areas provide a well-rounded background to the study of the settlers of early New England. Perhaps most notable is Demos' chapter "Hard Thoughts and Jealousies," which deals extensively with the Mary (Bliss) Parsons trial. Detailed notes indicate the sources of his information, many of which were used to begin research for this project. This is an excellent study, including close readings of the available documents, and insight into the Puritan mind.

Gender and Economic Factors

In *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, Carol F. Karlsen collects detailed statistics to present "a collective portrait of New England witches" (47) to consider what kind of people were

most frequently accused of and tried for witchcraft. For instance, it is clear from Karlsen's work that being a woman was the most important common factor among those accused of witchcraft. While this may come as no surprise, her evidence further supports that of the men who were accused, most of them were relatives or supporters of accused females. Karlsen also shows that women over the age of forty "were consistently more vulnerable to accusation" (66). Thus it is not our expected stereotype of the old woman, but the middle-aged woman who is more commonly at risk for witchcraft accusation and prosecution. Essential to this element of the profile is the fact that these women were beyond traditional or common child-bearing age. Surprisingly, married women were quite frequently the objects of accusation, but often their husbands offered protection – whether in their appeals to authorities, or sometimes by initiating slander proceedings – that single or widowed women did not have. In general, women alone (whether widowed or never married) were most vulnerable to prosecution. Moreover, many of these single women were in a position to inherit or potentially inherit (i.e. married women who had no brothers and no male offspring), or were daughters of inheriting women. Karlsen also observes economic factors, concluding that while women from all classes and levels of society were objects of accusations, women of wealthy families were frequently safer from prosecution than women of poor families.

Karlsen's theories are useful in understanding a number of factors in Mary Parsons' case. As Karlsen emphasizes, being married did not protect women from accusations, although marriage, particularly to a prominent and/or wealthy man, did offer some protection from being tried or executed. Certainly Cornet Joseph Parson's position in the community, as well as his ties to [Pyncheon](#) and his considerable wealth, worked in Mary's favor as she faced the court in Boston. In terms of the inheritance issue, both of Karlsen's suggested factors were in play for Mary: not only was there her own potential for a large inheritance upon the death of her husband, but her mother, Margaret Bliss, had inherited a considerable estate, and was well-known for managing it effectively and defending it publicly in the courts to her own great advantage.

Studies of the various demographic factors of witches can prove enormously useful to understanding the factors contributing to whether a person would be accused of or tried for witchcraft; moreover, the results of trials – confessions, acquittals, executions – can also be considered in light of the various characteristics of the accused (and, potentially, of the

accusers too). In the future, our site will also include a database of New England witch trials. You can sort this database by a number of factors – town, gender of the accused, or kind of proceedings. See if you can find any important factors.

Community Tensions

In Paul Boyer and Steven Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, the pair consider the role of community and familial relationships. A broader sketch of common, "ordinary" life leading up to the events of hysteria offers an understanding of the complicated personal conflicts and rivalries, particularly the relations of the Porters, Putnams, and Parrises (and each family's associated supporters). The book offers useful background and overview, explains the major events clearly, and shows "the big picture." Also, the broader culture of not just Salem, but New England Puritans more generally, suggests a pattern for the behavior that would erupt into the hysteria. The book is a follow-up to their epic *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England*, a collection of the major documents associated with the Salem trials. For anyone interested in primary source work, this is the first and best source.

Boyer and Nissenbaum create a "collective portrait" of Salem witches, portraying them as "outsiders" "who were mobile" "and lacking in deference" (190 – 209). Certainly Mary Parsons was no outsider, since she was of the first family of Northampton. Her house was a central part of the Northampton settlement, as was her husband's ordinary, which would have made the Parson family central to the town's daily life and entertainment. But if we consider Mary's position as one of wealth, perhaps the common people of Northampton did think of her as an "outsider," if only because she seemed to have such a fortunate and comparatively easy life. As for mobility, the Parsonses were clearly settled in Northampton, but they only came there after many moves (and eventually they would find themselves moving again). Mary herself moved many times throughout her life, from England to Hartford, to Springfield, and finally Northampton. As for whether she was actually "lacking in deference," there were certainly enough rumors about her behavior that some might interpret in such a way.

Medical Theory: Encephalitis

Laurie Winn Carlson's *A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials* (1999), studies the various symptoms experienced by the residents of Salem in 1692, and proposes that their behaviors resulted from an epidemic of encephalitis. Carlson reads the symptoms of the afflicted, including sensations of pinching and pricking, fits, and hallucinations, as symptoms of encephalitis lethargica, or sleeping sickness, a disease that has appeared in the United States and around the world at various times before and since. Her analysis focuses on reading the testimony of the afflicted girls at Salem, as well as research into earlier witchcraft cases in Europe. Carlson also points to the fact that such an outbreak can also affect livestock, causing symptoms similar to those seen in humans.

Carlson's analysis does not seem to apply directly to the Mary Parsons case, but certainly medical explanations could shed some light on the Northampton story. After all, it is the mysterious death of Mary (Bridgman) Bartlett that is a key factor in the formal accusation of Mary Parsons. No one in Northampton seems to be afflicted in the same way that the Salem girls were, however, there were certainly enough sick, lame, and mysteriously dead oxen, cows, and pigs, to make one wonder if there wasn't some kind of disease or contagion among the animal population, if not the human residents of Northampton.

Medical Theory: Ergot Poisoning

Another medical explanation was proposed by Linnda R. Caporael in her article "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?" which appeared in *Science* magazine in 1976. Her study proposes that the symptoms experienced by the afflicted in Salem were the result of convulsive ergotism resulting from the residents of Salem eating rye infected with ergot. Caporael studies both the symptoms of the girls as well as the climactic and agricultural conditions of the Salem area at the time, and concludes that ergot poisoning was a very probable source of the ills experienced, not just by the girls in Salem, but also perhaps in other witchcraft outbreaks in the colonies and Europe. Since the ergot poisoning and its most violent symptoms seem to affect women in greater numbers than men, and since young people are particularly susceptible to the effects, Caporael sees fit to propose that although all the residents of Salem may have experienced the poisoning to some degree, the young girls who would become known as the afflicted would obviously show the most pronounced symptoms. Her work has been refuted by some, including Nicholas P. Spanos and Jack Gottlieb

in their follow-up article later that year in the same magazine, "Ergotism and the Salem Village Witch Trials."

While the ergot poisoning theory lacks credibility, and does not seem to apply in the Mary Parsons case, the symptoms and illnesses cited in the Parsons record, as well as the mysterious deaths, could lead us to consider that poisoning of some kind (whether intentional or accidental) could have been a contributing factor. Unfortunately, lacking more evidence or detailed medical records, such a theory is difficult to investigate. Nonetheless, issues of the natural environment and climate of Northampton and the human physiology of its residents certainly played a role in how the Mary Parsons case played out.

Connection to Indian Wars

Mary Beth Norton's 2002 book, *In the Devil's Snare, The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*, presents evidence that the events in Salem were profoundly influenced by the horrors of the Puritans' conflicts with the Indians, particularly the massacres in Maine in 1689 during King William's War. Her study tracks a large number of refugees from these battles, finding that many of them landed in Salem, particularly several girls who witnessed their families being killed who went on to be key accusers in the trials. Perhaps more importantly, the Puritan's defeat and severe losses led the judges and perhaps the community at large to place blame somewhere, and "witches" became the target. We might consider the Indian-War connection in relation to the Mary Parsons case, since her son's death in the Indian wars was a cause for gossip. According to local legends, some of the residents claimed that his death was her punishment for her involvement in witchcraft. One tradition recalls local sentiment as being "though human judges may be bought, God's vengeance neither turns aside nor slumbers."

Other Books About Witchcraft

Marc Mappen's *Witches and Historians: Interpretations of Salem* (1980) gives an excellent overview of many theories, including reprints of key arguments, as well as critical responses to them, and his own commentary on each. Mappen's book includes excerpts from the original texts by contemporaries such as Cotton Mather and John Hale, and also later notable writers on the topic, such as Charles Upham. Medical and Psychological interpretations are also surveyed. The book is an excellent

resource for tracing the variety of evolving historical perspectives on this case.

Frances Hill's *A Delusion of Satan: The Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials* tells the story of Salem in dramatic detail and focuses on social and psychological mechanisms, particularly for the afflicted girls (the accusers). Central to her narration is the issue of disinheritance. Hill also considers the harsh environmental conditions of colonial New England, as well as the harsh discipline of Puritan society as key factors in understanding the dynamics of the people involved in the Salem hysteria. The book gives worthwhile analyses of previous books on the topic, as well as pointing to inadequacies of earlier interpretations. Hill's book often reads like a novel, filling in the blanks, and asking the reader to "imagine" a scene that she goes on to paint with a variety of "perhaps" surmises.

Marion Lena Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts, a Modern Inquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (1949) is focused specifically on the incidents in Salem in 1692. Starkey takes dialogue directly from the trial transcripts, and attempts a "psychological reconstruction," focusing mostly on the behavior of the accusing girls of Salem. She combines her close readings of the trial transcripts with the works of Freud and studies in hypnotism and spiritualism to create a plausible reading of the internal struggle these citizens of Salem experienced during this tumultuous time. While it sometimes reads like a novel, Starkey has focused on maintaining the historical accuracy of the narrative, quoting transcripts directly wherever possible, and noting when and where she has created dialogue or details.

In *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches*, Marion Gibson studies pamphlets from 1566 to 1621. She suggests the importance of understanding not just what is told in these narratives, but how it is told, and who tells it. Her conclusions suggest a variety of questions that we must ask about any witchcraft account. The pamphlets she studies are about English witchcraft cases, but her conclusions can be usefully applied to any testimony or documentary evidence of witchcraft cases.

Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692 (1993), by Bernard Rosenthal, rejects the notion of hysteria and reads the original documents against the various interpretations and mythologies that have evolved in the three hundred years since the events took place. He considers Salem as "America's huge metaphor for persecution" (8), and does close textual readings to separate the "amalgam of myth and history" (8) that has been

created by the many layers of interpretation by numerous different individuals and groups with their own motivations and goals. Rosenthal's book is useful in reminding us that each new interpretation reflects as much about the person writing it and the time in which it was written as it does about Salem in 1692.