Examination of a Witch, 1853, by Thompkins H. Matteson

The painting depicts officials looking for the "devil's mark" on the body of a young girl accused of witchcraft.

Source: Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA

Teaching the Salem Witch Trials through Place and Time

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When Betty Parris, Abigail Williams, and Anne Putnam Jr. began exhibiting strange behavior in the winter of 1691-1692, their families could not identify the source of their "fits." Members of the local community suspected witchcraft. The ensuing events, which came to be known as the Salem witch trials, escalated to such a frenzy that practically everyone in the town and village of Salem was touched. The Salem witch trials of 1692 took the lives of 24 people, 20 of whom were executed and four of whom died in prison. Even though the infamous witch trials occurred more than three centuries ago, they continue to capture the hearts and minds of many in academe and the public, and they play an important role in the Salem region's tourism industry. The many historical sites, museums, and monuments in the region offer students an opportunity to experience a "living history" of the witch trials through exposure to the places where some of the events occurred and direct access to documents and other artifacts from the time period.

This teaching resources article describes significant stops on a tour of sites relevant to the Salem witch trials that helps students experience

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both the history and the social milieu in which events occurred. The tour description is followed by a unit plan for fifth through twelfth grades and a list of secondary resources for teachers.1 Jerra Jenrette is a history professor at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, where Mary Jo Melvin is a professor of early childhood education. Debbie Piper and Rebecca Schaef are doctoral candidates in curriculum and instruction at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and both are teachers in the Crawford School District.

This tour focuses on several locations in Salem and nearby Danvers, including the Rebecca Nurse Homestead, the Witchcraft Victims' Memorial, the Ingersoll Ordinary, and the Samuel Parris Archaeological Site.[2]

THE REBECCA NURSE HOMESTEAD

The Rebecca Nurse family was working its way towards owning some 300 acres of land when the witch accusations began, and the Nurse family was particularly targeted by the Thomas Putnam Jr. family.[3] Today, the Rebecca Nurse Homestead, located at 149 Pine Street in Danvers, includes the original home, a barn, a gift shop, and a meetinghouse replica. The latter was constructed for the 1985 docudrama *Three Sovereigns for Sarah,*

Professor Jerra Jenrette with a group of students at the Rebecca Nurse Homestead in October 2010. Photo: Patricia Hillman

which remains the best and most historically accurate portrayal of events surrounding the witch trials. A short walk from the home is a graveyard, which includes a monument to Rebecca Nurse that was erected in 1885. The Homestead is owned and operated by the Danvers Alarm List Company, a group dedicated to preserving the history of the Homestead and the local community.

Upon arriving at the Rebecca Nurse Homestead, tour guides lead visitors to the Meetinghouse for a brief film and a question/answer session. The short film, narrated by Danvers Archivist Richard Trask, gives a brief history of the Salem witch trials as well as the early history of Danvers. The film focuses on the significance of the meetinghouse in colonial history, providing a place not only for Sunday worship, but also for other important political, economic, and social gatherings. After the film, the docent talks to the students about Rebecca Nurse and the Nurse family.

One can envision what it must have been like to sit in the 1692 Meetinghouse and listen to the Reverend Samuel Parris sermonize about the growing problems in the community. Whether it was fear of attack by local Native American tribes, smallpox, or conflicts with Salem Town, Parris promised the congregation that life would soon be different. When I visit with students in October, it is always cold as we are well into fall. So the temperature inside the meetinghouse gives one a small taste of cold 1692 New England winters.

As students tour the house itself, one can get a sense of historic place and time. The first floor consists of only two rooms: the kitchen and living room. They provide visitors a view into seventeenth-century New England home life, and the docent provides helpful background information about the colonial period. Carolyn Pitcairn, a history graduate student at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, describes the significance of the homestead for a living history tour:

> This settlement allows students to enrich their experience through sight and touch. A student can easily walk through the house and interpret what might have been the normal lifestyle for the Nurse family, and in turn, the families participating in the trials. While there, students can experience what it might have looked like to sit and watch the trials take place: an almost spooky, but worthwhile endeavor. Overall, the homestead represents a big part of Salem history, and without it, I feel that students would rely more on books and have less of a true understanding of the actual time period.[4]

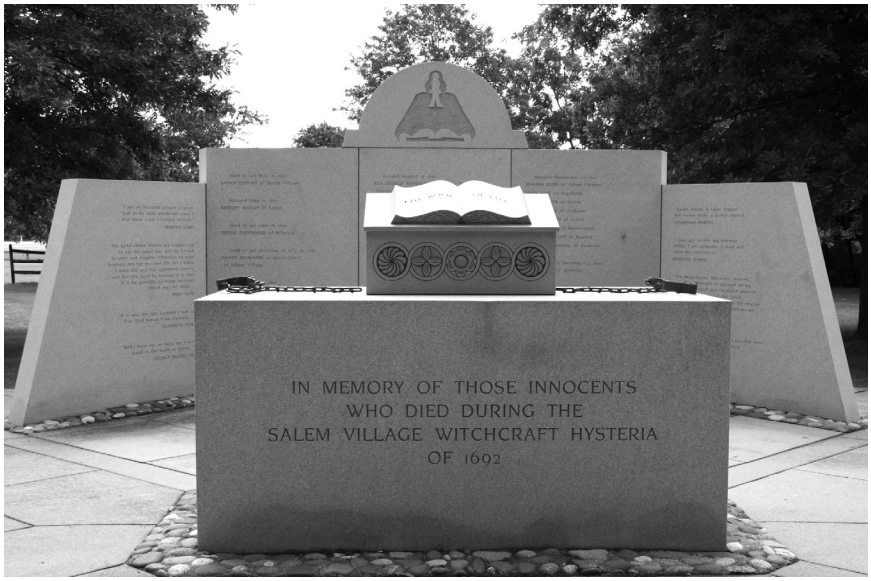
WITCHCRAFT VICTIMS' MEMORIAL, DANVERS

The memorial was installed in 1992 by the town of Danvers as a testament to the strength of character of the victims and the centuries-old dedication the community of Danvers has to ensuring that the truth is told about the trials. The memorial is a crucial part of the history of the Salem witch trials. Memorializing all of the victims, this monument allows students the opportunity to pause and reflect on the horrors which these trials brought.

INGERSOLL ORDINARY TAVERN

Though unused and in disrepair, the tavern is another important piece of the history of the Salem witch trials. Accused members of the community were brought here for their inquests.

Members of the Nurse Family Association gathered for the July 1885 dedication of a memorial to Rebecca Nurse. The memorial includes an epitaph to Nurse written by poet John Greenleaf Whittier: "O Christian Martyr who for truth could die/ When all around thee owned the hideous lie!/ The world redeemed from Superstition's sway/ Is breathing freer for thy sake today."



Witchcraft Victims' Memorial, Danvers

The three panels at the rear of the memorial are carved with the names of the victims of the witch trials along with passages of statements made by eight accused witches during their trials.

Ingersoll Ordinary Tavern

SAMUEL PARRIS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

The last stop in Danvers is the Parris Archaeological Site, located a quarter of a mile from the memorial to victims of the witch trials. Although it is not actually an active archaeological site anymore, the site was the original location of the Salem Village parsonage and serves as an excellent teaching tool. As students gather around the split rail fence that surrounds excavated stones from the original buildings, it may not be easy at first to grasp that the witch trial hysteria actually began in this idyllic setting. But, set back from the busy street that runs through the community and surrounded by foliage, the site is somewhat isolated, helping to give one a sense of the isolation residents of Salem might have felt in 1692. In fact, the sense of isolation it imparts makes it a perfect location to contemplate how boredom could breed rumors and hysteria that would envelope an entire community for more than a year. One of the important issues to remember is that this is "living history," standing in the space where one of the major events in U.S. history occurred. As history graduate student Carolyn Pitcairn notes, the site is close to where the trials began and "this eerie site allows visitors to take in where

Samuel Parris Archaeological Site

the Parris's were in relation to the rest of the victims, like Rebecca Nurse. By visiting the remaining stones of the house, students can think about the various requests made by Parris to the village and town, and come to their own conclusions as to why he may have done so."[5] Moreover, she adds, the site is a suitable place for a lecture.

Next, the tour makes it way to the town of Salem. Salem is a much more commercialized locale, offering a number of museums; however, we choose selected museums and one event.

PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM LIBRARY (DISPLAY OF WITCH PAPERS AND ARTIFACTS)

The Peabody Essex is one of the most significant museums in the country. However, for the purposes of this trip we stop only in the library where a few artifacts and papers from the witch trials are on display.

THE WITCH DUNGEON MUSEUM

The Witch Dungeon Museum provides visitors the opportunity to see a short skit which focuses on Mary Warren's accusation of Elizabeth Proctor. Warren was a servant in the Proctor home who claimed that her mistress bewitched her and the other girls. The staff of the Witch Dungeon Museum provides the broad historical context of the witch trials in the opening commentary and allows time for questions from the audience. Once the skit is over, the guide leads the visitors down a staircase into a recreated 1692 dungeon. Visitors see different types of cells, some of which allow only enough room to stand up in while others do not even provide that much space. Also included in this exhibit is a portrayal of the pressing of Giles Corey, who refused to enter a plea when he was accused of witchcraft. As Corey breathed his last breath, legend says he whispered, "more weight."

WITCH HOUSE (JONATHAN CORWIN'S HOME)

A block and a half from the Witch Dungeon Museum is the so-called "Witch House," which was the home of trials' magistrate, Jonathan Corwin. Self-guided tours offer the opportunity to compare this home with the Nurse Home. The Corwin Witch House was, according to local author John Goff, "considered a mansion house" during the Seventeenth century.[6] It was here that magistrate Jonathan Corwin presided over many of the pretrial examinations of the accused.

"CRY INNOCENT"

One the best parts of the trip is provided by Gordon College theatre group in their production of "Cry Innocent," a play that is based on the hearing of accused witch Bridget Bishop. Performances of the play begin in July and continue through October. The student actors begin the play on Essex Street near the plaza and mall. The town crier asks people if they have seen the suspect by describing her attire. Shortly thereafter, Bishop shows up and is arrested. The actors and audience then walk some two blocks to the old town hall where Bishop is examined to determine if enough evidence exists to hold her for trial. At various times, the audience is invited to give evidence or to ask questions of Bishop and the others. Finally, once all evidence has been submitted, the audience is called upon to serve as the jury and to determine if enough evidence has been presented to warrant holding her for trial. In the thirteen years we have taken the trip, more often than not the audience votes against holding her for trial. Bishop then informs the audience they have not kept with historical accuracy as she was indeed tried and executed.

SALEM WITCH TRIALS MEMORIAL

Like nearby Danvers, Salem has raised a memorial to the victims of the witch trials. Situated in a small park adjacent to the old cemetery, the Salem Witch Trials Memorial features a handcrafted stone wall from which protrude 20 granite benches. Each bench is inscribed with the name of one of the executed. The threshold at the entrance of the memorial is inscribed with quotes from some of the victims, protesting their innocence. This simple, yet striking memorial is located behind the Peabody Essex Museum, bringing participants back to the first stop on the Salem portion of the tour.

THE CRITICAL DOCUMENTS

The large majority of the papers available from the Salem witch trials have been digitized by the University of Virginia and can be found online. They are also housed in the Danvers Archives in Danvers, Massachusetts.[7]

Teaching Unit: Salem Witch Trials
The Cause and Effect of Human Behavior
(5th-12th grades)

The Salem Witch Trials were the climax of various factors brought to a fevered pitch by the accusations of three young girls. The cause(s) and effect of human behavior during this historical time period can be taught using historical documents and artifacts. Rebecca Schaef, a teacher from Neason Hill Elementary School in Meadville, Pennsylvania, has developed a unit that exemplifies the teaching of "living history." The unit uses children's and young adult literature as well as primary source documents and maps to capture and contextualize the stories from this time.

There are two core lessons. The first focuses upon building background knowledge. It allows students to conduct an analysis of primary sources. The second lesson illuminates the causes and effects of the trials in terms of human behaviors. For the duration of the unit plan, conduct the first activity, literature circles, which will promote discussion and application of knowledge throughout. Lesson one includes the reading of trial transcripts and completing an analysis of accounts/letters of innocence from those accused. Lesson two activities include an analysis of area maps to assess land ownership and geographical features of Salem, as well as the creation of a newscast depicting life in Salem during 1692. The unit plan also includes adaptations to meet the individual learning needs of all students, as well as numerous resources for the teacher.

Essential Question: What application can be made to current events today in both personal and political arenas from studying this time period and the factors that led to the frenzy of the Salem witch trials of 1692?

Lesson 1: Students conduct an analysis of actual historical documents to capture the "big picture" of the events and why these events occurred during 1692 in Salem.

Lesson 2: Students identify the causes and the effects of the trials, not only on the accused but on the entire community. They will use their knowledge of the factors leading to this witchcraft hysteria and analyze maps of the region in order to further establish these factors as causes.

Organizing Idea: When the first accusations of witchcraft were heard in 1692, Salem Village and Town had been experiencing crisis and disunity from numerous factors including economic worries precipitated by a decline in agriculture and the opening of a sea port, as well as religious disagreements over selection of a pastor. Thus vulnerable, the communities were receptive to claims that witchcraft lay at the root of their troubles, a claim that might otherwise have been dismissed.

Key Questions

1. What issues lay at the center of the feuding and discord between Salem Village and Town?
2. What brought the religious conflict to a head?
3. What can we learn from the actual documents, such as warrants for arrest of those accused of witchcraft?
4. What occurred to bolster the belief in the accusations made by the young girls?
5. What can be learned from the actual documents that give accounts of the innocence of those accused of witchcraft?
6. What factors influenced many of the innocent accused to plead guilty to the charges of witchcraft?

Background

1684: Salem Colony loses charter.

1680's: Decline in agriculture as economic business and an increase in income from the sea port businesses.

1688: Thomas Putnam Jr. hires Samuel Parris as pastor. Parris comes from Barbados and brings Tituba, his slave, along with his family. He expects a large salary.

1692: Dr. Griggs examines the afflicted girls and concludes that their symptoms are evidence of the hand of evil. John Hale and others also investigate and agree with Griggs that the devil is at work in Salem.

February 14, 1692: Samuel Parris gives a sermon stating that "the Devil is around, but this soon will change."

February 29, 1692: Warrants are served for the arrests of Tituba, Good, and Osborne.

March 1, 1692: The first examinations of the accused witches take place.

Materials Bank: Literature Circle Reporting Forms

Summarizer: writes a summary of events for each section of the book read.
Discussion Leader: writes questions for the group to discuss based upon the information learned and questions raised from the section that has been read.
Story Connector: identifies parts of the section read that remind them of other texts read; compares and contrasts the two texts.
Real-Life Connector: identifies parts of the text that remind them of things that have happened to them personally or to others in a personal sense, as well as in current events.
Illustrator: draws a detailed picture of a scene from the section of the book being read. Members of the group will use the pictures to describe and discuss that part of the book.
Word Wizard: identifies challenging words from the text and finds the definitions for these words; the words are then related back to the context in which they are used and discussed.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Literature Circles

Place students into groups of six and give each group the choice of a book, which can be fiction or non-fiction, based on the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. Have students choose literature circle roles and assign dates for the readings. Give time allotments of two to three weeks for grades 5-8 and three to four weeks for grades 8-12. At the end of the literature circles, assign a "share out" for each group to present the information gained from their selections. Presentations should focus on the essential questions of the unit and the key questions of the lesson and follow such methods as story vine, story cube, poetic expression, TV commercial, Artifacts Bag Retelling, Round Robin Retelling, Timeline of Events, Newspaper Review, or any other such creative methods approved by the teacher(s).

Some students may prefer the book on audiotape or CD. Some may also benefit from completing a literature circle role with another student. Adapt each role appropriately to fit each student's individual learning needs, which may include using prepared pictures rather than written text, enlarging pages, or adjusting the number of requirements per page. Enlarged print books should also be made available. Student success can be ensured through these and other adaptations that provide focus and structure to the expectations.

Activity 2: Reading Trial Transcripts

Supply small groups—which should be different from the literature circle groups—with copies of an actual transcript from the trial of one individual accused of witchcraft, taken from the University of Virginia's Salem Witch Trials archive.[8] (Teacher can modify for students with special educational needs through various methods, such as enlarging the transcript, recording the transcript being read aloud on tape and allowing the student to listen using headphones, highlighting, etc…)

Within these small cooperative groups, assign half of the students to support a "not guilty" verdict and half to favor a "guilty" verdict. While the transcript is read, the prosecution and the defense should both find evidence that supports their points of view. Allow time following the reading for students on both sides to present their ideas convincingly to the opposing side. Afterwards, open up the floor for students to discuss which side was easier to uphold using logic and reasoning similar to today's justice system. Discussion should include Puritan beliefs and how this affected their decisions. As an enrichment activity, students can present their "trials" to other classes or to a panel of teachers and receive feedback.

Activity 3: Analysis of Accounts/Letters of Innocence

In partners or small groups, have students read accounts and actual letters stating the innocence of those accused of witchcraft. Use the following accounts/letters: Mary Easty, and Rebecca Nurse, which are available online.[9]

Instruct groups to look for the similarities and differences between the accounts, paying attention to the language of this time period and pulling quotations to further analyze in great detail. Help students interpret the quotes using today's language, preserving the intent of the meaning of each.

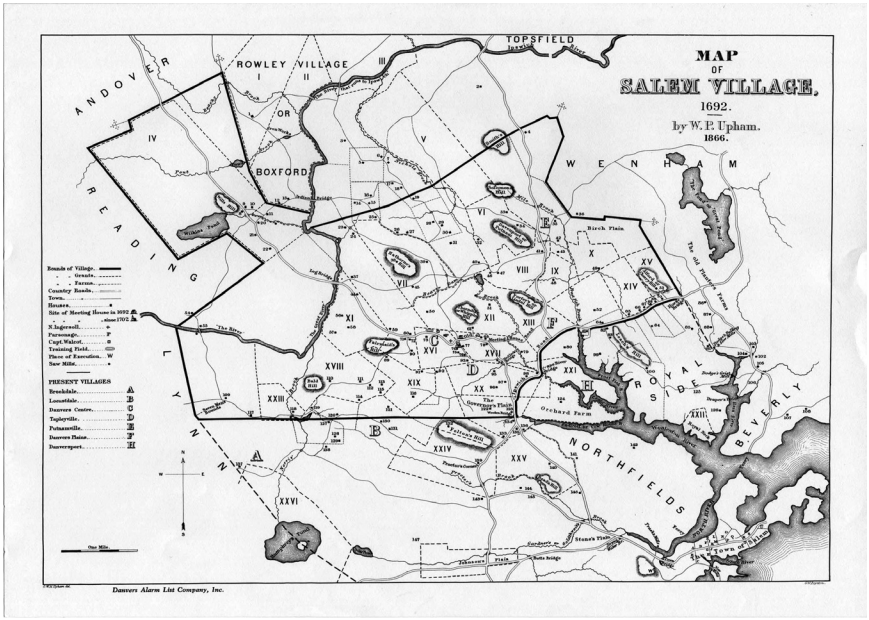
Have students create a visual in their groups to report out what they learned from reading these two different accounts, and encourage them to show their analysis of the language and the various quotes pulled from these accounts. Finally, have students create a poster containing their translations of various quotes into today's vernacular in order to fully understand their meaning and to reflect upon the eloquence of the way people spoke during this time. After the groups have shared their visuals and their findings, hold a class discussion and note questions raised during this activity.

Some students may benefit from choosing visuals from a set already completed, while others will enjoy creating and finding their own. Enlarge documents as needed. A template for organizing similarities and differences may also be helpful for some students.

Activity 4: Analysis of Area Maps, Land Ownerships and Geographical Features of Salem

This activity encourages students to analyze the various factors of the witchcraft hysteria of 1692 by plotting the affected areas on a map from the period to show the areas of more intense activity based on the accusations made. They will use the maps to look more closely at the family feud between Thomas Putnam Jr. and Joseph Putnam, the effect that the success of the seaport had upon agriculture, and the conflict between Salem Village and Salem Town. Viewing the maps gives students a better perspective on what life was like during this time.

Allow students the choice of small group or independent work on this activity. Allot some class time to complete the activity, incorporating teacher input and facilitation to ensure understanding. Some students may benefit from being partnered or placed within a small group for this activity. A template for organizing the landholdings of Thomas Putnam Jr., Joseph Putnam and other individuals crucial to the factors being discussed as contributing to the conflict can be made available, as well as the use of various colors of pins, highlighters, or other such markings, complete with a key to visually help students connect to the topic.



Historic maps of Salem Village and Town can be found at http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/maps/

Activity 5: Newscast

Provide students with an example of a newscast, and use this as a template for them to write their own newscasts about life in Salem during 1692, touching upon the weather, crimes, local news, world news and human-interest stories. Their choices of topic should reflect accuracy when recounting events. Information may be pulled from all of the sources used throughout the unit.

The amount of information within the newscast can also be decreased from five to three news topic areas. It may be beneficial to partner some students to complete the assignment. Some students may also find a template with fill-in-the-blank news stories helpful towards their success with this activity.

Notes

[1] Numerous scholars have researched and written about the trials, the conditions that gave rise to the events, and their aftermath, including Paul Boyer and Steven Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social and Economic Causes of the Salem Witch Trials* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press. 1974); Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*: *Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987); and Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002). These scholars represent but a small sampling of important works on the trials. The preceding bibliography provides many more.

[2] The first land grants were awarded in the 1630s and 1640s for the area that would become known as Salem Village or Salem Farms, home to the large majority of accusers in the witch trials. While legally a part of Salem Town, the Village began petitioning for independence soon after it was established and, in 1673, established a separate parish headed by Samuel Parris. Parris' daughter and niece were two of the girls whose unexplainable "fits" set off the chain of events that culminated in the witch trials. Salem Village, now known as Danvers, was incorporated in 1752 and today provides most of the real "living history" experiences related to the witch trials.

[3] Information on the Rebecca Nurse Homestead can be found at http://www.rebeccanurse.org. *Three Sovereigns for Sarah* focuses on the lives of Sarah Cloyce and her sisters, Rebecca Nurse and Mary Easty, during the Salem witch trials. All three were accused of witchcraft, and both Nurse and Easty were executed. See *Three Sovereigns for Sarah*. Directed by Philip Leacock. Produced by Michael E. Uslan. PBS, 1985. DVD/VHS

[4] Carolyn Pitcairn. Email to Jerra Jenrette, July 27 2011.

[5] Carolyn Pitcairn. Email to Jerra Jenrette, July 27 2011.

[6] John Goff, *Salem's Witch House: A Touchstone to Antiquity* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2009), 40.

[7] See http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/texts/transcripts.html and http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/Collection.html

[8] http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/archives/MassHist/

[9] Letters are available at Linder, Douglas. "The Witchcraft Trials in Salem: A Commentary," http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/SAL_ACCT.HTM.

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