



The Salem Witch Trials: Sociopolitical Hysteria, Systematic Persecution of Women, or Ergot Poisoning?

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Introduction

History of Salem

It is Founded by Puritans in the County of Essex, Originally called "Salem Village". Now known as Danvers; As Salem

experienced new growth in commerce, a new class of wealthy merchants arose. Merchants competed with farmers over tax revenue, control of land and religion (Figure 3) & (Figure 4).

Social Unrest Erupts

- Religious differences arose among the Protestants, the Quakers and the Anglicans.
- Many disputes arose between the farmers and merchants over land and taxes.
- The farmers asserted their rights to have their own church, and their own minister.

My Church is Better than Your Church!

Political power moved away from the founders' Protestant Church

- In 1689, Samuel Parris moved to Salem from Barbados to become the Preacher in the new "Village Church", attended by the farmers
- The Villagers and Towns people became adversaries.

- Rev. Parris brought his 10 year old daughter, Betty, and niece Abigail Williams with him.

Betty Parris and Abigail Williams Were Among the First to "succumb" to Witchcraft?

- Signs of being possessed included:
- Seeing visions & hearing voices,
- Changes in color & appearance of the skin
- Screaming out in pain
- Fits (convulsions)

William Griggs, MD, physician to the family said, these afflictions:

"were of 'supernatural origin' "

- Neighbor Mary Sibley suggested that Tituba, the Barbadian slave, bake a "witch cake" containing Betty's urine.
- Following a round or two of "water boarding" and a few other "friendly persuasions",
- Tituba confessed to being a Witch and named four others as witches.
- What could account for all of this? .

Could it be Satan? (Figures 1 & 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2

The Mushroom From Hell

- A. LSD and other ergot alkaloids are produced by various fungi.
- B. Once such fungus is *claviceps purpurea*, a purple fungus that produces ergots and grows on rye grain in cold, damp conditions (Figure 3).



Figure 3

Effects of Ergot Alkaloids

- A. Vaso-constriction of blood vessels leading to gangrene and leaving a black color to the skin
- B. Intense pain
- C. Abortions
- D. Hallucinations, seizures
- E. Recurred throughout history (9th -16th centuries) when stored rye grain became wet and fungus grew on it
- F. Last episode Pont St. Espirit, France, 1951.

Le Pain Maudit “The Accursed Bread”

- A. Ignis sacer (holy fire)
- B. Feu sacre

- C. Heilige Feuer
- D. Dancing Mania
- E. Pestis igniaria
- F. St. Anthony’s Fire

St. Anthony’s Fire

- A. Caused by ergot fungus growing on rye grain
- B. Those afflicted feel as if their fingers and toes are on fire due to vasoconstriction
- C. They jump around and scream out in pain
- D. Ergot alkaloids are related to LSD and cause hallucinations and abortions (Figure 4 & 5).



Figure 4



Figure 5

Hostility Escalates Many Legal Actions Ensur

Sir William Phips, Governor of Massachusetts, created a special court of “Oyer and Terminer” to try all the “Witch Cases”. In the end, 17 Women and 7 Men were tried for:

- A. Practicing Witchcraft
- B. Demonic Possession
- C. Affiliating with Satan

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