

The Salem Witch Trials

In 1692, strange events spiraled out of control, resulting in the worst witch hunt in U.S. history

CHARACTERS

Reverend Samuel Parris, a minister

William Griggs, a doctor

Betty Parris, 9, Samuel Parris's daughter

Thomas Putnam, a constable

Nicholas Noyes, a minister

Tituba, a slave from Barbados, owned by Reverend Parris

John Hathorne, a judge

Ann Putnam, Thomas Putnam's daughter

Rebecca Nurse, a Salem resident

Narrators A-E

All of the characters were real people. The dialogue is based on historical records but paraphrased for space and clarity.

WORDS TO KNOW

- **hysteria** (n): an uncontrollable outburst of emotion or fear
- **malice** (n): a desire to harm
- **Puritans** (n): Protestants who settled Massachusetts Bay Colony after fleeing England to escape religious persecution

PROLOGUE

Narrator A: During the frigid winter of 1692, the children of Salem, Massachusetts, had to play inside. A group of young girls frequently met at Betty Parris's house. They played fortune-telling games and listened to stories of demons and witchcraft.

Narrator B: Many of the villagers believed in and feared witchcraft. Salem had been settled by English **Puritans** seeking religious freedom. The Puritans were strict people who saw life as a continuous struggle between good and evil. Fun was considered sinful, and many Puritans thought witchcraft was a sign of Satan's presence. Under English law, the practice of witchcraft was punishable by death.

Narrator C: When Betty and the other girls suddenly began acting oddly, the villagers grew concerned. Were the children ill, or was something more sinister at work? What took place next in Salem led to a **hysteria** that destroyed many lives.

SCENE 1

Narrator D: In January 1692, Dr. William Griggs enters the home of Reverend Samuel Parris.

Reverend Samuel Parris: Thank you for coming, Doctor. We're very worried about Betty's cousin



A girl describes supernatural events during the Salem witch trials.

Abigail. She's acting odd. She hasn't touched a bite of food in three days, and she stares up at the ceiling without saying a word! I don't know what to do.

William Griggs: I can understand your concern. How old is Abigail?

Parris: Eleven.

Narrator E: Betty Parris rushes down the stairs in a panic.

Betty Parris: Father, Abigail is not well! She's out of her bed and



down on all fours, barking like a dog. I'm afraid!

Parris: We'll pray for her.

Narrator A: Before long, Betty also begins acting strangely. Dr. Griggs cannot find an explanation for the girls' unusual behavior. Then, a few weeks later, he is called to Thomas Putnam's home.

Thomas Putnam: I'm afraid that our daughter Ann is ill. She's thrashing around on the floor!

Griggs: I fear that they've all been bewitched by an evil hand!

Putnam: Who, Doctor?

Griggs: Your daughter Ann and the other girls. Reverend Parris reports the same strange symptoms in Betty and Abigail.

SCENE 2

Narrator B: As more girls begin to show signs of puzzling behavior, tales of witchcraft spread like wild-

fire through Salem. Reverend Parris calls for a day of prayer at the church. Nearly everyone in Salem attends. But cries from the girls interrupt the service.

Nicholas Noyes: Look how they moan and fall at the very mention of God! An evil spirit has robbed these girls of their will.

Parris (shouting in frustration):

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Who are their tormentors? If only we knew!

Noyes (to the girls): What ails you, children? Is it a person who is doing this to you?

Narrator C: The girls don't answer but continue to cry and moan.

Noyes: This is very serious. What can we do, Reverend?

Parris: I've heard it whispered that my slave, Tituba, has made witch's cakes to break evil spells.

Noyes (in a suspicious tone): Isn't it true that someone who breaks spells can also cast them?

SCENE 3

Narrator D: Reverend Parris questions his daughter, who finally says that Tituba taught the girls witchcraft.

Betty: Yes, it was Tituba. She told us scary stories, and we watched her bake a witch's cake. She made the cake with rye meal and other strange ingredients, Father. She said the cake might help Abigail and me get better.

Narrator E: Enraged that Tituba would use a superstitious folk remedy rather than prayer to treat his daughter, Reverend Parris confronts

his slave in the family's kitchen.

Tituba (nervously wringing her hands): It was only a game—a game I learned when I was a child.

Parris: A game of witchcraft?

Tituba: No, a game to make the children laugh. I was just trying to keep the girls busy. Ask Betty. Ask Abigail. Ask Ann Putnam!

Parris: Enough, you evil woman!

Narrator A: Judges come to Salem from Boston to conduct a hearing on the witchcraft accusations. At first, Tituba denies everything. But finally she admits to witchcraft, hoping that it will save her life. Her story leaves the residents in shock.

Tituba: They made me do it!

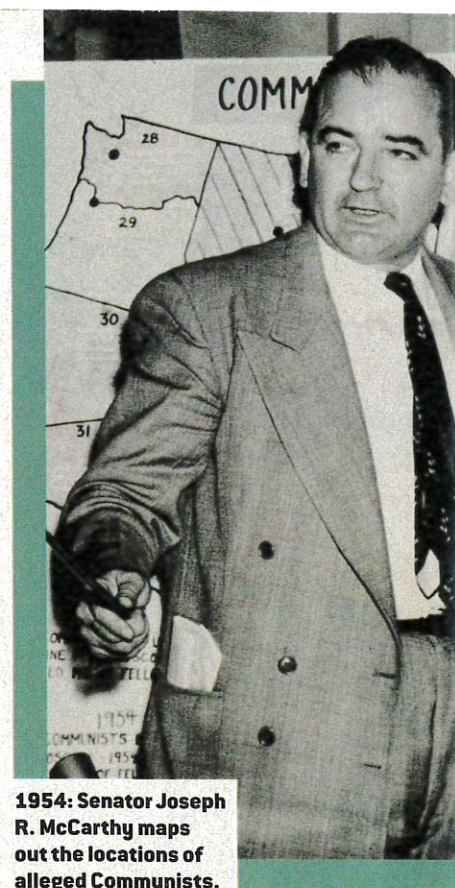
John Hathorne: Who, Tituba? Tell me now.

Tituba: I can't remember.

Hathorne: You must try to recall.

Tituba (pauses before speaking): Wait. Yes. I remember now. It was a shape. A shape like a man. He carried a cane and a book of gold. A yellow bird flew to him and perched on his shoulder. The bird began to talk.

Hathorne: And what was written in this devil's book?



1954: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy maps out the locations of alleged Communists.

Tituba: The names of his helpers, written in blood.

Hathorne: What names did you see in this book?

Tituba: I can't read, but the bird told me. One was Sarah Osborne, and the other was . . . Sarah Good.

SCENE 4

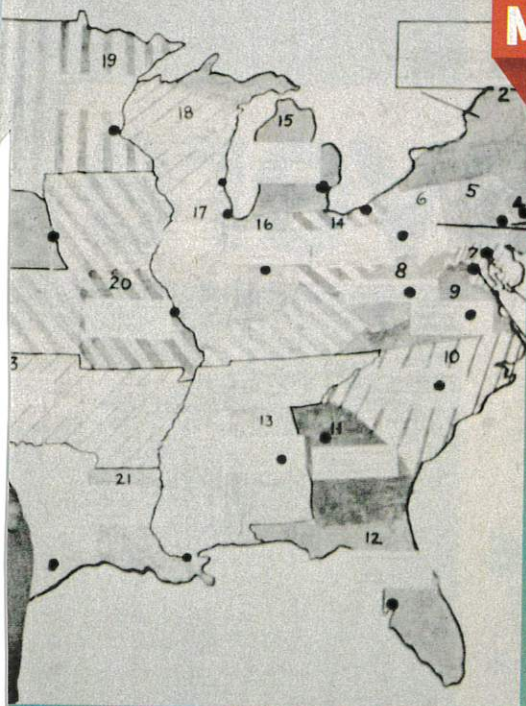
Narrator B: Tituba, Sarah Osborne, and Sarah Good are thrown in jail in Boston. With the accused now in prison, life in Salem begins to return to normal. But the peace doesn't last for long.

Narrator C: Soon, Betty and the other girls are acting stranger than ever. They begin twitching and speaking incoherently. They claim that someone—or something—is pinching and biting them all over. The girls accuse more people of being witches.

Putnam (to his daughter Ann): Rebecca Nurse? She's a witch?

Ann Putnam: Yes, Father. Just this morning she beat me. Then she bit





MODERN-DAY WITCH HUNTS

Witch hunts through history have taken many different forms. The term has come to describe a frenzied search for perceived enemies. During a witch hunt, hysteria and fear replace common sense. People can be convicted of wrongdoing based on mere accusation.

The best-known example of a modern-day witch hunt occurred in the 1950s, during the Cold War. That was a nonmilitary conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union and their allies. During this time, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy charged that many Communists were secretly working inside the U.S. government.

McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin, held several congressional hearings that were broadcast on national TV and radio. As a result of McCarthy's inquiries and accusations, the lives and careers of many innocent people were destroyed.

In 1953, playwright Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible*, an account of the events in Salem, Massachusetts, as an allegory of McCarthy's "witch hunt." (An *allegory* is a story in which characters and their actions are equated with meanings that lie outside the text.)

me and made me write in her book. Ask Abigail. She hurt her too!

Putnam (*looks up to the ceiling, shaking his fists*): Is there no one who can withstand the devil's power? I must write to Judge Hathorne in Boston.

SCENE 5

Narrator D: Rebecca Nurse is called to the village meetinghouse for questioning on March 24. Many of Salem's residents are stunned to hear that Nurse, a 71-year-old mother and respected member of the community, has been accused of witchcraft. A large crowd of Nurse's friends and supporters attends her hearing before Judge Hathorne.

Hathorne: Rebecca Nurse, Ann Putnam complains of your hurting her. What do you say?

Rebecca Nurse: I have never harmed a child in my life.

Hathorne: Are you in any way involved in all this witchcraft?

Nurse (*touching a hand to her*

throat): I am innocent, and God will clear my name!

Narrator E: Across the room, Ann and the other girls begin to mimic Rebecca Nurse. They also touch their throats. Every time Nurse makes a move, they cry out in pain, as if she is harming them with unseen magical powers.

Nurse (*shouting in desperation*): The Lord knows I have not hurt them! I cannot help it if the devil may appear in my shape.

EPILOGUE

Narrator A: Rebecca Nurse's case went to trial. The jury initially found her innocent, but a judge asked the group to reconsider its decision. Nurse was declared guilty of practicing witchcraft, and she was hanged on July 19, 1692. By then, the witch hunt had spread to other towns in Massachusetts. Before the chaos was over, more than 200 people had been accused of being witches. Nineteen people

were hanged, a 71-year-old man was pressed to death with heavy stones, and many others died in jail.

Narrator B: Finally, in October 1692, Massachusetts Governor Sir William Phips ordered an end to the witch hunt. Public opinion turned against the accusers.

Reverend Parris, in whose house the witchcraft scare started, was forced to move away. In time, some of the accusers began to express regret for their actions. Nearly 14 years later, Ann Putnam, by then an adult, made a public confession.

Putnam: The people I accused were innocent. What I did was done not out of **malice**, but because I was tricked by Satan! I beg God's forgiveness for all the sorrow and suffering that I caused by my actions.

Narrator C: As far as it's known, Ann Putnam was the only one of the girls to ever formally confess to any wrongdoing.

—Louis C. Adelman & Brooke Ross