

Salem and the Puritans (Background info)

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, some English trading companies started to send settlers to North America. Among them were the Pilgrim Fathers, who crossed the Atlantic in the *Mayflower* and landed in Massachusetts on November 21, 1620. Ten years later, about a thousand Puritans settled around Massachusetts Bay, in the area later known as New England. They brought with them a royal charter (constitution/contract) to set up a colony ruled by a Governor and General Court. A Puritan elite of politicians and clergymen imposed a strict administration on the new colony. As well as reclaiming land from the forest, the settlers had to put up with the Native American tribes and periodic outbreaks of smallpox.

By 1692 there were marked differences between the various centers of population. Trade and education flourished in towns like Boston; inland areas were much less safe and prosperous. Several other factors caused unrest. While the colony awaited the arrival of a new charter from England, its laws, including those on land tenure, were technically suspended. The rulers felt their grasp slipping.

Salem had developed as the agricultural hinterland, a thriving trading town on the coast five miles away. Rivers and sea inlets lay in between the town and the village, which was in reality a collection of scattered farms. Farmers living further inland had to grow their produce on much less fertile terrain. Added to jealousies about land were disputes over appointing a minister. The town continued to demand taxes and to exercise authority over the villagers.

Puritans believed that every soul was predestined for Heaven or Hell. The Puritans blamed the Devil for any temptations to break their stern code. Those who broke the rules had to confess in public and suffer severe punishment. To work on Sunday was a serious offence. The Puritans disapproved of most forms of recreation. They confined their reading to the Bible and other religious texts. Children had to live up to this code of behavior from their earliest years and do their share of adult work from the age of seven.

Witchcraft and the Salem Witch-Hunt

Like most people in the seventeenth century, the Puritans believed in witches. The idea of witchcraft existed long before the Christian era. The Old Testament states, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." This was the basis of the witchcraft laws. In prehistoric societies, magic and sorcery were features of religion; the early Christian Church regarded them as the remains of paganism. There were laws against the practice of witchcraft, but no systematic persecution.

Anxieties began to increase when the Church declared in 1320 that magic and witchcraft involved a pact with the Devil and were called heresy, carrying the penalty of eternal damnation. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thousands were put to death for witchcraft. Medicine and veterinary science were so primitive that disease and sudden death could seem to result from a spell cast by a spiteful neighbor. Those suspected of being witches were male and female, of all ages and social rank. However, a majority of those accused were older women.

There were several witchcraft trials in Massachusetts before the famous **Salem Witch Trials** of 1692. Two involved adolescent girls suffering hysterical fits similar to those seen in Salem. In January 1692, the daughter and niece of the village parson (minister), Reverend Parris, having experimented with fortune-telling, began to babble nonsense and twist their limbs into grotesque positions. They claimed that the spirit of Parris's West Indian slave, Tituba, was tormenting them. Soon, more young girls began to display the same symptoms. Tituba and two other women were arrested on the charge of bewitching them.

Over the following months, the number of hysterical girls increased, as did the number of people they accused. The youngest victim was a child of four. The defendants were jailed, but not tried until June, when the new governor set up his official court, which decided to allow "spectral evidence," that is, the girls' allegation that the witches were sending out their invisible spirits. The witch-hunt spread and scores of people went to prison. Those who confessed were reprieved (no longer punished). Six men and thirteen women were hanged. Since prisoners had to pay for their keep, many families went bankrupt. Doubts arose about the "spectral evidence," particularly when the girls began naming prominent people. The Governor intervened, and in May 1693 the remaining accused were set free, except for those who could not pay their prison charges.