

THE HALF-WAY COVENANT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

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Introduction

The Salem Witch Trials are an infamous representation of witchcraft hysteria in the United States that occurred from 1692 to 1693. In just over a year, twenty people in Salem, Massachusetts, were executed following accusations of sorcery and coercing with the devil. Historians have pondered as to what factors led to the trials conjuring theories that range from collective delusions caused by ergot poisoning to mass hypnotism to a clergy conspiracy intended to drum up need for ministerial services.¹

Recent scholarship has identified the New England Puritan's Half-Way Covenant (HWC) as a possible cause for the trials.² However, the historical support of such a claim is, at best, scarce. The goal of this paper is to consider the HWC's impact upon the culture and church in 17th-century Salem to determine the HWC's role, if any, in the witch-hunt. To accomplish this goal, the circumstances and purpose of the HWC will be examined. Second, the location, social environment, and persons involved in the trials will be considered. Finally, these observations will be compared to Rodney Stark's three necessary conditions of a witch-hunt.

In *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-hunts, and the End of Slavery*, Stark identified three sociopolitical conditions that typically resulted in

¹ Norman Gevitz, "The Devil Hath Laughed at the Physicians': Witchcraft and Medical Practice in Seventeenth-Century New England," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 55, no. 1 (2000): 6; Marion L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Inquiry into the Salem Witch Trials*, (Bristol: Western Printing Services, 1949), 12; Ernest W. King and Franklin G. Mixon, Jr., "Religiosity and the political economy of the Salem Witch Trials," *The Social Science Journal* 47 (2010): 678–688.

² Jone Johnson Lewis, "A History of the Half-Way Covenant: Inclusion of Puritan Children in Church and State," Learn Religions, last updated January 14, 2020, <https://www.learnreligions.com/half-way-covenant-definition-4135893>.

witch-hunts in the 13th through 17th centuries.³ In the final section, the circumstances surrounding the Salem Witch Trials will be compared to Stark's three conditions to determine if the HWC contributed to the causation of the event.

Membership in 17th-Century New England Puritan Church

The Church and the State

Puritan pilgrims viewed the prospect of settlements in the New World as the opportunity to establish, develop, and maintain the perfect Christian society. Most Puritans were at odds with both the church and the rule of Old England and relished the idea of a fresh start.⁴ In November of 1631, the *Lion* weighed anchor in the waters just off the shores of the New England Bay bringing the first Puritan settlers to the New World.⁵ Unfortunately, the New England settlements were not the idealistic utopias hoped for. Every year, hundreds more Puritan immigrants arrived and, as the population grew, conflict increased. Moreover, the same ecclesiastical and political struggles that plagued Old England followed settlers to New England.⁶

³ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-hunts, and the End of Slavery*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 254; Rodney Stark served as a professor of Sociology and Comparative Religion at the University of Washington and Baylor University before his death in July of 2022.

⁴ New England consisted of charter colonies under the rule of England.

⁵ John Adair, *Puritans: Religion and Politics in Seventeenth Century England and America*, (Sutton Publishing, 1982), 183.

⁶ Timothy H. Been and Stephen Foster, "The Puritans' Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts," in *Puritan New England: Essays on Religion, Society, and Culture*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan and Francis J. Bremer, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 110–127.

The Royal Charter of Massachusetts enforced British law over the New England colonies. In June 1684, Charles II granted the annulment of the charter.⁷ The Dominion of New England was established in 1686 by King James II which encroached upon the liberties of New England citizens.⁸ In 1689, The Glorious Revolution shifted England from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, restoring liberty in New England lost under King James II.⁹ Massachusetts was without a charter from 1689 through 1692 and “a sense of political crisis gripped the area,” David Weir wrote.¹⁰

The church was the ultimate authority in the New England colonies. The Puritans put little stock in the potential for civil government to result in an ideal Christians society and focused on the church as the central governing entity.¹¹ The church members and clergy held sway over decisions regarding immigration into the colonies as well as who was allowed membership within the church.¹² Vaughan and Bemer wrote, “The Puritan sense of community and mission would tolerate no threat to the success of their experiment.”¹³ Moreover, church

⁷ A leading factor in vacating the charter was that the Crown felt criminals were being executed too flippantly and frequently in Massachusetts. David A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 60–61; George Ellis presented an extensive explanation of the annulment of the Massachusetts charter. George E. Ellis, *Puritan Age and Rule in the Colony of Massachusetts Bay 1629-1685*, (New York, NY: Burt Franklin, 1970), 492–555.

⁸ The Dominion of New England included Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. An example of liberties encroached upon: ministers in Massachusetts and Connecticut were not allowed to perform wedding ceremonies. Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England*, (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), 118–119.

⁹ John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), 381.

¹⁰ Weir, 7.

¹¹ Weir, 134.

¹² Vaughan, 173.

¹³ Alden T. Vaughan and Francis J. Bemer, eds., *Puritan New England: Essays on Religion, Society, and Culture*, (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), 173.

membership was required to vote. Therefore, the church controlled who was allowed into their communities and who among their citizens had a voice.

The New England Puritans were notoriously legalistic and overwhelmingly strict. Sundays in the Puritan towns were treated much like the Jewish Sabbath: a sacred day of reverence from dawn to dusk. In 1647, a man in New Haven, Connecticut was put on trial for being absent at Sunday worship. The man pleaded that he had fallen into the river on Saturday and could not manage to dry his clothes in time for church the following morning. He was found guilty of “slothfulness” and punished by whipping.¹⁴ The amalgamation of the church and the state in the New England colonies set the stage for more superficial trials such as the aforementioned to take place.

The Church Covenant and Ordinances

Like all Massachusetts settlements, Salem was a Covenant Society, a distinction which placed the church at the center of Puritan life.¹⁵ Frances Hill described the Puritan covenant church as “a gathering of people judged by a minister likely to be destined for heaven.”¹⁶ The church covenant served to establish each church as a recognized body of believers and to confirm those who sought membership.

For contemporary Protestants, the true church was represented by the preaching of the word, the administration of the ordinances, and the exercise of church discipline. The church

¹⁴ Frances Hill, *A Delusion of Satan: The Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 9.

¹⁵ Weir, 137.

¹⁶ Prior to the establishment of the church covenant in Salem Village in 1689, resident church members had to retain or obtain membership through other churches outside of their community in order to receive communion or cast votes. Hill, 54.

body consisted of those redeemed through the finished work of Christ and God's covenant of grace. Puritans took this a step further and viewed the church covenant, a physical document signed by every member, as a manifestation of God's grace covenant with the redeemed.¹⁷

Adhering to their strict Reformed theology, church membership and the observance of the ordinances was strictly reserved for the regenerate. The regenerate were those whose faith had been proven via the "morphology of conversion" which included a profession of faith in Christ.¹⁸ Prior to the 17th century, Puritans lumped together the church covenant and a profession of faith. After 1650, the two were treated as separate commitments, a distinction which complicated and extended the process of joining a church.¹⁹ A lengthy covenant signing ceremony followed a profession of faith and the expression of the evidences of salvation.²⁰ Benjamin C. Ray explained, "To gain full membership in the congregation, which included the right to have one's children baptized, to receive communion, and to vote on church policy, individuals had to make

¹⁷ Weir, 137.

¹⁸ The "morphology of conversion" required three evidences of salvation: renouncement of the Church of England, acceptance of Reformed Christianity, and moral living. The expression of the latter two evidences, however, proved problematic because they could easily be faked. The "morphology of conversion" was inherited from the Puritan movement in England. The Puritan church in New England sought to succeed where the church in Old England had failed by keeping the unregenerate out of the church. The strict requirements of the Puritans did the job of keeping out the undesirable members (those who did not live moral lives) but also often rejected true repentants and "some of the elect were left outside." Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 4–5; The "morphology of conversion" is detailed in Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁹ Caldwell, 56.

²⁰ Weir, 137.

public professions of [faith].”²¹ Additionally, prospects were not allowed access to the church without testimony from a church member regarding their good works.²²

The church’s membership standards proved to be too restrictive. Evangelism became fruitless when membership was denied to so many whom could not provide the evidences of regeneration and the process of gaining church membership proved to be too strenuous. The continuance of the church was predicated upon the possibility of new membership and their methods contradicted that desire.²³

According to Puritan theology, the Bible taught that the church consisted only of visible saints. Yet, as Perry Miller explained, “it also declared... that whenever God extended the covenant of grace to His saints, He included their ‘seed’ in the grant.”²⁴ This understanding led to the Puritan justification for child baptism. Speculation arose concerning the future of the church if children who were baptized into church membership did not experience regeneration later in life. What happened to their membership if those baptized children did not come to full salvation in maturity? If they are no longer church members, at what point did membership cease? What of the former members’s children? Should the end of one generation’s membership disallow a new generation to be baptized under their grandparents’s covenant? In 1662, a synod was ordered to answer such questions once and for all.²⁵

²¹ Ray, 76.

²² Ray, 76.

²³ Pope, 6.

²⁴ Perry Miller, “The Half-Way Covenant,” *The New England Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1933): 679.

²⁵ Pope, 6–7.

The Half-Way Covenant

Eighty clergymen from churches across New England gathered at a synod ordered by the Massachusetts General Court and recommended the HWC as a means to put an end to the controversy surrounding membership in the Puritan settlements.²⁶ The conditions of this new covenant permitted a partial membership to the children of regenerate church members. Those who entered under the HWC would be baptized into church membership and were subject to church discipline though they were not allowed to take communion or vote in church affairs.²⁷ The implementation of the HWC sought to quell controversy over baptism by allowing partial membership that did not cease even if the baptized child did not become regenerate. Additionally, the HWC guaranteed that the offspring of partial members could be baptized as well.²⁸

The impetus behind the establishment of the HWC was intended to make church membership more accessible to a new generation of slipshod Puritans. However, the lasting effect of the HWC proved to be unintentionally detrimental.²⁹ The HWC resulted in an increased risk of unregenerate members in the church, despite the intention to do the opposite.³⁰ Though the number of baptisms in New England churches increased following the implementation of the HWC, the number of unregenerate imposters also increased. The HWC is viewed historically as a misstep on the behalf of the Puritan church.³¹

²⁶ Pope, 6–7; Miller, 680–683.

²⁷ Pope, 7.

²⁸ Pope, 8.

²⁹ Pope, 9–10; 251–252.

³⁰ Pope, 251.

³¹ Pope, 9–10; 251–252.

The Circumstances of the Salem Witch Trials

The Half-Way Covenant Rejected in Salem

The church in Salem implemented the HWC in 1664 under the leadership of pastor John Higginson.³² In 1672, a new church was established in Salem Village, an inland settlement of greater Salem Town, though they were not allowed to confirm a church covenant. Without a covenant, Salem Village did not have its own civil government.³³ The covenant for the Salem Village church was granted on the same day that its first ordained pastor, Samuel Parris, was hired in November 1689.³⁴ Protests against Parris began almost immediately due to the church's decision not to implement the HWC.³⁵ Parris and his parishioners viewed the HWC as too lenient and wished to more strictly reserve the ordinances and membership for "those in full communion."³⁶ The Salem Village church's refusal to apply the HWC put them at odds with their own community and the churches in surrounding communities whom continued to do so.

³² Pope, 143.

³³ Salem Village was a settlement inland of Salem Town established in 1632 but did not have its own civil government until the founding of the church covenant in 1689. Ray, 69-70.

³⁴ The new church in Salem Village had twenty-five members whom had been released from their covenant at the church in Salem Town in order to establish the church in the new settlement. Benjamin C. Ray, "Satan's War against the Covenant in Salem Village, 1692," *The New England Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2007): 71.

³⁵ Ray, 71.

³⁶ Ray, 74.

The Accusers and the Accused

Samuel Parris's daughter and niece were the initial accusers who were diagnosed as "bewitched" and started the chain of events that led to the trials.³⁷ Betty Parris and her cousin, Abigail Williams, were joined by Anne Putnam, Elizabeth Hubbard, Mercy Lewis, and Mary Walcot as the primary witnesses to witchcraft in Salem. The girls were between the ages of ten and seventeen and had close connections to both the Salem church and the parsonage, the home of the Parris family.³⁸ Once accusations were made against church members in March of 1692, others began to point fingers at those inside and outside of the church. Among the accusers were Ann Putnam's parents, Thomas and Ann, prominent members of the church and community.³⁹

Those who were first accused of witchcraft in January were social outcasts, elderly, and non-church members: Tituba, a slave in the Parris household; Sarah Good, a beggar; and Sarah Osborne, a local pariah.⁴⁰ In March, the fourth person accused was Martha Cory, a prominent church member. Her husband, Giles, testified against her. By June, over fifty people had been

³⁷ In January of 1692, Betty Parris and Abigail Williams began to throw unexplainable fits. In Puritan reasoning, afflictions were caused by the devil. But, since the girls were baptized church members, the only explanation was that they were bewitched. This suspicion was confirmed by Dr. William Griggs, a physician, a Puritan, and the uncle of Elizabeth Hubbard. Hill, 36; Marilynne K. Roach, *Six Women of Salem: The Untold Story of the Accused and Their Accusers in the Salem Witch Trials*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2013), 202.

³⁸ Hill, 35; Ray, 69.

³⁹ Hill, 225–226; Ann Putnam, Sr. was also accused of witchcraft, arrested, and tortured. Hill, 84.

⁴⁰ Hill, 36; John Demos noted that witchcraft accusers were roughly one generation younger than those accused. John Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," in *Puritan New England: Essays on Religion, Society, and Culture*. Edited by Alden T. Vaughan and Francis J. Bremer, (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 250–266; Detailed accounts of those accused in the trials are provided in *Six Women of Salem* by Marilynne K. Roach and Stacy Schiff, *The Witches: Suspicion, Betrayal, and Hysteria in 1692 Salem*, (New York, NY: Back Bay Books / Little, Brown and Company, 2015).

imprisoned for witchcraft.⁴¹ Bridget Bishop was the first to be hanged on June 10, followed by five others, including Sarah Good, on July 19.⁴²

The trials came to an end due to four sociopolitical events. First, Cotton Mather, a minister in Boston, wrote a sermon condemning the use of spectral evidence to condemn witches.⁴³ Mather, along with a group of Boston ministers, sent a letter to newly appointed governor William Phips in June of 1692 urging him to intervene in the trials.⁴⁴ Second, George Burroughs, a former minister in Salem, was accused of witchcraft, found guilty, and executed in August.⁴⁵ At his hanging, Burroughs was heard citing the Lord's Prayer.⁴⁶ This caused many to question the legitimacy of the trials and the guilt of the accused.⁴⁷ Third, Giles Cory was pressed to death after refusing to enter a plea when he was accused of sorcery.⁴⁸ Cory's inhumane execution cast further doubt into the minds of the public.⁴⁹ Finally, an accusation was made against the wife of Governor Phips which gained the focused ire of the politician and a

⁴¹ Hill, 226.

⁴² Hill, 164; 226.

⁴³ Spectral evidence was non-physical evidence reported by individuals who experienced supernatural attacks by accused witches and served as a key piece of condemnable evidence against the accused in the trials.

⁴⁴ Boyer, 10.

⁴⁵ Hill, 178.

⁴⁶ The inability to quote Scripture or cite prayers was considered a characteristic of a witch. Citing the Lord's Prayer became a common test in the trials. Suspicion of Sarah Good increased due to her inability to fully quote from Psalms or say the Lord's Prayer. Boyer, 12.

⁴⁷ Hill, 178–179.

⁴⁸ Those executed for crimes of witchcraft were forced to sign over their possessions to the government. Cory used a clever legal tactic to ensure that his children inherited his property. Hill, 184–185.

⁴⁹ Giles Cory was the only person executed during the Salem Witch Trials who did not confess. Hill, 184–185.

determination to put the madness to an end.⁵⁰ From October, 1692 to May, 1693, Phips toiled to end the trials and release those who were imprisoned for suspicion of witchcraft.⁵¹

All in all, fourteen women and six men were put to death as a result of the trials.⁵² Most of the victims were elderly widows, individuals that held little sociological value.⁵³ As long as the succession of executions did not take a significant social toll, the trials were allowed to continue.⁵⁴ But the hanging of a minister, the torture and killing of a man who refused to confess, and an accusation against a governor's wife caused the public perception of the trials to change irrevocably.

The Location of the Trials

The trials were set to be held at a local tavern in Salem Village. However, due to the large crowds that were attracted by the spectacle of the trials, the proceedings were moved to the Salem Village meetinghouse where church services were held.⁵⁵ Therefore, the witchcraft accusations that resulted from fits of children that began in Samuel Parris's home were tried in the building where he also occupied the pulpit.

⁵⁰ Ellis, 556–557.

⁵¹ Hill, 225-226.

⁵² Five people also died while in prison for accusations of witchcraft including an infant born to Sarah Good in July of 1692 while she was interned. Hill, 229.

⁵³ Demos noted that most accused of witchcraft had dubious reputations in the community. Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," 255.

⁵⁴ Those who were executed for witchcraft prior to August of 1692 had been social outcasts. Stark noted that individual witch-hunts ended not because of intellectual enlightenment or scientific advances but due to the social toll that it took on the societies involved. Stark, 276–287.

⁵⁵ Hill, 42–43.

The Overseers of the Trials

The Salem Village church was overseen by the church in Salem Town until they were allowed to establish their own church covenant and appoint civil leadership in 1689.

Bartholemew Gedney, John Hawthorne, and Jonathan Corwin represented Salem Village's civil leaders along with pastor Samuel Parris. Prior to 1692, Salem Village operated with no established charter in Massachusetts.⁵⁶ In May 1692, newly appointed governor William Phips arrived from England with the new Massachusetts charter in-hand. In an overreach of his office, Phips solely selected the "Court of Oyer and Terminer" within a few days to oversee court proceedings regarding the immense backlog of witchcraft cases accumulated since January.⁵⁷

Among the court members were William Stoughton, whom Phips selected as lieutenant governor, and Samuel Sewall, a Boston minister.⁵⁸ Bartholemew Gedney, Nathaniel Saltonstall, John Richards, Wait Winthrop, and Peter Sargent constituted the remainder of the court.⁵⁹ Samuel Parris was consistently present for the court proceedings and, along with Thomas Putnam, took notes on the proceedings.⁶⁰ The names of the grand jury are lost to history save the foreman, John Ruck.⁶¹ Like the accusers, the overseers of the trials had close connections to either Samuel Parris, Salem Village, or the Puritan church as covenanted members.

⁵⁶ Weir, 7.

⁵⁷ Boyer, 6–7.

⁵⁸ Hill, 6; Boyer, 7.

⁵⁹ Hill, 155; Saltonstall resigned from his post after the first court session resulted in the hanging of Bridget Bishop. Boyer, 9.

⁶⁰ Roach, *Six Women of Salem*, 211–212.

⁶¹ Roach, *Six Women of Salem*, 228.

Stark's Conditions Applied to the Salem Witch Trials

Rodney Stark proposed a three-fold formula that is present in every documented account of witch-hunts in the 16th and 17th centuries.⁶² The first is the response of the culture to divination. According to Stark, some form of magic has been practiced in every documented human society. The variable is not whether magical practices were present in any given society but rather how the given culture responded to it. Additionally, the likelihood of a witch-hunt is increased if the given society is probable to relate magic to satanism.⁶³

The second factor is weak governance. In every case, witch-hunts occurred in areas where small centralized governments allowed their elites to impose their particular brand of standards.⁶⁴ Stark noted that Switzerland and Germany, which both experienced political upheaval in the 16th and 17th centuries, accounted for much of the documented witch-hunts in Europe. More politically stable countries such as France, England, Spain, and Italy experienced comparatively low accusations of witchcraft.⁶⁵

The third and final factor is religious conflict which causes a low tolerance for nonconformity to societal norms.⁶⁶ Those who do not meet the sociopolitical standards of the state are more likely to be ostracized and mistreated. Despite the presence of religious conflict in

⁶² Stark observed that an increase of witch-hunting occurred after the Protestant Reformation and in areas where the Protestant church flourished, a fact that he does not consider a coincidence. Stark, 250–255.

⁶³ Stark, 254

⁶⁴ Stark, 254.

⁶⁵ In the 14th and 15th centuries, Switzerland disproportionately accounted for 29% of all documented witch trials with a total of 122. In the same period, Spain documented only 2. Stark, 252–254.

⁶⁶ Stark, 255; Demos noted that persons accused of witchcraft possessed eccentricities or conspicuous anti-social tendencies. Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," 257.

Italy and Spain during the period of The Inquisition (1220–1834), Stark noted that the existence of a strong government prevented the development of witch-hunts.⁶⁷

According to Stark's research, no one of the listed factors alone has led to a witch-hunt.⁶⁸ The presence of the practice of magic or even demonic worship never caused a witch-hunt separate from a weak government and religious conflict. The same can be said for any arrangement of these components. Stark noted that the presence of all three characteristics does not guarantee a witch-hunt will transpire, but rather that all three factors are present in places where a witch-hunt did occur.⁶⁹ Stark summed up his factors thusly:

The frequency and intensity of witch-hunting will have been highest where and when: (1) Serious efforts were made to *suppress* magic and sorcery, and there was a high probability that *satanism would be imputed* to such activities, and (2) there was substantial *conflict* among religious groups representing credible threats to one another's *institutional power*, causing the withdrawal of tolerance for religious nonconformity, and (3) *weak* central ecclesiastical and/or political *governance* prevented "national" elites from *curtaining local enthusiasms*.⁷⁰

All three of the societal conditions described in Stark's formula are present in events that occurred in Salem in 1692.

The Response to Magic in Salem

In 17th-century Salem, magic and witchcraft were considered a pact with Satan.⁷¹ In this strict Reformed society, no weightier accusation could be made. In fact, the only condemnable

⁶⁷ Stark, 254.

⁶⁸ Stark, 254–255.

⁶⁹ Stark, 255.

⁷⁰ Stark, 255.

⁷¹ Gevitz, 10.

evidence for witchcraft was for the accused to confess to conferring with the devil.⁷² The Puritans viewed the otherworldly as a real and imminent threat. Though they championed scientific investigation and the practice of medicine, they considered afflictions to be of supernatural causes.⁷³ Thus, the fits experienced by Betty Parris and the others were diagnosed as a witch's curse rather than a physical malady.

Samuel Parris's records reveal that his sermons in the four months that immediately preceded the trials were wrought with warnings of Satan's work in Salem. According to Ray, Parris had "translated opposition to his ministry into a demonic attack on the new covenant."⁷⁴ Parris's preaching likely attributed to the hysteria surrounding witchcraft in the settlement.

Witchcraft accusations were not unprecedented in Massachusetts nor in Salem. John Putnam Demos reported over seventy documented accusations of witchcraft in Massachusetts prior to 1692. The earliest witchcraft trial that resulted in an execution was that of Elizabeth Kendall in 1647 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In Salem, Edith Crawford was accused of witchcraft in 1667 and Bridget Oliver was put on trial for witchcraft in 1680.⁷⁵

Many of the hundreds accused of witchcraft in 1692 plead guilty because of the hysteria surrounding the trials. Due to the Puritan response to witchcraft, an accused individual's

⁷² Gevitz, 10; Boyer, 9–21.

⁷³ "In Puritan New England, all afflictions were seen ultimately as the result of supernatural forces. It was God's will that human should suffer for their sins. Thus, when ill, the sick were expected to think about their moral lapses or inadequacies, bear their afflictions with grace, learn the lesson that God was teaching them, and, if they recovered, walk a straighter path. Ministers and health care practitioners ideally played complimentary roles. The clergy would help the patient by using spiritual means to treat the 'disease of the soul,' while health care practitioners, calling on God's grace to bless their efforts, would employ material agents to treat physical complaints." Gevitz, 10.

⁷⁴ Ray, 79.

⁷⁵ Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 401–409.

reputation was in shambles and there was little to no chance of social recovery.⁷⁶ Those who denied their charges were held until they confessed while some who confessed were allowed to live. In essence, confession of guilt was the only possible course for innocent people to survive their accusation.⁷⁷

Salem's Weak Government

Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum noted that the trials were the result of “a convergence of a specific and unlikely combination of historical circumstances at this particular time and place.”⁷⁸ Due to the lack of a charter and established civil leadership in Salem Village, accusations of the crime of witchcraft occurred at a time when local government was “nearly immobilized.”⁷⁹ Salem Village was a fledgling community that had only recently received its independence from Salem Town. Stark stated that witch trials would have been squashed under the rule of large governing bodies such as the British Empire. Witch-hunts primarily occurred in “political vacuums” in which local magistrates were allowed to exercise authority without the scrutiny of a larger governing entity.⁸⁰ Because civil leaders in Salem Town and nearby cities

⁷⁶ The fortunes of all involved, accusers and accused, were affected by the trials. Many children, including Abigail Williams and Mercy Lewis, were orphaned. Elizabeth Hubbard lived as a servant in her uncle's household. Tituba was never allowed freedom from slavery. Families lost their wealth and reputation. Thomas and Ann Putnam were denied their rightful patrimony. Samuel Parris did not receive inheritance from his father's lands in Barbados. Even the city itself, Salem, lost its reputation in the region and ceased to be the bustling community that it was before 1692. Hill, 217.

⁷⁷ In 1709, Ann Putnam returned to Salem church to publicly apologize for her role in the deaths of innocent people. She stated that the event was “a great delusion of Satan.” Hill, 228.

⁷⁸ Boyer, 107.

⁷⁹ Boyer, 7.

⁸⁰ Stark, 251.

such as Boston did not take more decisive action, the trials were allowed to continue as they occurred.⁸¹ Overseas, the frequent conflict and shifting of power distracted England from what was occurring in the New World.⁸²

Boyer and Nissenbaum conjectured that, had it been a rural community distanced from Salem Town, Salem Village may have implemented more immediate civil stability. Additionally, if Salem Village had been granted its independence when it was initially founded in 1672, the community may have developed stronger institutions. Alternatively, if Salem Village had remained “Salem Farms”, a region of Salem Town, it never would have had its own meetinghouse, civil representatives, or minister.⁸³ Instead, Salem consisted of a weak, unstable governmental system that was unable to quell the uprising that resulted from accusations of witchcraft within its borders.

Religious Conflict in Salem

At the time of the trials, Salem found itself at the center of religious controversy both inside and out. Political and religious tensions raged throughout the 1600s. Demos detailed the religious tensions that plagued New England during the 17th century: the Antinomian Controversy (1636–37), the “remonstrance” of Robert Cohen and his allies and the debate over New England government (1646), the split of the Hartford church (1650s), disputes over heresy with Quakers (1660–61) and Anabaptists (1665–68), and localized disagreements concerning

⁸¹ Boyer 108.

⁸² T. H. Breen, *Puritans and Adventurers: Change and Persistence in Early America*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1980), 82–83.

⁸³ Boyer, 107–109.

Presbyterianism (late 1660s). The HWC was the final major conflict to occur in the Puritan world that century, however tensions were compounded by outside conflicts with Native Americans and Englishmen.⁸⁴

In Salem, tensions ran high due to controversy surrounding the pastorate of Samuel Parris. In 1691, protests regarding Parris's position led to the halt of his salary and the stunted growth of the church. The opposition to Parris and the new church covenant was a response to the restrictive membership requirements and Parris's refusal to implement the HWC. In response, Parris berated the congregation for their actions which only added to the stress. Parris warned his parishioners that Satan was actively working to disrupt and corrupt the ministry of the church.⁸⁵ It was in the midst of such turmoil that Parris's daughter and niece began having fits, which he attributed to physical manifestations of the tension surrounding the church in Salem.⁸⁶

Conclusion

The thesis of this paper assumed that the Salem Witch Trials were exacerbated by the implementation of the HWC which allowed non-regenerate Christians access to membership in the Puritan church, thus corrupting the church and allowing the atrocities endured. In reality the HWC was not implemented in Salem Village church where the trials took place. Therefore, the HWC was not a direct cause of the trials but rather one among many religious controversies that surrounded Salem and the Puritan church at the time. The HWC was one factor among many that resulted in a witch-hunt in Salem Village just prior to the turn of the 18th century.

⁸⁴ Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 379–381.

⁸⁵ Ray, 69–71.

⁸⁶ Ray, 69–71.

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