Pens not Panic: The Petitions of the Salem Witch Trials

[00:00:00]

**Sarah Jack:** I petition your honors not for my own life, for I know I must die, and my appointed time is set, but the Lord he knows it is, that if it be possible, no more innocent blood may be shed, which undoubtedly cannot be avoided in the way and course you go in, I question not but your honors does to the utmost of your powers in the discovery and detecting of witchcraft and witches and would not be guilty of innocent blood for the world, but by my own innocency, I know you are in the wrong way. The Lord in his infinite mercy direct you in this great work, if it be his blessed will that no more innocent blood be shed.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Those powerful words came from a petition written by Mary Esty.

Welcome to The Thing About Salem. I'm Josh Hutchinson.

**Sarah Jack:** And I'm Sarah Jack.

**Josh Hutchinson:** During the Salem Witch Trials, dozens of petitions were submitted [00:01:00] that still exist today in Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt for all of us to read.

In this place and time, a petition was one of the few ways an accused person could defend themself.

The first known petition of the Salem Witch Trials was submitted on an unknown date between March 23rd and May 14th,testifying to the innocence of Rebecca Nurse.

And then weeks passed before the next petition appeared at the end of June, June 25th.

In all, only seven still-existing petitions were submitted through August of 1692.

By the time we get to September 1692, there are six more petitions and more through fall and winter, as people felt like they needed to use their voices to advocate. And the last petition that we have in Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt was dated March 28th, [00:02:00] 1750.

And here's a very recent date.On January 16th, 2025, Representative Steven Owens submitted House Bill 1927, which contains a provision to take away the disgrace from all accused of witchcraft across Massachusetts, including at Salem.

And that was in response to a petition, which you can sign at change.org/witchtrials.

**Sarah Jack:** These petitions were variously sent to the Court of Oyer and Terminer, the General Court, ministers, or Governor Phips.

**Josh Hutchinson:** And the petitioners asked for a wide variety of things. Some of these petitions were character witness testimonies. You had multiple petitions vouching for the good character of accused individuals like Rebecca Nurse, Mary Bradbury, and John and Elizabeth Proctor.

**Sarah Jack:** They emphasized the accused's [00:03:00] Christian behavior, community standing, and lack of any previous suspicion.

**Josh Hutchinson:** A pair of these character witness petitions were submitted to support John and Elizabeth Proctor. The first one was dated August 5th, and it was signed by 21 neighbors, who said that they had never heard of any accusations of witchcraft against the Proctors and that the Proctors had lived a good life.

**Sarah Jack:** And in that second one, inhabitants of Ipswich, where John was from, the petition was dated also August 5th. The neighbors say that the devil may be impersonating the Proctors.

 If you've listened to our previous episodes, we've discussed the spectral impersonation that the community was trying to evaluate. Is this happening?The petition went on to say God permits Satan to impersonate innocent people, and the tempting of Job and the abuse of [00:04:00] Samuel is evidence of that in the Old Testament.

**Josh Hutchinson:** And the neighbors said that they were compelled by charity to do whatever they could to establish the innocence of their neighbors, the Proctors.

**Sarah Jack:** They even saidthere's no abominable wickedness known of the proctors. Witchcraft accusations, you know, it's an abominable wickedness that people are being accused of, and the neighbors are saying, no, no, no, that that's not the proctors. And they've only had minor sins like everybody else.

**Josh Hutchinson:** And the Proctors, they're totally innocent of witchcraft. And John was raised among these neighbors in Ipswich by religious parents, and this petition was signed by 32 men.

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**Sarah Jack:** Another type of petition we wanna tell you about areprocedural challenge petitions.

**Josh Hutchinson:** One of these petitions came from a Baptist minister named William Milborne, who submitted this June 25th [00:05:00] petition questioning the validity of the spectral evidence that we've been talking about.

**Sarah Jack:** And spectral evidence, again, is where witnesses claim the accused appeared to them in dreams or in visions causing harm to them. Everyone knew it was impossible to verify if the specters were the accused or the devil. They weren't really worrying about whether the accused were seeing specters. That wasn't in question.

**Josh Hutchinson:** In this petition, William Milborne said,

**Sarah Jack:** "Therefore, request that the validity of specter testimony may be weighed in the balance of your grace and solid judgments, it being the womb that hath brought forth inextricable damage and misery to this province."

 This act of public dissent landed him in jail.

**Josh Hutchinson:** So this petition really represents an early example of legal, religious criticism of witch trial evidence procedures in [00:06:00] Massachusetts Bay Colony at the end of the 17th century.

**Sarah Jack:** And a number of the petitions were personal pleas written while the accused were in prison. One of these was a petition that Ann Pudeator wrote challenging the false testimony against her.

Ann Pudeator contested the credibility and accuracy of witness statements, and she did argue that accusers had provided inconsistent or fabricated testimony, which we've all read and talked about.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Ann was first accused as a witch on May 12th, 1692, and sadly she was executed September 22nd, along with Mary Esty and six others.

**Sarah Jack:** This petition represents an attempt to counter the accusations through legal challenge rather than confession.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Another major form of [00:07:00] petition was the family advocacy petition, which was very prominent in the fall and winter of 1692. You had multiple petitions come in from husbands, children, parents seeking the release of family members from terrible jail conditions.

**Sarah Jack:** On October 12th, there was a petition of John Osgood Sr., John Fry, John Marston for their wives and daughters. It was signed by eight men, and they say they are distressed by the distressed conditions of their distressed loved ones. It's a triple distress.

**Josh Hutchinson:** In the petition, they emphasize the needs of their loved ones in the jails. They need food to stave off starvation, and they need warmth in the coming winter so they don't freeze to death in these unheated jails.

**Sarah Jack:** This was during a period of high tax burdens and public debt, and they were [00:08:00] put to great personal expense to care for their incarcerated family members.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Families had to bring in fresh clothing, straw for bedding, blankets, better food than what the jails were serving, and they had to pay the jail fees, and some of them struggled to afford those.

The men who wrote this petition, they asked for their family members, who they described as being approved as penitent confessors, to be released on bond and placed in the supervision of their husbands or fathers until their next court date.

**Sarah Jack:** Community petitions are well known. We know the signatures of the community who signed to support Rebecca Nurse. It's on her monument at the Homestead. And also there were community petitions from Andover and Ipswich.

**Josh Hutchinson:** On October 18th, 1692, a petition was filed by [00:09:00] 26 Andover men concerning townspeople accused of witchcraft. So these weren't necessarily their own family members, it was just everybody in their community that they wanted to speak up about.

And so this was signed by both of the Andover ministers, Thomas Barnard and Francis Dane, as well as 24 other prominent Andover men. There were community leaders signing this, people with a lot of weight.

**Sarah Jack:** And those 26 men call the accusers distempered. I think that's worth noting.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Yeah, because, they're saying that they're not thinking clearly, and they shouldn't be trusted.But the men say that while they're not defending any people who are actually guilty of witchcraft, so they're saying that witchcraft is real, we acknowledge that, but we're not defending the people who are really guilty, but we believe that [00:10:00] these people from Andover have been misrepresented and that they need speaking up for.

**Sarah Jack:** They also go on to blame the devil, like many leaders do during this time. Duringthe actual trials and after, when they're in the aftermath of the trials trying to come to terms with what has happened, the devil is to blame and they say in this petition, we know not who can think himself safe if the accusations of children and others who are under a diabolical influence shall be received against persons of good fame.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Wow. So the afflicted children and the other accusers, they're not just distempered, they're diabolically being manipulated to say these things that they're saying.In addition to themselves, the Andover menknew of several honorable and worthy men of other places whose names were also tarnished [00:11:00] by accusations of afflicted people in Andover. And so they asked the court to consider their low and distressed estate.

**Sarah Jack:** Pardon Request Petitions, it's interesting that we would call them that, since here in the US when we're seeking to clear names of the accused now in 2025, we're not seeking a pardon, we're seeking an exoneration. But these were pardon requests.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Abigail Faulkner and Rebecca Eames, they were seeking pardons. Eames explicitly recanted her forced confession.

**Sarah Jack:** In December, four months after her arrest, Faulkner petitioned the governor pleading for clemency. She explained that her husband was an invalid, and though his condition had been stable, her arrest caused him to suffer a relapse, leaving her children with no caretaker and "little or nothing to subsist on." He granted her request.

**Josh Hutchinson:** [00:12:00] Though released, her name was not cleared at that time, so she kept petitioning the court, and in 1703,

**Sarah Jack:** a bill reversing the attainders of Abigail Faulkner, Elizabeth Proctor, and Sarah Wardwell was passed by the Massachusetts General Court. This cleared their names, it reversed and nullified the charges against them.

And those were three women who were convicted who could have been hanged if the hanging hadn't stopped. A 1711 bill for reversals of attainder cleared another 21 people who had been convicted of witchcraft, and it cleared Abigail Faulkner a second time.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Yeah, she got double covered so she's extra clear. And families and survivors petitioned for restitution payments in the year 1709 through 1711. Many received meager financial payouts in 1712.

**Sarah Jack:** As mentioned earlier, families of [00:13:00] those accused of witchcraft continued to fight for reparations as late as 1750. Reverend George Burroughs' and Philip English's families were particularly active during that period.

**Josh Hutchinson:** And the petition story isn't over just yet. Coming to the 20th century, in the 1950s, a petitioner asked the Massachusetts General Court to reverse the attainder of Ann Pudeator, and the legislature granted this petition, included Ann Pudeator and, quote, "certain other persons," which were not named.

**Sarah Jack:** Then, in response to a 2001 petition, the General Court cleared the names of Bridget Bishop, Susannah Martin, Alice Parker, Margaret Scott, and Wilmot Redd.

**Josh Hutchinson:** And three years ago, 2022, the legislature cleared Elizabeth Johnson Jr., who was the last of those convicted in Salem [00:14:00] to be cleared. This followed a petition and letter writing campaign by middle school students from North Andover, Massachusetts.

**Sarah Jack:** And a bill is under consideration by the legislature right now to clear the names of all accused of witchcraft in Massachusetts ever, like the eight who are convicted in Boston, who have never had their names cleared.

**Josh Hutchinson:** So again, go to change.org/witchtrials to show your support by signing the petition.

**Sarah Jack:** Come have more fun with us on Patreon.

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