The Salem Witch Trials: TL;DR Edition

**Josh Hutchinson:** [00:00:00]

Picture this. You're in your small farming village of about 550 people in 1692. When you have an argument with your neighbor, it goes back and forth and towards the end you say some harsh words saying, the devil take you away from me, and your neighbor's cow, a month later, stops giving milk. So what happens in this kind of scenario?

Well, in 1692 Salem, you could have been accused of flying through the night to bewitch the cow to stop it giving milk because you had this little tussle with your neighbor and you're just such an angry person. So this was real scenarios in the Salem Witch trials 1692 and 1693.

**Sarah Jack:** Welcome to *The Thing About Salem*. I'm Josh Hutchinson.

I'm Sarah Jack. We are descendants of families who experienced the Salem Witch trials. What was the Salem [00:01:00] Witch-Hunt?

**Josh Hutchinson:** Well, the Salem Witch Trials were the largest, most infamous group of witchcraft prosecutions in what is now the United States. What happened in Massachusetts in 1692 and 1693 is considered to be a witch panic. It was a witch-hunt that grew so large so quickly that the usual rules and the usual suspects were disregarded.

In between February 1692 and May 1693, at least 156 individuals were formally accused of witchcraft and many others were named but not prosecuted. This prosecution resulted in 25 deaths at the least. There were 19 innocent victims hanged, one man was pressed to death with heavy stones for refusing to stand trial, and at least five individuals died in jail due to the harsh [00:02:00] conditions.

Including an infant child.

What began in the small farming community that we mentioned at the beginning of the episode, Salem Village, with its population of 500 to 550 people spread to involve suspects from 25 different communities, stretching from Boston in the South, north to Wells, Maine.

**Sarah Jack:** The Salem Witch Trials was New England's largest witch-hunt, exceeding the total from all prior witch trials in New England, which included Boston and Hartford, Connecticut, witch trials and others. Salem was one of the least typical hunts in England or New England, as victims were accused indiscriminately and the jails were full of unexpected alleged witches. While called the Salem Witch-Hunt, prosecution was led by men from Boston, and the witch trials included [00:03:00] accusations for Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine.

**Josh Hutchinson:** In January, 1692, strange symptoms began in the household of minister Samuel Parris in the center of Salem Village, his daughter Betty, who was about nine years old, and his niece Abigail Williams, who in real life was around 11, started behaving very strangely. They were barking, quacking, hiding under tables, attempting to walk into fireplaces or wells.

**Sarah Jack:** William Griggs, the local doctor, came to check on the girls to determine what is going on here. He concluded they were under an evil hand, implying diabolical influence. That's influence of the devil. Then there was an incident involving a neighbor, Mary Sibley. Reverend Parris and his wife were gone.

Tituba, [00:04:00] the enslaved servant of the Parris household, would've been taking care of the girls. And we know from her testimony that she was very concerned and upset about the state they were in. So Mary Sibley, the neighbor, wanted to help out, and so she came over and she instructed Tituba and her husband, John Indian, to make a witch cake. And that cake would help identify who is bewitching these girls. Later, Mary Sibley was reprimanded in church by Samuel Parris. He condemned this folk magic use, because

**Josh Hutchinson:** using folk magic to identify who is working with the devil was considered a dangerous action.

**Sarah Jack:** And after the baking of the witch cake, the girls who were afflicted, Betty and Abigail, did begin to identify witches. They started to name the [00:05:00] names. There were two other afflicted girls by this point, also Ann Putnam Jr. and Elizabeth Hubbard, and between these four afflicted girls, they accused Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborne of witchcraft And then on March 1st, the three women were arrested. Tituba's. testimony when she was examined and interrogated in the Salem Village meeting house on March 1st, 1692 really confirmed a lot of the fears in the community, and also got them to think about what if there are more than these three people who are committing witchcraft in our community. Sarah Osborne was a typical suspect, because she had transgressed social norms by marrying a younger indentured servant and failing to attend Sunday meetings, [00:06:00] even though that she expressed that was due to her health.

And Sarah Good was a usual suspect, because she was an impoverished woman who went door to door asking for help to take care of herself and her children.

That fits into your stereotypical lineup of who might be a witch in the community. But with Salem, things got so out of hand that other people started to get accused, as well,

who weren't so typical.

Some of those unexpected individuals were church members, like Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse. And 4-year-old Dorothy Good. Sarah Good, we talked about her. She was arrested, but then so was her 4-year-old daughter.

**Josh Hutchinson:** These individuals were atypical, because in a normal witch trial situation, you'd be looking at [00:07:00] people on the outside of society, people who were not formal members of the church, so Martha Cory and Rebecca Nurse were shocking selections to be accused.

And then the 4-year-old, Dorothy Good, was just so out of the normal age range of people you'd expect to be harming you. That of course that was also very shocking andamazing that she was caught up in this, and they treated her so badly, making very small shackles for her little, tiny wrists and chaining her up in a dungeon for months and months and months.

**Sarah Jack:** One of the ways that they got to that state was because of the role of unreasonable evidence. If you look back to the original examinations with Tituba, some of the story that she was [00:08:00] pressed to share, some of the things that she used to identify witches

it wasn't enough to pursue a conviction in previous cases in other communities in earlier years.

There's some pretty wild stories of witch specters.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Yeah, I had this uncle, Benjamin Hutchinson. He's my ninth great grand uncle from Salem Village, and he got involved in some of these spectral accusations. In one case, Abigail Williams told him, Hey, look over there. There's George Burroughs, the minister from Maine, his specter over there, which is his shape, that is to say basically his spirit left from his body while his body's somewhere else, in this case in Maine. He's in Salem Village, Massachusetts, supposedly [00:09:00] tormenting these afflicted children, andwhat does Benjamin Hutchinson do? He unsheaths his rapier and just starts swinging and stabbing and slashing and hacking, and Abigail's like, oh, you got him. You got him.

**Sarah Jack:**

**Josh Hutchinson:** The specters were so feared, because the specters were in league with Satan. And according to the beliefs of the Massachusetts colonists and generally European people of the time, witches entered into a diabolical pact to get their powers. They signed a contract with Satan, so all throughout the Salem Witch Trials, you have references to the devil's book and people signing or making their mark in the Devil's book, and this is part of this satanic pact, and it's all part of this vast conspiracy of the devil and the witches and the devil's other allies to [00:10:00] defeat Massachusetts and this Puritan experiment. According to testimony that's given, the devils and witches want to tear down Christ's church in Massachusetts and raise up the devil's kingdom in its place. So this is a very fundamental, existential threat to society, civil order, and church.

**Sarah Jack:** And in previous New England Witch trials, afflicted girls weren't the reverend's children. This like started in the home of the minister.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Yes, it was a direct assault on the faith, and Massachusetts being founded as a colony largely to practice this faith. This is devastating.

**Sarah Jack:** The other thing that is really devastating about the Salem witch-hunt is the extent of the suffering [00:11:00] and the casualties. There as we said were 19 convicted alleged witches who were executed, but there was lots of other suffering. During the examinations, there was suffering. They checked for witches teats and devil marks on the bodies of the women.

**Josh Hutchinson:** The women and men and children that were accused were interrogated, grilled so hard and intensely that that's why you get these confessions. It's people desperate to end badgering, to be released from this suffering, and get out of these horrible jails.

And people in the families of the accused were having to travel miles and [00:12:00] miles and miles every week, as often as they could, leaving their farms and businesses behind, to visit their relatives, because they needed food and clothing and bedding, and these things weren't provided by the jails. So the suffering just goes on through, ripples through every family and friend and loved one that you have if you're accused. It wasn't just these 156 accused that were even paying a price. It's their families and friends and neighbors.

By the end of September in 1692, 4 rounds of hangings had occurred and the jails still remained overcrowded with people accused of witchcraft. As summer became fall, opposition to the witch trials mounted through citizen petitions, [00:13:00] letters, sermons, and pamphlets. Many people cautiously but anonymously spoke out, while others risked putting their names on paper to voice their concerns and went to jail for it.

Eventually, prominent citizens, including the minister Increase Mather, urged caution,leading to changes in how cases were prosecuted later on in 1693. In 1692, 27 of the 27 people who were tried were convicted. That's a hundred percent conviction rate. Unprecedented.

But in 1693, after spectral evidence was dropped, only three people were found guilty out of over 50 trials, and none of these last three were executed. They were reprieved by the governor with everyone else who had been convicted. So no executions occurred in 1693, and by the end of the year, the jails were clear.[00:14:00]

**Sarah Jack:** And is that because people started confessing?

**Josh Hutchinson:** No confessing didn't save lives. Confessors were basically just kept alive long enough to testify against other suspects, but their own trials and executions were planned. A group of confessors was indeed convicted and condemned in September 1692. However, their executions were postponed until after the non-confessors, the people who had maintained their innocence throughout, they were executed September 22nd, the last eight of them. A death warrant was actually issued for these confessors, but the governor stepped in at the last minute and reprieved them all.

**Sarah Jack:** Over 1400 people are named in the Salem Witch-Hunt records. That has led to tens of millions of descendants today, and many discover they're related to both accused [00:15:00] and accusers.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Today, one way that we remember the Salem Witch trials is through physical memorials.

There's also a pop culture and artistic legacy, the Crucible, film, fantasy books, it's endless.

And as we think about the legacy of the Salem Witch Trails, we should also think about what lessons we can take to apply to our daily lives now from these witch-hunt, because we don'twant this to happen again. We see that panics do happen from time to time because fear becomes prevalent in our communities. So be the voice of reason in times of fear and panic.

**Sarah Jack:** Treat every human with dignity and respect, especially in our differences.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Don't rush to judgment, and seek to [00:16:00] understand different backgrounds or beliefs.

**Sarah Jack:** The patterns of blame and scapegoating are all around us in our modern world. We have to take individual action and lead by example to stop this pattern.

**Josh Hutchinson:** And finally, if you see your neighbor, or their cow, fly by on or off a broom this week, put down your rotten milk and write that fantasy novel you've been putting off.

**Sarah Jack:** Come see us on Patreon and chat with us about the Salem Witch Trials.