Whatcha got to hide, Salem? The Conspiracy to Cover up the Salem Witch Trials

[00:00:00]

**Josh Hutchinson:**

When I came home, I found many persons in a strange ferment of dissatisfaction, which was increased by some hot spirits that blew up the flame. But on inquiry into the matter, I found that the devil had taken upon him the name and shape of several persons who were doubtless innocent, and to my certain knowledge, of good reputation, for which cause I have now forbidden the committing of any more that shall be accused without unavoidable necessity. And those that have been committed, I would shelter from any proceedings against them wherein there may be the least suspicion of any wrong to be done unto the innocent. I would also wait for any particular directions or commands, if their majesties please to give me any, for the fuller ordering this perplexed affair. I have also put a stop to the printing of any discourses, one way or the other that may increase the needless disputes of [00:01:00] people upon this occasion, because I saw a likelihood of kindling an inextinguishable flame, if I should admit any public and open contests. Governor Sir William Phips, October 12th 1692.

Letter to the Privy Council in London. Welcome back to *The Thing About Salem*. I'm Josh Hutchinson.

**Sarah Jack:** And I'm Sarah Jack. Our ancestors had to move on after the Salem Witch Trials, but as Governor Phips predicted, an inextinguishable flame had been kindled, and that flame still burns today. Do you see it? Do you feel it's heat?

**Josh Hutchinson:** So, here we are in Massachusetts. It's October, 1692. The colony has just executed 20 people based on spectral evidence. The governor has shut everything down, and suddenly [00:02:00] everyone's looking around like, what now?

**Sarah Jack:** Over 150 people have been crammed into horrible jail conditions.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Let's talk about. Other events of October, 1692. GovernPhipspps had stopped the trials. He banned unauthorized books, but guess who gets to publish, Cotton Mather and Increase Mather.

**Sarah Jack:** Cotton rushes out his publication. You know the title, Wonders of the Invisible World, the official we did nothing wrong account defending the trials.

**Josh Hutchinson:** In *Wonders of the Invisible World*, he wrote, "I have indeed set myself to countermine the whole plot of the devil against New England in every branch of it, as far as one of my darkness can comprehend such a work of [00:03:00] darkness."

Meanwhile, Cotton's father, Increase Mather, who ministers with them at the same church in Boston. They.

**Sarah Jack:** They

**Josh Hutchinson:** Both published these books in October, 1692, Increase's book is called *Cases of Conscience* and he argues against spectral evidence while Cotton Mather defends the use of spectral evidence.

and yet, in their books, they claim that they agree with each other.

So, Increase Mather, in *Cases of Conscience*, one of the things that he says is, "the same God who hath said, 'thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' hath also said, 'at the mouth of two witnesses or three witnesses shall he that is worthy of death be put to death, but at the mouth of one witness, he shall not be put to death.'"

**Sarah Jack:** But do they really get the last [00:04:00] word? Did that extinguish the flame that Phips wanted stomped out?

**Josh Hutchinson:** There was one other narrative that did get out in October 1692. It was written anonymously by the Reverend Samuel Willard, also of Boston, but he published it under an imprint that said it was printed in Philadelphia.

So he is both not putting his own name on it, it's coming out in Philadelphia, all to get around this publication ban and any repercussions against him because Massachusetts had prosecuted for some writings.

for "scandalous and seditious" writings criticizing the court proceedings. So we know that any blowback against what the court was doing did actually [00:05:00] result in penalties, fines, and jail time. So it was dangerous to try to skirt this publication.

But,

**Sarah Jack:** Samuel Willard writes this book, it's called *Some Miscellany Observations on our Present Debates Respecting Witchcrafts, in a Dialogue between S and B*, which everyone believes stand for Salem and Boston, and he credits it, he says it's written by P.E. and J.A., so Philip English and John Alden, who had escaped from the witch trials and gone, fled to New York. So it's all wrapped up in this mystery. He's really hiding his name behind a number of layers here. And then there's somebody who has given us a lot of details and he started openly [00:06:00] confronting Cotton Mathers through correspondence.

**Josh Hutchinson:** They had a furious exchange of letters, which Robert Calef printed in his book, *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, which here,

*More Wonders of the Invisible World* is a play on the title of Cotton Mather's work *Wonders of the Invisible World*, suggesting that here's some more information about the Salem Witch trials.

**Sarah Jack:** In it, he says, "and now 19 persons have been hanged and one pressed to death, and eight more condemned, in all 20 and 8 of which above a third part were members of some of the churches in New England and more than half of them of a good conversation in general and not one cleared.About 50 having confessed themselves to be witches, of which not one [00:07:00] executed. Above 150 in prison and above 200 more accused."

**Josh Hutchinson:** Another guy who's really trusted here, because he witnessed a lot of the witch trial activity firsthand is the minister from Beverly, Massachusetts, John Hale. He's one of the ones who, Samuel Parris called in very early before any witchcraft accusations were even made to come and pray for Betty Parris and Abigail Williams when they were afflicted. And so he's involved, he, he testifies against Dorcas Hoar. He's in the trials and involved with them. And then in the fall, supposedly his wife got accused of witchcraft and so that caused him to reconsider. [00:08:00] And so he spent years, five years, actually, reconsidering the Witch trials and thinking it all through, what it meant, how it went wrong. And he challenges the official narrative with this book. It's written in 1697. It's noteworthy that it's not published in Boston until 1702, which is after William Stoughton had died in July, 1701. So he's the primary cheerleader for the Salem Witch trials, basically, the former chief justice of the court. And by the way, Governor Phips had died in 1695, so they're both out of the way. And now it's finally time to publish *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft* by Beverly minister John Hale.

**Sarah Jack:** It's apparent the community was really questioning everything that they had [00:09:00] just experienced and witnessed. Yeah,

**Josh Hutchinson:** And another way that we know that people were questioning it is through some public acts of contrition. You might call them apologies. You might say that maybe they're not the most sincere apologies, but they are apologies and on January 14th, 1697, there is a fast day being held all across Massachusetts, partly in response to the late troubles with the witch trials, because things have really gone badly for Massachusetts the last five years since they tried all these witches and well, maybe one thing is responsible for the other, so they're gonna have a fast day. Judge Sewall stands up in his church. He hands a note to minister Samuel Willard, [00:10:00] who we've met before, and Samuel Willard reads this apology aloud while Judge Sewall stands there under the gaze of all of his fellow congregants, and he takes responsibility on himself. He doesn't blame anybody else. He takes responsibility for his role in the witch trials.

**Sarah Jack:** And we know he was tormented becausethere is a transcription of magistrate Sewall's diary. There's a lot of really great stories in there and a lot of details about life, and one of the things that he expresses is having nightmares.

**Josh Hutchinson:** And Robert Calef reports that several jurors signed statements saying they were sadly deluded and mistaken, asking for forgiveness from families in the community.

The apologies continued, or at least there was one more in the 18th century. [00:11:00] August 25th, 1706, Ann Putnam Jr. Apologized in church. She probably stood in front of the congregation while the new minister of Salem Village, Joseph Green, read what she said, but here she is, when the witch trials were happening, she was 12. Now she's about 26, and she's standing before her whole congregation saying that she desires to lie in the dust and take the blame and the shame of it.

**Sarah Jack:** Continuing on into the 18th century, the legal reckoning opens.

**Josh Hutchinson:** In 1703 Massachusetts reversed the attainders and the convictions of three women out of the 30 people who had been convicted, and so the rest are still waiting, but 1711 comes around and finally the General Court of Massachusetts takes some [00:12:00] actions, but they sound like the jurors, they sound like Ann Putnam Jr. They're saying that the trials were caused by delusion that yes, there were innocent victims but it was a delusion of Satan that caused that to happen. They do reverse convictions and attainders.

And then in 1712, the general court paid out, restitution to the individuals, many of them, not all, who had family members killed or who had survived being convicted, like Elizabeth Proctor had survived because of her pregnancy, but she was convicted and still lived under this attainder, which was basically legal death.

And this bill, this reversal of [00:13:00] Attainder in 1711, it didn't include everybody who had been convicted, there were several people who had to have their names cleared. In 1957, Ann Pudeator was cleared, then you had five women cleared in 2001, and finally, Elizabeth Johnson Jr. had her attained her reversed in 2022.

**Sarah Jack:** And that took a lot of work.

**Josh Hutchinson:** We've seen, pardons in Spain, we've seen a apology in Scotland, we've seen absolution in Connecticut. Those all took concerted efforts with petitions backed by thousands of signatures and justa lot of letter writing and testimony being given to push for those things to be done. And [00:14:00] as it happens, there are eight individuals who were convicted of witchcraft in Boston prior to the Salem Witch trials who have not been cleared or recognized. So there is a bill to exonerate those individuals. It's Massachusetts Bill H 1927. It was proposed by Representative Stephen Owens of Cambridge and Watertown, and it clears those eight individuals and it also recognizes everyone who's suffered witchcraft accusations in Massachusetts.

**Sarah Jack:** If you would like to have your name on the petition asking for this exoneration, you can go to change.org/witchtrials and show your support with the thousands of other people who are signing it.