

## Cold Case Files: Solving the Mystery of the Salem Witch Trials

*“Often the past is attractive as a means to say something about the present.” -Arthur Miller*

### Overview

Students assume the roles of detectives as they investigate the occurrences during the Salem Witch Trials. They also assume the roles of lawyers and explore the principles of American democracy through the documents and laws that are meant to protect citizens from such unjust treatment in modern history.

### Grade

10

### NC Essential Standards for American History: the Founding Principles, Civics & Economics

- FP.C&G.1.4 - Analyze the principles and ideals underlying American democracy in terms of how they promote freedom (i.e. separation of powers, rule of law, limited government, democracy, consent of the governed / individual rights –life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, self-government, representative democracy, equal opportunity, equal protection under the law, diversity, patriotism, etc.
- FP.C&G.3.4 - Explain how individual rights are protected by varieties of law (e.g., Bill of Rights, Supreme Court Decisions, constitutional law, criminal law, civil law, Tort, Administrative law, Statutory law and International law, etc.

### Essential Questions

- What Puritan beliefs and practices allowed for an event like the Salem Witch Trials to occur?
- How do concepts such as distrust, fear, mass hysteria, conformity, conspiracy, calumny, and personal integrity impact individual’s daily interactions and choices in Puritan Massachusetts?
- What values and principles of American democracy were defied during the Salem Witch Trials?
- How does the Constitution and the Bill of Rights establish protections that were violated during the Salem Witch Trials?
- How are the 1692 Salem events representative of other historical events?

### Materials

- An Unsolved Crime, handout attached
- Salem Witch Trials 6 minute Flash Movie, free download at:  
<http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schooladventures/salemwitchtrials/story/> (A computer with internet access and a projector will be needed to show the video.)
- Definition Essay on Justice, optional assignment attached

### Duration

One block period

### Procedure

#### Warm Up: Someone in the Class is CHEATING!

1. As a warm up to lead into the themes of the Salem Witch Trials, say something similar to the following to the class, making what you say seem as believable as possible:

- It has come to my attention that some individuals in this class believe cheating is an appropriate tool for performing well in class; in fact, I understand this group promotes cheating to others, encouraging them to follow their lead.
  - I suspect that many of these individuals and their new-found followers were active yesterday while taking our quiz. (Substitute any type of graded work done in the previous week of class if a quiz was not given). I also know that some people in this class were not involved at all.
  - Because I am not exactly sure who involved and who wasn't, the entire class is suspect as you all get along well and hang out together outside of class.
  - Thus, you will all come before the principal and me. If you choose to cooperate and to reveal the name(s) of the *cheaters*, then you will not be punished regardless of whether or not you, too, are a *cheater*. If you do not cooperate, the principal and I will make sure your personal record notes you as a "cheater" regardless of whether or not you are. We must have these names as cheating is a serious offense.
  - The principal and an assistant principal will arrive within five minutes. I don't want any discussion, but I want all of you to think long and hard about whether or not you are a *cheater*.
  - Remember, you can save yourself, or you can have a flawed academic record.
2. Allow the students to muddle over this dilemma for several minutes while you "wait for the principal to arrive." Then, inform students you feel you should give them some advice, and ask:
    - What are you going to do? Are you going to save yourselves and reveal the *cheaters*?
    - Are you going to sacrifice someone else's reputation for your own?
    - Are you going to stand up for yourself?"
    - Would you turn in someone you know did not cheat to save yourself?
    - Would you admit to cheating even if you didn't?
    - Would it be worth it to stand up for your personal integrity, for the principle of truth, for your morals even though doing so means your record will be forever tainted?
    - How do you feel about this situation? Is it fair that the principal and I intend to question everyone?
    - Should I have more evidence that points to just a few – the *real* cheaters?
  3. Finally, let students know that there has not been any cheating, and that they are not actually being questioned. Apologize for duping them but explain that a situation similar but much more extreme happened in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. A major difference, however, was that rather than face the risk of suspension, those accused faced torture and death.

#### **Introduction to the Salem Witch Trials**

4. Introduce students to the key events of the Salem Witch Trials:
  - In 1692, nineteen innocent men and women were charged and hanged for witchcraft in Salem Village, Massachusetts. An old man was pressed to death under a pile of stones. Four others died in jail awaiting trials.
  - These nineteen were accused by a group of adolescent girls who had previously been caught dancing and conjuring with an enslaved woman named Tituba.
  - In fear of being caught and punished, the girls began placing blame on others claiming they were bewitched by them.
  - Terror and mass hysteria spread throughout Salem as the idea of the "Devil" and witchery became all too real. Many were fearful that witchcraft would spread like wildfire, and thus, they believed the accusations and became part of the accusers.
  - Over 100 people were accused. How did a village get caught up in such madness?

5. To further peak student's interest and curiosity, play the 6 minute flash multi-media video as an overview of the Salem Witch Trials, available for free download at:  
<http://school.discovery.com/schooladventures/salemwitchtrials/story/>
6. Next, divide students into small groups, and hand out the attached *An Unsolved Crime: The Salem Witch Trials*. Give students an overview of the activity, explaining that they will be assuming the role of cold case detectives in an attempt to figure out what happened in 1692. If possible, allow each group access to the internet so that they may uncover more facts than what is provided on the handout. Refer students to the websites listed at the end of this lesson under Resources. Allow for around 20-30 minutes of student "detective work." When groups have completed their theory, allow them to present to the class and discuss:
  - Who were the key players in the Salem Witch Trials, and how did they contribute to the "plot"? (discuss figures such as: Cotton Mather, Anne Putnam, Rebecca Nurse, John Winthrop, Sarah Good, Samuel Parris, James II, John Proctor, Tituba, Elizabeth Parris, Mary Easty, Abigail Williams, Cotton Mather)
  - What are the possible explanations of what caused this occurrence? Ensure the following gets mentioned:
    - Puritan Clergy encouraged the excitement around the trials to restore their dwindling power.
    - Hysteria rose because witchcraft did exist and was practiced in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.
    - The recent appointment of a Royal Governor caused a sense of lost autonomy and political anxiety.
    - Cabin Fever spread amongst them because of the harsh New England weather.
    - Certain indigenous herbs may have caused hallucinations similar to those experienced by the girls.
    - Repressive elements of the Puritan religion and society may have contributed to this "acting out."
    - The accusations and trials were used to as a means of control (competition over land disputes, community boundaries, and the settling of family wills).
  - What role did the following themes play in the Salem Witch Trials: religious fanaticism? Scapegoats? Mass hysteria? Fear? Bandwagon mentality? Power?
  - What mentalities, in your opinion, may have led members of Salem Village to begin persecuting their neighbors and friends? Explain your answer.
  - What rational fears were at play during the Salem Witch Trials? What irrational fears were at play?
  - How might the geography of Salem have contributed to the Salem Witch Trials? (Discuss the MA cold, gray winter, and how that might have affected mood and mentalities.)
  - How might economic interests and/or the diversity of the people of Salem Town and Village have contributed?
  - Do you find these trials to be more related to economic, social, religious, or political issues? Explain.
  - In your opinion, what is the most plausible explanation of what occurred in Salem?
  - Of the key players, or other individuals you read about, who seems most culpable in the continuance of the trials and the related deaths? Explain.
7. Encourage students to begin relating the Salem Witch Trials to concepts of American democracy. Discuss:
  - Identify other historical and current examples that connect to the Salem Witch Trials. When have people similarly behaved?
  - Do you believe a similar event could happen again? Why or why not?
  - What values and principles of American democracy were defied during the Salem Witch Trials? Explain.
  - What governmental documents, amendments, laws, rights, etc. would assist to prohibit this from occurring in modern society? (i.e. freedoms of expression, search and seizure, due process, self

incrimination, rights of those accused, speedy and public trial, trial by jury, fines and punishments, etc.)

8. Next, give students the following instructions to complete in their groups (this can also be used as an individual assignment or a homework extension):
  - Your detective team is now a prosecutor's team. Imagine that you represent one of the victims from the Salem Witch Trials, who wishes to sue the town officials of Salem, MA for the injustice they experienced at their hands. Using any documents, amendments, laws, rights, etc. from past or present, formulate a case highlighting why your chosen victim was wrongfully treated. Prepare a statement, using as much evidence as you can, to prove his/ her treatment was undemocratic and unconstitutional.
9. Allow students to present their cases to the class and discuss. When the prosecuting group presents, the rest of the class can assume the role of the defense team, and attempt to challenge the evidence the prosecutors have presented. Encourage students on either side to back up statements and ideas with evidence.

### **Culminating Activities/Assessments**

- Have students write a newspaper editorial discussing what they believe truly happened in Salem and what lessons the United States can learn about democracy from the Salem Witchcraft Trials. This editorial should be at least one page and should be persuasive.
- Assign the attached Definition Essay on Justice

### **Resources**

- Famous American Trials: Salem Witchcraft Trials: <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/SALEM.HTM>
- What About Witches: <http://www.salemweb.com/guide/witches.shtml>
- The Salem Witch Trials: A Chronology of Events: <http://www.salemweb.com/memorial/>
- The Salem Witch Museum: <http://www.salemwitchmuseum.com/>
- National Geographic Interactive Lesson: <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/features/97/salem/>

## An Unsolved Crime: The Salem Witch Trials

In the colony of Massachusetts in 1692, 19 innocent men and women were hanged for witchcraft. An old man was pressed to death under heavy stones for refusing to stand trial. Four other died in jail as they awaited trial. How did a village get caught up in such madness? What really caused this hysteria in 1692?

**Your group has been hired as the “Cold Case” detective unit to try and figure out exactly what happened over 300 years ago in Salem, MA. Read the information below, which contains many important facts that may have contributed to this insanity, then create a theory stating what you believe caused the village of Salem to kill 24 people for being “witches.”**

**Read the following information that remains in the “case file,” pulling out important clues that may have lead to the witch trials occurring and getting so out of hand. Pay close attention to some of the phrases that have been underlined for you. How might these things have contributed to the paranoia and drama?**

### Evidence Set A: Life in Salem, Massachusetts, 1692

Twenty-four innocent victims lost their lives in the Salem witchcraft hysteria. How did the community of Salem let this tragedy happen? Was it simply fear and superstition, or were there other factors at work?

The events of 1692 took place during a difficult and confusing period for Salem Village. As part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Salem was under British rule. When the hysteria began, the colony was waiting for a new governor and had no charter to enforce laws. By the time the new governor, William Phips, arrived in Massachusetts, the jails were already filled with alleged witches. To make matters worse, New England towns were under attack by Native Americans and French Canadians.

Salem Village faced daily challenges closer to home as well. Most families had to support themselves, making their own clothes, planting vegetables, raising meat. Farming was often a painstaking task in the harsh climate and rough, rocky terrain—and a drought or flood could ruin a year’s harvest. An epidemic of small pox could kill a family. In a world where people saw the Devil lurking behind very misfortune, it is little wonder they believed evil spirits were at work.

**Clues you found in the above section (what did you read and infer that might have added to an environment that lead to such violence):**

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_

### Evidence Set B: Religion and Witchcraft in 1692

Church was the cornerstone of 17<sup>th</sup> century life in New England. Most people in Massachusetts were Puritans—colonists who had left England seeking religious tolerance. But the strict Puritan code was far from tolerant. It was against the law not to attend church—where men and women sat on opposite sides through long services. The Puritan lifestyle was restrained and rigid. People were expected to work hard and repress

their emotions or opinions. Individual differences were frowned upon. Even the dark, somber Puritan dress was dictated by the church.

Since Puritans were expected to live by a rigid moral code, they believed that all sins—from sleeping in church to staling food—should be punished. They also believed God would punish sinful behavior. When a neighbor would suffer misfortune, such as a sick child or a failed crop, Puritans saw it as God’s will and did not help.

Puritans also believed the Devil was as real as God. Everyone was faced with the struggle between the powers of good and evil, but colonists believed that Satan would select the weakest individuals—women, children, the insane—to carry out his work. Those who followed Satan were considered witches. Witchcraft was one of the greatest crimes a person could commit, punishable by death in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In keeping with the Puritan code of conformity, the first women to be accused of witchcraft in Salem were seen as different and as social outcasts: Tituba, a Caribbean slave; Sarah Good, a homeless beggar; and Sarah Osborne, a sickly old woman who married her servant.

Fear of magic and witchcraft was common in New England, as it had been in Europe for centuries. Over 100 alleged witches were tried and hanged in New England during the 1600s, with the hangings in 1692 Salem being the last ones in America.

**Clues you found in the above section (what did you read and infer that might have added to an environment that lead to such violence):**

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_

**Evidence Set C: Puritan Children**

In 1692, children were expected to behave under the same strict code as the adults—doing chores, attending church services, and repressing individual differences. Any show of emotion, such as excitement, fear, or anger, was discouraged and disobedience was severely punished. Children rarely played, as toys and games were scarce. Puritans saw these activities as sinful distractions.

But unlike young girls, boys had a few outlets for their imagination. They often worked as apprentices outside the home, practicing such skills as carpentry or crafts. Boys were also allowed to explore the outdoors, hunting and fishing. On the other hand, girls were expected to ten to the house, helping their mothers cook, wash, clean, and sew.

Many children learned to read, but most households owned only the Bible and other religious works—including a few that described evil spirits and witchcraft in great detail. There were a few books written for children, but these often warned against bad behavior and described the punishment that children would suffer for sinful acts.

Such was the world of Abigail Williams and Betty Parris during the long, dark winter of 1692. There was little to feed their imagination that did not warn of sin and eternal punishment. It is no wonder that the young girls

were so captivated by Tituba's magical stories and fortune-telling games. These activities were strictly forbidden, which must have filled them with fear and guilt. This may have been one reason for their hysterical behavior. And at a time when young girls were forbidden to act out or express themselves, it is easy to see why they were so enraptured by the attention they received when they became "bewitched."

Of course, there were probably many factors behind the girls' actions. But what is more surprising than the accusations from these imaginative young girls is the reaction from the community. The girls may have sparked the witch hunt, but it was the adults who set the wheels into motion.

**Clues you found in the above section (what did you read and infer that might have added to an environment that lead to such violence):**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Do your detective work!**

Now it's time to start doing some real detective work. Using the Internet and based on what you have read, create a general list of key players from the Salem Witch Trials to serve as a prime suspect list. Remember, a suspect is anyone you are interested in interviewing to find out their involvement in the situation. List at least 8 suspects below.

- |    |    |
|----|----|
| 1. | 5. |
| 2. | 6. |
| 3. | 7. |
| 4. | 8. |

Imagine that you are able to interview these suspects. Create five questions you would want to ask in your interrogation:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Thinking back on what you have read and discussed with your detective team, and now putting all of your clues together, form a theory regarding what you believe caused the Salem Witch Trials to occur. Be clear, be specific, and back up your theory with examples from the text. Your team will present your theory to the rest of class in an attempt to convince them that you alone have solved the case. Use notebook paper to brainstorm and prepare your group's final theory.