

Name: _____

Colonial America

The Salem Witch Trials



Directions: Read the following passage then answer the questions.

The Salem Witch Trials: A Bewitching Tragedy

In 1626 a group of colonists headed for the New World. They thought that the Church of England was corrupt. They felt that this church needed to be purified, so they were known as Puritans. They left England and founded the small village of Salem in Massachusetts. The religious leaders of this group governed Salem. They followed a very strict religion.

In the year 1692, a mystery unfolded in this little village. Whispers of witchcraft echoed through the narrow streets. The religious and superstitious villagers feared nothing more than Satan and dark magic. A wave of hysteria and fear spread amongst them.

Whispers and Witches

Salem Village was like a ticking time bomb of suspicion and worry. Then a small group of young girls began to exhibit strange behavior. They shook in convulsions. They entered trances and babbled in strange tongues. They accused certain people in the town of witchcraft.

Now the whispers had turned to shouts. Accusations spiraled and fingers pointed at unsuspecting villagers. Neighbors turned against each other. A fierce witch hunt had begun.

The Fear Spreads

The people were in a frenzied state when the witch trials began. There was little or no evidence to support these cases. All the proof needed was a hysterical claim or suspicion. An accuser could cite “spectral evidence” based on dreams or visions. And any accused person faced dire choices: confess or face a ghastly execution. Most who were found guilty were hanged. More than 20 innocent lives were taken. At least one man was crushed by giant stones. And over 200 people were accused.

But these trials were not only about witchcraft and the fear of dark magic. The town of Salem was insecure and divided. Some would use the witch trials to settle old scores with neighbors. Grievances and envies transformed into lethal accusations. The accused were forced to give up their assets and property. They were imprisoned and ostracized. Lives were ruined and people died.

The End of the Frenzy

Many people lived in a state of fear during this time. Nobody knew who might be accused next. As the trials swallowed more people, others became skeptical. Families of the accused began to raise their voices. Public outcry grew. Then the Governor of Massachusetts, William Phips, stepped in. He dissolved the witch courts. He forbade the use of spectral evidence. And he created new courts that were based on more reliable evidence. The accused who were still in jail were freed.

Years later the people and leaders of Salem fully recognized the witch trials as a tragedy. Some apologized for their roles in the trial. The names of the accused were cleared and these victims were given small sums for their losses. Sadly, their property was not restored. The Salem Witch Trials have had a lasting impact on the U.S. legal framework. They continue to remind us of the importance of evidence in courtrooms and the dangers of mass hysteria.

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Reading Questions

1. Why were the settlers in Salem known as “Puritans”? _____

2. What behavior did the young girls show that raised fears of witchcraft? _____

3. How did “spectral evidence” lead to false convictions? _____

4. Why might people have been so quick to believe the accusations without solid evidence?

5. How might things have been different if Salem weren't governed by its religious leaders? _____

6. Why do you believe this?

7. What actions did Governor William Phips take to end the witch trials? _____

8. Were the victims of the trials treated fairly after it was over? Why or why not? _____

9. How can we make sure that events like the Salem Witch Trials do not happen again?

10. Why do you believe this?
