An Unholy Mess

Massachusetts was the epicenter of Puritanism in 1692. So how did the devil get loose in such a God-fearing place?

by **Anthony Brandt**

On Thursday, March 24, 1692, at 10 in the morning, Judges John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin brought 71-year-old Rebecca Nurse to be examined in front of a large crowd in the Salem meetinghouse. She was suspected of practicing witchcraft. One of her accusers was Ann Putnam, the wife of Thomas Putnam, a prominent figure in Salem Village where Nurse lived. Another was the Putnams' 12-year-old daughter, Ann. Deodat Lawson, one-time minister of the church at Salem Village, attended the proceedings and wrote that Goodwife Nurse "pleaded her own innocency with earnestness," but the Putnams, mother and daughter, "accused her that she appeared to them, and afflicted them in their fits."

The Rev. Lawson had to leave the proceedings, but he later heard from others that Rebecca Nurse afflicted any number of people—right in the meetinghouse. Whenever she moved, people complained of being tormented. If she leaned back, it "was as if their backs was broken." If she leaned against the bar in front of her, their breasts were bruised. The "Black Man"

A woman is examined for a "witch's mark" in T.H. Matteson's 1853 depiction of the Salem community in turmoil. Physical anomalies such as scars or moles were thought to indicate intimacy with the devil.

> 'You are a liar. I am no more a witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my life God will give you blood to drink'
>
> —*Sarah Good, executed July 19, 1692*

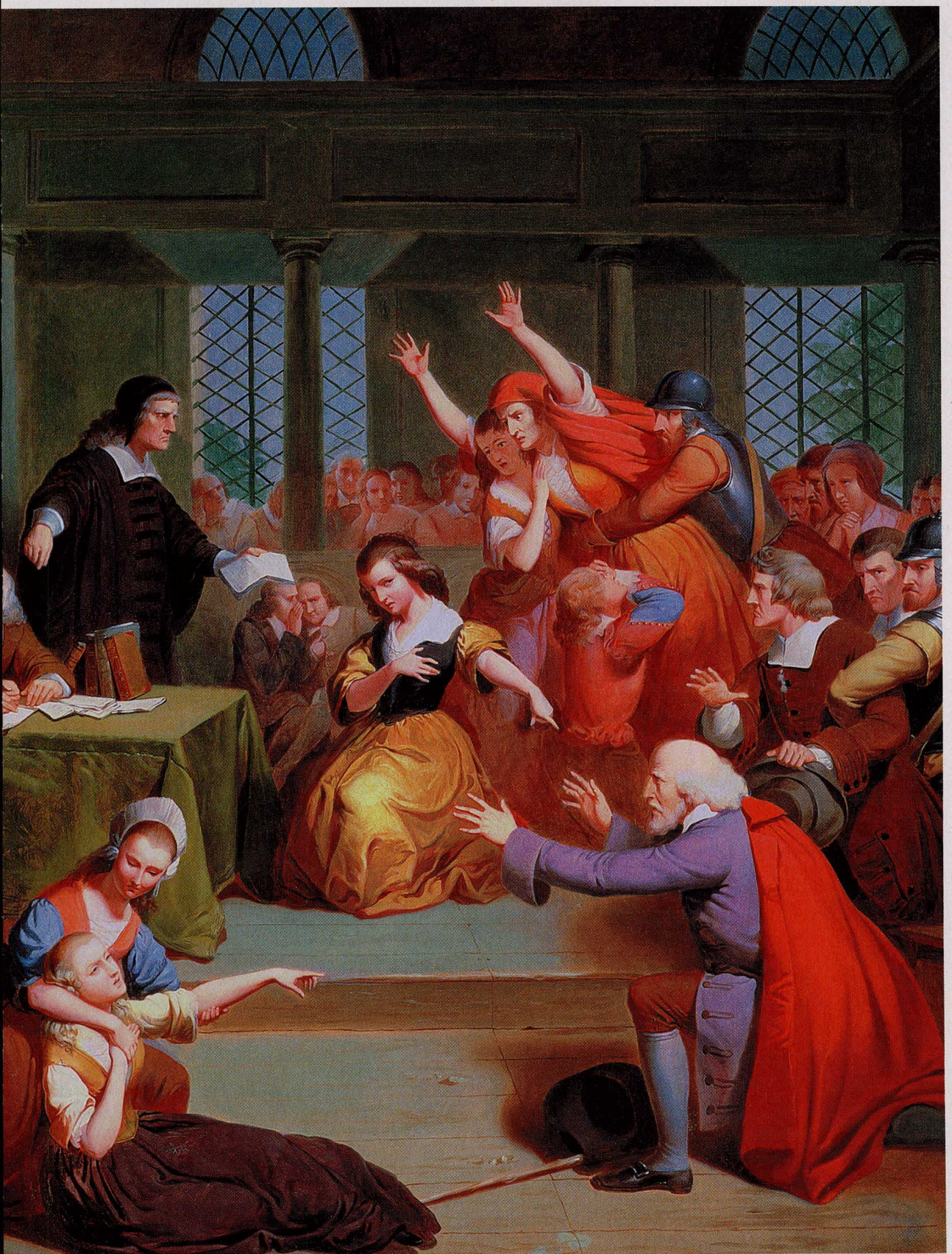
(the devil), they said, "whispered to her in the assembly." The senior Ann Putnam had a fit "to the very great Impairing of her strength, and wasting of her spirits, insomuch as she could hardly move hand, or foot, when she was carried out." At one point so many were "grievously afflicted" that "an hideous screech and noise" emerged from the meetinghouse as Lawson walked away, and "the whole assembly was struck with consternation, and they were afraid that those that sat next to them were under the influence of witchcraft." Nurse went to prison that day.

Massachusetts governor Sir William Phips set up a Court of Oyer and Terminer in Salem Town "to hear and determine" the validity of the mounting number of witchcraft accusations. Nurse and four other accused women were brought to trial there on June 30. Nurse was known to be one of the most devout people in the Salem area. She joined the church in Salem Town in 1672. The church there was more liberal than the one in adjacent Salem Village (now Danvers, Mass.), but a prospective member was still required to attest her faith, which in turn required that she search her conscience for any trace of sin. In 1674, as an act of charity, Nurse took in a neighbor's child and raised the youngster after the neighbor left the area for parts unknown. She and her family had seldom been involved in the constant lawsuits, actions for slander and land disputes that featured so prominently in early New England village life.

Perhaps because of this unblemished reputation, or because Nurse maintained her innocence so earnestly, or because the evidence was weak, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty. When it was read, "all the accusers in the court, and suddenly after all the afflicted out of court, made an hideous outcry, to the amazement, not only of the spectators, but the court also seemed strangely surprized." The judges were indeed surprised. The presiding judge, Deputy Governor William Stoughton, said the jury had misinterpreted a piece of evidence that seemed to implicate Nurse as one of the witches.

What was this piece of evidence? When Goodwife Deliverance Hobbs and her daughter, who confessed to having made

George Jacobs kneels before the court on August 5, 1692. Jacobs, 72, was accused of witchcraft by his granddaughter Margaret (center, pointing at Jacobs) and found guilty. Margaret soon recanted her testimony, but her grandfather was hanged on August 19.



TOMPKINS HARRISON MATTESON, 1855/© PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM, SALEM, MASS./BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

'I never had to do with Witchcraft since I was born. I am a Gospel Woman'

—Martha Corey, executed September 22, 1692

a covenant with Satan—known as signing the devil's book—were brought into court to testify, Nurse remarked, "What, do these persons give in evidence against me now, they used to come among us." What she meant, as she later explained, was that the Hobbs women had also been in prison with her and the others accused. The jurymen took it as an admission that all three women were witches. When one of the jurors asked Nurse to explain her statement, she stood silent. She later said she didn't answer the question because she didn't hear it; Rebecca was an old woman and half deaf. Nevertheless, the jury changed its verdict to guilty.

The case was not quite over. Nurse's family presented her explanation and dozens of neighbors' and friends' testimonials to Governor Phips. After reading them, he reprieved the old woman. At that the outcry against her began again. Unnamed Salem gentlemen rushed to Boston and persuaded Phips, who was much more a soldier than a politician, to change his mind. Rebecca was hanged on July 19, along with four other women. One of them, Sarah Good, when urged by a minister to confess and save her soul, would have none of it. "You are a witch. You *know* you are a witch," he declared.

She shouted back at him, "You are a liar. I am no more a witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my life God will give you blood to drink."

Rebecca Nurse was too pious and too weary to be defiant. She submitted to her fate and died quietly.

Few events are better known in American colonial history than the Salem witch trials. Countless works have been published—the first books and pamphlets appeared within a year of the hysteria. The most recent book, *Six Women of Salem*, by Marilynne K. Roach, came out in 2013. It takes the reader through the trials day by day, focusing on a half-dozen accusers and accused, including Rebecca Nurse. Roach has spent decades researching and writing about Salem, and public fascination with the topic remains strong—Jon Stewart interviewed Roach on *The Daily Show*. We know what happened, who said and did what to whom. The difficulty has always been to explain why.

Why Salem? Witchcraft cases were hardly unknown in New England in the 1600s—more than a hundred were recorded before 1692—but they were mostly isolated, widely separated in time and space, scattered around the colonies. Executions were rare. In Salem, however, between February and October 1692, the number of people accused of witchcraft and scheduled for trial ran to well over a hundred, and 19 of those brought to trial were hanged. A 20th who refused to stand trial was pressed to death by the piling on of stones, until he could no longer draw breath. No other event in the history of American witchcraft has come close to causing an uproar as extensive and intense as the Salem trials.

At the time, belief in witchcraft was widespread in Western culture, although in Europe it was fading fast. England's last witch hanging took place a decade before the Salem trials began, and by 1736 all British laws relating to witchcraft had been repealed. But in New England, belief in witchcraft lingered; it was basic to Puritan theology, and Puritan theology ruled New England. Not to believe in witches was tantamount to not believing in the world of spirits, which were everywhere, and evil spirits, Satan's lieutenants, were always ready to pounce on human weakness and turn souls away from God—thus the "Black Man" who whispered in Rebecca Nurse's ear. People the witches were supposedly afflicting could see this apparition or claimed they could.

It was thought that witches could cause people to have "fits"—falling-down fits, much like epilepsy—just by looking at them. They could kill cattle, start fires, induce illness, murder babies; they could pinch or bite people at a distance, prick them with pins. They could ruin people's lives. They could do all this because they had traded their souls to the devil in exchange for supernatural powers. Anything suspicious in nature—an unexplained illness (and most illnesses in the 17th century were unexplained), a calamity or misfortune—might be a witch's evil work. If two neighbors were fighting over a boundary and something untoward happened to one—witchcraft could be suspected of the other. If a fruit crop failed, or someone lost some knives or a man could not loosen the tap on a keg of beer while his wife could do it with her little finger—"it could not have been so except it were bewitched." These are actual claims from witchcraft trials, and this was the mind-set common to the time and place, to the rural village life that characterized New England, to what one historian called its "farmyard world anxieties," set amidst the dark surrounding forests, the biblical "howling wilderness" of the New World.

But Salem was no closer to that wilderness than most other New England villages. In 1692, to be sure, fear of the wilderness and its savage inhabitants was exacerbated by King William's War, one of the many European conflicts that reached across the Atlantic to the colonies. The French colonies to the north, in Canada, were sending their Indian allies to raid English settlements as close to Salem as southern Maine and New Hampshire. Some historians suggest the resulting unrest in New England contributed to the hysteria. Others have said that news of the Port Royal, Jamaica, earthquake in June 1692 that killed 1,700 people sparked fears in faraway New England that God was growing angrier with this sinful world. But the danger from Indians had been constant for years, and the witch trials were well underway by the time the earthquake

struck. In the 1970s an article in *Science* and a subsequent book put the blame on ergotism, a condition brought on by eating bread made with spoiled rye, which produces hallucinations very much like those induced by LSD. But scholars no longer take this explanation seriously: Everyone was eating the bread; only a few were seeing the Black Man.

Another explanation returns to the idea of religious strife as the root of the Salem witch hunt. Salem Village had been arguing with itself for years over whether its church should adopt the more liberal Half-Way Covenant, which loosened the rules of church membership and was followed in Salem Town, or carry on the strict original Calvinist doctrine that separated the elect, the "visible saints" whom God had predestined for salvation, from the rest. Under the stricter doctrine, the elect sat apart in church and only they could take Communion; only they were assured of heaven. Ministers had been hired and fired regularly as the dispute swung one way or the other. The Salem Village minister in 1692 was Samuel Parris, a fervent subscriber to strict Calvinism whom one historian describes as a stew of "psychological rigidity and religious enthusiasm." He may already have been on his way out at the time of the trials. When Parris was hired, he was promised ownership of the parsonage; that promise had not been fulfilled. He had not been paid for a year. The church committee responsible for replenishing his firewood—provided as part of Parris' contract—was not doing its job; Francis Nurse, Rebecca's husband, was on that committee. Parris' congregation was deeply divided over whether to retain his services, and he began preaching about the devil's assault on the church aided by "Wicked & Reprobate men."

The question "Why Salem?" will probably never have a definitive answer. It seems, at bottom, that an unsavory brew of village enmities and jealousies, gossip, a narrow-minded belief system and religious paranoia bubbled over into mounting hysteria and spread through the community, and even into neighboring communities. But it may indeed be significant that the crisis began with an event in the parsonage where Samuel Parris, the embattled minister, was living.

It happened to two Parris girls, Betty and her cousin Abigail. They began acting strangely, sighing, moping, hiding under the furniture as if they were afraid of something. They "gabbled nonsense," says Marilynne Roach. A physician could find no cause. Their bodies twisted into strange shapes. In January and on into February, the "affliction" continued. In mid-February another local "doctor" came; having found no physical cause for the girls' suffering, he suggested that they might be under an "evil hand." Witchcraft.

Everyone in the village knew by then that something was wrong. On February 15, Goodwife Mary Sibley visited the girls while the adults were away to try an old folk remedy. With the help of Parris' Caribbean slaves, Tituba and John, Sibley baked a cake soaked with the urine of the bewitched victims and fed it to a dog. This "good magic" was supposed to turn the evil magic back on the witch.

Identity Crisis

WHO WERE THE SALEM WITCHES? Historian Carol Karlsen, in *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, documented 185 accused witches in the outbreak: 141 were women and almost half were over 40. But the numbers tell only part of the story. The Salem hysteria crossed the lines of gender, age and social position. Among the 20 put to death were:

- **Bridget Bishop, age about 60.** Bishop had a reputation for being loud and quarrelsome, and she had been punished publicly for fighting with her husband.

- **Rev. George Burroughs, about 40.** The former Salem Village minister had left town abruptly a decade earlier after a rancorous dispute over money with the Putnam family. Rumors abounded that he had murdered his two wives and that he sided with the Wabanaki Indians in their attacks on frontier settlements. Burroughs was arrested in Maine and returned to Salem for trial.

- **Sarah Good, 39.** Deeply in debt, Good's family subsisted on charity and may have been considered a nuisance in Salem Village. Her 4-year-old daughter, Dorcas, was also imprisoned on witchcraft charges, one of at least eight children under the age of 12 to be accused. Sarah was granted a stay of execution because she was pregnant. After giving birth to a daughter, who died in prison, Sarah was hanged.

- **Ann Pudeator, about 70.** The widowed midwife married a man 20 years younger after his wife died unexpectedly while under Ann's care. Her inheritance after his death left Ann fairly well off.

- **John Willard, about 30.** The sheriff's deputy was accused after refusing to arrest suspected witches he believed were innocent.

In 1711 Massachusetts issued a general amnesty clearing the names of 14 of the 20 Salem victims. A 15th was exonerated in 1957 and the remaining five in 2001.

The Lancashire Witches, hanged in 1612, were among the most well-known witchcraft cases in England's history. The trials bore unsettling similarities to those in Salem 80 years later.

ENGLISH SCHOOL, 17TH CENTURY/PRIVATE COLLECTION/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Kith and Kin

I WAS ABOUT 10 when one of my mother's aunts told me that we were descended from a Salem witch—Rebecca Nurse. At 10 you don't quite know what to make of news like that, but you also never forget it. When I went years later to see Arthur Miller's play about the Salem witch trials, *The Crucible*, it was oddly thrilling to think that I was connected in the real world to one of the play's leading characters, and since then the relationship has come up several more times. A good friend of mine, the novelist Eric Kraft, is also descended from Rebecca Nurse, and another writer, Jody Proctor, one of my closest friends before he died, was a direct descendant of John Proctor, hanged at Salem a month after Rebecca.

It's almost as if the story has been following me around, begging to be told once more, but this is the first chance I've had to write about it. And that has proved to be a much more emotional task than I expected. According to Nurse family lore, Rebecca's husband and children dug her body out of the shallow grave it was dumped in and took it back to the family farm, where it was reburied with respect and dignity. Historians are not supposed to react emotionally to the past, but I could not help but choke up when I read that.

Nurse's court testimony plainly shows that this old and frail but beautiful soul was incapable of lying and would not have willingly hurt anyone. In answer to the accusers at her trial, she said, "The Lord knows I have not hurt them; I am an innocent person.... I cannot help it [if] the Devil may appear in my shape." When first told she had been accused of witchcraft, she sat "as it wear Amazed," then asked, "What sin hath god found out in me unrepented of that he should Lay such an Affliction upon me in my old Age?" She looked to her own conscience, not to her accusers, to know God's purpose, and accepted God's will even though she did not understand it. Was there anyone in that demented assembly of hysterics saintlier than she? I would be chagrined, as 19th-century writer Nathaniel Hawthorne was, if I were descended from one of the judges in the Salem witch trials, but I am proud to be descended from Rebecca Nurse.

—Anthony Brandt

'What sin hath god found out in me unrepented of that he should Lay such an Affliction upon me in my old Age?'

—Rebecca Nurse, executed July 19, 1692

It didn't work. The girls did not get better. They saw "shadowy forms" and felt pinches and blows. Then other girls in the village began feeling the same thing. The contortions and choking the Parris girls were suffering worsened. The young Putnam girl became afflicted. She saw not just shadowy forms but specters of people she knew: Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, Tituba (who eventually confessed to being a witch, though she testified later that she did so after a beating by Samuel Parris). Soon enough, Ann would also see the specter of Rebecca Nurse.

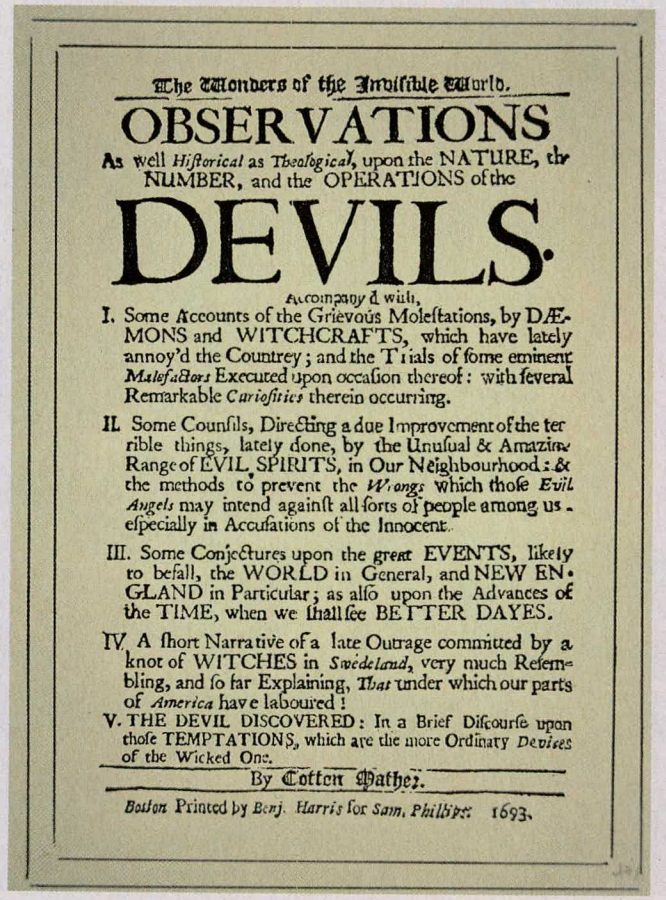
The hysteria escalated rapidly. The examinations by the magistrates started in March. Accused women were subject to a physical exam in which other women looked for "teats," places on the body where some sort of "excrescence," perhaps a large mole, scar or growth, appeared. This was where the witch suckled her "imp" or "familiar," a black cat, a mouse, a bat, a bird, with her own blood. In Rebecca Nurse's case, the women found a fold of skin between her legs that seemed unusual. It might have been the result of giving birth to 10 children—her labors had been difficult—or it might have been the teat. But mostly the trials were based on what was known at the time as "spectral evidence": testimony by people who claimed they saw the shapes of the supposed witches—men as well as women—sitting on their beds, pinching them, sticking pins in them, throwing things at them from across the room, causing their fits. "Don't you see her?" the afflicted would cry out. "She's right there, over the mantel." All the while, the people in court would stare, fascinated and afraid.

Legally, spectral evidence was not grounds for convicting a witch. The judges in Salem, however, accepted it, and this in itself makes Salem unusual. The judges were all distinguished men. Samuel Sewall, whose diary is a standard source for understanding the Puritan mentality, was highly respected. Nathaniel Saltonstall, John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin were all pillars of the community. Deputy Governor William Stoughton presided, though he was known to be particularly zealous in his desire to rid the colony of suspected witches. Cotton Mather, the Puritan divine known throughout New England, was a frequent trial participant, leading prayers—considered the only true remedy for witchcraft—for the souls of those afflicted and for the witches themselves. He would be one of the first to write a book about the trials, defending his role in them.

It is obvious that a kind of mass hysteria was at work. Much has been written about the psychology of the Salem events, and the Freudian term "conversion hysteria"—when anxiety is "converted" into physical symptoms—has been used to explain them. It is also obvious that every trial was a circus. The historian John Demos writes that "every witchcraft case was, in part, a public drama. The enactment of elaborate roles, the presence of attentive spectators, the fundamental interest in seeing and being seen—all these elements point in a single direction." To a climax. The drama of a trial demands it, and of course the most satisfying climax in a trial is a conviction.

Rebecca Nurse (opposite) is brought to trial in chains. Many of the accused were shackled in irons that weighed 8 pounds. The restored Nurse homestead (below) in Danvers, Mass., formerly Salem Village.

Influential Puritan ministers Cotton Mather (above) and his father, Increase Mather (right), were not surprised by the presence of witches in pious Massachusetts. In his 1693 defense of the Salem trials, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (below), Cotton Mather asked, "Where will the Devil show most Malice, but where he is hated, and hateth most?"



The Wonders of the Invisible World.

OBSERVATIONS

As well *Historical* as *Theological*, upon the NATURE, the NUMBER, and the OPERATIONS of the

DEVILS.

Accompanied with,

I. Some Accounts of the Grievous Molestations, by DÆMONS and WITCHCRAFTS, which have lately annoy'd the Country; and the Trials of some eminent *Malefactors* Executed upon occasion thereof: with several Remarkable *Curiosities* therein occurring.

II. Some Counsils, Directing a due Improvement of the terrible things, lately done, by the Unusual & Amazing Range of EVIL SPIRITS, in Our Neighbourhood: & the methods to prevent the *Wrongs* which those *Evil Angels* may intend against all sorts of people among us. especially in Accusations of the Innocent.

III. Some Conjectures upon the great EVENTS, likely to befall, the WORLD in General, and NEW ENGLAND in Particular; as also upon the Advances of the TIME, when we shall see BETTER DAYES.

IV. A short Narrative of a late Outrage committed by a knot of WITCHES in *Swedeland*, very much Resembling, and so far Explaining, *That* under which our parts of *America* have laboured!

V. THE DEVIL DISCOVERED: In a Brief Discourse upon those TEMPTATIONS, which are the more Ordinary *Devices* of the Wicked One.

By Cotton Mather.

Boston Printed by *Benj. Harris* for *Sam. Phillips.* 1693.

All through the summer of 1692 the convictions mounted. The first hanging, of Bridget Bishop, took place on June 10, the next five, including Rebecca Nurse, on July 19. On August 19 five more, four of them men, were hanged. One of them was John Proctor; his wife, Elizabeth, had been convicted, too, but she was pregnant and was spared. On September 9 and 17 a total of 15 more were sentenced to death; four were spared because they confessed to being witches, a fifth because she was pregnant. A man named Giles Corey refused to stand trial; he was pressed to death. Eight more were hanged on September 22.

In October the adjoining village of Andover, fearing witches were responsible for causing illness there, sent for two of the afflicted Salem girls; they accused more than 50 people. At Gloucester, on Cape Ann, the girls' allegations sent four women to prison. Then they accused Lady Mary Phips, the wife of the governor, and Margaret Thatcher, the mother-in-law of Salem magistrate Jonathan Corwin, among other extremely prominent people, of being witches.

That put the brakes on. Increase Mather, Cotton's father, preached a sermon in October casting doubt on the reliability of spectral evidence and pronounced, "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned." Governor Phips decreed that imprisonments for witchcraft would cease; then he dissolved the Court of Oyer and Terminer trying the cases. He reprieved the rest

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: AMERICAN SCHOOL/PRIVATE COLLECTION/PETER NEWARK AMERICAN PICTURES/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; JAN VAN DER SPRIETT/© MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, BOSTON/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; TITLE PAGE FROM A WITCH HUNT PAMPHLET BY COTTON MATHER, PRINTED IN BOSTON, 1693/AMERICAN SCHOOL/PRIVATE COLLECTION/PETER NEWARK AMERICAN PICTURES/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

> 'You tax me for a wizard, you may as well tax me for a buzard I have done no wrong'
>
> —*George Jacobs, executed August 19, 1692*

of those who had been convicted and in May 1693 released all the accused witches still in jail. It was finally over. Twenty had been put to death, four had died in jail, scores more had been accused and imprisoned, but the executions, at least, were over.

A great shame followed, and there were apologies. The 12 members of the jury said they did "hereby declare that we justly fear that we were sadly deluded and mistaken," and that they had brought upon themselves "the Guilt of Innocent Blood; which Sin the Lord saith in Scripture, he would not pardon." One of the judges, Samuel Sewall, stood up in church in 1697 while his minister read out what he had written, "that he might have fallen into some Errors in the Matters at Salem."

But the most satisfying apology came from the younger Ann Putnam, who also stood up in church, in August 1706, while the Rev. Joseph Green read it out. "I desire to be humbled before god," she confessed, "for that sad and humbling providence that befell my father's family in the year about '92: that…I should be made an instrument for the accusing of several persons of a grievous crime, whereby their lives were taken away from them, whom I now have just grounds and good reason to believe they were innocent persons." And in particular, she went on, "as I was a chief instrument of accusing Goodwife Nurse and her two sisters, I desire to lie in the dust, and to be humbled for it, in that I was a cause, with others, of so sad a calamity to them and their families; for which cause I desire to lie in the dust, and earnestly beg forgiveness of God."

Still, it is Rebecca Nurse's words that bear remembering. Shortly before she was hanged she said, "I can say before my Eternal father I am innocent, & God will clear my innocency." ■

Anthony Brandt wrote about the Whiskey Rebellion in the August 2014 issue of American History. *His latest book is* The Man Who Ate His Boots: The Tragic History of the Search for the Northwest Passage *(Anchor).*

Samuel Sewall (standing, right) repents for his role in the Salem trials. The scene, *Dawn of Tolerance*, is one of five murals painted for the Massachusetts State House in the 1940s to document milestones in state history.

COURTESY OF COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS ART COMMISSION