

# Hunting for Salem Witches in Your Family Tree

By Maureen A. Taylor

Family history is full of surprises. Almost every family tree contains an ancestor so colorful or tragic that you become obsessed with discovering more about them. If you have early Essex County, Massachusetts, ancestry then you might uncover a link to the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. There were other witch trials in the colonies, but none as noteworthy as those that occurred in Salem. If you find a connection on your family tree you'll end up pleasantly surprised at the amount of material you can look at for evidence. Rhonda McClure's 2002 *Computer Genealogist* column, "[17th-Century History with a 21st-Century Twist: The Salem Witchcraft Trials on the Internet](#)" explored web resources on the topic. Her new book, *Finding Your Famous and Infamous Ancestors: Uncover the Rogues, Renegades, and Royals in Your Family Tree* (Betterway, 2003), is a wonderful resource for anyone with colorful roots.

If your ancestor lived in the Salem area at the time of trials you might find them mentioned in the plethora of manuscripts, books, and articles on the topic. From primary source documents to interpretations by famous historians to the websites covered in Rhonda's earlier article, there is no shortage on materials to study.

While the reasons behind the hysteria are a topic of constant debate, there are a few known facts. The whole series of episodes began in January 1692 when two girls — Betty Parris, daughter of minister Samuel Parris, and his niece Abigail Williams — began exhibiting strange behavior. By June the hunt for "witches" expanded beyond Salem to Andover, Ipswich, Gloucester, and other areas in Essex County. The last hangings occurred in September and by May of 1693 all accused witches still imprisoned were released. The final count was twenty executed and more than a hundred imprisoned (one died in prison).

Your family history might include both accusers and the accused since intermarriages occurred. It's easy to get carried away with excitement tracing a notable ancestor, especially when you find materials that help tell the story of his or her involvement in a key event in early American history. It's a wonderful melding of history and genealogy. Here's a method for staying on track and an overview of resources.

## What's Available in Print?

When researching topics I start with what's in print because the resources are easy to locate and often lead to new discoveries. You'll also save time. Rather than hunting for documents and sifting through irrelevant ones, start with the printed sources and consult footnotes to locate those pertinent to your ancestor.

After first checking the index to see if there are any specific references to your ancestor, study the text to familiarize yourself with the background history. This will help you interpret what you do find.

Your local public library should be able to obtain many of the titles listed below through interlibrary loan. Most are still in print and available in bookstores (online and otherwise).

## Historical Documents

Many of the original trial documents are now both in print and online. See the previously mentioned [Computer Genealogist column](#) by Rhonda McClure for useful links.

*The Salem Witchcraft Papers: Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692* by P. Boyer and S. Nissenbaum, eds. 3 vols. (DeCapo Press, 1977)

*Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases: 1648-1706*, edited by George L. Burr (1914, reprint Barnes and Noble, 1975)

*The Salem Witch Trials: A Primary Source History of the Witchcraft Trials in Salem, Massachusetts (Primary Sources in American History)* by Jenny MacBain (Rosen, 2003)

Written for children from grades five to twelve, this title uses original documents to explain the crisis.

## Books

There are numerous books on the Salem Witch Trials as historians reinterpret the evidence. Here's a select list of

publications on the topic.

*The Salem Witch Trials: A Day-To-Day Chronicle of a Community Under Siege* by Marilynne K. Roach (Cooper Square Press, 2002)

This 600+ page book offers an exhaustive chronological approach to the topic.

*Hunting for Witches: A Visitor's Guide to the Salem Witch Trials* by Frances Hill (Commonwealth Editions, 2002)

A visit to Salem is a must for anyone with ancestry related to the witch trials. This book guides the visitor through the streets of Salem to the significant houses, churches, and landmarks of the time.

*In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* by Mary Beth Norton (Knopf, 2002)

One of America's leading historians uses newly discovered sources to analyze the factors that led to the hysteria.

*The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, Witchcraft in Colonial New England* by Carol F. Karlsen (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987).

This classic work describes how gender relations, social structure, and the role of women in Colonial society led to accusations of witchcraft.

*The Salem Witch Trials Reader* by Frances Hill (DeCapo Press, 2000)

This overview of facts and myths of the trials includes commentary on firsthand accounts, the works of previous historians, and the literary works that drew inspiration from the crisis.

## Articles

There are three helpful resources to assist you in finding articles. The Periodical Source Index (PERSI) on [Ancestry.com](#) contains citations for relevant articles in both genealogical and historical publications. I discovered resources by using "Massachusetts" and "Salem" as search terms in the locality index. Not all were pertinent to the time period but it was easy to browse through the hits.

*America: History and Life*, a finding aid for academic journals, is available at college and university libraries. It's a very useful index, but can be difficult to locate if you don't live near a facility that has a subscription.

My public library subscribes to InfoTrac, a database that indexes magazines. I use this to identify articles in popular magazines and some academic journals. It's easy to use and some of the articles are available in a full-text version that eliminates having to track down the issue and make copies. Check with the reference staff at your local public library to see what periodical indexes they have available in print or via computer.

## Original Manuscripts

The Phillips Library at the [Peabody Essex Museum](#) (East India Square, Salem, Massachusetts 01970) is a major research center for the local history of Essex County. Items in their collection relating to the Salem Witch crisis include court documents, maps, and vital records. Many of these materials are online at [The Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive](#). If you want to use their resources in person, it is best to contact the reference staff in advance of your visit at 978-745-9500, ext. 3014.

## Explore the Past

Planning a family history trip to visit the haunts of your Witch Trial ancestors is simple. [The Salem Office of Tourism & Cultural Affairs](#) has a variety of resources for tourists on their website. Search their calendar of events, learn about local history, and plan your trip all via their website.

Find your ancestors in historical journals, discover who they are in original documents, and walk in their footsteps. Every new discovery will help you understand more about your family and their role in an important period in American history.