

Position Paper

Salem Crisis

William Stoughton

William Stoughton, born December 1694, played a decisive role during the Salem Witch Trials. Although born in either Dorchester, Massachusetts or in England, Stoughton was raised in Dorchester. His parents, some of the original settlers of Dorchester, were both politically active and very religious; he received a strict Puritan upbringing. Stoughton studied divinity at Harvard College before attending Oxford to receive a Fellowship. However, when King Charles II restored his power, Stoughton lost his Fellowship and returned to New England. Stoughton was a political moderate; instead of encouraging opposition to the Massachusetts charter, he “urged accommodation to English regulation.”

In Massachusetts, Stoughton held many administrative positions. Throughout the course of his life, he was a minister, military officer, public servant, and judge. Moreover, Stoughton was a shrew politician. He easily formed and abandoned alliances with others if it benefitted him. For example, even though Stoughton served as Deputy President under Sir Edmund Andros (royal governor from England), as people revolted against his power, Stoughton distanced himself from Andros in hope of not ruining his own reputation.

Even so, there were many instances when Stoughton’s reputation deteriorated as result to his own actions. For example, when the Second Indian War broke, Stoughton was at the Maine border. He was marked responsible for arming the militia and ordering attacks. This, however, ended disastrously as the 16 English settlers were kidnapped by their opposition, the Wabanakis Confederacy. Later, Andros placed Stoughton in charge of settling a prison exchange, but for unknown reasons, was unable to do so. Many of these prisoners were later killed.

In 1692, Stoughton was appointed as head of the court of Oyer and Terminer (total of nine people), the court instituted to deal with recent witch accusations. It placed so-called witches through court before execution. Stoughton, therefore, was Chief Justice during the Salem Witch Trials. However, at the time, he had no legal court training. The trials were, therefore, unprofessional. The defense counsel for the accused was forbidden, spectators were allowed to interpret the procedures, and private conversations between the accusers and the judges, for example, took place.

The justices were meant to follow English law in all of their court decisions. However, said law did not specify on what was considered valid proof and evidence to convict a witch. At the time, there were four different kinds of evidences. The first, and most substantial one, was a confession, generally out of guilt. The second type of evidence was a supranational strength, weaknesses, and unusual physical characteristic. The third, and considerably less reliable, was “anger followed by mischief.” The least substantial form of evidence was spectral evidence, which was when one person gave a testimony saying that they were “visited by a demonic form,” such as in a dream. Of course, one is unable to verify said evidence, so it was often dismissed.

However, Stoughton, determined to remove all witches from Salem, invariably accepted spectral evidence. He sentenced many people to death based on evidence from another person's dream. Nineteen of said victims were killed. Stoughton was, in fact, one of the only magistrates to not apologize for using it; he never saw it as an error on his behalf.

There is a theory that Stoughton acted so callously and obstinately because of animosity. Stoughton was obsessed with power, and it is clear that he was given much of it at a young age. Through his shortcomings with the Second Indian War, it is possible that he wasn't completely qualified for all of the power he received. So, although just a theory, Stoughton may have been influenced by something similar to the Napoleon Complex; he felt as if to deem himself worthy of power and continue to having decisive role in society, Stoughton needed to be cruel and stubborn.

Therefore, it is entirely possible that if Stoughton was not in his position of power, the Salem Witch Trials would have fared a vastly different end. Perhaps it would not have gone down as a chaotically dark time in American history.

Bibliography

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