Social Classes in the Salem Witch Trials

Sarah Thomson
U.S. History 101
November 29, 2016
Biting, reading, screaming, and dancing are only some of the forbidden acts that were seen as witchcraft, and some were even punished for by death. In the village of 1692 Salem, a group of young girls fell unexplainably ill, and were said to be “bewitched.” The town’s people became frightened and began interrogating the girls to find out who was a witch. The girls started off by naming 3 woman, but the numbers continued to increase. The accused were forced to confess to witchcraft, and if no confession was provided, then the accused was turned over to the superior court, imprisoned, and sometimes hung.¹ From around February 29, 1692, to late May 1693, at least 144 people were accused of witchcraft.² Of the 144 accused, most were jailed, fourteen women and five men were hung, and four more died in custody.³ The Salem Witch Trials were a very tragic, preventable time in American history, and the reasoning behind accusations had a major connection to social classes. During the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, while the social class of the accused played a role in who was targeted, the social classes of the accusers and judges played an even more significant part in the outcome of the trials.

The social classes of the accused somewhat affected who was targeted. Although not all of the accused witches were in the lower class, most of them were. In the journal article The Long and Short of Salem Witchcraft, the typical description of an accused witch was, “...women of middling or advanced years, often widowed or single, who had been involved in bickering and disputes with neighbors. Some of these incidents had resulted in earlier charges of witchcraft


³ Ibid,4.
when harm had mysteriously befallen people or property associated with the quarrel." The author, Latner, describes Salem witches as the unmarried and widowed women, who were often poorer, and in the lower class. Latner also mentions some accusations of witchcraft started after an argument over land owed to someone. As a result, the poorer people in Salem had a difficult time providing promised land. Latner continues to provide an example of an accused woman, “Dustin was so poor that she could not pay her fees, and died in jail.” Lydia Dustin was an eighty-year old widow, and was arrested, along with her two daughters and granddaughter, for witchcraft. She was found innocent, but wasn’t released from jail because she was too poor. Dustin is an example of a poor, powerless woman accused of witchcraft. Another example is Tituba, a slave that “belonged to Samuel Parris, the minister in whose household the witchcraft erupted; his daughter and niece were the first to convulse.” The New World Encyclopedia states, “Tituba was an easy and obvious target as she was a slave and of a different ethnicity than that of her Puritan neighbors… Sarah Good was often seen begging for food.” Both Tituba and Sarah Good were accused of witchcraft. Tituba was a slave for the Parris family, and Sarah Good was a homeless woman. Since, they were both in poverty and powerless, they had no way of defending themselves. The encyclopedia also describes Tituba and Sarah Good as “vulnerable

---


5 Ibid.


targets,”9 due to their poverty. One final example of a lower class person targeted in the trials of witchcraft, is from the book The Devil’s Snare, “Poole Good, born in Wenham, was only thirty-eight years old, but she otherwise fit the classic stereotype of a witch. From a prosperous family, she had become impoverished as a consequence of two unfortunate marriages and an unfairly withheld inheritance.” (23)9 Poole Good is yet another example of an impoverished woman targeted during the Salem witch trials. Lydia Dustin, Tituba, Sarah Good, and Poole Good are only a fraction of the accused, but they all are examples of how having a lower social class could make you more likely to be accused, since they have little to no power, and are therefore easy targets.

As the trials went on, the accused shifted from merely the poor to both the poor and some rich. To begin with, “Biographies of Key Figures in the Salem Witchcraft Trials” states, “not even the wealthiest of Salem's residents were immune from accusations of witchcraft. Yet, as it turned out for Philip and Mary English, money had its advantages.”10 Philip English was the owner of a highly profitable trading company, and the couple was very wealthy. Yet, unlike Lydia Dustin, their money benefitted them when it came to fees and escaping the charges. In addition, the source also claims, “At the time of her questioning, Easty was about 58 years old and was married to Isaac Easty, with whom she had had seven children. Isaac owned and lived upon a large valuable farm.”11 Mary Easty is another accused witch that was wealthier, and

8 Ibid.
9 Norton, In the Devil’s Snare, 23.
11 Ibid.
owned a lot of land with her husband. Although, both Mary English and Mary Easty were members of the elite, they were not protected from the accusations, thus demonstrating that even though the lower class was a bigger target during the trials, social class wasn’t the only motivation when accusing someone.

While the social classes of the accused only affected who was targeted to some extent, the social classes of the judges played a more significant role. First of all, one of the judges is described in “Biographies of Key Figures in the Salem Witchcraft Trials,” “John Hathorne was born on August 5 1641 in Salem to William Hathorne and Anne Smith. Hathorne, the son of a successful farmer, became a noted Salem merchant and a politician.” John Hathorne was one of the 9 judges in the Salem Witch Trials, and he was an elite politician. Hathorne was very wealthy, and as a politician, he relied on his reputation, and didn’t chance ruining it during the trials. Secondly, Samuel Sewall was another wealthy judge overseeing the trials. The same source, “Biographies of Key Figures in the Salem Witchcraft Trials,” states “...he graduated from Harvard. Sewall married Hannah Hull, the daughter of one of the wealthiest men in the colony, in 1676 and began a career as a merchant.” Samuel Sewall was also in the upper class, and was a very well educated man. Finally, in the novel In the Devil’s Snare, the author categories all of the judges as “wealthy merchants” and therefore “urge(d) ‘exceeding tenderness’ toward accused people with good reputations, they said nothing about those persons

---

12 Sutcliffe, "Biographies of Key Figures in the Salem Witchcraft Trials;"

13 Ibid.

14 Norton, In the Devil’s Snare, 198.
who have been termed herein ‘usual suspects.’” The 9 judges of the Salem Witch Trials, were all elitist and successful men, who cared about the well being of wealthy, upper class citizens when it came to prosecuting the witches. The judges were less likely to prosecute people from their social class, making the lower class a more vulnerable target. Samuel Sewall, John Hathorne, and other judges made biased decisions based on social classes, and created targeted the lower class.

In addition to the social classes of the judges, the social classes of the accusers also significantly affected who was targeted during the Salem Witch Trials. To begin with, Thomas Putnam Sr., a member of a wealthier land owning family, was a big contributor to the accusations. He married a wealthier woman, and his family wanted more power and land. He believed that his nephews were being cheated out of their inheritance by Sarah Osborne, so he accused her of witchcraft. Thomas Putnam is just one of the many examples of the wealthy using the witch trials to benefit themselves, or for revenge. Like her father, Thomas Putnam, Ann Putnam Jr. was a key accuser during the trials, she accused 62 people of witchcraft. Sutcliffe explains that her father had complete control over her actions, and may have been advocating her accusations. The Putnams are examples of the wealthy using their power to accuse people, for their own benefit. Regarding more members of the Putnam family, The Salem Witch Trials states, “Whatever the reason, it seems clear that the Putnams in 1692 projected their bitterness onto persons who were, politically or psychologically, less threatening targets: notably

---

15 Ibid. 214.
17 Sutcliffe, "Biographies of Key Figures in the Salem Witchcraft Trials,"
older women of Mary Veren Putnam’s generation.” Laura Marvel is referring to the younger Thomas Putnam and his siblings, and their hatred for their stepmother, who they could not accuse. Instead, the siblings used their power of wealth to accuse poorer, helpless people in Salem. The Putnam family is an example of the wealthy abusing their power and accusing innocent people, for their own benefit.

The Putnam family accused dozens of people, but there were more key accusers. Another accuser was Lieutenant Nathaniel Ingersoll, the innkeeper. He was fairly wealthy, and had the best interest of his inn in mind. Two of the witches he testified against were his competitors.\(^{18}\) Ingersoll was an upper class man, who also took advantage of the Salem Witch Trials. He used his power to improve his business. In addition to Ingersoll, two of the afflicted girls, Abigail and Betty, from the Parris household accused numerous people. Samuel Parris was a decently wealthy man, he attended Harvard, although he didn’t obtain a degree, and later became a merchant until his business was harmed by a hurricane.\(^{19}\) Parris himself didn’t sign any of the complaints, but he was involved with Abigail and Betty’s accusations. Parris was extremely strict and would not have allowed the girls to condemn others without his permission. Many people opposed Reverend Parris’ preaching in Salem, and many of the woman named by Abigail and Betty, along with Thomas Putnam, were against his ministry.\(^{20}\) Parris used his daughter and niece to accuse people and further his career as a priest in Salem. The social classes of the

\(^{18}\)Marvel, *The Salem Witch Trials*, 42.

\(^{19}\)Ibid, 35.

\(^{20}\)Ibid.
accusers had a major role in who was targeted during the Salem Witch Trials, the elite made most of the accusations and targeted those who would benefit them.

Even though the social classes of the accused impacted who was targeted, the social classes of the judges for the witch trials and the accused, had a larger impact. A majority of the accused were in the lower class, since they were easier targets, but it didn’t prevent the upper class from being accused as well. The judges of the trials were elite, wealthy men, who tended to prosecute the lower class witches. The Putnam family, Ingersoll, and the Parris family were also rich, and used the Salem Witch Trials to their advantage. The Salem Witch Trials was a tragic example of a “witch hunt,” and more examples can be found even in our society today.
Bibliography


