

Salem Witch Trials

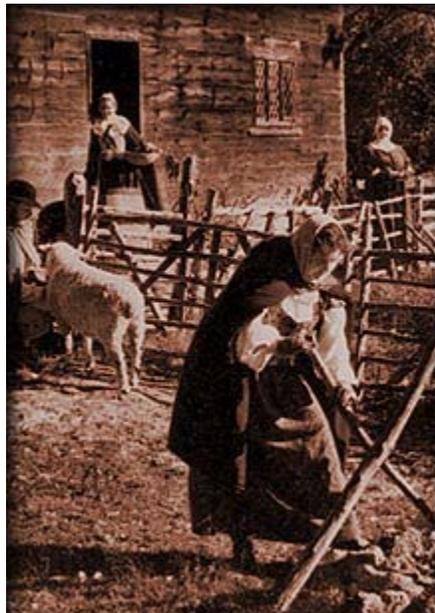
Life in Salem : Introduction

Twenty-four innocent victims lost their lives in the Salem witchcraft hysteria. How did the community of Salem let this tragedy happen? Was it simply fear and superstition, or were there other factors at work?

The events of 1692 took place during a difficult and confusing period for Salem Village. As part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Salem was under British rule. When the hysteria began, the colony was waiting for a new governor and had no charter to enforce laws. By the time the new governor, William Phips, arrived in Massachusetts, the jails were already filled with alleged witches. To make matters worse, New England towns were under attack by Native Americans and French Canadians.

Salem Village faced daily challenges closer to home as well. Most families had to support themselves, making their own clothes, planting vegetables, raising meat. Farming was often a painstaking task in the harsh climate and rough, rocky terrain—and a drought or flood could ruin a year's harvest. An epidemic of smallpox could kill a family. In a world where people saw the Devil lurking behind every misfortune, it is little wonder they believed evil spirits were at work.

But there may have been stronger factors behind the witch hunts—the Puritan lifestyle, a strong belief in the Devil and witchcraft, the divisions within Salem Village, and the expectations of children.



Salem Witch Trials

Life in Salem : Religion and Witchcraft

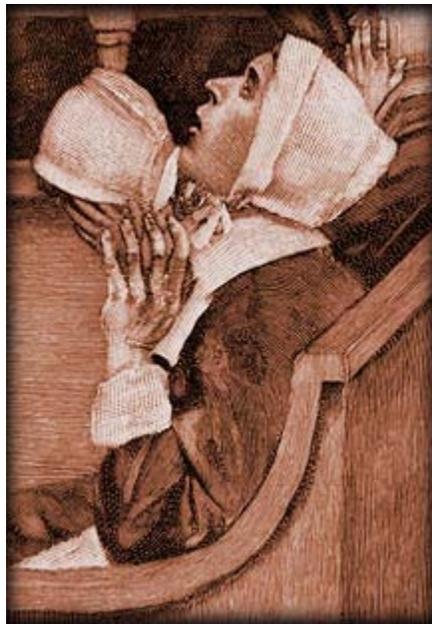
Church was the cornerstone of 17th century life in New England. Most people in Massachusetts were Puritans—colonists who had left England seeking religious tolerance. But the strict Puritan code was far from tolerant. It was against the law not to attend church—where men and women sat on opposite sides through long services. The Puritan lifestyle was restrained and rigid: People were expected to work hard and repress their emotions or opinions. Individual differences were frowned upon. Even the dark, somber Puritan dress was dictated by the church.

Since Puritans were expected to live by a rigid moral code, they believed that all sins—from sleeping in church to stealing food—should be punished. They also believed God would punish sinful behavior. When a neighbor would suffer misfortune, such as a sick child or a failed crop, Puritans saw it as God's will and did not help.

Puritans also believed the Devil was as real as God. Everyone was faced with the struggle between the powers of good and evil, but Satan would select the weakest individuals—women, children, the insane—to carry out his work. Those who followed Satan were considered witches. Witchcraft was one of the greatest crimes a person could commit, punishable by death.

In keeping with the Puritan code of conformity, the first women to be accused of witchcraft in Salem were seen as different and as social outcasts: Tituba, a slave; Sarah Good, a homeless beggar; and Sarah Osborne, a sickly old woman who married her servant.

Fear of magic and witchcraft was common in New England, as it had been in Europe for centuries. Over 100 alleged witches had been tried and hanged in New England during the 1600s. But the hangings in 1692 Salem would be the last ones in America.



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Life in Salem : Economic and Social Divisions

In 1692, Salem was divided into two distinct parts: Salem Town and Salem Village. Salem Village (also referred to as Salem Farms) was actually part of Salem Town but was set apart by its economy, class, and character. Residents of Salem Village were mostly poor farmers who made their living cultivating crops in the rocky terrain. Salem Town, on the other hand, was a prosperous port town at the center of trade with London. Most of those living in Salem Town were wealthy merchants.

For many years, Salem Village tried to gain independence from Salem Town. The town, which depended on the farmers for food, determined crop prices and collected taxes from the village. Despite the three-hour walk between the two communities, Salem Village did not have its own church and minister until 1674.

But there was also a division within Salem Village. Those who lived near Ipswich Road, close to the commerce of Salem Town, became merchants, such as blacksmiths, carpenters, and innkeepers. They prospered and supported the economic changes taking place. But many of the farmers who lived far from this prosperity believed the worldliness and affluence of Salem Town threatened their Puritan values. One of the main families to denounce the economic changes was the Putnams—a strong and influential force behind the witchcraft accusations.

Tensions became worse when Salem Village selected Reverend Samuel Parris as their new minister. Parris was a stern Puritan who denounced the worldly ways and economic prosperity of Salem Town as the influence of the Devil. His rhetoric further separated the two factions within Salem Village.

It is likely that the jealousies and hostilities between these two factions played a major role in the witch trials. Most of the villagers accused of witchcraft lived near Ipswich Road, whereas the accusers lived in the distant farms of Salem Village. It is not surprising that Reverend Parris was a vigorous supporter of the witch trials, and his impassioned sermons helped fan the flames of the hysteria.



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Life in Salem : Puritan Children

In 1692, children were expected to behave under the same strict code as the adults—doing chores, attending church services, and repressing individual differences. Any show of emotion, such as excitement, fear, or anger, was discouraged, and disobedience was severely punished. Children rarely played, as toys and games were scarce. Puritans saw these activities as sinful distractions.

But unlike young girls, boys had a few outlets for their imagination. They often worked as apprentices outside the home, practicing such skills as carpentry or crafts. Boys were also allowed to explore the outdoors, hunting and fishing. On the other hand, girls were expected to tend to the house, helping their mothers cook, wash, clean, and sew.

Many children learned to read, but most households owned only the Bible and other religious works—including a few that described evil spirits and witchcraft in great detail. There were a few books written for children, but these often warned against bad behavior and described the punishment that children would suffer for sinful acts.

Such was the world of Abigail Williams and Betty Parris during the long, dark winter of 1692. There was little to feed their imagination that did not warn of sin and eternal punishment. It is no wonder that the young girls were so captivated by Tituba's magical stories and fortune-telling games. These activities were strictly forbidden, which must have filled them with fear and guilt. This may have been one reason for their hysterical behavior. And at a time when young girls were forbidden to act out or express themselves, it is easy to see why they were so enraptured by the attention they received when they became "bewitched."

Of course, there were probably many factors behind the girls' actions. But what is more surprising than the accusations from these imaginative young girls is the reaction from the community. The girls may have sparked the witch hunt, but it was the adults who set the wheels into motion.



Salem Witch Trials

The People: Cotton Mather

The belief in witches and witchcraft was widespread in 1692 New England. One of the most ardent believers was Cotton Mather, a respected Boston minister who wrote on many religious topics.

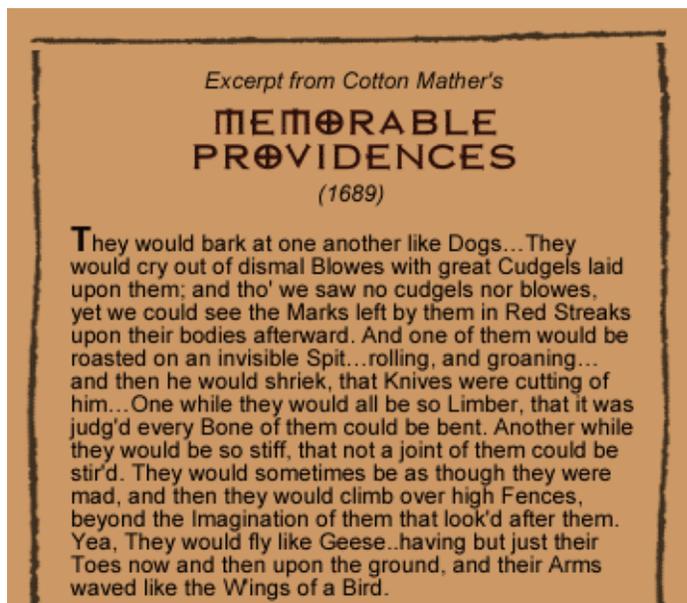
Mather's 1689 book, *Memorable Providences*, describes a case of supposed witchcraft that had occurred in Boston the previous year. Three children had begun acting strangely after a disagreement with an Irish washerwoman, Mary Glover. After examining the children, Mather concluded that they were innocent victims of Glover's witchcraft. The book was widely read throughout New England and was among the works in Reverend Parris's library. Even if the young "circle girls" who began the accusations had not read the book themselves, they were likely familiar with its contents.

But Mather played a much more direct role in the Salem Trials. His sermons and written works fanned the flames of the witchcraft hysteria. He declared that the Devil was at work in Salem, and that witches should face the harshest punishment.

His steadfast belief in witchcraft was perhaps no more apparent than at the hanging of George Burroughs, a former pastor of Salem Village. Just before he was hanged, Burroughs turned to the crowd and perfectly recited the Lord's Prayer—supposedly impossible for a witch or wizard. His dramatic prayer and claim of innocence drew tears and doubts from the spectators. Robert Calef describes Cotton Mather's reaction in his account, *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700):

[A]s soon as [Burroughs] was turned off [executed], Mr. Cotton Mather, being mounted upon a Horse, addressed himself to the People, partly to declare, that he was no ordained Minister, and partly to possess the People of his guilt; saying, That the Devil has often been transformed into an Angel of Light; and this did somewhat appease the People, and the Executions went on.

When the witch hunt subsided, the judges agreed to turn over the court records to Mather. Some were friends of Mather's and hoped his account would portray them favorably. In 1693, Mather recounted the trials in his book, *Wonders of the Invisible World*



Salem Witch Trials

The People: Ann Putnam Jr.

Twelve-year-old Ann Putnam was in many ways the leader of the “circle girls,” the young girls whose accusations sparked the Salem witch trials.

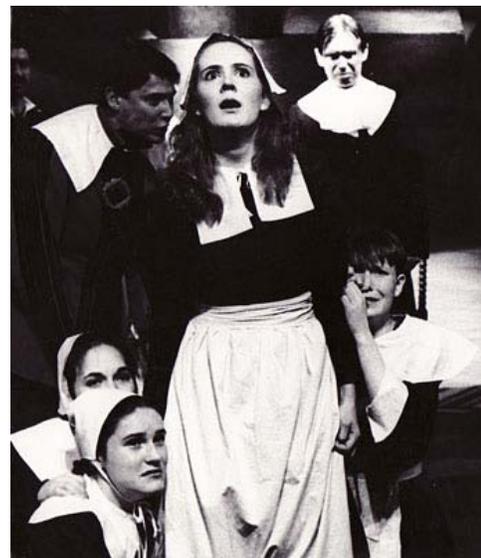
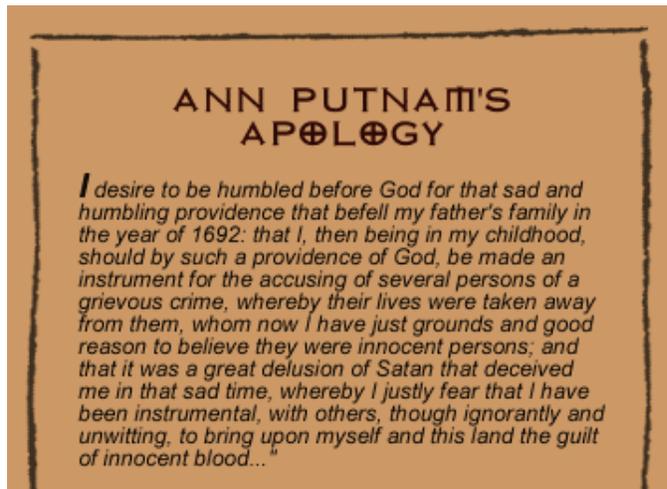
During the winter of 1692, the circle girls gathered secretly at Reverend Parris’s house for evenings of storytelling and magic with the Parris slave, Tituba. One of the fortune-telling games was to drop an egg white into a glass of water and see what shape it took. One evening, Ann saw the shape of a coffin. Soon afterwards Ann, Betty Parris, and Abigail Williams started behaving strangely—babbling, convulsing, or staring blankly.

Once diagnosed as victims of witchcraft, the girls were asked to identify their tormentors. Ann pointed fingers at Sarah Good and Sarah Osburne. She was also quick to testify against Tituba, claiming an apparition of the West Indian woman had “tortured me most grievously by pricking and pinching me most dreadfully.”

Ann’s next accusation surprised the village. She claimed to have been tormented by the spirit of Martha Corey, a solid member of the church. Despite the lack of hard evidence, Martha was sent to prison and was eventually hanged. But Ann’s bold accusation had sparked the fear that any one of the villagers could be a witch.

Ann accused many more in the coming months—including four-year-old Dorcas Good. Ann’s parents, Thomas and Ann, also accused dozens of townspeople of witchcraft—most of whom were enemies of the influential Putnam family. Two of Ann’s most shocking accusations—against the pious Rebecca Nurse and the former Salem pastor George Burroughs—may have been provoked by old family disputes.

By the time the witch hunt was over, Ann had accused 62 people. In the coming years, she would have a difficult life. Both her parents died, leaving her to raise her nine brothers and sisters on her own. But she did something none of the other circle girls would do—publicly acknowledge her role in the trials. In 1706 she stood before the church as the pastor read her apology.



Salem Witch Trials

The People: Tituba

In Puritan Salem Village—a place where anyone different was not trusted—Tituba was perhaps the most different among them. Not only was she a slave, which was unusual in the area, she was also a dark-skinned foreigner, setting her apart from the white Puritan villagers.

Tituba was born in a small village in South America, but as a child she was captured and taken to the Caribbean island of Barbados. There she was sold as a slave to Samuel Parris—a local merchant originally from New England.

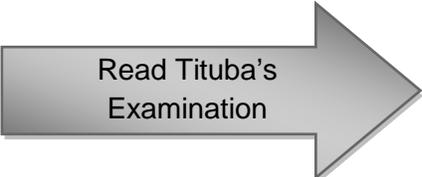
In 1680, Parris, Tituba, and another West Indian slave named John Indian moved to Boston. In Boston, Parris married, started a family, and became a minister. Tituba and John married in 1689, the same year that Parris moved the family to Salem Village to become their pastor.

Parris's wife Elizabeth had many duties as the pastor's wife and was often sick, so Tituba tended to the three children: Thomas, Betty, and Susannah. In the evenings Tituba entertained little Betty and her cousin Abigail Williams by the kitchen fire. She played fortune-telling games and told them stories of magic and spirits from the Caribbean. Such activities were strictly forbidden by Puritan code. But word secretly spread among the neighborhood girls, and soon a small group of girls—known as the “circle girls”—were joining Tituba around the fire.

That cold winter of 1692, Betty, Abigail, and Ann Putnam began exhibiting strange behavior—babbling, twitching, and convulsing—that was diagnosed as witchcraft. Tituba and John baked a “witch cake” with rye and Betty's urine and fed it to the dog. It was believed the dog was a “familiar,” or witch's helper, and by eating the cake, the spell would be broken and the identities of the witches would be revealed.

When pressed to identify their tormentors, the girls pointed to three social outcasts—including Tituba. Tituba denied practicing any witchcraft—she loved young Betty. But Reverend Parris beat his slave and demanded that she confess to the magistrates, promising her freedom if she cooperated. During her three-day examination, Tituba did confess to practicing witchcraft and claimed there were other witches in the village. Tituba was put in prison, but because she had confessed, she did not stand trial.

Parris did not keep his promise and refused to pay the fees to release Tituba. She stayed in prison until the following spring, when she was sold and taken away from Salem. Nothing else is known about Tituba. But it is believed that she and John had one child, a daughter named Violet, who lived in the Parris household until the reverend's death in 1720.



Read Tituba's
Examination

Salem Witch Trials

Excerpt from the
EXAMINATION OF TITUBA
*(from Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents
of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692.
Edited by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum)*

Judge: Did you never see the devil?
Tituba: The devil came to me and bid me serve him.
Judge: Who have you seen?
Tituba: Four women sometimes hurt the children.
Judge: Who were they?
Tituba: Goody Osburn and Sarah Good and I do not know who the others were. Sarah Good and Osburne would have me hurt the children but I would not.
Judge: When did you see them?
Tituba: Last night at Boston.
Judge: What did they say to you?
Tituba: They said, "Hurt the children."
Judge: And did you hurt them?
Tituba: No. There is four women and one man. They hurt the children and then lay all upon me and they tell me if I will not hurt the children they will hurt me.
Judge: But did you not hurt them?
Tituba: Yes, but I will hurt them no more.
Judge: Are you not sorry you did hurt them?
Tituba: Yes.
Judge: And why then do you hurt them?
Tituba: They say hurt children or we will do worse to you.
Judge: What have you seen?
Tituba: A man come to me and say serve me.
Judge: What service?
Tituba: Hurt the children. And last night there was an appearance that said Kill the children and if I would no go on hurting the children they would do worse to me
Judge: What is this appearance you see?
Tituba: Sometimes it is like a hog and some times like a great dog.
Judge: What did it say to you?
Tituba: The black dog said, "Serve me," but I said, "I am afraid." He said if I did not he would do worse to me.



Salem Witch Trials

The People: Sarah Good

Sarah Good was one of the first to be accused of witchcraft by the circle of young girls in Salem. She was a likely witch in the eyes of many townspeople—an odd homeless woman who did not fit the Puritan mold.

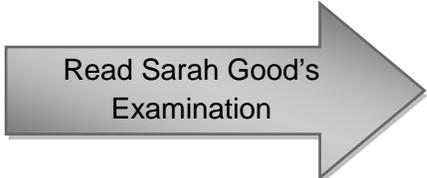
The people of Salem were very familiar with Sarah Good. She often begged door-to-door with her children. If she were refused, she would walk away mumbling. Many claimed these “curses” were responsible for failed crops and death of livestock.

On March 1, 1692, Sarah Good faced examination with two other accused witches, Sarah Osburne and Tituba, Reverend Parris’s Caribbean slave. During the questioning, Ann Putnam, Betty Parris, and Abigail Williams shrieked and fell into fits. Sarah Good pleaded, “I am falsely accused,” but then Tituba named her as a witch. Several villagers—including her own husband—also testified against her, and Sarah was put in prison.

Then on March 24, Ann Putnam accused Sarah’s five-year-old daughter, Dorcas, of witchcraft. When examined, the imaginative young child confessed that she and her mother were witches. She showed the magistrates a red spot on her finger—most likely a flea bite—claiming it was from a snake her mother had given her. Little Dorcas was put in prison, chained to a wall.

Sarah Good was tried on June 30. Despite no evidence other than the claims of the afflicted girls, she was found guilty. She was one of five women to be hanged on July 19, 1692. Just before the hanging, the other women prayed and asked God to forgive the accusers, but Sarah Good showed no sign of forgiveness. Local minister Reverend Nicholas Noyes urged her to confess, announcing that she was indeed a witch. Sarah Good replied: “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.”

Twenty-five years later, Reverend Noyes died of internal bleeding, choking on his own blood.



Read Sarah Good's
Examination

Salem Witch Trials

Excerpt from
**THE EXAMINATION
OF SARAH GOOD**
(March 1, 1692)

Judge John Hawthorne: What evil spirit have you familiarity with?
Sarah Good: None.
Hathorne: Have you made no contract with the devil?
Good: No.
Hathorne: Why do you hurt these children?
Good: I do not hurt them. I scorn it.
Hathorne: Who do you employ then to do it?
Good: No creature, but I am falsely accused.
Hathorne: Why did you go away muttering from Mr. Parris his house?
Good: I did not mutter but I thanked him for what he gave my child (Dorcas).
Hathorne: Have you made no contract with the devil?
Good: No.

[Hathorne asked the children to look upon her, and see, if this were the person that had hurt them and so they all did look upon her and said this was one of the persons that did torment them--presently they were all tormented.]

Hathorne: Sarah Good, do you not see now what you have done why do you not tell us the truth, why do you thus torment these poor children?
Good: I do not torment them,
Hathorne: Who do you employ then?
Good: I employ nobody. I scorn it.
Hathorne: How came they thus tormented?
Good: What do I know? You bring others here and now you charge me with it.
Hathorne: Why? Who was it?
Good: I do not know but it was some you brought into the meetinghouse with you.
Hathorne: We brought you into the meetinghouse.
Good: But you brought in two more.
Hathorne: Who was it then that tormented the children
Good: It was Osburne.



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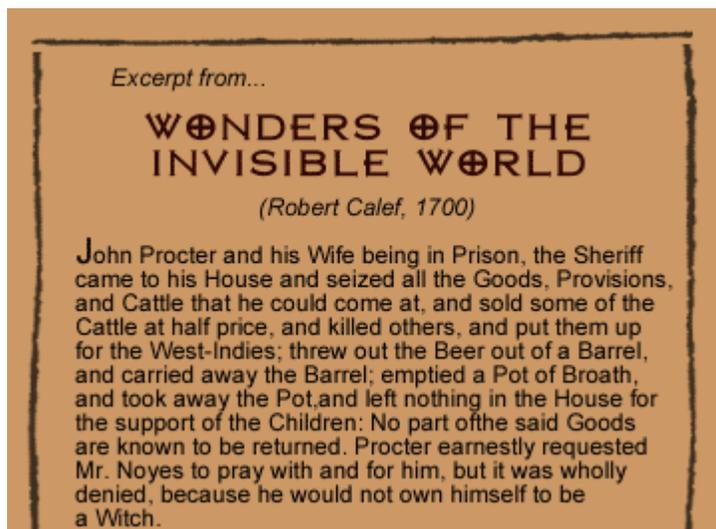
The People: John Proctor

Not everyone in Salem supported the witch trials. Wealthy farmer John Proctor sternly denounced the proceedings and warned against listening to the young girls. When his maidservant, Mary Warren, began to have fits, he sat her down at her sewing wheel and threatened to beat her unless she stopped. But as the hysteria grew, Mary's fits returned.

After the examination of Rebecca Nurse—the pious grandmother accused of witchcraft—Proctor was enraged, saying: “If they [the afflicted girls] were let alone, so we should all be devils and witches.” Such comments were eventually used against him. Some townspeople believed that someone with so little concern for the afflicted girls must be guilty himself.

But Proctor's wife Elizabeth was accused first. As John staunchly defended her innocence at the trials, the girls suddenly pointed their fingers at him—the first man to be named a wizard. Mary Warren confirmed the accusations against him. The only evidence against them was spectral—the afflicted girls claimed the Proctor's apparitions, or specters, were tormenting them. Their hysterics proved enough for the court, and both John and Elizabeth were imprisoned.

Proctor wrote an impassioned letter to the Boston clergy, claiming “we are all innocent persons.” He described the unfairness of the court proceedings and how torture was used to extract confessions. His letter may have made an impact on the clergy, but it was not in time to affect the trials. On August 5, both John and Elizabeth were found guilty. Elizabeth's life would be spared because she was pregnant. But John was hanged on August 19, 1692.



Salem Witch Trials

The People: Mary Easty

Mary Easty, a wife and a mother of seven, was well respected in Salem. She was a kind, religious woman whose dignified demeanor fit the strict Puritan mold. But even she was not safe from the hysteria. In April 1692, she was accused of witchcraft.

The accusation shocked the village. Unlike some of the other alleged witches, she was not a social outcast or an outspoken woman who may have offended the villagers. Perhaps the accusation was inspired by envy—the Eastys owned a valuable farm in Salem—or maybe Mary was a likely target after the conviction of her sister, Rebecca Nurse.

Mary was calm and respectful during her examination, but the afflicted girls' cries were insistent, and she was sent to prison. She was set free a few days later, but Mercy Lewis cried out that Easty's apparition was strangling her. Her fit was so severe, Mary was put back into jail.

On September 9, Mary Easty was tried and condemned despite her plea: "I never complied, but prayed against [Satan] all my days ... I will say it, if it was my last time, I am clear of this sin." Before her execution, she wrote a letter to the judges asking that "no more innocent blood be shed." Her letter raised sympathy and doubt in Salem Village, but could not prevent the last round of hangings.

Easty and seven others were carted to Gallows Hill on September 22. John Calef described the scene in *More Wonders of the Invisible World*:

Mary Easty, Sister also to Rebecka Nurse, when she took her last farewell of her Husband, Children and Friends, was, as is reported by them present, as Serious, Religious, Distinct, and Affectionate as could well be expressed, drawing Tears from the Eyes of almost all present.

