

*History*  
UNFOLDING

# THE WITCHES OF SALEM



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**MindSparks**  
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	.....	2
<b>Lesson 1</b>	An Age of Inquisition .....	4
<b>Lesson 2</b>	Troubled Times in Puritan New England.....	8
<b>Lesson 3</b>	Accusers, Witches, Judges .....	12
<b>Lesson 4</b>	Salem: The Aftermath.....	16
<b>Appendix</b>	Image Close-ups .....	21

# Introduction

## What Happened at Salem?

“We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” Franklin Roosevelt made this point to a nation unravelling in the midst of the worst economic crisis of this century. Yet, along with paralyzing fear, real dangers also did beset Americans at that time.

A much better target for FDR’s warning would have been the residents of Salem, Massachusetts, in January of 1692. For they were about to descend into a deadly community-rending nightmare of utterly groundless fears and accusations. Of course, in the late 1600s, people still did have a name for such terrors—and that name was “witch.” In fact, the 15th and 16th centuries were the high point of fears about witchcraft in Europe. The outburst in Salem was actually one of the last of its kind. But why Salem?

We do know some of what contributed to the sense of foreboding in Salem Village in 1692. Warfare with the Indians along the New England frontier had been widespread in recent years. The old Puritan order was starting to fade. Ties within New England’s close-knit towns were fraying. A sense that things were falling apart was in the air. Yet these factors only take us so far. For as quickly as the hysteria swept through Salem, just as quickly did it pass. Human weakness and human strength were both nurtured within this community. In this sense, the story of Salem is a warning to us all that good and evil exist side by side, and that good can never be taken for granted.

The 12 visual displays we have chosen here focus on many of these aspects of the story of the Salem witch trials. The visuals are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three displays to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **An Age of Inquisition**

The persecution of heretics and witches reached its high point during the centuries of Reformation and the wars of religion. The illustrations here focus on this broader context for the events in Salem.

### **Troubled Times in Puritan New England**

New England’s strict Puritan faith, Indian troubles along the frontier, social and economic tensions with Salem itself—all these and more made the townsfolk highly anxious and open to the idea that all their problems might have a supernatural cause.

### **Accusers, Witches, Judges**

The illustrations here all focus on aspects of the witch hysteria itself—the behavior and motives of the accusers, the approach taken by the judges, the different responses of the hundreds who were all falsely accused.

### **Salem: The Aftermath**

For a year, the hysteria spread out from Salem. Even at its height, there were many who had doubts about the accusations. Then, the colony came to its senses. Outwardly, life was not all that different in it after 1692. But in part because of the crisis, something had changed forever.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*The Witches of Salem*

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**OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will better understand the historical context for the Salem witch trials.
  2. Students will consider reasons for the increase in fears about witchcraft in Europe in the 1500s and 1600s.
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# An Age of Inquisition

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*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

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**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

Religious intolerance has a long history, not only in Europe and the West, but throughout the world. The Salem witch trials erupted toward the end of that history. This horrifying illustration is of an earlier, somewhat different form of persecution. It pictures some executions ordered by the Spanish Inquisition. From the 1200s on, the Catholic Church was increasingly worried about heresy. And its various Inquisitions were aimed mainly at finding and punishing heretics, not witches. The Spanish Inquisition was especially brutal. It had more to do with the political goals of Spain's rulers than with the purely religious concerns of the Church. But in general, the Inquisitions indicate that fears about threats to religious unity were rising in Europe even before the Reformation.

**Illustration 2**

The Reformation divided Europe and changed its history drastically. In England, it led to a three-way conflict between Catholics, Anglicans and various sects who wanted to "purify" the official Anglican Church. This illustration is a book cover from 1645, during the English Civil War. In it, King Charles I and an Anglican bishop protect the tree of religion as a Jesuit strips its bark and Cromwell's Puritans dig up its roots and cut its branches. The scene illustrates the bitter rivalry between Catholicism and Europe's Protestant political rulers, as well as the clash between those rulers and other Protestant sects they could not control. The illustration depicts a spirit of bitter rivalry that triggered many religious wars throughout Europe in this Reformation era.

**Illustration 3**

A belief in witches with magical power to do harm has been found in many cultures. In Christian Europe, this belief also included the idea that witches were agents of the devil—and therefore not simply a threat to individuals. They endangered the entire community, if not Christianity itself. As in other cultures, women were seen as more likely than men to become witches. The two centuries after the Reformation were actually the high point of witchcraft fears. Tens of thousands were burned at the stake or executed in other ways. Cultural and social change in these years may have left people feeling uneasy and cut off from one another, a good setting for fostering fears of witches and their evil powers.

## Lesson 1—An Age of Inquisition

# Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### **Discussing the Illustration**

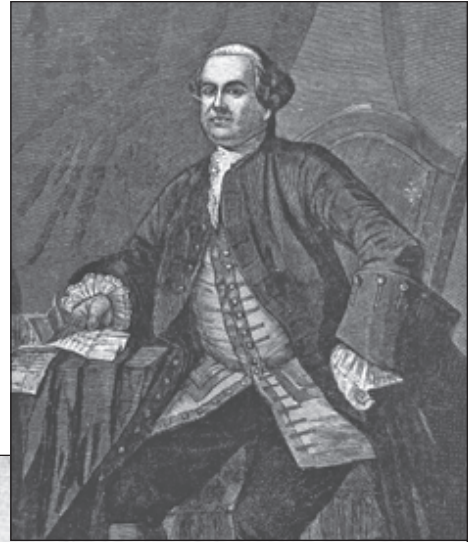
1. This horrible scene is an example of what sometimes happened to heretics in Europe in the Middle Ages and later. What is meant here by the word “heretic”?
2. In this illustration, a number of heretics are being burned at the stake. This punishment was carried out often by the rulers of Spain in the late 1400s. But these rulers claimed to be acting for the sake of the one organized church that at that time controlled religious life of Europe. Can you name that church?
3. In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church set up a special tribunal to stop heresy. Can you give the name of that tribunal?
4. The Inquisition was especially cruel in Spain. Can you think of why this was so? In general, why do you think the Church and many kings and queens in Europe approved of such cruel methods against heresy?

### **Follow-up Activities**

1. **Small-group activity:** The Inquisition of the Middle Ages differed in many ways from the so-called Spanish Inquisition agreed to by the Pope in 1478. Your group should learn more about both versions of the Inquisition. Prepare a brief report in which your group takes a stand for or against this statement: “The entire Catholic Inquisition should not be unfairly blamed for the worst excesses of the Spanish Inquisition.”
2. Learn more about the methods used in the various Inquisitions to force heretics to confess. Make a list of all of these methods. Now divide the methods into two groups. One of these groups should be made up of all the methods you think would be allowed in courts today. The other group should include all those methods that would not be allowed in courts today. Discuss your two groupings with the entire class.

## Salem: The Aftermath

# Illustration 2



Courtesy of the  
Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress