

American History on the Screen

Film and Video Resource



Wendy S. Wilson and Gerald H. Herman



User's Guide
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UNIT 1

The Colonial Experience

TEACHER'S GUIDE

THREE SOVEREIGNS FOR SARAH

Nightowl Productions, 1986; directed by Philip Leacock, color, 172 minutes

BACKGROUND OF THE FILM

This three-episode video was originally presented on public television. It is based on extensive research into the period of the Salem witch trials, notably the book *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum. The outbreak of hysteria in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, which resulted in the execution of 19 people as witches, has been the subject of many books, stories, and plays such as *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. This film looks at this event as part of a series of social and political disputes that occurred in Salem.

As early as 1700, Robert Calef wrote an analysis of the witch trials in Salem Village (now Danvers, Massachusetts) that pointed to the serious social divisions in the village itself and the opposition felt by many villagers against the more worldly and affluent port, Salem Town. The inland Salem Village was far more rural, and it was subordinate to the influences of Salem Town. In 1689, Salem Village chose a new minister, and this engendered a division within the village itself. The man ultimately selected was Reverend Samuel Parris, a failed merchant who had never held a position in a church. A dispute between pro-Parris and anti-Parris factions left deep scars in the village community. Parris's most outspoken supporter was Thomas Putnam. Very vocal in his opposition to Parris was Joseph Putnam, Thomas's stepbrother, who had inherited their father's wealth.

The film uses this rivalry as a focal point, again based on the research by Boyer, Nissenbaum, and others.

The theory presented is that the "afflicted" children began their accusations as a game. The adults then used the girls' afflictions and accusations as a way to get back at their enemies, especially those who had opposed Parris. Thomas Putnam's wife, Ann, was particularly instrumental in the accusations. She sought to avenge herself over the loss of her husband's inheritance as well as losses in her own family. Ann Putnam's family had lost land and status to a family of three sisters, Rebecca Nurse, Mary Easty, and Sarah Cloyce. The movie presents these village divisions through the narration of the surviving sister, Sarah Cloyce, as she strives to clear her sisters' names.

The film's dialogue is based on original transcripts of the trial and Sarah's diary. The costumes, buildings, locations, and props attempt to be faithful to the late 1600s in America. Many of the original locations were used in Salem, Danvers, and Ipswich, Massachusetts. The script also gives a good glimpse of the fundamental religious nature of life in Puritan Massachusetts.

SYNOPSIS OF THE PLOT

Since it was made to be a television series, this film is in three episodes. Episode One begins in Boston in 1703. A woman in ill health, Sarah Cloyce, has come with her nephew, Samuel Nurse, to testify before magistrates at a private hearing. Sarah wishes to clear her sisters' names from the charge of witchcraft. She tells the judges a story of conspiracy and

family rivalry in Salem Village, which were the factors that led to the accusations of witchcraft.

In a flashback, the story returns to June 1689, when Salem Village was picking a new minister for its meetinghouse. Thomas Putnam wants Reverend Samuel Parris. He is opposed by his stepbrother, Joseph Putnam, one of the wealthiest village landholders. In November of 1689, Parris does become minister. He preaches his first sermon, in which he equates his supporters with holiness. In February 1692, Parris's daughter Betty, his niece Abigail Williams, and Ann Putnam, Jr., begin to have fits after practicing crystal reading with Tituba, Parris's West Indian slave. When a doctor is sent for, he proclaims that the children are bewitched. The children are finally brought together in Thomas Putnam's house, and they name Tituba and two other women as witches.

During her testimony in 1703, Sarah explains to the judges how these girls were influenced by their guardians. The names came from adults such as Ann Putnam, rather than from the children themselves.

Back again in 1692, Sarah is visiting her ailing sister, Rebecca Nurse. She is joined by her other sister, Mary Easty. Rebecca's son, Samuel, and Joseph Putnam arrive to tell Rebecca that she is to be arrested for witchcraft.

Episode Two begins in March 1692, with an examination held in the Salem Village meetinghouse. The girls and Ann Putnam accuse Rebecca of being a witch. When the girls have fits, Rebecca is sent to trial for witchcraft along with Sarah Good, another woman of Salem Village.

When Samuel Parris preaches an inflammatory sermon, Sarah stands up and leaves, slamming the door behind her. The children then have fits and name Sarah as their tormentor. Sarah is later arrested. She is stripped and searched for devil's marks. She is then brought before the magistrate to be examined. The children once more have hysterical fits and name Sarah as a witch. Sarah is taken to prison to await trial.

As Joseph and Samuel ride to find help, they pass an elderly man, Giles Corey, being pressed to death for refusing to plead either guilty or innocent of being a wizard.

In prison Sarah meets Tituba, who has confessed to being a witch. Tituba shows Sarah the wounds she has from being beaten until she confessed. More and more of the accused are filling the prison. As the episode ends, Mary Easty is arrested for witchcraft.

Episode Three begins with Mary Easty being acquitted for lack of evidence. She is rearrested, though, and thrown into prison when another child names her. The evidence used is "spectral evidence"—the claim that Mary's specter has been tormenting the child, the most difficult charge for defendants to deny. Rebecca Nurse is found guilty and sentenced to death. She is brought before her minister, Nicholas Noyes, and excommunicated. On July 19, 1692, Sarah Good and Rebecca Nurse are hanged.

Mary Easty is next brought to trial and found guilty. As time goes on, surrounding towns borrow the afflicted girls to point out witches in their communities. Despite the power of the girls, Parris's influence erodes and he loses his salary. On September 22, many more accused witches are hanged, not just from Salem but other towns as well. Mary Easty is executed.

Sarah is taken from prison in Salem to a private jail to relieve overcrowding. Her health deteriorates in the poor conditions of her confinement. Finally, Samuel and Peter Cloyce come to free Sarah; the governor has issued a general pardon to all those accused. Ministers above Parris have rejected spectral evidence as proof of witchcraft.

The program moves forward again to 1703. Sarah presents evidence of a conspiracy to the magistrates. The judges state that while years may pass before any final judgment will be made on the accused, she and her sisters are absolved from wrong. They give Sarah three gold sovereigns as a symbol, one for each of the three sisters wrongly accused of witchcraft. The story ends with Sarah telling what happened to the primary

accusers after the witch trials. Mary's and Rebecca's names were completely cleared in 1711, and in 1712 Rebecca's excommunication was overturned. Sarah Cloyce died three weeks after the hearings and was buried with the three gold sovereigns.

IDEAS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

The American colonies saw one of the last major outbursts of witchcraft hysteria in the civilized world. A good focus for class discussion might be to discern why this was so. Was Europe so far ahead intellectually due to the Scientific Revolution? Did the upheaval caused by the rise of the new scientific view of the world encourage a search for scapegoats? Or was there something inherent in American Puritanism that could account for this? *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller would be an appropriate reading to accompany the viewing of this film. In writing his play Miller was protesting the witch trial-like hysteria of the McCarthy era. Perhaps the social, economic, and political background of events in Salem Village can account for the witchcraft trials, as suggested by Boyer and Nissenbaum in their book, just as McCarthy's outbursts were influenced by the political events of his day. Is the desire for human gain or the desire to find someone to blame for unsettling change the unifying force in both cases?

BOOKS AND MATERIALS RELATING TO THIS FILM AND TOPIC

Boyer, Paul S., and Stephen Nissenbaum. *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.

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

Weisman, Richard. *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in 17th Century Massachusetts*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.

Zeinert, Karen. *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1989.

OTHER MEDIA RESOURCES FOR THIS TIME PERIOD

The Crucible (1996, 123 minutes) Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder star in this Arthur Miller screenplay set in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692; it is a parable of Senator Joseph McCarthy's Communist witchhunts of the 1950s.

The Last of the Mohicans (1992, 114 minutes) Retells James Fenimore Cooper's frontier story, replacing the racism of the original with a careful recreation of European–Native American relations at the time of the French and Indian War; the film is rated **R** because the violence of that conflict is realistically portrayed.

Mayflower (1970, 90 minutes) A made-for-television movie with Anthony Hopkins as the ship captain and Richard Crenna as William Brewster, this film tells about the Pilgrims' decision to emigrate and the voyage to the New World.

Plymouth Adventure (1952, 102 minutes) This film deals with the founding of the Massachusetts colony.

Roanoke (1986, 180 minutes) A three-part, made-for-television movie about the early contacts between English explorers and settlers and the Algonquian-speaking native population along the North American coast of what is now North Carolina; the story is told through the relationship between the Roanoke governor and artist John White and two native warriors, Wanchese and Manteo.

The Scarlet Letter (1972, 94 minutes) Based on Hawthorne's classic tale of adultery in seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts

Squanto: A Warrior's Tale (1994, 102 minutes) The story of the Native American who befriended the Pilgrim settlers



UNIT 1

**The Colonial
Experience**

— **THREE SOVEREIGNS FOR SARAH** —

Nightowl Productions, 1986; directed by Philip Leacock

Major Character	Actor/Actress
Sarah Cloyce	Vanessa Redgrave
Samuel Nurse	Ronald Hunter
Reverend Samuel Parris	Will Lyman
Rebecca Nurse	Phyllis Thaxter
Mary Easty	Kim Hunter
Chief magistrate	Patrick McGoohan
Joseph Putnam	John Dukakis
Thomas Putnam	Daniel von Bargen
Ann Putnam, Sr.	Maryann Plunkett

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

This made-for-TV movie deals with an episode in American history that is both fascinating and repellent to many—the Salem witch trials of 1692. The film captures accurately the events of the time using the manuscripts of the trials and Sarah Cloyce’s diary for dialogue. It also gives us a glimpse of historical detective work into the past to uncover why these witchhunts may have started. The hysterical accusations of witchcraft, which pitted neighbor against neighbor in Salem Village (now Danvers), Massachusetts, has been a subject of investigation and hypothesis for three hundred years. Two historians, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, believe that they have successfully explained the reason for the start of these witchcraft accusations and for such widespread acceptance of the claims that caused hundreds of people to be accused of being witches.

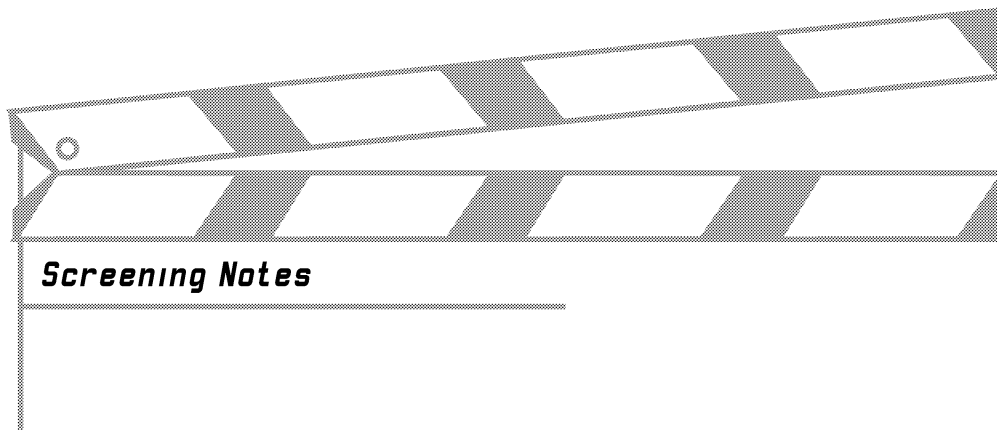
(continued)

UNIT 1: The Colonial Experience *(continued)*



Boyer and Nissenbaum's well accepted theory is that there was a division in Salem Village in the 1690s that pitted its less well-to-do people against their neighbors in the nearby and affluent Salem Town. The supporters of the controversial minister of Salem Village, Reverend Samuel Parris, particularly Ann Putnam, had personal and family grievances over land and inheritance against many of the accused who did not support Parris. The main character, Sarah Cloyce, sets out this theory in order to exonerate her two older sisters, Rebecca Nurse and Mary Easty, who were hanged for practicing witchcraft.

Note the costumes, props, buildings, and settings. These are accurate recreations of seventeenth-century New England. Note also the importance of religion in this Puritan community. An interesting comparison could be made between our court system today and justice as it was practiced in 1692.



UNIT 1

**The Colonial
Experience**

— **THREE SOVEREIGNS FOR SARAH** —

VOCABULARY

excommunication

magistrate

meetinghouse

Puritan

restitution

specter

witchcraft

QUESTIONS BASED ON THE FILM

1. What happened in England in 1688 that has affected the colonies and caused them, in Sarah's words, to "feel adrift"?

2. What economic and cultural differences are there between Salem Village and Salem Town?

3. Why does Ann Putnam have grievances against Sarah Cloyce's family?

(continued)

UNIT 1: The Colonial Experience *(continued)*



4. According to Sarah, why is Rebecca accused of witchcraft?

5. What are the tests for sorcery that are used at Sarah's trial? _____

6. Why does Tituba confess to being a witch? _____

7. Why is the sentence of excommunication the worst punishment for Rebecca Nurse?

8. Why do the witchhunts finally stop? _____

9. What evidence of a conspiracy does Sarah present to the magistrates at Boston in 1703?



UNIT 2

The American Revolution

TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE PATRIOT

Columbia Pictures Corporation, 2000; directed by Roland Emmerich, color, 157 minutes

Note: This film is rated **R** due to the violence of the battle scenes, but is contained in many educational video catalogs. You may wish to use a parental permission form.

BACKGROUND OF THE FILM

For such a formative period in our nation's history, the American Revolution is featured in many fewer films than the western expansion of America or the Vietnam War. *The Patriot* is a film with all of the elements of a commercially viable Hollywood movie: adventure, drama, color, romance, and a "good triumphs over evil" ending. It is also a film for which considerable effort was made to place the story within a historically accurate frame. To achieve this end, the production staff engaged several departments of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History to advise them on such things as uniforms, weapons, battle formations, furniture, and the many aspects of eighteenth-century American life portrayed in the film.

Recommendations from Smithsonian personnel often took the story in new directions. For example, the chairman of the museum's cultural division suggested that a good hiding place for the Martin family could have been a maroon village. There were many of these hidden communities established by runaway slaves; they were held together by the Gullah language, a patois of native West African languages

and English. Maroon villages usually were not located on the water, as shown in the film, but deep in the woods and swamps. The coastal location was chosen by filmmakers for its esthetic look—one of a few compromises made between historical accuracy and visual appeal.

The costumes, weapons, and battle tactics were carefully researched. Actors had to learn to load and fire the six-foot-long muskets. (In fact, because of the long reloading intervals and relative inaccuracy of these weapons, the authentic eighteenth-century military tactic of lining armies up to face each other was not quite as suicidal as it appears today.) Contemporary reenactors were used as extras to portray colonial-era soldiers; they were then multiplied by computer-generated special effects. The scenes in which cannon balls roll or bounce into a line is based on fact. Cannon balls did not explode upon impact, as is the common misconception; they killed people by the force of contact, causing the loss of body parts. Chain shot was used to wipe out larger numbers of an advancing line of soldiers. One costume change made by the filmmakers was to have the British Green Dragoons wear mostly red coats instead of green; this was to make it clear to the audience that these men were on the British side.

Students will doubtless want to know about the bundling bag that Gabriel is sewn into in order to spend the night with Anne without any impropriety. This was true to the time period. In colder climates, couples courted in the warmth of a bed with a bundling board separating them.

The main characters in the film, with the exception of Lord Cornwallis, are not real historical figures, but they are very often based upon real people or composites of several people. Mel Gibson's character is a composite of several Revolutionary War heroes who used unconventional (later called "guerilla") tactics against the better armed and trained British, who regarded them as operating beyond the pale of civilized warfare. The models for Gibson's character include Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, Daniel Morgan, Andrew Pickens, and Elijah Clark. Marion, known as the Swamp Fox, had his own militia and used surprise tactics against the British much as the Ghost does in this film. The chief villain, Colonel Tavington, is based upon Lieutenant Banastre Tarleton. Tarleton was known for his cruelty in having Americans killed even after they had put down their arms and surrendered. However, the extreme brutality shown to the civilian population in the film was not practiced by Tarleton, although he was generally known as the Butcher. This misrepresentation caused a good deal of criticism in the British press when the film was released in the United Kingdom.

Another inaccuracy in the movie is that slaves were *not* automatically granted their freedom by either the British or the Continental army if they fought. Some slaves did serve in their masters' places and could be granted freedom for this deed, but most slaves who fought actually returned to bondage. Yet, the American Revolution did see the last integrated army until the Korean War. According to the filmmakers, the last scene of the movie is symbolic as Martin arrives to find the former bigot and the former slave working together to rebuild his house. The underlying mission of the American Revolution was the building of freedom for all people—a task which some might argue has still not been completed even today.

SYNOPSIS OF THE PLOT

The hero of this film is Benjamin Martin, a widower with six children who lives on his farm in South Carolina. A veteran of the French and Indian War, Benjamin feels guilty about his role in that

conflict and does not wish to join the revolution as either a Loyalist or a Rebel. The film opens in 1776, with a post rider arriving at the Martin's farm with mail. An assembly has been called in Charles Town (now known as Charleston); as a result, the entire Martin family goes to the city. Benjamin attends the assembly, but he declares that he will not fight, despite encouragement from his former comrade Harry Burwell, who is serving as a Rebel officer. South Carolina votes to join the war; Benjamin's oldest son, Gabriel, enlists in the Continental Army.

Back at the farm some time later, a letter arrives from Gabriel. He writes that things are going badly for the colonial regulars. As the family eats dinner, Gabriel actually staggers in, wounded from a local battle between the British Green Dragoons and the Virginia Regulars. As Benjamin watches, a battle rages just outside; he takes in the wounded from both sides.

The leader of the Green Dragoons, Colonel Tavington, orders the Martins' house and barn to be burned. He captures Gabriel to have him hanged and orders that the Rebel wounded be killed. When Benjamin's 15-year-old son, Thomas, tries to save his brother, Tavington shoots and kills him. Then, as the house burns, Benjamin rushes in and gathers up his weapons from the French and Indian War. He and his two younger sons hide in the woods, ambush the British troops, and rescue Gabriel. Benjamin slaughters a British soldier with a tomahawk in a wild frenzy of anger and grief. At the British camp, a survivor tells Tavington that the slaughter has been the work of just one man, and at this point Benjamin is labeled the Ghost.

Benjamin takes his family to Aunt Charlotte's (his sister-in-law's) plantation. Gabriel goes off to rejoin the army; Benjamin then decides to go after him. They watch from an abandoned house as the colonial army under General Gates is soundly defeated by the British regulars at the Battle of Camden (August 1780). Benjamin meets with the only officer left on the American side, Colonel Harry Burwell, and tells him the cause is lost unless the Rebels stop trying to