



Season of the Witch

The truth is scarier than fiction

Halloween is traditionally a time to embrace scary things. We go on haunted hayrides, television is overrun with horror movies and we invite witches, ghosts and media monsters into our homes. Parents even allow their children to take candy from costume-clad strangers.

The town of Salem, Mass., sees an increase in tourism this time of year as townspeople exploit the infamous witch trials of the late 17th century. While the haunted houses and witch walks of today's Salem might seem frightening, they pale in comparison to what actually happened there long ago.



The University of Virginia's library maintains an electronic archive of the Salem Witch Trials at etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft. While most people have heard of the trials, they're probably not familiar with the details. The website shines a light into some of the darker shadows of human history.

'Afflicted' children

From February 1692 to April 1693, Salem and other towns in the Massachusetts Bay area succumbed to a mob mentality that cost at least 25 people their lives. Many more were deprived of their freedom, rights and property.

The madness was set in motion by the accusations of two young girls who lived with the Rev. Samuel Parris, who was embroiled in a dispute with many of the villagers. The girls, along with children of some of the minister's supporters, claimed they were "afflicted" by certain villagers.

When prayer failed to cure the children's erratic behavior and contortions, a village doctor proclaimed they were suffering from the "evil hand." An overzealous prosecutor relying on "spectral" evidence, a presumption of guilt and confessions extracted through torture started sending those judged to be witches to jail or the gallows.

At first, it was people on the bottom of the social ladder that were victimized. Slaves, single mothers and women who didn't hew to the male-dominated society had little chance of mounting a defense. When the accusations started to climb the ladder and affect people of means and status, pressure was brought to bear on the governor and the trials were ended.

Thoroughly documented

The website tells the story using contemporary articles, historical documents, court transcripts, correspondence, maps and pictures. The site's overview section does a good job of telling the tale.

Reading the historical documents, such as court transcripts or hand written arrest warrants, is interesting, but the old-time language and handwriting make it a bit of a chore.

Maps on the site range from period maps of Salem and surrounding towns to modern interactive maps that allow you to track the trials with a timeline. There are also links to many literary works that have the trials as their subject.

Another section contains brief biographies of many of the people involved with the trials. This includes judges, defendants, witnesses, supporters and critics of the trials, and even some of the "afflicted" children. A collection of paintings and drawings depicting events related to the trials adds an element of drama to the coverage.

Nothing bewitching

The Salem Witch Trials site has a simple design and navigation. It's straightforward and academic-looking with no spooky type or broom-riding witches. The home page is a collection of text and image links that take you to other areas of the site. They're logically organized into categories such as documents, maps, people, etc.

The first two layers of the site, meaning the home page and the pages linked directly to it, are unified in design and navigation. Once you click through to deeper layers the unity starts to fall apart. After three or four clicks the design is all over the place and you have to start using the back button to return to the home page. Many links take you away from the site completely.

That's a pet peeve of mine. I prefer sites with standard navigation controls throughout and that open off-site content in a separate window.

While this site doesn't look like anything special at first, it's actually pretty engaging once you dig in.

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