



October 31, 2002

They Called It Witchcraft

By Mary Beth Norton

ITHACA, N.Y.— In 17th-century New England, almost everyone believed in witches.

Struggling to survive in a vast and sometimes unforgiving land, America's earliest settlers understood themselves to be surrounded by an inscrutable universe filled with invisible spirits -- both benevolent and evil -- that affected their lives. They often attributed the sudden illness of a child, a household disaster or a financial setback to a witch's curse. The belief in witchcraft was, at bottom, an attempt to make sense of the unknown.

While witchcraft was often feared, it was punished only infrequently. In the first 70 years of the New England settlements, about 100 people were formally charged with being witches; fewer than two dozen were convicted and fewer still were executed.

Then came 1692. In January of that year, two young girls living in the household of the Rev. Samuel Parris of Salem Village began experiencing strange fits. The doctor identified witchcraft as the cause. After weeks of questioning, the girls named Tituba, Parris's female Indian slave, and two local women as the witches who were tormenting them.

Judging by previous incidents, one would have expected the episode to end there. But it didn't. Other young Salem women began to suffer fits as well. Before the crisis ended, 19 people formally accused others of afflicting them, 54 residents of Essex County confessed to being witches and nearly 150 people were charged with consorting with the Devil. What led to this remarkable outcome?

Traditionally, historians have argued that the witchcraft crisis resulted from factionalism in Salem Village, deliberate faking, or possibly the ingestion of hallucinogens by the afflicted. I believe another force was at work. The events in Salem were precipitated by a conflict with the Indians on the northeastern frontier, the most significant surge of violence in the region in nearly 40 years.

In two little-known wars, fought largely in Maine between 1675-1678 and 1688-1699, English settlers suffered devastating losses at the hands of the Wabanaki Indians and their French allies. Most of Maine was abandoned twice, in 1676 and 1690, not to be resettled thereafter for decades.

The key afflicted accusers in the Salem crisis were frontier refugees whose families had been wiped out in the wars. These young women said they saw the Devil in the shape of an Indian. In testimony, they accused the witches' reputed ringleader -- the Rev. George Burroughs, formerly pastor of Salem Village and of several Maine parishes -- of bewitching the soldiers sent to fight the Wabanakis.

It is worth noting that while Tituba, one of the first people accused of witchcraft, has traditionally been portrayed as a black or mulatto woman from Barbados, that was not the case. All evidence points to her being an American Indian. Her contemporaries uniformly referred to her as Indian. In addition, most slaves in Massachusetts at the time were indigenous to North America -- transported from Spanish missions in Florida and the Georgia sea islands.

To the Puritan settlers, who believed themselves to be God's chosen people, witchcraft explained why they were losing the war so badly. Their Indian enemies had the Devil on their side. His diabolical assistance allowed them to lay waste to frontier settlements -- and then disappear.

In late summer, some prominent New Englanders began to criticize the witch prosecutions. In response to the dissent, Gov. William Phips of Massachusetts in October dissolved the special court he had established to handle the trials. But before he stopped the legal process, 19 people (14 women, five men) had been hanged. Another man was crushed to death by stones for refusing to enter a plea and thereby acknowledge the court's authority over him. Eight more of the accused had been convicted but not yet hanged; they survived because Phips reprieved them several months later.

The governor still believed in witches, but he concluded that much of the spectral evidence presented at the trials had been "the Devil's testimony" and so could not be trusted. Visions of witches had diabolical, not divine, origins. That made the identification of the spectral torturers suspect, for the Devil could appear in the shapes of innocent men and women. Accordingly, when the trials resumed in 1693 in the regular Massachusetts courts, the judges no longer accepted spectral evidence. Yet juries still convicted three more of the accused. Phips reprieved them, too.

The war with the Indians continued for six more years, though sporadically. Slowly, northern New Englanders began to feel more secure. And they soon regretted the events of 1692. Within five years, one judge and 12 jurors formally apologized as the colony declared a day of fasting and prayer to atone for the injustices that had been committed. In 1711, the state compensated the families of the victims. And last year, more than three centuries after early Americans reacted to an external threat by lashing out irrationally, the convicted were cleared by name in a Massachusetts statute. It's a story worth remembering -- and not just on Halloween.