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If ever there were witches, men and women in covenant with the Devil, here are multitudes in New England. - Reverend Samuel Parris, - 1692.1

Looking back at Seventeenth Century colonial America, several key events grab the imagination...One occurrence, however, lurks in the dark days of the early 1690's. That event is the Salem witch trials of 1692. This episode stands out among the others as a brutal and backward looking mistake in (the) course of American history. The history of this period is indeed tragic, but, nevertheless, it still inspires great interest...To find the true cause of the Salem witch trials, one must fit all these strands together like a jigsaw puzzle. In doing this, it becomes obvious that this unfortunate episode is one of the most complex in colonial American history...

...Many people believed that witches made a covenant (**definition: a formal signed and sealed agreement or contract**) with the Devil, from whom they acquired their magic powers... After the Reformation, fear of the Devil tremendously increased in England. Most Englishmen believed in a physical, tangible Devil. One Englishman believed that the Devil was the "prince and God of this world." **This historical tradition of witchcraft beliefs is the first piece of our puzzle...**

...In English tradition, the first statute against witchcraft was implemented in 1542...in 1604...a new and more brutal act against witchcraft was passed. The 1604 act remained in force until 1736. If found guilty under the 1604 statute, the sentence was death...**the legal background of witchcraft is a very important piece of the puzzle of Salem.**

Before we move on to New England and Salem, we must see the episode in perspective. While ultimately twenty people were killed in Salem, over ten thousand people were executed for witchcraft in Europe during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries alone. In looking back at the Salem episode, it is sobering to remember that the Salem affair was only the "tip of the iceberg."

With the English background in mind, we must now examine the attributes of witchcraft in New England...A New England witch tended to be a woman who was middle aged and of "humble" social status...Added to this was the fact that most accused witches, male and female, had disagreeable or self-assertive personalities. It was this type of person who was first accused of witchcraft in Salem.

One of the most important aspects of the woman-witch, one that would figure prominently in the Salem trials, had to do with property...several women in Salem owned property or stood to own property. The female property owner upset the Puritan social order, and made these women vulnerable to witchcraft accusations. All over New England, but in Salem in particular, conflicts between sons who believed that the real property of their deceased fathers was theirs, and widows who held that property (or whose new husbands held it) could and often did cause a great deal of resentment. These conflicts only contributed to the witch craze in Salem.

While the events in Salem are familiar, a brief review of the episode is in order. It began quietly in the kitchen of the Reverend Samuel Parris, in Salem Village, Massachusetts; a group of young girls and a slave from the Caribbean named Tituba were trying to determine what their future husbands would be like. Utilizing a primitive crystal ball, the girls saw something that terrified them: "a specter in the likeness of a coffin." Soon the girls began to experience "odd postures", "foolish, ridiculous speeches,: "distempers," and "fits." While at first Parris and others sought medical explanations, they soon determined that the girls were under the spells of the witches. The girls initially gave up three names, Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osbourne, all of whom roughly corresponded to the usual conception of a witch. While the others denied the charges, Tituba soon confessed, and the women were locked up. However, the girls' fits did not stop. Ministers came to examine the situation, which appeared to cause the girls even more fits.

As the Spring went on, more people became afflicted, and more people were accused of witchcraft. The Salem jail began to fill with witches...The first trial...of Bridget Bishop, returned a guilty verdict...Bishop was hanged. The trials...when they finally ended in September, due to the direct intervention of several Massachusetts ministers, and Governor Phips, there had been 141 accusations, and twenty people were dead. Part of the reason that the trials were eventually stopped was that the accusers began to accuse people whose status...was so firmly established that people no longer believed them.

To begin to fit together the pieces of Salem's puzzle, we will start with the afflicted people: what exactly was happening to them? They were believed to be possessed...the afflicted girls would claim to be tempted to sign the Devil's "Book," they asserted that the touch of the accused witch would halt their fits...

...It is possible that the afflicted were experiencing some type of mental aberration...but the idea of a mass mental illness not only ignores previous witchcraft trials, but witchcraft outbreaks in other societies.

Ergotism is another explanation of exactly what the afflicted persons were going through in 1692. Briefly, ergotism is a disorder which comes from eating contaminated rye bread, which was prevalent in Salem. Ergot contains some elements of lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD, and it is alleged that this element caused very vivid hallucinations which were interpreted as possession. Indeed, it is alleged that the spectral evidence (the vision of a witch appearing to a possessed person) bears great similarity to ergot inspired hallucinations...While the idea of ergotism holds a certain appeal, it is an unsatisfactory answer to what was happening. In fact, when one remembers the thousands of accused witches in Europe, and the witchcraft cases in New England before Salem, the idea of ergotism cannot stand. Joseph Klaits, an historian of European witchcraft, states that the claims of ergotism rest on "a long chain of unlikely assumptions."

A more plausible explanation has to do with psychology and physiology. Very often people do things for reasons unknown, even to themselves. The world of Salem was a world in which the existence and powers of demons and devils was rarely questioned...Anthropologists have observed similar possession behavior in many different cultures...These kinds of behaviors (feelings of choking, being bitten, strange postures) can emerge in times of severe stress, which Salem Village was experiencing in 1692..."If the ordinary means of coping [with emotions and stress] fail...the unconscious takes over." Very often, **neurotic stress can produce strange symptoms which cannot be traced to physical causes...**

...While it is true that what was happening to the afflicted people is an important piece of the puzzle, a more important piece has to do with those who interpreted what was happening...(They) believed that the girls were possessed and that the accused had considerable magic power...The adults observing the afflicted people assumed witchcraft almost from the beginning. **It is possible that if those adults had given a different interpretation of these events, the whole episode might never have happened.**

Since it was very easy for an accuser to become accused, many people who had been accused of witchcraft in the past began to accuse others. In addition, if a person were to withdraw their accusation, they could be accused of witchcraft themselves. Therefore, the magistrates who presided over the trials both encouraged solidarity among the afflicted and they were a major cause of the fast expansion of accusations...Add to this a willingness to believe any accusation, and it becomes evident that the adults and magistrates play an extremely important part in the story.

To understand **the most important piece of the puzzle**, one must first realize that **Salem was a divided community**. It was divided into Salem Town, which was a port town to the southeast, and Salem Village, bordering the town, (Salem Village) was a farm town to the west...by 1672 the two communities were different socially and economically, but politically they were...one unit. To worship, the Villagers had to travel to the Town, as the Village had no meeting house of its own. For many years the Village agitated for independence. The Town...managed to prevent it. By 1672, a compromise was reached: the Village could have its own meeting house and pastor, but it was still politically connected to the Town. The situation bred serious tension which would erupt with a vengeance twenty years later in 1692.

By 1692 Salem...was poisoned by factionalism (factionalism). Samuel Parris arrived in Salem...in 1691 to be its new minister, and only two weeks later, he managed to gain the support of one faction, and the enmity of another...For most of 1692, the supporters of Parris held political control of the Village, and it was they who were in charge of the witchcraft trials. What began as a political controversy soon became a search for witches. "The witchcraft episode did not generate the divisions within (Salem), nor did it shift them in any fundamental way, but it laid bare the intensity with which they were experienced, and heightened the vindictiveness with which they were expressed."

Why was this factionalism so vicious in Salem? To answer this question, the first place to begin is an examination of the characteristics of the two factions. First, it is apparent that membership in the Salem Village had a clear connection...An overwhelming number of church members supported Parris...Second, in terms of wealth, the wealthier a (person) was, the more likely he was to oppose Parris...Third, and most importantly, the geography...**Those...living in the eastern end...opposed Parris; those who lived in the western edge...supported the minister...**

...although the first accused witches conformed to the established pattern of witchcraft, soon all classes of people began to be accused of witchcraft, first with the arrest in March and subsequent execution of Rebecca Nurse. Nurse was married to a man with a valuable estate...and she had acquired a reputation of unquestioned piety in the community...The success in accusing...encouraged the afflicted persons to continue their accusations...

...An interesting and revealing fact is that while the accusers were still predominantly afflicted girls, it is clear that they were not acquainted with many of the people they were accusing. Often, an adult would suggest a name to a possessed girl, and she would confirm that name. With this in mind, a geographic pattern begins to emerge. In Salem...there were fourteen accused witches; twelve of them lived in the eastern part of it. Thirty two adult Villagers supplied testimony against them. Of these, only two lived in the eastern part of the Village. Twenty nine Villagers either publicly showed skepticism about the trials or defended some of the witches. Twenty four of them lived in the eastern section of the Village. The pattern that emerges is: **for the most part, the western half of the Village was accusing the eastern half of the Village of witchcraft...**

...Why would the factionalism present in Salem Village lead to an outbreak of witchcraft accusations?...While Salem Village and Salem Town were extremely dependent on each other...The western part of the Village had a much more rural base than the eastern part of it...land was becoming more scarce in the western part of the Village, as fathers continued to divide their lands among their children...later generations...had much less chance of acquiring economic prosperity than their fathers...the western Villagers were becoming to feel that their interests were being neglected by the Town and its supporters, creating an almost *under siege* mentality...

...As the Town's economic interests expanded, so did its political influence, relative to the Village (*to the west*). People who lived in the Town were over represented...in Salem's government. The rise...fueled the resentment of the more rural Villagers...

...The residents of Salem were Puritans, and to Puritans, a community was not just a collection of people, it was an entire living organism, living under a covenant (*definition: a formal signed and sealed agreement or contract*) with God. If a person were to pursue a private interest, perhaps at the expense of the good of the community, they were not "behaving properly." In this society, where images of a tightly knit community were slowly being replaced by an image of a society where individual achievement was stressed...Salem Town represented "a looming moral threat with implications of the fundamental sort." **In recognizing this conflict between a world view which was fading and a world view which was on the rise, the true nature of the bitterness and animosity with which the two sides viewed each other finally emerges.** The western group of Villagers were engaging in an ultimately doomed attempt to preserve a rural and Puritan ideal...

...many of the accused witches confessed, especially after the Court...declared that those witches who confessed would not be executed. These confessions were often attained...sometimes by torture...the act of confession held...significance...For a Puritan to renounce the Devil and regenerate himself or herself, in an important way allowed the community to regenerate itself. Confession allowed the community to restore its belief in its covenant with God, against an evil, demonic conspiracy...it also allowed them to purge their own guilt over their actions during these trials...

...While there are several other minor pieces of the puzzle which could be added, we have examined the major ones. There are several pieces: medieval witchcraft beliefs, unexplainable (at the time) psychological phenomena, resentment towards women owning land, and most importantly, severe, obsessive factional disputes. Any of these factors alone would not have caused the witchcraft trials; but the convergence of all these factors in the same place and the same time produced one of the more tragic episodes in colonial American history. The answer to the question of how did the Salem witch trials occur is a complex one. It cannot be explained in a simple sentence, such as:

"It was caused by Pro-Parris versus Anti-Parris factions doing battle with each other,"

(or)

"It was caused by a historical tradition of witch hunts."

(or)

"It was caused by the pre-modern tradition fighting against a coming modern tradition."

(or)

"It was caused by an ignorant reaction to a psychological problem."

The Salem witch trials occurred because all of these things interacted with each other, producing a sad and terrible result.