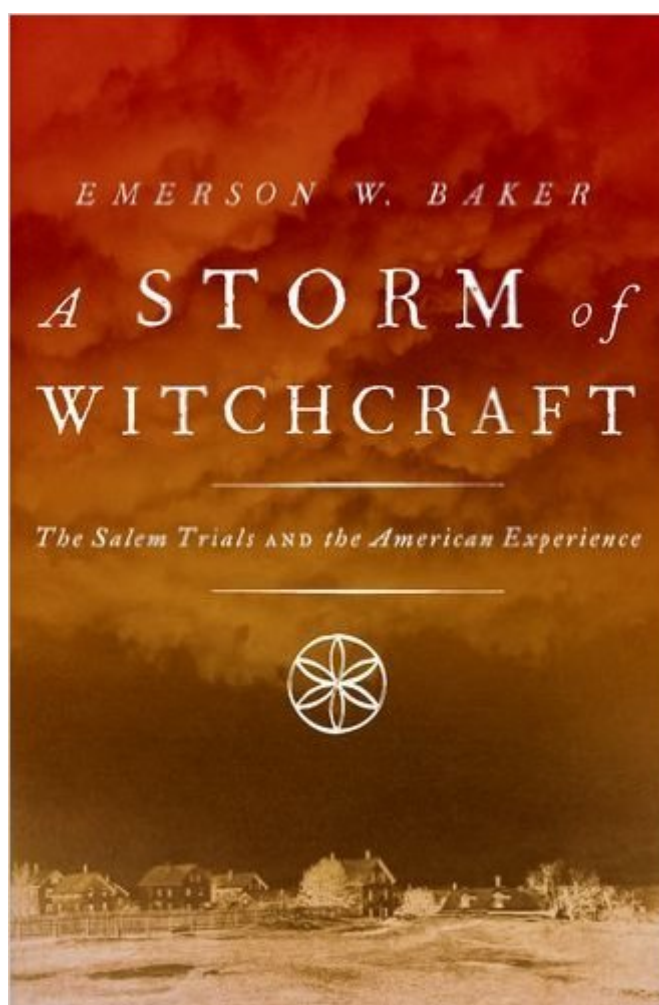


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A Storm Of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials And The American Experience (Pivotal Moments In American History)



Synopsis

Beginning in January 1692, Salem Village in colonial Massachusetts witnessed the largest and most lethal outbreak of witchcraft in early America. Villagers--mainly young women--suffered from unseen torments that caused them to writhe, shriek, and contort their bodies, complaining of pins stuck into their flesh and of being haunted by specters. Believing that they suffered from assaults by an invisible spirit, the community began a hunt to track down those responsible for the demonic work. The resulting Salem Witch Trials, culminating in the execution of 19 villagers, persists as one of the most mysterious and fascinating events in American history. Historians have speculated on a web of possible causes for the witchcraft that started in Salem and spread across the region--religious crisis, ergot poisoning, an encephalitis outbreak, frontier war hysteria--but most agree that there was no single factor. Rather, as Emerson Baker illustrates in this seminal new work, Salem was "a perfect storm": a unique convergence of conditions and events that produced something extraordinary throughout New England in 1692 and the following years, and which has haunted us ever since. Baker shows how a range of factors in the Bay colony in the 1690s, including a new charter and government, a lethal frontier war, and religious and political conflicts, set the stage for the dramatic events in Salem. Engaging a range of perspectives, he looks at the key players in the outbreak--the accused witches and the people they allegedly bewitched, as well as the judges and government officials who prosecuted them--and wrestles with questions about why the Salem tragedy unfolded as it did, and why it has become an enduring legacy. Salem in 1692 was a critical moment for the fading Puritan government of Massachusetts Bay, whose attempts to suppress the story of the trials and erase them from memory only fueled the popular imagination. Baker argues that the trials marked a turning point in colonial history from Puritan communalism to Yankee independence, from faith in collective conscience to skepticism toward moral governance. A brilliantly told tale, *A Storm of Witchcraft* also puts Salem's storm into its broader context as a part of the ongoing narrative of American history and the history of the Atlantic World.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

At last! A search for truth in a field flooded with myths, misconceptions and mistakes. In a crowded field with countless books available about the Salem Witch Trials this may well be the most comprehensive and best one yet. The author demonstrates a rich knowledge of documented historical evidence and primary sources. Emerson Baker, professor of history at Salem State University and former dean of its graduate school, draws upon his other fields of expertise in this outstanding book. Also a historical archaeologist, he is at home in the 17th century having dug deep in dirt in Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire and Virginia to discover and interpret early American material culture. With a colleague, John Reid, he published a biography of Sir William Phips, who served as Royal Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony during the Salem Trials. Readers will learn that Phips was better at building forts and fighting Native Americans and French than at government administration. In 1692 156 residents of Essex, Middlesex and Suffolk Counties were formally accused of practicing witchcraft, a capital crime. 113 were imprisoned. 20 persons were put to death and at least 5 died in prisons in Boston, Cambridge, Ipswich and Salem. Previous authors have attempted to analyze how it came about putting forth various points of view. Baker disproves popular ideas such as that the so-called Afflicted Girls were infected with ergotism or rye fungus. Other recent explanations range from Lyme disease to "Arctic Hysteria in Salem" having taken place during "a Little Ice Age."

I have to rate this book five stars for the amount of research author Emerson Baker has put into it along with how he organized the chapters throughout the book. I like the fact the author divided the book into chapters such as a general history of Salem in addition to chapters on those accused of witchcraft, the accusers, the judges, the search for atonement, and modern-day Salem as it relates to its infamous history. Reasons for the 1692 hysteria were many. Puritans believed their religion was the best and, therefore, the devil would work hardest at destroying it. Crop failures may be blamed on witchcraft along with the heathen practices of the Indians. Boredom among the girls,

illness which caused an early death, and the intolerance of the Puritans towards those of other religions were many. To the Puritans the only thing worse than a witch was a Catholic. Quakers who ventured into the Massachusetts Bay Colony risked execution. Like today neighbors didn't always get along and vengeance may be gained by accusing another individual as a witch. Author Baker also provides research into the search for forgiveness upon citizens of Salem for seeing the error of their ways. Interesting tidbits are provided regarding the family tree of individuals are given such as author Nathaniel Hawthorne being a direct descendant of Judge John Hathorne. Possible reasons are given why author Nathaniel added the "w" to his last name are provided. Israel Putnam, who fought in the Battle of Bunker Hill and author of the quote, "Don't shoot 'til you see the whites of their eyes" would be a descendant of the Salem Putnam family as would patriot Nathan Hale of the Reverend John Hale of Salem.

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