An Unsolved Crime: The Salem Witch Trials

In the colony of Massachusetts in 1692, 19 innocent men and women were hanged for witchcraft. An old man was pressed to death under heavy stones for refusing to stand trial. Four other died in jail as they awaited trial. How did a village get caught up in such madness? What really caused this hysteria in 1692?

**Your group has been hired as the “Cold Case” detective unit to try and figure out exactly what happened over 300 years ago in Salem, MA. Read the information below, which contains many important facts that may have contributed to this insanity, then create a theory stating what you believe caused the village of Salem to kill 24 people for being “witches.”**

Read the following information that remains in the “case file,” pulling out important clues that may have lead to the witch trials occurring and getting so out of hand. Pay close attention to some of the phrases that have been underlined for you. How might these things have contributed to the paranoia and drama?

**Evidence Set A: Life in Salem, Massachusetts, 1692**

Twenty-four innocent victims lost their lives in the Salem witchcraft hysteria. How did the community of Salem let this tragedy happen? Was it simply fear and superstition, or were there other factors at work?

The events of 1692 took place during a difficult and confusing period for Salem Village. As part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Salem was under British rule. When the hysteria began, the colony was waiting for a new governor and had no charter to enforce laws. By the time the new governor, William Phips, arrived in Massachusetts, the jails were already filled with alleged witches. To make matters worse, New England towns were under attack by Native Americans and French Canadians.

Salem Village faced daily challenges closer to home as well. Most families had to support themselves, making their own clothes, planting vegetables, raising meat. Farming was often a painstaking task in the harsh climate and rough, rocky terrain—and a drought or flood could ruin a year’s harvest. An epidemic of small pox could kill a family. In a world where people saw the Devil lurking behind very misfortune, it is little wonder they believed evil spirits were at work.

**Clues you found in the above section (what did you read and infer that might have added to an environment that lead to such** **violence):**

1.

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4.

**Evidence Set B: Religion and Witchcraft in 1692**

Church was the cornerstone of 17th century life in New England. Most people in Massachusetts were Puritans— colonists who had left England seeking religious tolerance. But the strict Puritan code was far from tolerant. It was against the law not to attend church—where men and women sat on opposite sides through long services. The Puritan lifestyle was restrained and rigid. People were expected to work hard and repress their emotions or opinions. Individual differences were frowned upon. Even the dark, somber Puritan dress was dictated by the church.

Since Puritans were expected to live by a rigid moral code, they believed that all sins—from sleeping in church to staling food—should be punished. They also believed God would punish sinful behavior. When a neighbor would suffer misfortune, such as a sick child or a failed crop, Puritans saw it as God’s will and did not help.

Puritans also believed the Devil was as real as God. Everyone was faced with the struggle between the powers of good and evil, but colonists believed that Satan would select the weakest individuals—women, children, the insane—to carry out his work. Those who followed Satan were considered witches. Witchcraft was one of the greatest crimes a person could commit, punishable by death in the 17th century.

In keeping with the Puritan code of conformity, the first women to be accused of witchcraft in Salem were seen as different and as social outcasts: Tituba, a Caribbean slave; Sarah Good, a homeless beggar; and Sarah Osborne, a sickly old woman who married her servant.

Fear of magic and witchcraft was common in New England, as it had been in Europe for centuries. Over 100 alleged witches were tried and hanged in New England during the 1600s, with the hangings in 1692 Salem being the last ones in America.

**Clues you found in the above section (what did you read and infer that might have added to an environment that lead to such violence**):

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**Evidence Set C: Puritan Children**

In 1692, children were expected to behave under the same strict code as the adults—doing chores, attending church services, and repressing individual differences. Any show of emotion, such as excitement, fear, or anger, was discouraged and disobedience was severely punished. Children rarely played, as toys and games were scarce. Puritans saw these activities as sinful distractions.

But unlike young girls, boys had a few outlets for their imagination. They often worked as apprentices outside the home, practicing such skills as carpentry or crafts. Boys were also allowed to explore the outdoors, hunting and fishing. On the other hand, girls were expected to ten to the house, helping their mothers cook, wash, clean, and sew.

Many children learned to read, but most households owned only the Bible and other religious works—including a few that described evil spirits and witchcraft in great detail. There were a few books written for children, but these often warned against bad behavior and described the punishment that children would suffer for sinful acts.

Such was the world of Abigail Williams and Betty Parris during the long, dark winter of 1692. There was little to feed their imagination that did not warn of sin and eternal punishment. It is no wonder that the young girls were so captivated by Tituba’s magical stories and fortune-telling games. These activities were strictly forbidden, which must have filled them with fear and guilt. This may have been one reason for their hysterical behavior. And at a time when young girls were forbidden to act out or express themselves, it is easy to see why they were so enraptured by the attention they received when they became “bewitched.”

Of course, there were probably many factors behind the girls’ actions. But what is more surprising than the accusations from these imaginative young girls is the reaction from the community. The girls may have sparked the witch hunt, but it was the adults who set the wheels into motion.

**Clues you found in the above section (what did you read and infer that might have added to an environment that lead to such violence**):

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**Do your detective work**!

Now it’s time to start doing some real detective work. Using the Internet and based on what you have read, create a general list of key players from the Salem Witch Trials to serve as a prime suspect list. Remember, a suspect is anyone you are interested in interviewing to find out their involvement in the situation. List at least 8 suspects below.

1.

2.

3.

4.

Imagine that you are able to interview these suspects. Create five questions you would want to ask in your interrogation:

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2.

3.

4.

5.

Thinking back on what you have read and discussed with your detective team, and now putting all of your clues together, form a theory regarding what you believe caused the Salem Witch Trials to occur. Be clear, be specific, and back up your theory with examples from the text. Your team will present your theory to the rest of class in an attempt to convince them that you alone halve solved the case. Use notebook paper to brainstorm and prepare your group’s final theory.