

Salem Witch Crisis: Summary

The Salem witchcraft crisis began during the winter of 1691-1692, in Salem Village, Massachusetts, when Betty Parris, the nine-year-old daughter of the village's minister, Samuel Parris, and his niece, Abigail Williams, fell strangely ill. The girls complained of pinching, prickling sensations, knifelike pains, and the feeling of being choked. In the weeks that followed, three more girls showed similar symptoms.

Reverend Parris and several doctors began to suspect that witchcraft was responsible for the girls' behavior. They pressed the girls to name the witches who were tormenting them. The girls named three women, who were then arrested. The third accused was Parris's Indian slave, Tituba. Under examination, Tituba confessed to being a witch, and testified that four women and a man were causing the girls' illness.

The girls continued to accuse people of witchcraft, including some respectable church members. The new accused witches joined Tituba and the other two women in jail.

The accused faced a difficult situation. If they confessed to witchcraft, they could escape death but would have to provide details of their crimes and the names of other participants. On the other hand, it was very difficult to prove one's innocence. The Puritans believed that witches knew magic and could send spirits to torture people. However, the visions of torture could only be seen by the victims. The afflicted girls and women were often kept in the courtroom as evidence while the accused were examined. If they screamed and claimed that the accused witch was torturing them, the judge would have to believe their visions, even if the accused witch was not doing anything visible to the girls.

Between June and October, twenty people were convicted of witchcraft and killed and more than a hundred suspected witches remained in jail.

