

## **Theory #1: Could a disease have caused the accusations?**

Is it possible that the girls had contracted an illness that caused their strange behaviors and led to the witchcraft accusations? It might seem crazy, but take a moment to review the evidence before making your decision! Some historians believe the girls contracted ergotism, a form of poisoning caused by the ingestion of rye grain containing the fungus known as ergot.

Rye is the most common grain that can become infected with ergot. Once infected, the rye grain develops dark, hard, and drawn-out structures. The poisonous ergot then replaces the rye on the grain. The ergot fungus needs warm and damp conditions, and it is believed that the marsh-like conditions in and around Salem were a haven for the ergot fungus.

Once consumed, the ergot fungus begins to wreak havoc on the human body. Europeans living in the Middle Ages actually nicknamed the early symptoms of ergot poisoning as “Holy Fire” (“holy” comes from the belief that it was a punishment from God and “fire” comes from the burning sensations that shortly followed consumption). Extreme forms of ergotism can lead to severe infections in the arms and legs, however the most common symptoms include seizures, convulsions, and hallucinations. In fact, the dangerous drug known as LSD can be extracted from ergot. But, is it possible this caused the witchcraft allegations?

First, it is very possible (and likely) that ergot populated the Salem countryside simply because the damp, marshy environment made for an ideal situation for the fungus to thrive. Second, the Salem community relied on rye production and distribution. If ergot did exist, it is almost certain they would have been contaminated. Third, the afflicted girls complained in court about pinching, biting, or burning sensations, all of which are consistent with the symptoms associated with ergotism. Is it possible that the afflicted girls had ergotism and accused others of witchcraft because of their strong belief in witches? Why did nobody else experience the same sensations?

1. What is ergot, how does it grow, and where does it grow?

2. What symptoms might one experience if ergot was consumed?

3. What factors point to ergot poisoning as the reason behind the witchcraft accusations?

4. Are you convinced the ergot caused the hysteria? Why or Why Not?

## Theory #2: Could Jealousy have caused the accusations?

Like many communities around the world, the neighborhood where you live might give someone a clue as to your economic status. For example, would you expect a doctor or a worker at a gas station to live in a gated community (where you need to show a badge and enter through a gate)? Obviously, this lifestyle seems to fit more with the doctor. A similar situation existed in Salem in 1692.

Despite still being considered as one community in the late 1600s, there was quite a difference between those who lived in Salem Village and those in Salem Town. Salem Village was more **rural** (country setting) as it existed on the outskirts of town. People here had more farmland, were generally poorer, and had more conservative values than those living in Salem Town. Those living in Salem Town were more prosperous, educated, and generally more respected than those who lived in Salem Village. As the population increased, the divide between these two communities continued to grow until Salem Village asked to separate from Salem Town and create their own community.

When Salem Village asked for independence from Salem Town, a great deal of fuss took place. Salem Village produced the food for the area, so those in Salem Town grew very concerned. However, the businessmen in Salem Town set crop prices, and many lashed out by lowering prices to punish the farmers in Salem Village. Once finally separated from Salem Town, Salem Village appointed a new reverend, Samuel Parris, to lead their church. His early sermons spoke about the power of the devil, and he even convinced the residents of Salem that the devil lived among them. Soon after, the first accusations of witchcraft took place. The accusers (those who called people witches) lived in Salem Village, while those who were accused lived along Ipswich Road, the dividing line between the Village and the Town. Is this an example where jealousy and the desire for revenge caused the hysteria? Or, is this just a coincidence?

1. How were Salem Village and Salem Town different? How were they similar?
2. What factors might have caused resentment between Salem Village and Salem Town?
3. How did the separation of Salem Village from Salem Town cause more strife between the communities?
4. Are you convinced that jealousy and the division between these two communities caused the accusations?

### **Theory #3: Could the strict adherence to their religion have caused the accusations?**

To New England Puritans, church was the center of daily life. In fact, it was a crime, often punishable by a fine, for not attending services on the Sabbath (day of rest). The Puritans were so committed to their religion that they refused to accept anyone of differing beliefs. Roger Williams, for example, was **banished** for suggesting the colony have a separation church and state.

Every moment of Puritan life reflected their commitment toward their faith. The church taught people to crush their emotions, opinions, and to ignore individual differences. Anyone who stepped outside these boundaries risked being labeled as possessed by the devil. Even the dark, plain, and somber clothing style that Puritans wore was dictated by the church. It is easy to see just how much influence the church had over Puritan life.

Puritans, due to their strict adherence to their religion, believed that individuals would be punished by God for their actions. When a neighbor was faced with a setback, such as an illness, a death in the family, or even a failed crop, people believed it was God's will and they did not try to intervene. They believed that God was making things right by punishing the person for a sin.

Is it possible that Puritans, with their intense devotion to their faith, caused harm to others? Is this what was responsible for the witchcraft accusations? Well, let's look at the facts. Puritans strongly believed in the existence of the devil. They also believed that witches were real and were in league with (or helped) the devil corrupt the world. Puritans were also convinced that witches lived in Salem, and that any person could easily be impersonated by the devil. Women, it was believed, were the most likely to be corrupted since they were viewed as weak; to Puritans, the devil could easily persuade women to do his evil deeds. Even the bodies of those who were accused of witchcraft were examined to find possible "portals" for Satan to enter the body - they looked for moles, warts, or birthmarks.

**Banish** (ban-ISH): to send someone away from a country or an area as punishment

**Dictate** (dict-tate): to issue an order, or impose a set of rules on something

1. What are at least three words you would use to describe Puritan life?

2. What are two examples you can provide to show how strict the Puritans followed their religion?

3. When witchcraft accusations began in Salem, how did the Puritan religion reinforce the idea that these accusations were real?

4. Are you convinced that the Puritans were too committed to their religion?