

Understanding the Records of the Salem Witch Trials

A **primary source** provides direct or firsthand evidence about an event, object, person, or work of art. Primary sources include historical and legal documents, eyewitness accounts, speeches, diaries, etc. Below is an overview of significant primary sources relating to the Salem witchcraft trials.

Court Documents:

Many, though not all, of the legal documents produced during the Salem witch trials survive. These documents include pre-trial examinations, arrest warrants, depositions given at trial, prison expense lists, execution warrants, and petitions for restitution. Unfortunately, the transcriptions of the trials themselves have not survived, though historians have been able to piece together what happened in many cases due to the survival of the depositions and brief descriptions given by contemporary writers.

The Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project is a helpful database that contains digitized scans of many (though not all) of the documents produced during the witchcraft trials. This website also includes transcriptions of letters written during the trials, sermons given by Reverend Samuel Parris, excerpts from the diary of Samuel Sewall (one of the magistrates in 1692), and maps of the area: <https://saalem.lib.virginia.edu/home.html>

In 2009, a group of dedicated historians meticulously compiled a collection of the known records of the Salem witch trials. *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* presents transcriptions of these documents in chronological order. This work also contains fantastic information about the process of working with these documents, a detailed introduction to the legal system of colonial Massachusetts, and more:

<https://www.archives.gov/nhprc/projects/catalog/salem-witch-hunt>.

Eyewitness Accounts

In addition to the court documents, there were several essays and important books produced by contemporary witnesses.

Throughout 1692, several letters and essays were circulated by prominent gentlemen of the colony. Salem Village's former minister **Deodat Lawson** described the events early on in 1692. As the panic escalated, **Thomas Brattle**, **Reverend Increase Mather**, and **Samuel Willard**, asked the magistrates to reconsider the evidence used during the trials in works of their own. Mather and Willard specifically argued that spectral evidence and folk tests should not be allowed, nor should the testimony of the afflicted witnesses.

Reverend Cotton Mather wrote the court sanctioned account of the trials, which argues they were a necessary measure for public safety. Though Mather was not present for any of the trials, nor was he involved beyond a peripheral capacity, he was given access the court papers and instructed by the Governor to compile this account. **Robert Calef** provides an important counter perspective, as he wrote a scathing account of the witchcraft trials and was highly critical of Cotton Mather's book (as the title of his work would suggest). Calef was in Salem during some of the proceedings in 1692 and his account was largely based on information acquired from the

families of the accused witches. **Reverend John Hale** was the minister of Beverly and was present for many of the important developments in 1692. He was called to the Betty Parris and Abigail Williams after they became ill, questioned several of the accused while they were in jail, and even testified against one of his parishioners. It is difficult to say when he became skeptical of the proceedings, but his opinion was certainly impacted when his own wife was accused of witchcraft in November of 1692. Hale's account, in contrast to both Mather and Calef, is written in a more moderate tone.

Letters and Essays:

Deodat Lawson *A Brief and True Narrative of Some Remarkable Passages Relating to Sundry Persons Afflicted by Witchcraft at Salem Village*

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A49794.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

Thomas Brattle, "Letter of Thomas Brattle, F.R.S, 1692"

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130822211700/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=Bur2Nar.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=publ ic&part=2&division=div1>

Reverend Increase Mather, *Cases of Conscience*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo2;idno=B43422.0001.001>

Samuel Willard, *Some Miscellany Observations on our Present Debates Respecting Witchcrafts, in a Dialogue Between S. & B.*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;idno=N00505.0001.001>

Books:

Reverend Cotton Mather, *Wonders of the Invisible World*

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28513/28513-h/28513-h.htm>

Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World*

<https://archive.org/details/morewondersofinv01cale/page/212/mode/2up>

Reverend John Hale, *A Modest Enquiry Into the Nature of Witchcraft*

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N00872.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

Many of these sources are included in George Lincoln Burr's *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*. This book has been digitized and is available through the Smithsonian Libraries:

<https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/narrativesofwit00burr>

Close Secondary Source

Thomas Hutchinson, the last Royal Governor of Massachusetts, published a survey of colonial history in 1767 entitled *The History of Massachusetts from the First Settlement Thereof in 1628, until the year 1750* <https://archive.org/details/historyofprovinc02hutc/page/n1/mode/2up>. He includes a discussion of the witchcraft trials in this work and describes these events as both tragic and preventable. As Royal Governor, Thomas Hutchinson was a target during the Stamp Act Crisis of 1765. His home was attacked, and the contents of his library (including the witchcraft documents) were thrown into the street. While Hutchinson was not an eyewitness, he had access to documents that no longer exist, making this another valuable resource. His volume includes transcriptions of at least 11 documents, including several that were lost or destroyed.