

## Salem Witch Trials Primary Sources Lesson Plan

### Introduction

The Salem witch trials were the largest and deadliest series of witchcraft trials in North American history. The Court of Oyer and Terminer (meaning to hear and to determine) oversaw these trials between June and September of 1692. Tragically, many of the documents produced by this court were lost with time, leaving fragmented records from the actual witchcraft trials. The remaining records include pre-trial examinations, depositions, petitions, and letters. While valuable insight into the events of 1692, these documents were composed by highly biased observers who more often than not wholeheartedly believed in the guilt of those accused. As such, working with the primary sources from the Salem witch trials presents a series of tricky obstacles for historians.

### Objectives

- Introduce students to the challenges of working with primary source documents.
- Enhance students' ability to evaluate the historical accuracy of a document.
- Enhance students' understanding of the experiences and motivations of the individuals involved in witchcraft trials.

### Materials

- Printed copies of:
  - Biographies of Tituba and Jonathan Corwin.
  - Excerpt from the Examination of Tituba— Note, spelling has been modernized throughout the document for ease of reading. At one point, the author changes from writing in the first person to third person. This section is in italics for the readers clarity. The digitized document with a transcription in its entirety can be found at: <https://saalem.lib.virginia.edu/n125.html>
  - Close Reading Charter

### Warm Up

- Begin by stating or writing out the definitions of primary and secondary sources.
  - Primary sources are immediate firsthand accounts of an event or person of the past. Secondary sources interpret those accounts.
- Ask students to brainstorm examples of primary and secondary sources (primary sources include diaries, court documents, letters, and newspapers etc. Secondary sources include journal articles, academic books etc.).
- Ask students:
  - What are the benefits of using a primary source?
  - What challenges do they expect they may encounter using these sources?

### Activity

- Direct students to read the Examination of Tituba. They may read independently, or they may read the transcript aloud in groups of two, with one partner reading the questions (as the magistrate) and the other the answers (Tituba).
- Once they are done reading the examination, students should read the biographies of Tituba and Magistrate Jonathan Corwin.
- Either with a partner or independently, have students complete the Close Reading Chart.
- Come back together as a class and discuss the following questions:
  - What event is described by this document?
  - Do you think this is a reliable account of Tituba's examination? Do you think her answers are trustworthy?
  - What can this examination teach us about the belief in witchcraft in 1692?

## Tituba Biography

In the year 1692, Tituba was an enslaved woman living in the home of Reverend Samuel Parris. Samuel Parris had arrived in Salem Village in 1688, along with his wife, Elizabeth, their three children, Thomas, Elizabeth (Betty), and Susannah, and his niece, Abigail Williams. Abigail was likely orphaned and may have been working as a servant in the household. In addition to the family, Parris owned three slaves, Tituba, John Indian, and a teenage boy who died after the family's arrival. Reverend Parris was the village's fourth minister in only 17 years, as the community was constantly fighting about this important post. While Samuel Parris was accepted as the minister by many, others strongly disliked him and wished to see him leave Salem Village.

As is almost always the case for enslaved individuals, very little information is known about Tituba. There is no information about her age, physical description, or even country of origin. There are two major theories regarding her background, though neither can definitively tell us where she was born or where she lived before she was purchased by Samuel Parris. One theory suggests Tituba may have been from the Arawak tribe native to the northeastern corner of South America (what is now Guyana or Venezuela). Another theory proposes she was from Yorubaland (a region in West Africa, present day Nigeria). Both arguments acknowledge Tituba was likely enslaved and brought to Bridgetown in Barbados (a major port during the time of the slave trade), where she was purchased and brought to New England. It is difficult to determine if Samuel Parris purchased Tituba in Barbados or after he arrived in New England, though records reveal she was definitely living with him in Boston by 1680.

Tituba was married, though when her marriage took place is unclear. Her husband, referred to in the records as John Indian, was also an enslaved person owned by Reverend Samuel Parris. Like Tituba, John's origins are unknown, though his name provides a slight clue. During this period, enslaved people would often be given a name by their owner, some of which included a "racial tag"—a name which identified that person's race. For example, another enslaved person involved in the Salem witch trials was named Mary Black, indicating she was probably of African descent. John Indian's name suggests he was likely an Indigenous person, though it is unknown if he was from New England. Tituba is also sometimes referred to as Tituba Indian, which may provide a clue as to her origins.

As an enslaved person, Tituba would have had no freedom in Puritan New England. Her day-to-day life consisted of household work and caring for the Parris family. She cooked, cleaned, did the family's laundry, and looked after the Parris children. There were typically no separate living quarters for enslaved people in Massachusetts, so she and John Indian would have slept in the house, likely on pallets on the floor in the kitchen.

How Tituba was treated by the Parris family is unknown. She was probably viewed like most other enslaved woman in Puritan Massachusetts, as a servant who would always be an outsider. As Puritans sometimes referred to the devil as "the black man," it is perhaps no surprise they were often suspicious of Africans and Indigenous peoples. Tituba and her husband would at the very least have been looked down on and distrusted by the family.

Tituba and two local women, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, were the first to be accused of witchcraft in 1692. Official complaints were brought to the local magistrates in late February and arrest warrants were issued. The three suspects were brought before the magistrates on March 1<sup>st</sup>. Sarah Osborne and Sarah Good were the first to be questioned. Neither confessed. Tituba was questioned last and faced two magistrates, dozens of spectators, and the children who claimed she tormented them with witchcraft.

## Jonathan Corwin Biography

Jonathan Corwin (alternatively spelled Curwen) was born in 1640 in Salem, Massachusetts. His father, Captain George Curwen, immigrated from England to the North American colonies with his wife Elizabeth in 1638.

Jonathan was the second son of a family of five. Though he attended Harvard College (beginning his schooling at the age of 16) with the intention of becoming a minister, he left school two years later to pursue a career as a merchant. Jonathan Corwin held many important positions in the colony, including Deputy to the General Court, serving on the Council for Safety, and an Assistant in the General Court.

In 1671, he married Elizabeth Sheaffe. The couple settled in Salem Town, a prosperous seaport and one of the oldest settlements in the Massachusetts Bay colony. Jonathan's home was in the center of town, just a short walk away from both the Court House and Meeting House. His home has been preserved over time and still stands in Salem today, now as an operational historic house museum.

By 1692, Jonathan Corwin was a Justice of the Peace. When accusations of witchcraft began in February of that year, Jonathan, as a local magistrate, was one of the men tasked with dealing with this serious matter. Along with John Hathorne, a fellow local Justice of the Peace, Jonathan Corwin traveled to Salem Village (a distance of about 4 miles) to question the accused. These were not formal trials, but instead pre-trial examinations to gather evidence and determine if there was cause to hold the suspects for trial.

For Jonathan, witchcraft was a very serious and frightening danger to the community. At this time, a witch was believed to be an ordinary person who sold their soul to the Devil in return for supernatural powers. They were regularly warned by their ministers that anyone could become a witch, and these fiends could be hiding in plain sight, waiting to harm or destroy good Puritan men and women. Though witchcraft suspicions were common, formal accusations were relatively rare in colonial New England. In fact, in the 25 years leading up to the Salem witchcraft trials, only one person had been executed for witchcraft. Her name was Goody Glover. She was an Irish woman accused of harming the Goodwin children in Boston in 1688. This alarming story was well-known throughout Essex County in the following years.

As was the case in Boston, the witchcraft accusations began in Salem with the mysterious illness of two children, the daughter and niece of Samuel Parris. Soon, other local girls were showing signs of the same strange sickness. There is some evidence to suggest one of Jonathan Corwin's children may have been ill in these early months. As this illness is only referenced in the primary source documents on one occasion, it is difficult to say how long the illness lasted or if the Corwins believed this too was the result of bewitchment.

After the witchcraft trials were over, Jonathan Corwin lived out the remainder of his life in his home in Salem Town. He never publicly acknowledged any wrongdoing in regards to his involvement in the witchcraft trials. Jonathan Corwin died at the age of 78 in 1718.

**Excerpt of the Examination of Tituba, as Recorded by Jonathan Corwin**

*March 1, 1692*

**Magistrate:** Why do you hurt these poor children? What harm have they done unto you?

**Tituba:** They do no harm to me. I no hurt them at all.

**M:** Why have you done it?

**T:** I have done nothing; I can't tell when the Devil works.

**M:** What, doth the Devil tell you that he hurts them?

**T:** No he tells me nothing.

**M:** Do you never see something appear in some shape?

**T:** No never see anything.

**M:** What familiarity have you with the Devil, or what is it that you converse with all? Tell the truth, who it is that hurts them?

**T:** The Devil for ought I know.

**M:** What appearance or how doth he appear when he hurts them, with what shape or what is he like that hurts them?

**T:** Like a man, I think. Yesterday, I being in the lean-to chamber, I saw a thing like a man, that told me serve him and I told him no I would not do such a thing. *She charges Goody Osburne and Sarah Good as those that hurt the children, and would have had her done it, she sayth she hath seen four, two of which she knew not, she saw them last night and she was washing the room.* They told me hurt the children and would have had me go to Boston, there was 5 of them with the man, they told me if I would not go and hurt them they would do so to me. At first I did agree with them, but afterward I told them I do so no more.

**M:** Would they have had you hurt the children the last night?

**T:** Yes, but I was sorry and I said I would do so no more, but told I would fear God.

**M:** But why did not you do so before?

**T:** Why they tell me I had done so before and therefore I must go on, these were the four women and the man, but she knew none but Osburne and Good only, the other were of Boston.

**M:** At first being with them, what then appeared to you? What was it like that got you to do it?

**T:** One like a man. Just as I was going to sleep came to me, this was when the children was first hurt, he said he would kill the children and she would never be well. And he said if I would not serve him he would do worse to me.

## Close Reading Chart

	Excerpt of Examination of Tituba, Recorded by Jonathan Corwin
What is described by this document? What do you think is happening?	
Who wrote the document? Do you think the author is giving a truthful account of what happened?	
What do you think was the purpose of this document?	
Who was the intended audience? Could this impact the perspective offered by this document?	
Can we trust this document? Why or why not?	