“The Salem Witch Trials and the Political Chaos that Caused Them: How the Glorious Revolution Kindled the Fire of Colonial Unrest”

Allison R. Anderson
Western Illinois University
The Salem Witch Trials have commonly been classified as a cultural phenomenon which may have been influenced by the stress of the very common and devastating Native American attacks on Massachusetts in the years preceding 1692. Unanswered by scholars, however, is whether there were any other factors that may have caused the execution of the “witches” of Salem Village. It is hardly a coincidence that the Salem Witch Trials occurred just four years following the replacement of the Catholic English King James II with Protestant leaders William and Mary, and the influence of the Glorious Revolution’s total replacement of government, even in the colonies, was deeply felt. Could the Glorious Revolution’s chaos in Massachusetts – politically as well as religiously – have increased the likelihood that a witch-hunt would occur? It seems likely so, especially when considering that the political environment in Salem was aligned with other witch-hunts in Europe during the seventeenth century. The Glorious Revolution provided the consequence of a political vacuum in Massachusetts, which contributed to a rise in the suspicion of demonic practices among its inhabitants.

In considering the many factors that may have led to a witch-hunt in Salem, Massachusetts, this paper will examine the legal and religious environments contributing to colonial unrest. Political instability on many fronts combined with the instability of the Church resulted in a bloody religious grab for local control. Additionally, my research will connect the Salem Witch Trials to two other witch-hunts in the seventeenth century: in East Anglia in 1645 and in Scotland throughout the late 1690s. The Glorious Revolution changed the political environments of England, Scotland, and the colonies; the effects of a political upheaval could have added to the probability that a large-scale string of witch-hunts would occur in the English realm.
The influence of politics on witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts, has been analyzed in depth by historians Carla G. Pestana and Richard Godbeer, along with many other researchers. Witchcraft scares in the early modern era swelled around times of increased tension within smaller communities, but Pestana and Godbeer approach the issue from differing viewpoints. In her publication of *Protestant Empire*, Pestana addresses the community tensions that led to the Salem Witch Trials from a large-scale perspective. She attributes the anxiety felt by the American colonists to the instability of the English government and the insecurity of the Puritan church in Massachusetts, which are both certainly vital to the discussion but have many facets of information and rabbit-holes of tangents.\(^1\) While it is imperative to observe the global context of historical mysteries, it is unclear which pieces of that global context directly influenced the witch-hunt. As this paper will examine, Pestana’s research points to substantiated comprehensive issues in the search for the causes of the Salem witch-hunt; nevertheless, small-scale and individualized factors are vital to the investigation as well.

In Godbeer’s *The Salem Witch Hunt*, he delves further into a few small-scale influences on the Massachusetts communities that may have increased the likelihood of a seventeenth-century witch scare. Godbeer focuses his research on individual religious beliefs of the Puritans in Massachusetts and particular characteristics of colonial townships to assert his findings. Concerning the Puritan religious beliefs, Godbeer emphasizes the following:

Puritan beliefs encouraged a preoccupation with evil forces that seemed to endanger individual souls and New England as a whole. The Devil’s agents posed a constant threat, whether in the form of Indians threatening to invade English settlements or neighbors

---

who used witchcraft to harm their enemies while masquerading as godly members of the community.²

By stating that the colonists were concerned for their “individual souls” as well as the safety of the region itself, Godbeer brings the Salem witch-hunt’s personal characteristics into his research. He claims in his writing that Puritans were convinced that every part of life, and every “trivial” daily event, was “willed by God.”³ The impact of these highly-personal religious beliefs on Puritan life amplified the likelihood that the Massachusetts colonists would place blame on supernatural beings or the Devil himself.

Godbeer’s examination of the specific township characteristics in Massachusetts at the time of the Salem Witch Trials emphasizes the “charity-refused model,” coined by historians Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas. In Massachusetts, according to Godbeer, the discomfort caused by an elderly woman asking for charity and having her requests refused by her neighbors could cause enough strife in the community to accuse the elderly woman of witchcraft.⁴ Godbeer also describes the possibility of a bad trade deal leading to allegations of witchcraft.⁵ Above all else, Godbeer establishes connections between neighborhood values and witchcraft accusations in colonial Massachusetts. He claims:

New Englanders … depended on each other for their survival …. The Puritan faith in which most of the colonists believed (albeit to varying degrees) taught that being a good neighbor had its spiritual as well as practical dimensions …. This emphasis on a spirit of community and mutual support meant that arguments between neighbors became not only irritating but also a betrayal of larger values on which their spiritual and practical welfare depended.⁶

---

Godbeer’s focus on the personal struggles influenced by “larger values” amongst the colonists at the time of the Salem Witch Trials establishes an important connection between Pestana’s global evaluation and Godbeer’s individual assessments.7

An increase in community anxiety within multiple facets of New England colonial life directly affected the colonists’ likelihood to establish religious dominance through the enforcement of anti-Satanic ideals. According to Pestana, there are five major factors which contributed to the Salem Witch Trials: government instability, religious insecurity, a “desire to combat atheism,” fear of Native American attack, and the increasingly oppressive overseas authority of the English government.8 The colonists in Massachusetts experienced all of these factors at their worst. As the center of North American trade, Boston was the capital of English colonial politics. The people of Boston, however, commonly believed that the English government dampened their ability to practice their Puritan theocratic legal ideology, especially regarding the ways in which the monarchy had mistreated the Puritans in England before they fled to the Americas. Pestana claims that the colonists of Massachusetts were “uncertain” of their ability to keep control of their own political environment.9 This legal and religious mix of discontent with the English government fed the people of Massachusetts with the tools to resort to unconventional practices; much like the sporadically-practiced witch-hunt.

British America had experienced witchcraft accusations, trials, and executions prior to 1692, most notably in the early 1660s. A fear of witchcraft had surfaced in the population and was exacerbated by the accusation of Goody Ayers.10 Of the seventeenth-century New England

8. Pestana, Protestant Empire, 151.
9. Pestana, Protestant Empire, 151.
3. Pestana Protestant Empire, 151.
The Salem Witch Trials were the most disastrous: from the total 83 indictments and 24 executions of seventeenth-century Massachusetts, 58 indictments and 19 executions took place in Salem in 1692.11

*The Instability of Government in the Massachusetts Bay Colony*

The Salem, Massachusetts, criminal justice system at the time of the witchcraft trials was “inconsistent and unjust,” and due to political confusion as a result of the Glorious Revolution in England, the colonists resorted to “appeals to moral authority” instead of legal authority to regain social control.12 Kermit L. Hall suggests that the witchcraft trials were a “brutal demonstration of the potential excesses that lurked in much of early American criminal law,” exposing the holes in colonial government that allowed for the festering of religiously motivated persecution of social outcasts.13 The infamous use of spectral evidence to support the indictment of twenty members of Salem society exposed the obvious flaws in colonial criminal law in the late seventeenth century.14

As eloquently stated by Hall:

The Salem Village witchcraft phenomenon is a classic example of what happens when formal law fails, for various reasons, to help resolve disputes, and the burden falls on customary norms. Such norms had, for a generation, sufficed to regulate behavior in the Massachusetts Bay colony, but in the 1660s the capacity of the Congregational churches to resolve disputes failed; there were too many residents who were either not Puritans or not willing to submit to church discipline …. We cannot fully understand what happened in Salem Village without appreciating the breakdown in the effectiveness of the law.15

---

14. According to *US Legal Definitions*, spectral evidence is an accuser’s testimony that the defendant’s spirit appeared to them in a dream. This accusation was taken very seriously during the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, and the evidence was interpreted to mean that the defendant was in communication with the devil.
The witchcraft accusations and executions in Salem Village exemplified the breakdown of public approval of the form of government that ruled Massachusetts during the late seventeenth century. Six separate events in the history of colonial Massachusetts converged to create the political instability of 1692: King Philip’s war and the continuation of Native American attacks, the installation of the Dominion of New England, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the subsequent Boston Revolt of 1689, the New Charter of 1691, and the installation of the new Governor William Phipps in 1692. These events contributed to the Salem, Massachusetts, population’s devastatingly religious-motivated accusations of witchcraft.

*King Philip’s War (1675-1676)*

King Philip’s War (1675-1676) in New England had been brought about by more than half a century of tension between the colonists and their Native American neighbors, most particularly the Wampanoag, Nipmuck, Podunk, Narragansett, and Nashaway peoples.16 During that time, some Native Americans worked for colonists and some converted to Christianity, but the tensions between Indian tribes and the English colonists still arose.17 While the colonists had a thirst to acquire more land for their doubling population, Native Americans fought to defend themselves and their land from the white men’s conquest.18 Many Native Americans who were angry with the colonists’ push into their territory requested that a local Indian leader, Metacomet (nicknamed “King Philip” by his English counterparts), begin a war against them. King Philip agreed to begin fighting back against the colonists in 1670 but did not begin active warfare until

---

17. Findling and Thackeray, *Events that Changed America*, 125.
18. Findling and Thackeray, *Events that Changed America*, 126.
June of 1675, after a colonist shot and wounded a Native American man who had killed one of his oxen.\textsuperscript{19}

During the year-long conflict, six hundred colonists and many more Native Americans were killed.\textsuperscript{20} Additionally, thirteen colonial settlements were lost.\textsuperscript{21} According to historians Findling and Thackeray, the colonists emerged from King Philip’s War “more unified,” but they were not unified with their faraway English government.\textsuperscript{22} The English often forced the colonists to pay for their own battles against Native Americans instead of assisting the colonists in keeping the land they acquired for the sake of the English monarchy.\textsuperscript{23} Massachusetts suffered extreme loss during the conflict, and westward expansion of the northeastern colonies would not resume until well into the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{24} The New England economy was also greatly damaged: the fur trade was relatively nonexistent, fishing and trade were interrupted because the sailors were called in to fight as soldiers, and “eight thousand head of cattle had been killed.”\textsuperscript{25} The chaos that characterized the New England postwar era significantly depleted the control Puritan governments enjoyed, and the efforts made by religious leaders to regain their power over local populations were unsuccessful. As stated by historian Steven Siry, the New England post-King Philip’s War era was marked by “religious upheaval.”\textsuperscript{26} Thus, King Philip’s War not only

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Findling and Thackeray, \textit{Events that Changed America}, 127.
\item \textsuperscript{20} In fact, according to Findling and Thackeray, “over six thousand Indians were killed, enslaved, or were reduced to becoming hired servants or poor farmers”; Findling and Thackeray, \textit{Events that Change America}, 135.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Findling and Thackeray, \textit{Events that Changed America}, 127
\item \textsuperscript{22} Findling and Thackeray, \textit{Events that Changed America}, 128.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Findling and Thackeray, \textit{Events that Changed America}, 136.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Steven Siry, “Interpretive Essay,” in John E. Findling and Frank W. Thackeray, \textit{Events that Changed America Through the Seventeenth Century} (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), 129-137.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Siry, “Interpretive Essay,” 134.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Siry, “Interpretive Essay,” 137.
\end{itemize}
damaged economic colonial stability, but also began the depletion of Massachusetts Puritans’
religious and political power of the 1680s and 1690s.27

The Dominion of New England

In his letter sent ten years following the Glorious Revolution in England, John Higginson
described the state of the colonies just before and during the conflict of 1688. He wrote that,
before the invasion of William of Orange, the installation of Sir Edmund Andros as Governor of
King James II’s Dominion of New England (which replaced all local Puritan governments with
royally-appointed governments and was headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts) resulted in
“[the] foundation of all our Good things [being] destroyd [sic].”28 As can be understood from the
letter to his son, John Higginson joined many colonists in believing that the installation of the
Dominion of New England unjustly stripped the colonists from their religious and political
freedom. Additionally, the royal appointment of the Anglican Sir Edmund Andros as Governor
of the Dominion magnified the political and religious disconnection the colonists felt from their
English rulers and offended many Puritan colonists – much like King James II’s Catholicism was
abhorred.29 Andros made no statements threatening to convert the colonists to Catholicism, but
similarly to the King’s troubles, the very presence of a Catholic ruler made his subjects uneasy.

20. The postwar chaos would also lead to more colonial involvement in local politics, which would be
magnified in 1686 after the creation of the Dominion of New England; Siry, “Interpretive Essay,” 136.
28. The Dominion of New England was a grouping of all British colonies under a single administration;
John Higginson, Letter to Nathaniel Higginson, August 31, 1698, in the Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive
and Transcription Project, salem.lib.virginia.edu/letters/higginson_letter.html.
29. Findling and Thackeray, Events that Changed America, 143.
The Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Boston Revolt of 1689

The Glorious Revolution was originally welcomed in America by most colonists because it brought to them an opportunity to overturn James II’s Dominion of New England. According to David S. Lovejoy, “the Glorious Revolution in England was an unexpected but welcome jolt to most colonists in America, particularly to those who saw it as a means of escape from an uncomfortable dilemma.” The colonists, when they heard the news of William of Orange’s conquest in early 1689, assumed that the new Protestant leaders of England would remove the Dominion of New England from the shoulders of the colonists. Thus, the colonists took into their own hands the overthrow of the Dominion’s Governor and top officials.

John Higginson wrote the following in the letter to his son:

As [soon] as they heard [that the] Prince of Orange was gone for England, [the] country rose in armes [sic], imprisoned [sic] [the] whole crew [Sir Edmund Andros and other Dominion officials] and sent [them] for England, but in little more [than] a year [the] country was brought into a sad condition being also distressed by wars from [the] Indians and French both by land and sea [which] continues to this day.

The colonists believed the new co-monarchs, William and Mary, would support them in their fight to regain local political control. Consequently, in the Boston Revolt of 1689, a mob gathered to confront Sir Edmund Andros and imprisoned him as well as other officials of the Dominion of New England. After the successful coup against Andros, the Dominion “ceased to function within New England.” The goal of the rioters in Boston was to “return to a godly

---

32. Higginson, Letter to Nathaniel Higginson, 1698.
33. Pestana, Protestant Empire, 152.
government” that satisfied the Puritan colonists. Following the removal of the Dominion of New England, the Massachusetts Bay colonists created a “Council for Safety,” headed by Simon Bradstreet (a former governor of Massachusetts), which included Jonathan Corwin and John Hawthorne, who became judges in the Salem Witch Trials just a few years later.

According to Godbeer, the Glorious Revolution caused an increase in Native American raids against the colonists. After William and Mary took control over the English monarchy, “the French king Louis XVI declared war on England and its colonies” and the French merchants in Canada subsequently “encouraged” local Native American groups to “launch a series of raids on the northeastern frontier of New England.” An increase in destruction due to Native American attacks would have left most colonists disgruntled.

This explanation of the many social stressors under which the colonists were pressured sheds light on a few factors that may have contributed to the violent response seen in the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. The idea that the chaotic political environment of the late seventeenth century influenced the Salem Witch Trials is also supported in Pestana’s research, in which she states that the tensions experienced by the colonists at the time of the Glorious Revolution was “one of the underlying causes of the Salem Witch Trials.”

The New Charter of 1691

Due to war with France, England did not originally take notice of the colonial political vacuum that had formed in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution. In 1691, three years

37. Pestana, Protestant Empire, 152.
38. The Nine Years’ War (1689-97) was a conflict between Louis XIV of France and the Holy Roman Empire, the Dutch Republic, Spain, England, and Savoy. King William of England had intervened in James II’s
following the Glorious Revolution, a new charter was assigned to the New England colonies by King William that mirrored the unpopular Dominion of New England. This generated renewed strife among the colonists. According to historian P.D. Swiney, “for three long years, there was no clear authority in Massachusetts…. The Glorious Revolution served… to undermine seriously the ties between England and her North American colonies.” During the time in which there was no clear political authority in Massachusetts, the people of Salem accused select women of witchcraft. The accused “witches” could not be officially tried, however, because the legal system in Massachusetts could not be solidified until a new charter was established. Consequently, before the new charter was enforced, the women who were accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts, spent the year in jail awaiting their trials.

John Higginson wrote in his letter to Nathaniel Higginson that the colonists were depressed by the new charter. Sir Edmund Andros had been ousted as the Governor of New England and replaced by local governments, and a new governor, Sir William Phipps, was to be placed in the same position. Higginson wrote, “King William gave us a new Charttrr [sic] and sent Sr. Wm. Phip [a] native of New England (last Sumer [sic]) to be our governr [sic].” The colonists waited three years for William and Mary to decide their position after the self-reinstatement of colonial locally-controlled governments, and the 1691 new charter significantly hurt colonial freedoms. Puritan colonists in Massachusetts were offended most by the new monarchical rule while he and Louis XIV were allied; thus, William’s invasion was interpreted by Louis XIV as an act of war; Derek McKay, Prince Eugene of Savoy. (London: Thames and Hudson LTD., 1997).

39. Findling and Thackeray, Events that Changed America, 143.
42. Higginson, Letter to Nathaniel Higginson, August 31, 1698.
charter, as the charter restricted religious-based laws in the colonies. The results of William and Mary’s disappointing ruling “increased anxiety and strife” among the colonists and were one of the factors that caused the Salem Witch Trials.

Women had been collected throughout 1691 and jailed as they awaited trial, but after the passing of the new charter in October, the courts needed time to be rebuilt. Unfortunately, the leaders of Salem, Massachusetts, began trying the accused “witches” in May of 1692 (before the courts were officially established) because the leaders saw the witch trials as a matter that needed immediate attention. It was rumored in Salem that the witches waiting in prison were still committing demonic acts from within custody, and the people of the village pressured town leaders to speed up the court process. Because the officials in Salem did not wait for the reestablishment of the court system in Massachusetts, many unconventional pieces of evidence were submitted into the Salem Witch Trials (i.e. the use of spectral evidence, dreams, and ghostly whispers as evidence). Had the courts been solidified, or had the Glorious Revolution not so deeply affected colonial government, the accused women of the Salem Witch Trials may not have been so readily executed.

Governor Phipps

The Massachusetts Bay colony was without formal government at the beginning of the witch accusations, and the political vacuum caused by the Glorious Revolution was not assisted...
or resolved by the creation of Salem’s interim government, the Council of Safety. Rumors had spread in early 1692 that the Native Americans were planning another attack on the colonists of Massachusetts. This, along with the many other factors addressed in this analysis, contributed to the colonists’ violent outburst in 1692 against the religious crisis observed through the practice of witchcraft and satanic ritual. As reported by Findling and Thackeray, “the events of Salem can be viewed as the result of an unstable government.” Fear of the devil was a large piece of Puritan worship, and the Puritan population of Salem, Massachusetts, may have been using this fear to regain control over their environment. Also, the use of witchcraft as a scapegoat to explain the colonists’ bad luck in terms of religious and political control is a possible explanation for the trials as well. The installation of Governor William Phipps solidified colonial loss of political control, unpredictable Native American attacks enhanced colonial fear, and the execution of “witches” in Salem gave comfort to the population. The colonists may have felt that in stamping out satanic presence in their village, they were protecting themselves from other unrelated unfortunate events.

The introduction of the new Governor of New England, Sir William Phipps, only increased colonial anxiety in 1692. He gave the local governments power to move through cases and punishments quickly, and then left the Massachusetts Bay colony completely “to lead a military expedition on the Eastern Frontier in Maine against the French and their Native American allies.” In his absence, the witchcraft accusation and conviction rates were quickly

45. Findling and Thackeray, *Events that Changed America*, 169.
47. Pestana, *Protestant Empire*, 151.
rising. By the time Phipps returned, his wife had been accused! It was only after Phipps ordered a stop to the Salem Witch Trials that the community repented of their decisions.

Comparing the Salem Witch Trials to the Witch-Hunt of East Anglia

To fully establish a connection between the Salem Witch Trials and the political vacuum caused by the Glorious Revolution, an examination of other instances similar to the Salem witch-hunt is essential. A common likeness among each witchcraft scare in European history is the fear of the “other” seen in many instances of witch-hunting. The most strikingly similar witchcraft scare in history to the Salem Witch Trials, however, took place in East Anglia on the eastern coast of England. In the well-known East Anglia witch-hunt, Matthew Hopkins (a “self-proclaimed ‘Witchfinder General’”) worked to capture and execute “witches” between 1645 and 1647. According to James Hoare, three factors contributed to both the East Anglia witch-hunt and the Salem Witch Trials: “the collapse of traditional authority, a vacuum at the heart of the legal system, and an upsurge of popular fears about the efficacy of witchcraft.” Hoare notes a correlation between “the depiction of Royalists as demonic [during the English Civil War] and the fear of witches that exploded in East Anglia.” By comparison, all three factors, in the case of Salem, could have been caused directly by the Glorious Revolution’s chaotic results in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Regarding the first factor, the collapse of traditional authority, the Glorious Revolution incited the Boston Revolt of 1689, which overthrew English control over the colonial

41. For instance, Germany’s Protestant witches, Spain’s Jewish witches, and France’s masculine-woman witches; Pestana, *Protestant Empire*, 151.
51. Hoare, “From Matthew Hopkins to Salem.”
52. Hoare, “From Matthew Hopkins to Salem.”
government and temporarily reinstated Puritan-based governments that had previously ruled the individual colonies. This revolt could be characterized as a “collapse.” For the second factor, the newly available positions at the heart of the Massachusetts Bay government created a rush to recreate new laws based on religious values that had been effectively restricted under the rule of the Dominion of New England. This rush could be characterized as a political vacuum, as has been previously discussed. Finally, the third factor, an “upsurge of popular fears about the efficacy of witchcraft” could have been caused by the reinstatement of a controlling English government after the 1691 new charter, which disregarded the colonists’ desires for religious-based (Puritan) rule. When the colonists’ desires for theocracy were directly rejected by King William, the colonists began to feel insecure about the validity of their religion.53 In response, the Salem population became obsessed with proving the security of the Puritan church by, instead, proving the existence of satanic ritual and persecuting members of their society for practicing witchcraft.54

In comparison, the East Anglia witch-hunt occurred during the English Civil War (1642-1651), which brought into question the validity of the religious beliefs of both Protestants and Catholics. Matthew Hopkins’ witch-hunt is believed to have resulted in the deaths of more than three hundred women – more than had been executed within the previous century for the crime of witchcraft.55 The English Civil War and establishment of the Long Parliament constituted a “collapse of traditional authority,” satisfying the first factor of Hoare’s witchcraft research. The second factor, “a vacuum at the heart of the legal system,” occurred just before King Charles I

53. Hoare, “From Matthew Hopkins to Salem.”
54. In the Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts, published by the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1641, rule ninety-four states that “if any man or woman be a witch, that is, hath or consulteth with a familiar spirit, they shall be put to death”; “Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts, 1641,” American Legal History: Cases and Materials, edited by Kermit L. Hall, William M. Wiecek, and Paul Finkelman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
55. Hoare, “From Matthew Hopkins to Salem.”
was executed in 1649 and Oliver Cromwell took over the legal system. There was a scramble during the English Civil War to seize power, and the political vacuum that resulted from the collapse of English government served as a trigger for Matthew Hopkins to create his own societal control. In the case of the third factor, that there seemed to be an “upsurge of popular fears about the efficacy of witchcraft” can be quite obviously explained based on the general upsurge in witchcraft accusations across seventeenth-century Europe.

The political links between the largest witch-hunt in English history at East Anglia in 1645 and the Salem Witch Trials in 1692 establish a pattern. The similarities between legal and religious environments surrounding the two largest witchcraft scares of the seventeenth century suggest that the act of witch-hunting should be reframed as a side-effect of a political vacuum. According to historian Frederick M. Stowell, witchcraft ideologies had been brought to New England from Europe, “where thousands had been executed as witches in the two centuries before 1650.” Additionally, according to Hoare, “Massachusetts had been a magnet for settlers from the Eastern counties in England that had been at the center of the earlier trials concerning Matthew Hopkins.” Furthermore, because the Massachusetts Bay colonists had similar cultural foundations to those of East Anglia, both groups could be expected to react similarly to legal and religious pressure as well as a political vacuum at the heart of English authority.

---

57. The only reason East Anglia was the focus of this witch-hunt as opposed to other parts of England was because that was where Matthew Hopkins was active at the time. Hopkins gave himself the authority he enjoyed. The fact that Hopkins was active on his own accord does nothing to diminish the environmental factors which helped kindle a witchcraft scare, however. Whether Hopkins acted on his own or otherwise, East Anglia was simply where the people were most susceptible. This is a topic for more deliberate future research; Hoare, “From Matthew Hopkins to Salem.”
59. Hoare, “From Matthew Hopkins to Salem.”
Coincidentally, the East Anglia witch-hunt occurred just four years after the beginning of the English Civil War, much like the Salem Witch Trials that occurred just four years after the Glorious Revolution. It took the same amount of time in both locations for a witch-hunt to brew following a local collapse of political authority. This parallel further proves the connection between witchcraft scares and political collapse. Chaos and confusion of authority during the seventeenth century increased the likelihood that massive witch-hunts would occur. The Salem Witch Trials’ origins, consequently, can be attributed to the lack of political authority in the colonies after the Glorious Revolution.

*Comparing Political Influences on the Church in Puritan Salem to that on Presbyterian Scotland*

After the colonists endured constant strife and political uncertainty throughout the late seventeenth century, they placed blame on the Devil’s work. Once a connection between political upheaval and religion was established, a gate was opened for the use of witches as a scapegoat for colonial issues. The religious environment of Puritan Massachusetts was focused and built around fear, and the Glorious Revolution occurred within a context of religious strife concerning Catholicism.\(^{60}\) In the sermon notebook of Samuel Parris, a Puritan religious leader in Salem, Massachusetts, he announced to the congregation on February 14, 1692: “None ought, nor is it possible that any should, maintain communion with Christ, and yet keep up fellowship with Devils.”\(^{61}\) While this was a fairly regular statement made by New England churches in the seventeenth century, that this statement was made by Salem, Massachusetts’s local church leader

\(^{50}\) According to Mofford, Smallpox epidemics had devastated New England in the 1680s and 1690s, adding to the fear of “God’s punishment.” While this factor may have influenced the rise in religious strife among the New England colonists, the New Charter instated by the English monarchy in 1691 posed a direct threat to the hoped reinstatement of the Puritan theocracy.

just three months prior to the first executions is no coincidence. Salem Villagers were attempting to regain the religious control they lost through the events of the Glorious Revolution by ridding “Devils” from their village.

Fear drove the colonists to assert witchcraft as the root of their difficulties in life. On May 1, 1692, Parris announced that “ye cannot drink the Cup of the Lord, and the cup of Devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lords table, and of the Table of Devils.” 62 This commentary was directed to the beginning of the Salem Witch Trials. The religious environment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony during the years following the Glorious Revolution emphasized the fear of witchcraft felt by the colonists. According to Pestana, “few people were skeptical about the existence of witches” at this time in colonial history, and this created an environment of constant fear. 63 New England was settled on the basis of religious conviction, not on a basis of profit or trade. 64 Therefore, the religious beliefs of the settlers were paramount to all other pieces of colonial life. Reverend John Higginson stated in 1663 that “if any man amongst us make Religion as twelve and the world as thirteen let such a man know he hath neither the spirit of a true New England man, nor yet of a sincere Christian.” 65 The colonists held religion as their central priority, their purpose in New England, and their ultimate duty to uphold. The church and state were wholly overlapping entities for the Massachusetts Bay colonists. 66 With this

---

63. Additionally, Pestana states that the “tensions generated by these various crises contributed toward an upsurge in fears of witchcraft in both Massachusetts and Scotland in the last decade of the century”; Pestana, Protestant Empire, 150.
64. Lovejoy, The Glorious Revolution, 123.
conviction, the colonists acted to restore their religious control from the local political effects of the Glorious Revolution in England.

The insecurity of the church bled into the colonists’ personal lives and helped them assert blame for their political uncertainty and recent misgivings to their religious anti-Christ. Rising fear of religious persecution or increased spiritual restriction among people in seventeenth-century empirical Britain increased the possibility that witchcraft would resurface as a threat. There was a single episode of British witchcraft accusations following shortly after the Glorious Revolution and the Salem Witch Trials, taking place in Presbyterian Scotland in the late 1690s.67 The witch-hunt began with fifty accusations and resulted in seven executions.68 The Presbyterian Church had been reestablished just following the Glorious Revolution, but the Presbyterians in Scotland could not gain the support they enjoyed before the chaos of King William’s ascension to the throne.

They viewed their religion to be under direct attack by this dip in support, and combined with a slew of atheistic fears and a rumored invasion of Scotland by French forces, a witch-hunt was retrospectively predictable in the region.69 The witch trials in Scotland just before the turn of the century ended because local authorities began doubting the credibility of evidence presented at trials, much like the Salem authorities questioned the use of “spectral evidence.”70 As a direct result of community anxiety following a recent political vacuum, this episode of witch trials in Scotland connected the largest witchcraft scares of the seventeenth century in England and

59. According to Pestana, “Among Europeans … witch scares such as had plagued Europe for centuries appeared to be in decline more generally, but they flared up in times of social stress”; Pestana, Protestant Empire, 150.
68. Unfortunately, it is unclear from Pestana’s analysis where these Scottish accusations were located; Pestana, Protestant Empire, 154.
69. Pestana, Protestant Empire, 154.
70. Pestana, Protestant Empire, 154.
English colonies to a distinct political environment. This research suggests that what was previously referred to as cultural phenomena can be directly attributed to a collapse of political authority and a subsequent political vacuum.

Conclusion

While it would be highly improbable for a modern witch-hunt to occur in America, there have been similar instances of religious beliefs which cater to unconventionally horrific tactics (i.e. gay conversion therapy, Ku Klux Klan lynching, and the anti-immigration policies put into effect most recently). Today’s politics often tug on the United States’ population’s fear of LGBTQ+ visibility, fear of “super-predators” characterized as black men, or a fear of immigrants. Additionally, religious leaders today regularly express worries that the American liberal society oppresses their constitutionally-given right to religious freedom. Worries like these were also felt by the Protestants in East Anglia before Matthew Hopkins’ horrific witch-hunt, by the Puritans in Massachusetts before the Salem Witch Trials, and by the Presbyterians in Scotland before the Scottish witchcraft scare of the late 1690s.

The reason that it is historically significant that the Salem Witch Trials and others were directly influenced by a political vacuum is because, as members of this society, it is important that we keep history from repeating itself. Looking back to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, for instance, the Ku Klux Klan and other racist mobs were able to lynch thousands of black men without punishment or enforcement of the law. Without the oversight of a traditional authority and of an efficient legal system, murder and unjust enforcement of the law run rampant, much like they did in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. The anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments felt by many American religious groups today could invoke a spike in hate crimes.

and “conversion therapy” attempts once government oversight lapses. Finally, with the federal government today allowing the separation of families at the U.S-Mexico border – which constitutes a collapse in traditional authority – there opens to our society the possibility that another instance of horrific, religiously-motivated destruction of human life could occur.

This research on the Salem Witch Trials suggests that the excusing of horrific religious actions as simply cultural phenomena instead of a direct side-effect of a collapse in regional political authority not only condones the actions done, but practically guarantees that the actions will happen once more. In order to move forward in a time of combined political uncertainty and religious strife, we must understand the consequences of such a combination and work to prevent them. It is necessary for the sake of forward movement that we begin to reframe cultural crises in relation to their political contexts – if not for accurate study, then for the predictability of when the next crisis will occur.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


