

# *Retrieving the American Past*

## Chapter Two

### WHO WAS ACCUSED OF WITCHCRAFT AND WHY: SCHOLARS' EXPLANATIONS

*The selections below, taken from recent histories of the witchcraft scare, all grapple with the question: What motivated the accusations? All four historians identify specific groups in the society liable to be the objects of witchcraft charges. And they all suggest that late-seventeenth-century Massachusetts was gripped by social tensions of one sort or another, tensions that led to the fears that sparked the charges against members of these suspect groups.*

*Whichever argument you find most appealing, it is important to recall that everyone in seventeenth-century New England believed in the existence of witches with the power to do harm. What is at issue here is whom among their neighbors did they identify as members of that frightening group.*

#### Economic and Political Causes

*The first excerpt outlines economic and political divisions in the community. Abridged from Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, "Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft," in Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development, ed. Stanley N. Katz and John M. Murrin, 3d ed. (New York, 1983), 346-53, 358-59, 361, 363-65.*

The first three women to be accused can be seen as "deviants" or "outcasts" in their community—the kinds of people who anthropologists have suggested are particularly susceptible to such accusations. Tituba was a West Indian slave; Sarah Good was a pauper who went around the Village begging aggressively for food and lodging; "Gammer" Osborne, while somewhat better off, was a bedridden old woman.

In March, however, a new pattern began to emerge. Two of the three witches accused in that month—the third was little Dorcas Good—were church members (a sign of real respectability in the seventeenth century) and the wives of prosperous freeholders. This pattern continued and even intensified for the duration of the outbreak. The twenty-two persons accused in April included the wealthiest shipowner in Salem (Phillip English) and a minister of the gospel who was a Harvard graduate with a considerable estate in England (George Burroughs). By mid-May warrants had been issued against two of the seven selectmen of Salem Town; and by the end of the summer some of the most prominent people in Massachusetts and their close kin had been accused if not officially charged. As the attorney who prepared the cases against the accused wrote at the end of May, "The afflicted spare no person of what quality so ever."

True, except for Burroughs, none of these persons of quality was ever brought to trial, much less executed. Some escaped from jail or house arrest, others were simply never arraigned. Nevertheless, the overall direction of the accusations remains clear: up the social ladder, fitfully but perceptibly, to its very top. Whatever else they may have been, the Salem witch trials cannot be written off as a communal effort to purge the poor, the deviant, or the outcast.

Just as the accusations thrust steadily upward through the social strata of provincial society, so, too, they pressed outward across geographic boundaries. Beginning within Salem Village itself, the accusations moved steadily into an increasingly wide orbit. The first twelve witches were either residents of the Village or persons who lived just beyond its borders. But of all the indictments which followed this initial dozen,

only fifteen were directed against people in the immediate vicinity of Salem Village. The other victims came from virtually every town in Essex County, including the five which surrounded the Village. (In the town of Andover alone, there were more arrests than in Salem Village itself.)

While almost all these arrests were made on the basis of testimony given by the ten or so afflicted girls of Salem Village (although in some cases they merely confirmed the validity of others' accusations), it is clear that the girls themselves did not actually know most of the people they named. Accusers and accused were in many if not most cases personally unacquainted. Whatever was troubling the girls and those who encouraged them, it was something deeper than the kind of chronic, petty squabbles between near neighbors which seem to have been at the root of earlier and far less severe witchcraft episodes in New England.

But if the outbreak's geographic pattern tends to belie certain traditional explanations, it raises other, more intriguing, interpretive possibilities. . . . There were fourteen accused witches who lived within the bounds of Salem Village. Twelve of these fourteen lived in the eastern section of the Village.

There were thirty-two adult Villagers who testified against these accused witches. Only two of these lived in that eastern section. The other thirty lived on the western side. In other words, the alleged witches and those who accused them resided on opposite sides of the Village.

There were twenty-nine villagers who publicly showed their skepticism about the trials or came to the defense of one or more of the accused witches. Twenty-four of these lived in the eastern part of the Village--the same side on which the witches lived--and only two of them in the west. Those who defended the witches were generally their neighbors, often their immediate neighbors. Those who accused them were not.

... Even before 1692 Salem Village had hardly been a haven of tranquility. For years its 600-odd residents had been divided into two bitterly antagonistic factions. The source of their troubles lay in the very circumstances under which the Village had first come into existence. Originally the settlement (which is now the city of Danvers, and not to be confused with Salem proper) had simply been a part of the town of Salem, and when it was granted a limited and partial legal existence as "Salem Village" in 1672, it still remained in many ways a mere appendage of its larger and more prosperous neighbor. Some people in the Village were quite content with this satellite status, but others resented it and pressed for complete independence. The latter group, led by a numerous and powerful local family named Putnam, focused its efforts on an attempt to establish a separate church--the central pillar of any Puritan town....

At last in 1689, however, the independence-minded group in Salem Village managed to get its way, and a church was formed under the ministry of Samuel Parris, a thirty-six-year-old former merchant. But this victory was purchased at a heavy price, for the new minister, and the church he headed, represented only a single group in the community--a group led by the Putnams. (Fully half of the original twenty-six church members bore the Putnam name!) The formation of the church, in short, did not serve to unify Salem Village, but only to intensify its inner divisions.

... Those Villagers who had all along opposed establishment of the church, and who now refused to join it--a group that included some of the community's wealthiest residents--determined to drive Parris out of his position. They refused to worship in the Village meetinghouse, pointedly attending elsewhere, and withheld payment of their local taxes (which went for the minister's salary and firewood). But their most deadly stroke came at the annual Village election in October 1691 when they swept out of office the existing five-man Village Committee (the local equivalent of a board of selectmen), dominated by Parris' friends, and elected a new Committee made up, to a man, of his known opponents.

The new anti-Parris Committee went quickly to work: it refused even to assess taxes for the payment of Parris' 1692 salary, and it challenged the legality of his "fraudulent" acquisition of the ministry-house and lands in 1689. Parris, now wholly dependent on the voluntary contributions of his supporters for money to

purchase the necessities of life-and even for firewood to heat his house-was in desperately serious trouble at the beginning of 1692, and his Putnam supporters knew it.

Thus we begin to see the significance of the fact that of the first four "afflicted girls" in Salem Village, two lived in the household of Samuel Parris himself, and a third, Ann Putnam, was the twelve-year-old daughter of Parris' most dogged supporter, Thomas Putnam Jr. (In the coming weeks, the Thomas Putnam household would produce two more afflicted girls: Mercy Lewis, a servant girl, and Mary Walcott, a young relative.)

While these girls themselves may well have been unacquainted with the details of factional politics in the Village, they could hardly have remained untouched by the bitterness and resentment that pervaded their own households. It may be no accident that their physical torments set in after they had attempted, with scary results, to predict the future-a future that loomed as highly uncertain not only for the girls themselves but for the adults they knew best....

. . . [T]he richest men in the Village opposed Parris by a margin of better than two-to-one, while the poorest supported him in almost precisely the same proportion.... [Those] who lived nearest Salem Town (or, in a few cases, just over the Village line in the Town) opposed Parris by a ratio of six-to-one. Those whose houses were in the northwestern half of the Village, most remote from the Town, supported Parris by a ratio of better than four to one.... [N]ot every Villager had reason to feel alienated from the Town. Indeed ' the economic and social transformation of the Town in these years affected different Villagers in quite different ways. The very developments which threatened many of them gave others reason to take heart. It was this fact, above all, that produced the factional lines which from the beginning divided the Village.

From the 1670's on, proximity to the Town, and even a direct involvement in its economic life, repeatedly emerged as a determining factor in the divisions which plagued the Village. These divisions pitted people who continued to identify with Salem Town against others for whom the Village, and what they saw as its distinctive interests, were paramount....

. . . In at least two important respects-quality of land and access to market-those farmers on the eastern (or Town) side of the Village had a significant advantage. Modern topographical maps show what any Salem Village farmer knew from first-hand experience: the best lands in the Village were the broad, flat meadows of the eastern part, nearest the coast, while the western part was increasingly broken up by sharp little hills and marshy depressions. The eastern side of the Village, too, was significantly closer to the network of roads and waterways which gave access to Salem Town and her markets. (The additional two or three miles may seem negligible today, but for the farmer who had to convey his goods by ox cart over rutted, muddy, and often flooded paths before reaching the better-maintained Ipswich Road, they certainly loomed large.) In both these respects, then, the farmers on this side of the Village had a crucial edge in supplying the needs of Salem Town....

More than any other inhabitants of the community, the Villagers who lived along the Ipswich Road were exposed to the Town and its concerns.... It is not surprising that a number of the men living on or very near the Ipswich Road were engaged in occupations which brought them into regular contact with a wide range of individuals: occupations such as a potter, physician, carpenter, innkeeper, sawmill operator, shoemaker, miller, sawyer (that is, wood finisher), and "dishturner." Particularly important, in terms of the Townward orientation of this part of Salem Village, were the four taverns which stood along a short stretch of the Ipswich Road as it passed through Salem Village. Three of these actually lay within the Village: the licensed taverns of Joshua Rea, fr. and Walter Phillips, and the unlicensed-but well known and well patronized-tavern of Edward and Bridget Bishop. The other, operated by John Proctor, stood about a mile south of the Village boundary....

The pro-Parris faction thus emerges as a coalition whose shared fears united it in support of Parris: a core group of Villagers of middling wealth who were also church members, supplemented by another group, approximately twice as large, of poorer Villagers who were not church members but who identified with

the Village church and its minister. The church members provided the institutional structure and the political impetus, the others supplied the votes and the signatures.

Since the pro-Parris faction also played a leading role in the witchcraft prosecutions, it has typically been portrayed as a powerful and domineering clique. From the evidence, however, this group emerges as by far the more vulnerable of the two: less wealthy than its opposition, owning less land, quite literally hedged in by more flourishing anti-Parris neighbors and less able to benefit from the commercial developments centered in Salem Town.

If the Ipswich Road helped shape and define the anti-Parris faction, it also provided an objective focus for the amorphous fears of the pro-Parris group, for whom it would have seemed not so much the line which separated the Village from the Town, but the very channel through which the Town penetrated the Village. The road stood as a perpetual affront to those who felt the integrity of the Village to be menaced from just this quarter. Its residents, with their more commercial outlook and occupations, had in many cases already succumbed to the lure which menaced the Village as a whole....

A revealing glimpse into the social circumstances surrounding the establishment of one of these taverns emerges from John Proctor's request to the Salem selectmen in 1666 for a license to operate a tavern in his house on the Ipswich Road near the Salem Village line. His residence, he said, was "in the common roadway, which occasioneth several travelers to call in for some refreshment as they pass along." Since the free entertaining of these wayfarers was proving to be expensive, Proctor added: "I do therefore earnestly request that you would be pleased to grant me liberty to set up a house of entertainment to sell beer, cider [and] liquors." The court granted Proctor's petition, with the stipulation that he sell exclusively to strangers. Thus, from the Salem Village perspective, the Proctor house became a rendezvous point for outsiders-and only for outsiders.

For the pro-Parris Salem Villagers, with their particular anxieties, this generalized concern over taverns must have been especially intense. Given such a background, it is not surprising to find that three of the four Ipswich Road tavern keepers figured prominently in the climatic Village events of the 1690's-and two of these three as victims of those events. Joshua Rea, Jr., publicly expressed his opposition to the witchcraft trials in 1692 by signing a petition seeking to save Rebecca Nurse from the gallows. In 1695 Rea's name appears on the anti-Parris petition. Two of the other tavern keepers, Bridget Bishop and John Proctor, were unable to take a stand for or against Parris in 1695: they had been hanged three years before for committing witchcraft.

## Gender Tensions

*The following selection examines the gender issues at play in the witchcraft scare at Salem and in other accusations made in colonial New England. Taken from Carol Karlsen, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England (New York, 1987), 47-48, 50-52, 101-2, 104, 107-8, 115-16.*

The single most salient characteristic of witches was their sex. At least 344 persons were accused of witchcraft in New England between 1620 and 1725. Of the 342 who can be identified by sex, 267 (78 percent) were female. Roughly half of the seventy-five males accused (thirty-six), as the historian John Demos has pointed out, were "suspect by association": they were the husbands, sons, other kin, or public supporters of female witches....

The idea that witches were women seems to have been more strongly held by local authorities, magistrates, and juries-men who had the power to decide the fates of the accused-than it was by accusers as a whole. This bias is most noticeable in non-outbreak witchcraft cases: although women made up a sizeable 83 percent of the accused in these cases, and although local officials sent roughly the same proportion of female and male suspects to the colony-wide courts for trial, fifteen of the sixteen convicted witches (94

percent) were women.... The only man to be found guilty was Wethersfield carpenter John Carrington, who was hanged with his wife Joan in 1651. Though he was married to a reputed witch and was one of the poorest men in his community, it remains unclear why, leaving outbreaks aside, he was the only man to receive a punishment normally reserved for women....

Statistics can establish the extent to which New Englanders considered witchcraft the special province of women, but they cannot convey the vindictiveness that characterized the treatment of female suspects. This sexual double standard is perhaps most vividly seen in the different punishments meted out to confessed witches outside of the Salem outbreak.

Deeming voluntary confession one of the best "proofes sufficient for Conviccion," ministers and magistrates put considerable pressure on women to admit they had covenanted with the Devil. No comparable coercion was used with men. When Wethersfield's Mary Johnson succumbed to this insistence in 1648, admitting that she and the Devil provided many services for one another, she was convicted of familiarity with Satan and hanged. After Rebecca Greensmith described the nature of her covenant with Satan in Hartford in 1662, she too was executed. Similarly, confession doomed the widow Glover in Boston in 1688. Except during the Salem events, when the magistrates decided to put off the executions of people who admitted their guilt until all local witches were discovered, women who incriminated themselves were almost all punished in accordance with the biblical injunction, "Thou shall not suffer a witch to live."

*Sex of Witches, Salem, 1692*

|           | <b>Female</b> | <b>Male</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|-----------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| Accused   | 141           | 44          | 185          |
| Tried     | 52            | 7           | 59           |
| Convicted | 26            | 5           | 31           |
| Executed  | 14            | 5           | 19           |

Adapted from a table in Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*.

Men who incriminated themselves were treated quite differently. When John Bradstreet of Rowley confessed in 1652 to having familiarity with Satan, the Essex County court ordered him whipped or fined "for telling a lie." In 1674, Christopher Brown was also released by Essex County magistrates, on the grounds that his confession seemed "inconsistent with the truth," despite his admission that he had been "discouring with ... the devil." Though Hugh Crosia of Stratford confessed in 1692 that he had "signed to the devells book and then seald it with his bloud" five years earlier, and that ever since he had "been practising Eivel against Every man," the Connecticut Court of Assistants refused to try him, discharging him upon payment of his jail fees and the costs of bringing him to Hartford. Men who confessed to witchcraft outside of the Salem outbreak were punished, to be sure-but whereas most confessing women were taken at their word and executed, confessing men were almost all rebuked as liars.

Even when the courts took charges against individual men more seriously, their responses to these men were noticeably less severe than were their responses to the women whose cases they acted upon. As the following accounts illustrate, the repercussions of an accusation were likely to be far graver and longer lasting for a woman than for a man, even when their personal circumstances and the evidence were strikingly similar....

[Karlsen then provides a detailed account of six women's experiences.]

... The six women featured in these histories were either (1) daughters of parents who had no sons (or whose sons had died), (2) women in marriages which brought forth only daughters (or in which the sons

had died), or (3) women in marriages with no children at all. These patterns had significant economic implications. Because there were no legitimate male heirs in their immediate families, each of these six women stood to inherit, did inherit, or were denied their apparent right to inherit substantially larger portions of their fathers' or husbands' accumulated estates than women in families with male heirs. Whatever actually happened to the property in question—and in some cases we simply do not know—these women were aberrations in a society with an inheritance system designed to keep property in the hands of men.

These six cases also illustrate fertility and mortality patterns widely shared among the families of accused witches. A substantial majority of New England's accused females were women without brothers, women with daughters but no sons, or women in marriages with no children at all. . . . Of the 267 accused females, enough is known about 158 to identify them as either having or not having brothers or sons to inherit: only sixty-two of the 158 (39 percent) did, whereas ninety-six (61 percent) did not. More striking, *once accused*, women without brothers or sons were even more likely than women with brothers or sons to be tried, convicted, and executed: women from families without male heirs made up 64 percent of the females prosecuted, 76 percent of those who were found guilty, and 89 percent of those who were executed....

Numbers alone, however, do not tell the whole story. More remains to be said about what happened to these inheriting or potentially inheriting women, both before and after they were accused of witchcraft.

It was not unusual for women in families without male heirs to be accused of witchcraft shortly after the deaths of fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons.... Not all witches from families without male heirs were accused of conspiring with the Devil after they had come into their inheritances. On the contrary, some were accused prior to the death of the crucial male relative, many times before it was clear who would inherit. Eunice Cole was one of these women. Another was Martha Corey of Salem, who was accused of witchcraft in 1692 while her husband was still alive. Giles Corey had been married twice before and had several daughters by the time he married the widow Martha Rich, probably in the 1680s. With no sons to inherit, Giles's substantial land holdings would, his neighbors might have assumed, be passed on to his wife and daughters. Alice Parker, who may have been Giles's daughter from a former marriage, also came before the magistrates as a witch in 1692, as did Giles himself. Martha Corey and Alice Parker maintained their innocence and were hanged. Giles Corey, in an apparently futile attempt to preserve his whole estate for his heirs, refused to respond to the indictment. To force him to enter a plea, he was tortured: successively heavier weights were placed on his body until he was pressed to death.

What seems especially significant here is that most accused witches whose husbands were still alive were, like their counterparts who were widows and spinsters, over forty years of age and therefore unlikely if not unable to produce male heirs. Indeed, the fact that witchcraft accusations were rarely taken seriously by the community until the accused stopped bearing children takes on a special meaning when it is juxtaposed with the anomalous position of inheriting women or potentially inheriting women in New England's social structure.

Witches in families without male heirs sometimes had been dispossessed of part or all of their inheritances before—sometimes long before—they were formally charged with witchcraft. Few of these women, however, accepted disinheritance with equanimity. Rather, like Susanna Martin, they took their battles to court, casting themselves in the role of public challengers to the system of male inheritance. In most instances, the authorities sided with their antagonists....

Looking back over the lives of these many women—most particularly those who did not have brothers or sons to inherit—we begin to understand the complexity of the economic dimension of New England witchcraft. Only rarely does the actual trial testimony indicate that economic power was even at issue. Nevertheless it is there, recurring with a telling persistence once we look beyond what was explicitly said about these women as witches. Inheritance disputes surface frequently enough in witchcraft cases, cropping up as part of the general context even when no direct link between the dispute and the charge is discernible, to suggest the fears that underlay most accusations. No matter how deeply entrenched the principle of male inheritance, no matter how carefully written the laws that protected it, it was impossible to insure that all

families had male offspring. The women who stood to benefit from these demographic "accidents" account for most of New England's female witches....

. . . If daughters, husbands, and sons of witches were more vulnerable to danger in 1692 than they had been previously, they were mostly the daughters, husbands, and sons of inheriting or potentially inheriting women. As the outbreak spread, it drew into its orbit increasing numbers of women, "unlikely" witches in that they were married to well-off and influential men, but familiar figures to some of their neighbors nonetheless. What the impoverished Sarah Good had in common with Mary Phips, wife of Massachusetts's governor, was what Eunice Cole had in common with Katherine Harrison, and what Mehitabel Downing had in common with Ann Hibbens. However varied their backgrounds and economic positions, as women without brothers or women without sons, they stood in the way of the orderly transmission of property from one generation of males to another.

### Character Traits

*John Demos, after suggesting that the witch prosecutions cannot be described as simply a war of the sexes, offers an explanation that relies largely on individual personality traits. Like Karlson, Demos looks at evidence from other witchcraft cases rather than just from Salem, Abridged from John Putnam Demos, Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England (New York, 1982), 63-64, 86, 89, 91-94.*

An easy hypothesis--perhaps too easy--would make of witchcraft a single plank in a platform of "sexist" oppression. Presumably, the threat of being charged as a witch might serve to constrain the behavior of women. Those who asserted themselves too openly or forcibly could expect a summons to court, and risked incurring the ultimate sanction of death itself. Hence the dominance of men would be underscored in both symbolic and practical terms. Male dominance was, of course, an assumed principle in traditional society--including the society of early New England. Men controlled political life; they alone could vote and hold public office. Men were also leaders in religion, as pastors and elders of local congregations. Men owned the bulk of personal property (though women had some rights and protections). Furthermore, the values of the culture affirmed the "headship" of men in marital and family relations and their greater "wisdom" in everyday affairs. Certainly, then, the uneven distribution of witchcraft accusations and their special bearing on the lives of women were consistent with sex-roles generally.

But was there more to this than simple consistency? Did the larger matrix of social relations enclose some dynamic principle that would energize actual "witch-hunting" so as to hold women down? On this the evidence--at least from early New England seems doubtful. There is little sign of generalized (or "structural") conflict between the sexes. Male dominance of public affairs was scarcely an issue, and in private life there was considerable scope for female initiative. Considered overall, the relations of men and women were less constrained "by differences of role and status than would be the case for most later generations of Americans. It is true that many of the suspects displayed qualities of assertiveness and aggressiveness beyond what the culture deemed proper. But these displays were not directed at men as such; often enough the targets were other women. Moreover, no single line in the extant materials raises the issue of sex-defined patterns of authority. Thus, if witches were at some level protesters against male oppression, they themselves seem to have been unconscious of the fact. As much could be said of the accusers, in the (putative) impulse to dominate....

And one final point in this connection: a large portion of witchcraft charges were brought against women by other women. Thus, if the fear of witchcraft expressed a deep strain of misogyny, it was something in which both sexes shared....

With the witches' sex, age, personal background, family life, propensity to crime, occupations, and social position all accounted for (as best we can manage), there yet remains one category which may be the most

important of all. What were these people like--as people? What range of motive, of style, and of behavior would they typically exhibit? Can the scattered artifacts of their separate careers be made to yield a composite portrait, a model, so to speak, of witch-character? ...

... Witchcraft was defined in reference to conflict; and most charges of witchcraft grew out of specific episodes of conflict. Hence it should not be surprising that the suspects, as individuals, were notably active that way....

To be sure, most of the evidence on the motives and behavior of witches comes by way of their accusers; what, then, of its relation to "objective" reality? Perhaps such evidence should be viewed as inherently prejudiced, indeed as a reflection of the accusers' own character and inner preoccupations. This difficulty can be countered, if not entirely resolved, in several ways. For one thing, at least some of the pertinent testimony derives from situations which had nothing to do with witchcraft. . . . There are also various comments made in court by the suspects--in short, self-reports--to much the same effect. (Mary Johnson declared that general "discontent" had tempted her to invoke the Devil. Katherine Harrison apologized for slandering her neighbors with "hasty, unadvised, and passionate expressions." Hugh Parsons admitted that "in his anger he is impatient, and cloth speak what he should not.") Finally, there is the simple probability that so much opinion, of such a broadly convergent sort, cannot entirely misrepresent actual experience--the proverbial "fire" burning unseen but rightly inferred behind a cloud of all-too-evident smoke." Hostile characterization usually finds some truth on which to fasten, even where it also expresses a deeply subjective concern....

However disagreeable they seemed to their peers, the suspects were tough, resilient, purposive. John Godfrey was not merely a frequent litigant; he was also a determined and successful one. Anne Hibbens would bend, but never break, in the face of unanimous censure by her brethren in the Boston church. Katherine Harrison countered the animus of her Wethersfield neighbors by way of formal actions at court and informal (personally given) rebuke. Indeed it was this configuration of qualities that made the individuals involved seem not only suspect but genuinely fearsome. Had they been "crazed," "distracted," or "impotent ... in understanding," their words and deeds would not have counted for very much. In reality, they seemed anything but "impotent." Their general ill will, their presumed envies and resentments, their explicit threats to do harm would all be treated with the utmost seriousness precisely because, in a certain sense, they were strong....

From this long and somewhat tortuous exercise in prosopography a rough composite finally emerges. To recapitulate, the typical witch:

1. was female.
2. was of middle age (i.e. between forty and sixty years old).
3. was of English (and "Puritan") background.
4. was married, but was more likely (than the general population) to have few children-or none at all
5. was frequently involved in trouble and conflict with other family members.
6. had been accused, on some previous occasion, of committing crimes-most especially theft, slander, or other forms of assaultive speech.
7. was more likely (than the general population) to have professed and practiced a medical vocation, i.e. "doctoring" on a local, quite informal basis.
8. was of relatively low social position
9. was abrasive in style, contentious in character-and stubbornly resilient in the face of adversity.

## **Religious Tensions**

*Finally, Christine Heyrman puts forth the only thesis considered here that places religion at the center of the controversy: she asserts that associates of the small community of Quaker dissenters were especially*

*likely to be targeted. Excerpted from Christine Heyrman, "Specters of Subversion, Societies of Friends: Dissent and the Devil in Provincial Essex County, Massachusetts," in Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History, ed. David D. Hall, John M. Murrin, and Thad W. Tate (New York, 1984), 47-48, 51-53, 55.*

Even before her alleged bewitchment in the fall of 1692, Mary Stevens had probably become an object of local concern because of her courtship by Francis Norwood, Jr., the Quaker grandson of Clement Coldom. The marriage of Mary to Francis would not have been the first merging of orthodox and dissenting families in Gloucester, but it was a union of tremendous social significance. For Mary was not a servant maid or the daughter of an ordinary local farmer up in Goose Cove, but the child of Deacon James Stevens of the First Church, one of Gloucester's most prominent citizens; and Francis was not the stepson of an obscure Quaker farmer, but an avowed Friend from a fairly affluent family. Francis's suit of Mary Stevens thus marked the first movement of the Friends in Gloucester out of their position on the periphery of local society and the neighborhood of the remote northern Cape and into the mainstream. Their betrothal persuaded Lt. William Stevens, Mary's older brother and a major local merchant, that only demonic influences could have prevailed upon his sister to accept the attentions of a Quaker. As alarmed by the discovery of dissenting affinities among his own kin as Clement Coldom had been earlier, William Stevens acted to defend his family's integrity and to dissuade his sister from a disastrous alliance by declaring that she was bewitched. Stevens also sent for four of Salem Village's "afflicted girls," the instigators of the witchcraft trials held earlier in 1692, who claimed to have the power to discern who troubled the victims of malefic magic. But when William Stevens sought assistance from Salem Village, he and his neighbors already suspected who had bewitched his sister—her prospective father-in-law, Francis Norwood, Sr., whom everyone in Gloucester had long believed to be a wizard....

What endows the story of Mary Stevens with some importance for understanding the history of heterodoxy in Massachusetts is that this case was not singular. In fact, the same fears of heresy's infecting orthodox families through intermarriage or other ties to dissenters that stirred William Stevens underlay many of the other witchcraft prosecutions in Essex County during 1692. The center of the hysteria that had peaked earlier in that year was Salem, the town with the largest concentration of Quakers in the county. As in Gloucester, the connection in Salem between actual prosecutions for witchcraft and religious heterodoxy was indirect: few Quakers, and none of Essex County's most prominent Friends, were accused of the crime. The situation in Salem differed from the Stevens possession in Gloucester in only one way: here it was the "witches" rather than the bewitched who had ties of blood, marriage, affection, or friendship to the Quakers. But many of the Salem trials, like the Stevens case, reflect the same anxieties over the merging of the orthodox and dissenting communities.

A substantial number of the witches accused by Salem Village's "afflicted girls" came from families or households that included Quaker members. A case in point is the apparently puzzling prosecution of Rebecca Nurse. The pattern of indictments in Salem conformed to that of Andover and Gloucester insofar as those initially accused were all social outcasts in some sense—poor or shrewish women prone to violent or unseemly behavior, and usually reputed to have practiced malefic magic against their neighbors. The sole exception was Rebecca Nurse, a paragon of matronly piety, a pillar of respectability, a church member, and the wife of a substantial Salem Village farmer, Francis. There was only one reason that her neighbors had for disliking Rebecca Nurse: namely, that in 1677 the young Samuel Southwick, the orphaned son of a local Quaker farmer, John Southwick, chose the Nurses as his guardians and that they took the boy into their home. Rebecca and Francis were not Quakers, but their ward was.

Among those accused of witchcraft later in the trial proceedings were a large number of people who shared with Rebecca Nurse the same kind of indirect Quaker affinities, connections of kinship, and friendship with religious dissidents. There was the Proctor family, for example, of which five members—John, his wife, Elizabeth, and three of their children—were charged with witchcraft. What made the Proctors suspect in the eyes of their neighbors was less that John ran a tavern on the Ipswich Road than that his wife's family, the Bassets of Lynn, included a large number of Quakers....

Along with the bonds of blood and marriage, geographic propinquity to the Quaker community characterized many of the accused witches of Salem Village. Since most of these accused witches lived in Salem Village's more prosperous eastern part, situated adjacent to Salem Town, and since the majority of the accusers came from the more remote and economically stagnant western side, it has been suggested that western farmers both envied and resented the east's exposure to the affluent, cosmopolitan town. But more prominent in the thinking of the western Villagers than the greater proximity of their eastern neighbors to commercial Salem Town may have been the even shorter physical distance separating the residences of the accused from Salem's Quaker enclave....

. . . [T]ypically the accused witches were not themselves members of dissenting sects, and their connections with heterodoxy consisted in more tangential ties to dissenters among blood relatives, in-laws, household members, or neighbors and friends. Even in the case of Abigail Somes, accusations passed over Samuel Gaskill, for decades a central figure in the Salem Meeting, and focused instead on his ward, the child of an orthodox father and a heretical mother. Her background and that of many other accused witches suggest that the focus of anxiety was less on dissenters themselves than on those individuals who because of their relations or residences fell under suspicion of harboring if not heterodox sympathies then at least sympathy for the heterodox. The very ambiguity of their affinities and the division of their religious loyalties by the ties of family and friendship made such figures even more threatening to the maintenance of orthodoxy than known dissenters.

## Questions

1. What explanation offered by these scholars do you find the most convincing?
2. Demos, writing prior to Karlsen, criticizes a simplistic explanation that relies on sex roles; do you believe that Karlsen has answered his objections in her analysis of the role of gender?
3. The excerpts by Boyer and Nissenbaum and Heyrman both refer to residential patterns in the accusations; whose interpretation do you find most convincing?
4. Can you think of any way to tie these various theories about who would be accused together: Is there, for instance, an underlying theme to unite them all?