



*The Museum* | *The Village Hall* | *The Research Library* | *The Museum Shop*

---

## ORIGINS OF THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

Belief in the supernatural—and specifically in the devil’s practice of giving certain humans (witches) the power to harm others in return for their loyalty—had emerged in Europe as early as the 14th century, and was widespread in colonial New England. In addition, the harsh realities of life in the rural Puritan community of Salem Village (present-day Danvers, Massachusetts) at the time included the after-effects of a British war with France in the American colonies in 1689, a recent smallpox epidemic, fears of attacks from neighboring Native American tribes and a longstanding rivalry with the more affluent community of Salem Town (present-day Salem). Amid these simmering tensions, the Salem witch trials would be fueled by residents’ suspicions of and resentment toward their neighbors, as well as their fear of outsiders.

The infamous Salem witch trials began during the spring of 1692, after a group of young girls in Salem Village, Massachusetts, claimed to be possessed by the devil and accused several local women of witchcraft. As a wave of hysteria spread throughout colonial Massachusetts, a special court convened in Salem to hear the cases; the first convicted witch, Bridget Bishop, was hanged that June. Eighteen others followed Bishop to Salem’s Gallows Hill, while some 150 more men, women and children were accused over the next several months. By September 1692, the hysteria had begun to abate and public opinion turned against the trials. Though the Massachusetts General Court later annulled guilty verdicts against accused witches and granted indemnities to their families, bitterness lingered in the community, and the painful legacy of the Salem witch trials would endure for centuries.

One of those accused was Sarah Towne Clayes who fortunately escaped and came to Framingham along with her husband Peter and other members of her family and settled in the Salem End area of Framingham.