

## ■ Publisher's Note

The *Defining Documents in American History* series, produced by Salem Press, offers a closer look at important historical documents by pairing primary source documents on a broad range of subjects with essays written especially for the series by expert writers, including historians, professors, researchers, and other authorities in the subject under examination. This established series now includes fifty titles that present documents selected to illuminate specific eras in American history—including the Great Migration, the Constitution, and Civil Rights—or to explore significant themes and developments in American society—The Free Press, Prison Reform, Slavery, Workers' Rights, Voters' Rights, and Watergate.

This set, *Defining Documents in American History: The Salem Witch Trials*, offers in-depth analysis of thirty-one documents, including book excerpts, court transcripts and testimonies, essays, interviews, legal documents, letters, journals, a play, religious documents, a short story, and more. These selections help define events surrounding the infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692-1693, from precursor religious sentiment in Europe and anti-witchcraft actions there and in the New World, to the trials themselves, to the echoes felt in modern times with puzzling cases of mass hysteria.

The material is organized into four sections, each beginning with a brief introduction that examines the importance of the topic through a variety of historical documents.

Essays appear under the following topics:

- The European Background
- New England and The Salem Witch Trials
- The Post-Witchhunt Era
- Modern Takes

The documents contained within these sections provide an overview of the history and significance of the Salem Witch Trials, from the deadly persecution that

occurred during that time, to modern examples of mass hysteria, such as the “Satanic panic” of the 1980s, or the more recent “Pizzagate” conspiracy that spiraled out of control.

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### Essay Format

Each Historical Document is supported by a critical essay, written by historians and teachers, that includes a Summary Overview, Defining Moment, About the Author, Document Analysis, and Essential Themes. An important feature of each essay is a close reading of the primary source that develops broader themes, such as the author's rhetorical purpose, social or class position, point of view, and other relevant issues. Each essay also includes a section entitled Bibliography and Additional Reading that provides suggestions for further readings and research.

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### Appendixes

- **Chronological List** arranges all documents by date.
- **Web Resources** is an annotated list of websites that offer valuable supplemental resources.
- **Bibliography** lists helpful articles and books for further study.

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### Contributors

Salem Press would like to extend its appreciation to all involved in the development and production of this work, in particular Editor Michael Shally-Jensen, who compiled the volume and oversaw the creation of new content. In general, the essays have been written and signed by scholars of history, humanities, and other disciplines related to the essays' topics. Without these expert contributions, a project of this nature would not be possible. A full list of the contributors to this set with their affiliations appears following the Editor's Introduction.

## ■ Editor's Introduction

In 1692, when the Salem witch trials erupted, the citizens of Salem, Massachusetts, like most other Europeans and Americans, held preestablished beliefs about witches and witchcraft. They believed that witchcraft was a real threat and that it was linked to the moral decay of individuals and society at large. According to their beliefs, the devil preyed on those whose souls had become weakened or corrupted; in exchange for their souls, he offered his victims dark powers. Or, more commonly, he subtly took over their will and directed their actions, leading them to perform evil or provocative acts to disrupt the harmony of the faith-based communities in the New World.

Meanwhile, the colonists were also troubled by occasional French and Indian assertions of power in New England, in the aftermath of King Philip's War (1675–1678) and the ongoing threat of King William's War (1688–1697). They had virtually no control over the cross-Atlantic situation, and only limited control in their own region. Compounding their fears were local economic tensions, including conflicts between families and disputes over land. These are some of the contributing factors lying behind the infamous witch trials in Salem.

### European Precedents

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In Europe witchcraft and witch trials have a long history. The biblical precept “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Exodus 22:18) was held up to justify the witch hunts that flourished there for several centuries. Harsh anti-witchcraft laws, ranging from “The Laws of Alfred, Guthrum and Edward the Elder” (886 CE) to the iconic tract *Malleus maleficarum* (*The Hammer of the Witches*), first published in 1486 and the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* (1532), all contained legal codes detailing the handling of persons accused of being witches. The standard penalty was death, by burning, hanging, or other means. In 1431 Joan of Arc was burned at the stake for witchcraft, and in 1484 Pope Innocent VIII issued a bull, or edict, against witches. It has been estimated that

during the next three centuries, 300,000 to over a million persons were executed as witches. It is difficult to know how many of the victims might have been following the old pre-Christian, pagan ways, how many lost their lives in the general hysteria simply because they were not liked in their communities, or how many genuinely considered themselves witches. Certainly many innocent people lost their lives in outbreaks of “witch hysteria” during troubling times.

Some scholars suggest that the recurring series of witch hunts in Europe between 1400 and 1600 point to a discord over Christian doctrine as a likely cause. Selected priests and communities began to question the invariant truths of the orthodox (Roman Catholic) belief system. Schisms arose, such as that of the new Protestantism under Martin Luther, and the faith and fears of the populace found expression in the persecution of witches and demons, who were conceived as the antithesis of all that was good and right. Men and priests struggled with demonic “night thoughts,” which they believed to have been injected by witches. In this context, women were accused of harboring lustful wishes and of leading secret lives in which they engaged in carnal acts with demons. The male authorities, therefore, judged that such witches had to be named and brought to justice. Burning at the stake, or worse, was often the result.

Scholars have applied a similar interpretation to the Salem witch trials. In this case, however, it was Puritan (i.e., devout Calvinist) religionists who worried about their faith being challenged by worldly circumstances. Ultimately, the historical events encompassed by this period have their origins in an overly active popular imagination during times of religious doubt and social upheaval. In both Europe and New England, there was an undue interest in “carnal knowledge.” The corporeal punishment used at the time seems to reflect an attempt to make concrete, to make manifest, the problematic understanding of women in society under the metaphysical doctrines and beliefs that then were current. Men, too, were sometimes accused of witchcraft, but the overarching theme of the witch trials is one of a male-domi-

nant society's suspicion of women as "anomalous," "emotional" beings. Often, but not exclusively, the first ones to be blamed for troubles within a community were women. Especially suspect were women who served as midwives, healers, or soothsayers, not to mention those who owned property. Such categories ran counter to (male) expectations regarding social order, proper conduct, and biblical faith.

### **The Salem Events**

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The Salem incident started in January 1692 when two young girls in the household of the Reverend Samuel Parris began to behave oddly. They babbled and claimed that they suffered unknown harms. They shook, stared, laughed for no reason, and collapsed on the floor in fits. Previously, the girls had participated in meetings at which incantations had been uttered and attempts had been made to foresee the immediate future. Parris believed that the girls had been bewitched, and subsequent examinations by a doctor, ministers, and magistrates confirmed that this seemed to be the case. At Parris's urging, the girls accused three Salem women of having placed spells on them and living secret lives as witches.

The resulting frenzy spread quickly. By March hearings were underway, and by the middle of May 100 persons had been imprisoned awaiting the start of trials. A special grand jury and court known as the Court of Oyer and Terminer (meaning "to hear and determine") was established by the new royal governor, Sir William Phips. Serving as judges and jurors were local magistrates, ministers, and prominent church members. Defendants, for their part—chained and suffering from the poor conditions of their confinement—had no recourse to legal counsel. After the first conviction, in June, a brief delay occurred while the judges discussed the validity of "spectral evidence," that is, testimony by witnesses about strange apparitions or voices that they claimed to have perceived in conjunction with suspicious acts carried out against them by supposed witches. The witch trials resumed following input by a group of leading ministers who advised the court that spectral evidence was permitted in religious investigations and so could be used in this case, too, with due caution.

As the trials went ahead, more people were convicted. By mid-September, nineteen of the twenty-seven convicts had been hanged; one had been pressed to death by stones during his "examination"—a stressful procedure that entailed both questioning and, often, physical torture. Under such circumstances, many of the accused confessed to witchcraft. Even then, another hundred awaited trial in prison, and continuing accusations implicated two hundred more.

As the trials proceeded, some clergy began to openly criticize spectral evidence, which was relied on in most of the convictions. Even Cotton Mather, the respected minister of Boston's main church and a supporter of witch trials generally, spoke against the mass hysteria in Salem. With this support, the governor promptly dissolved the special court and convened a new court that discounted spectral evidence. Soon, all those who were in jail were freed and the executions ceased.

In the aftermath, jurors admitted to errors of judgment, and Judge Samuel Sewall publicly regretted his role in the trials, as did some of the witnesses. Years later, in 1711, the colonial legislature voted to clear the names of all but six of the victims of the witch hunt, and payments were made to the victims' families. It is not known why the six victims were not cleared. In any case, the Massachusetts legislature acted to clear one of the six in 1957, and in 2001 the rest were cleared.

### **Eras After Salem**

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Witch beliefs did not disappear in America after Salem, but they were far less prominent. The last known executions for witchcraft in the United States occurred in the early eighteenth century. After that, new forms of religious faith spread throughout the country. The Great Awakening, for example, introduced a form of Christian "enthusiasm," based on individual spiritual experience, which in times past might have been looked at askance. At the same time, the position of women in society had begun to change, albeit slowly. One of the first tracts on women's rights in America, "Observations on the Real Rights of Women" (1818; by Hannah Mather Crocker), signaled a turning of the page on witch hunts and their legacy of the mistreatment of women. By the mid-nineteenth century, writers such as Charles Mackay (in his *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of*

*Crowds*) were examining crowd behavior and mass manias objectively, sociologically, rather than as matters of morality or faith. This was a new perspective.

The later nineteenth century saw the rise of Spiritism (also called Spiritualism), a movement that involved belief in communication with spirits of the dead through mediums, seances, and other spiritual practices. Spiritism became hugely popular after the American Civil War, when many family members of the dead sought to connect with them through spiritual mediums. The practice lingered into the twentieth century, when its popularity spiked again following World War I. Some of Spiritism's practices, such as a medium being "taken over" by a deceased's spirit and being directed to say or do things in the presence of a beloved, were reminiscent of earlier "demonic" activities. Yet, now, they were accepted by a wide swath of American (and European) citizens as legitimate forms of expression.

More recently witchcraft has experienced a resurgence in popular culture. Pre-Christian forms of Wicca (an old term for the practice) found renewed interest among New Age explorers of human experience, particularly among women who sought to find sources of empowerment outside the predominantly male institutions of society. Because of its influence primarily on individual practitioners rather than on groups of seekers—though witch "covens" (groups) did form—the movement initially remained underground. In more recent decades, however, Wicca and related neo-pagan belief systems have emerged as popular alternatives to mainstream religiosity. Noted movies, books, television series, and annual conventions of Wiccans and neo-pagans have shown that interest in witchcraft—and witch culture generally—is higher than ever.

Sometimes that interest has faced a backlash. In the 1980s a number of "satanic panics" took place, where innocent people or witch-adjacent spiritual explorers were accused of heinous acts related to their beliefs. A fa-

mous case in California, the McMartin Preschool incident, revealed that fears of witchcraft in the general populace could still erupt, even in the modern era. In this case, preschool teachers were accused of satanic ritual abuse of children, based on flimsy evidence. Although the accused were cleared ultimately, such worries continued in one form or another afterward. There have also been a number of anomalous cases involving young people (particularly young girls) who have exhibited symptoms of mass hysteria, or, more properly, mass psychogenic illness, which have raised public concerns. Usually, no concrete cause is identified, even as the victims appear to show demonstrable physiological conditions. Such incidents seem to highlight the malleable nature of (young) human beings, arguably harkening back to the original causes of the Salem witch trials.

—Michael Shally-Jensen, PhD

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# The European Background

In fiction and in legend, witches can be white or black, that is, good or bad. They can be heroines and healers or vicious hags. They are insatiably curious yet hard to detect.

The long tradition of “witch hunts” in Europe (as elsewhere) has an obvious misogynistic quality to it, though men too were sometimes accused of witchcraft. The infamous treatise *Malleus maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), first published in 1486, was meant to be both informative and provocative about the nature of women and witches. *The Witch of Edmonton*, a play of 1621 by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, was a subversive comedy as well as a topical commentary. In each case, the witches were female, their bodies the subject of controversy, and their passions unbridled.

Modern Western images of witchcraft stem largely from the “witch craze” between 1400 and 1800, and especially from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth. Scholarly research has assembled a detailed map of prosecution, from Sweden to Sicily, from Poland to Portugal. There were some 110,000 trials, half of which resulted in convictions. (During witch panics, however, the rate

usually rose.) Not all communities bothered with following the written law.

Besides misogyny, another factor was the ongoing friction between Protestants and Roman Catholics, both within and between states. Religion explains why witch crazes mostly took place in the early modern period, a time of great religious ferment. Europeans, from the early fourteenth century onwards, construed witchcraft as a conspiracy against an established monotheistic religion. The blending of witchcraft and heresy served to demonize religious dissent. In the 1420s there were campaigns against demon-possessed women in France, Spain, and Italy. In France, for example, Joan of Arc, was put on trial for heresy in 1431. She was accused of acting upon demonic visions, committing blasphemy by wearing men’s clothing, and refusing to subordinate herself to church officials.

Yet the ruling elites of Europe, who had done so much to promote and permit witch-hunting, eventually changed their minds about the reality of witchcraft as a theological concept and an indictable offense. By the 1800s, Joan of Arc had emerged as a heroine of popular legend, and in 1903 she was granted sainthood as a Christian martyr.

## ■ Excerpts from *The Book of the City of Ladies*

**Date:** 1405

**Author:** Christine de Pizan

**Country:** France

**Genre:** book excerpt

### Summary Overview

Reprinted here are two passages from the late medieval French writer Christine de Pizan's classic work *The Book of the City of Ladies*, written in praise of the good qualities of women and against the misogyny common among medieval elites. In the first passage, Christine voices support for the education of women, citing classical examples and arguing against the commonly held idea that education made women less virtuous. In the second, she argues against the misogynist cliché that women are inconstant (fickle) by pointing out that men are just as inconstant, if not more so, and much of women's inconstancy is the fault of men anyway. She employs the classical examples of two Roman emperors to demonstrate that even men in the highest stations are subject to inconstancy. She notes that "if evil women have done evil," so too have men, and the path out of it, in any case, is continued education.

### Defining Moment

The fourteenth century saw the beginning of the revival of interest in the lives and works of the ancient Greeks and Romans known as the humanist movement. Individualism, secularism, and the arts began to flourish as economic conditions improved for a larger section of the European population. This shift away from medieval traditions eventually led to the Renaissance. Italy, where Christine was born, was at the heart of humanism.

The period was also a time of refinement of court culture in northern Europe, particularly in France and Burgundy. Kings and nobles collected and displayed fine books as status symbols, helping to fuel a market for literature. Debates about women were also prominent in court culture, partly due to the continuing popularity of poem *The Romance of the Rose*, begun around 1225 by Guillaume de Lorris and continued in 1280 by Jean de Meun. It combined an allegorical presentation of a love affair with denunciations of female inconstancy. Much of Christine's early work, including *The Book of the City of Ladies*, was in part a response to and critique of the *Romance of the Rose*.

### Author Biography

Christine de Pizan was born in 1354 in Venice, where her father, Thomas de Pizan, was a physician, astrologer, and councilor in the Venetian government. Thomas encouraged his daughter's intellectual interests. He relocated to France along with Christine and the rest of his family when he was offered the position of astrologer to the French king Charles V (1338-1380). There, at the age of fifteen, Christine married a French royal official, Etienne de Castel, who supported his wife's education, despite the rarity of education for women in the Middle Ages. From what Christine wrote of the marriage later, it seems to have been happy. Despite her Italian origins, she readily adopted French life and culture.

Her husband's death ten years later left Christine with three small children. By that time, her father had also died, and she had to support herself. She may have worked copying manuscripts, as the industry of bookmaking moved out of the monasteries and into commercial scriptoria, which were among the few businesses interested in hiring educated women. By the early fifteenth century, she had become the first woman in Europe known as a professional writer,



producing both poetry and prose. She worked in a patronage economy rather than writing for a public market, however, and her works were dedicated to her various noble patrons and reflect the culture of the French nobility. Many survive in richly illustrated editions meant for the wealthy.

Several of Christine's works are notable for refuting the misogyny of much late medieval culture. She joined a convent after 1415, after which she wrote little, and she died around 1430.



Christine de Pizan, *Le livre de la Cité des Dames*, Miniature, Ms. BnF, fr. 1178, 1413-1414, Image from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]



## Historical Document

### Excerpts from *The Book of the City of Ladies*

Chapter 36.

Against those who say that it is not good for women to be educated.

Following these remarks, I, Christine, spoke, “My lady, I realise that women have accomplished many good things and that even if evil women have done evil, it seems to me, nevertheless, that the benefits accrued and still accruing because of good women—particularly the wise and literary ones and those educated in the natural sciences whom I mentioned above—outweigh the evil. Therefore, I am amazed by the opinion of some men who claim that they do not want their daughters, wives, or kinswomen to be educated because their mores would be ruined as a result.”

She responded, “Here you can clearly see that not all opinions of men are based on reason and that these men are wrong. For it must not be presumed that mores necessarily grow worse from knowing the moral sciences, which teach the virtues, indeed, there is not the slightest doubt that moral education amends and ennobles them. How could anyone think or believe that whoever follows good teaching or doctrine is the worse for it? Such an opinion cannot be expressed or maintained. I do not mean that it would be good for a man or a woman to study the art of divination or those fields of learning which are forbidden—for the holy Church did not remove them from common use without good reason—but it should not be believed that women are the worse for knowing what is good. Quintus Hortensius, a great rhetorician and consummately skilled orator in Rome, did not share this opinion. He had a daughter, named Hortensia, whom he greatly loved for the subtlety of her wit. He had her learn letters and study the science of rhetoric, which she mastered so thoroughly that she resembled her father Hortensius not only in wit and lively memory but also in her excellent delivery and order of speech—in fact, he surpassed her in nothing. As for the subject discussed above, concerning the good which comes about through women, the benefits realised by this woman and her teaming were, among others, exceptionally remarkable. That is, during the time when Rome was governed by three men, this Hortensia began to support the cause of women and to undertake what no man dared to undertake. There was a question whether certain taxes should be levied on women and on their jewelry during a needy period in Rome. This woman’s eloquence was so compelling that she was listened to, no less readily than her father would have been, and she won her case.”



## ■ Letter to the King of England from Joan of Arc

**Date:** 1429

**Country:** France

**Author:** Joan of Arc

**Translator:** Belle Tuten

**Genre:** letter

### Summary Overview

The historical icon Joan of Arc (Jeanne d'Arc) was a controversial figure in her time. She started life as a French peasant girl born during the tumultuous years of the long-running series of Anglo-French conflicts known as the Hundred Years' War. By the 1420s, around half of France, including Paris, had come under English control, and the heir to the French throne, Charles of Valois (later Charles VII), had been disinherited and his crown given to the English king. Joan of Arc was illiterate but deeply devout, and became convinced that she had been chosen by God to restore Charles to the throne and lead France to victory against England. She believed that she was the embodiment of a prophecy that a virgin would free France, and she called herself "the Maid." Dressed as a boy, Joan traveled in secret to meet Charles, and he gave her command of a French force of about six thousand. Joan of Arc led this force to the besieged city of Orléans, where she issued this ultimatum to the king of England and his envoys. Though Joan of Arc did see Charles crowned king of France and was able to lead the French to significant military victories, she was captured and burned at the stake for heresy and witchcraft in 1431 by the English and their allies.

### Defining Moment

France and England had been engaged in a series of bloody conflicts for the better part of a century by the time Joan of Arc was born, around 1412. At issue was the right of the English king to rule in France. Since the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, English kings had held significant territory in France, and a complex web of marriages and alliances left the French throne vulnerable to rival claims. In 1337, Charles IV of France died, and Edward III of England, believing that he had a strong claim to the throne, declared himself the legitimate king of France. He was encouraged by his mother, who was the daughter of the French king Philip IV. According to French law, however, the throne could not be claimed through a maternal line, and Charles IV's first cousin, Philip, Count of Valois (Philip VI), was crowned king instead. Feudal laws required that the English king perform homage to the French king, rec-



Joan of Arc, painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, c. 1882. Image from the Fitzwilliam Museum, via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

## ■ Excerpts from the Massachusetts Bay Colony Trial against Anne Hutchinson

**Date:** 1637

**Author:** Anne Hutchinson

**Genre:** court transcript

### Summary Overview

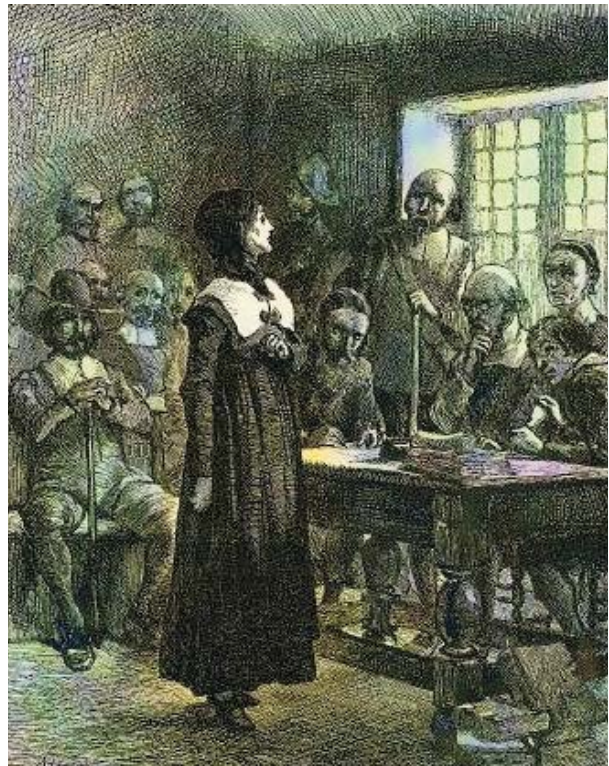
Anne Hutchinson, tried for what were perceived as her heretical religious teachings, remains one of the most well known and significant figures in 17th century American colonial history and almost certainly the most well-known woman. What many usually know of her is that she was a woman who got in trouble for teaching men and, for this crime, was exiled from the Massachusetts Bay colony. While this is true, it is hardly the whole story. As the transcript from Hutchinson's trial shows, she was at the center of a highly complex and contentious political and religious controversy in the young colony. Her crime was not simply that she was a woman who was teaching men—she was a woman whose teachings were prohibited because they threatened to undermine the religious—and, by extension, political—power structure of the colony.

One thing in particular to watch out for when reading these selections from her trial transcript is the high level of determination and logic that Hutchinson expresses in arguing her case with the governor and deputy governor of the colony. At no point does she acquiesce to their power. Rather, she forces them to lay out, explicitly, the charges against her which she then proceeds to refute. Note, also, the point at which she claims personal revelation from God.

### Defining Moment

The trial of Anne Hutchinson came amidst a wider conflict within the Massachusetts Bay colony known as the Antinomian Controversy (also sometimes known as the "Free Grace" Controversy). The colony had been founded in 1630 by Puritans from England and the government of the colony was tightly intertwined with the religious hierarchy. There was no freedom of religion in Massachusetts Bay. In order to possess political authority it was necessary to be in good standing with the church. Thus, controversies over religious doctrine had an effect on the civil government and heterodox or heretical ideas were prosecuted and punished as civil crimes.

The controversy itself revolved around several issues. One was the belief that God's grace (or unmerited favor) was the only thing necessary for salvation,



*Anne Hutchinson on trial, painted by Edwin Austin Abbey, c. 1901. Image by the JSS Gallery via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]*

aside from any good behavior (“works”) on the part of a Christian. The Puritans often viewed these good works as an outward sign that a person had received God’s grace. The Antinomians believed that the Puritan preachers over-emphasized such works. Just as troubling to the religious establishment was the idea among Antinomians, including Anne Hutchinson, that once saved, a Christian was literally inhabited by the Holy Spirit and could receive direct revelation from God. In England, John Cotton and William Wheelwright were prominent preachers of these ideas. When they came to Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s, they brought their teaching with them. Hutchinson became a popular and charismatic teacher at this time as well. A petition was circulated in support of the preachers but in 1637, Wheelwright was exiled from the colony, but Cotton was permitted to stay.

### Author Biography

Anne Marbury Hutchinson was born in July of 1591. While we do not know her exact date of birth, she was baptized on July 20 in Lincolnshire, England. As the daughter of a priest and teacher, she received a thorough education and, after her marriage to William Hutchinson, began following the work of John Cotton, a popular preacher. In 1634, Anne and William, along with their eleven children, migrated to the Massachusetts Bay colony, settling in Boston.

While she worked as a midwife, she also held religious meetings for other women in her home. Soon men began to attend as well. The preaching of John Cotton (who had come to Massachusetts as well) and John Wheelwright began to take root. Still being a follower of Cotton and Wheelwright (her husband’s brother-in-law), she began to share their ideas with



*Portrait of Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop, unknown author, 17th century. Image by the American Antiquarian Society, via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]*

others in the community, leading to the trial transcript here.

After her conviction, she and her fellow exiles established a settlement at Portsmouth, in Rhode Island. She later, after her husband’s death, moved outside English territory completely, settling in the Dutch colonies to the south. In 1643, an attack by local Native Americans from the Siwanoy tribe killed Hutchinson and the six of the children who had moved with her. A daughter, nine-year-old Susanna survived but was taken captive.



## ■ Cotton Mather's Account of the Salem Witch Trials

**Date:** 1693

**Author:** Cotton Mather

**Genre:** book excerpt

### Summary Overview

Beginning in February 1692, the town of Salem, Massachusetts, tried dozens of individuals for witchcraft, ultimately sentencing nineteen of them to death by hanging. Despite his peripheral role in these trials, the Puritan minister Cotton Mather is often associated with them because of his writings about the threat of witchcraft in New England. Given access to court transcripts and other documents, Mather compiled *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, published in 1693 as the official account of the Salem trials. His narrative describes witchcraft as a distinct and real threat to New England and the prosecution of witches as necessary for the well-being of the colonies.

### Defining Moment

Over the course of the Salem witch trials (1692-1693), the Puritan minister Cotton Mather initially had a small role. As minister of Boston's Old North Church, Mather only traveled to Salem once, being present for the execution of Reverend George Burroughs on August 19, 1692. The only minister sentenced to death for witchcraft during this period, Burroughs recited the Lord's Prayer during his execution. (He had been the former minister in Salem.) Because it was believed that an actual witch could not perform such a recital, Mather reportedly had to calm the crowd after the execution.

Mather, however, did not hold that such tests of witches were reputable sources of information. In fact, both Cotton and his father, the prominent minister Increase Mather, had cautioned against the use of "spectral" evidence in prosecutions of practicing witchcraft; such evidence entailed reliance on visions and dreams on the part of the accuser against the accused. Earlier trials had grappled with admitting the testimony of neighbors against those suspected of witchcraft. Though suspicions of this sort became a prominent source of evidence in these trials, some held that the testimony of someone attacked by a specter—a ghostlike image—resembling a person should not be admissible. Other forms of testing the accused were likewise increasingly viewed with



Cottonus Matheris (Cotton Mather), engraving by Peter Pelham, 1728. Image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, via Wikimedia Commons.

## ■ “The Curious Case of Teen Tics in Le Roy, N.Y.”

**Date:** March 10, 2012

**Authors:** Guy Raz (NPR/*All Things Considered*); Susan Dominus (*New York Times*)

**Genre:** news story; radio interview

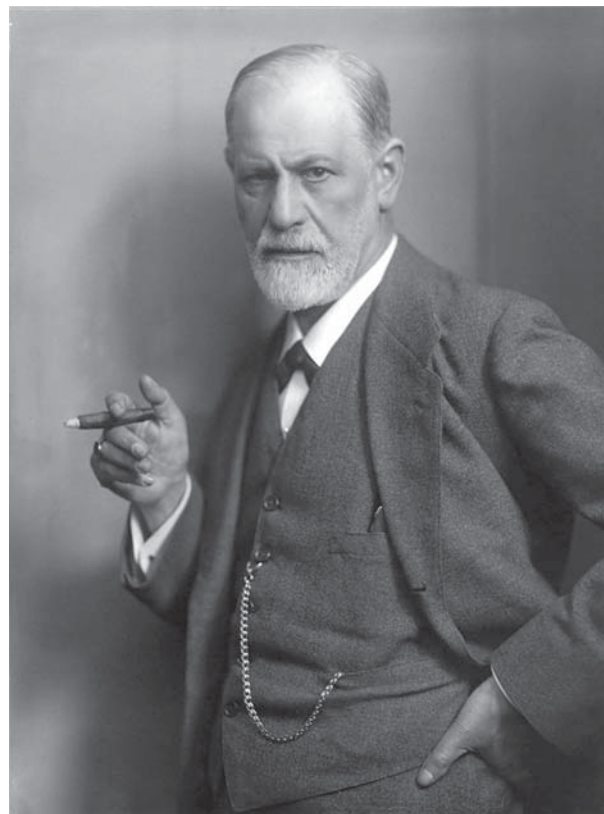
### Summary Overview

When a dozen students at Le Roy Junior-Senior High School in Le Roy, New York, a small town between Rochester and Buffalo, exhibited strange symptoms in the fall of 2011, parents and doctors alike were confounded. Those who first came down with the tics and uncontrolled movements that defined the event were girls, but over time one boy and an adult also exhibited similar behavior. For the families involved, the inability to find a specific cause produced worry. The girls seemed truly to be suffering. Toxic exposure, environmental sources, foods, and other causes were ruled out. The state health department eventually reacted to the symptoms of the group of girls by calling their collective behavior “conversion disorder”—a psychiatric condition in which stress produces physical symptoms—and mass psychogenic illness, or “mass hysteria.” This angered the families involved because it seemed to blame the victims and devalue their suffering. Some of the girls posted videos of their tics and appeared on the *Today Show* on television, hoping to publicize the issue. The symptoms continued for months but slowly dissipated, and the students were able to complete the school year in good health.

### Defining Moment

Mass hysteria suggests an image of crowds gone wild. In a medieval French convent, for example, one nun began meowing like a cat, soon joined by other sisters until the convent was filled with strange noises. In another early example, townsfolk in Strasbourg, France, began a dancing mania in 1518 that lasted weeks and led to death for some. In 1692 young girls in Salem, Massachusetts, accused women of the village of witchcraft, and the entire community became inflamed with the idea that witches abounded. Eventually, hundreds were put on trial and nineteen were executed.

Such events have confused authorities because there is no rational explanation, and the irrational is hard to study systematically. More recently, in the United Kingdom in 2010, 300 young musicians participating in a band competition became mysteriously ill. In many of these cases, the victims were girls, and this has led to a range of responses from serious studies on



Portrait of Sigmund Freud, c. 1921, who first mentioned “conversion disorder” to represent functional symptoms that could not be explained by neurologic diseases or other underlying medical conditions. Photo by Max Halberstadt, via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]