



A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience (Pivotal Moments in American History)

By Emerson W. Baker

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Beginning in January 1692, Salem Village in colonial Massachusetts witnessed the largest and most lethal outbreak of witchcraft in early America. Villagers--mainly young women--suffered from unseen torments that caused them to writhe, shriek, and contort their bodies, complaining of pins stuck into their flesh and of being haunted by specters. Believing that they suffered from assaults by an invisible spirit, the community began a hunt to track down those responsible for the demonic work. The resulting Salem Witch Trials, culminating in the execution of 19 villagers, persists as one of the most mysterious and fascinating events in American history.

Historians have speculated on a web of possible causes for the witchcraft that started in Salem and spread across the region--religious crisis, ergot poisoning, an encephalitis outbreak, frontier war hysteria--but most agree that there was no single factor. Rather, as Emerson Baker illustrates in this seminal new work, Salem was "a perfect storm": a unique convergence of conditions and events that produced something extraordinary throughout New England in 1692 and the following years, and which has haunted us ever since.

Baker shows how a range of factors in the Bay colony in the 1690s, including a new charter and government, a lethal frontier war, and religious and political conflicts, set the stage for the dramatic events in Salem. Engaging a range of perspectives, he looks at the key players in the outbreak--the accused witches and the people they allegedly bewitched, as well as the judges and government officials who prosecuted them--and wrestles with questions about why the Salem tragedy unfolded as it did, and why it has become an enduring legacy.

Salem in 1692 was a critical moment for the fading Puritan government of Massachusetts Bay, whose attempts to suppress the story of the trials and erase them from memory only fueled the popular imagination. Baker argues that the trials marked a turning point in colonial history from Puritan communalism to Yankee independence, from faith in collective conscience to skepticism toward moral governance. A brilliantly told tale, *A Storm of Witchcraft* also puts Salem's

storm into its broader context as a part of the ongoing narrative of American history and the history of the Atlantic World.

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Editorial Review

Review

"His rock solid historical work and lively, engaging prose made this book both an indispensable contribution to scholarship and a delight to read. I suspect that this is *the* book on Salem witchcraft for this generation." -- Scott D. Seay, *Christian Theological Seminary*

"...[A] cogent, readable, and comprehensive analysis of the literature on the Salem witch trials.... His emphasis on the choices made by individuals - to take action or remain passive - makes this work a welcome addition to our attempts to understand the significance of the Salem events of 1692." --*Journal of American History*

"Of many books about the Salem witch-trials, only a few really matter. This is one of them. Combining deep learning and clear-sighted good sense, *A Storm of Witchcraft* retells a story that has long managed to be familiar yet puzzling and misunderstood. Emerson Baker's masterly dissection of events is both genuinely original and utterly persuasive, not least because the importance of political circumstance, legal expediency and personal relationships seems obvious once it is pointed out. Baker reminds us that witchcraft was above all a religious crime, which took on terrifying significance at a time of extreme danger in New England's history. But his analysis of Salem's causal roots and painfully enduring ramifications does more than just demystify the trials: it illustrates universal truths about human emotions and their place in modern society." - Malcolm Gaskill, author of *Witchfinders: a Seventeenth Century English Tragedy*

"Baker, professor of history at Salem State College, places the trials in the larger context of American and English history, examining not only their prominent place in our collective memory, but also what made them so different from other witch trials of the era. Baker convincingly demonstrates that the trials were a pivotal point in American history and presents the mass hysteria surrounding them in very poignant terms." - *Publisher's Weekly*

"This extraordinarily researched, expertly written, and convincing study is suitable for and will appeal to a wide audience." --*Library Journal*

"By almost any measure, Emerson W. Baker's new history, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, is a masterpiece. Few volumes pass the exacting standards needed to be described as such. Baker's does.... Anyone interested in the Salem witch trials and the shaping of the nation should treat themselves to this book." --*Maine Sunday Telegram*

About the Author

Emerson W. Baker is Professor of History at Salem State University. He is the author of *The Devil of Great Island: Witchcraft and Conflict in Early New England*, and co-author of an award-winning biography of Sir William Phips.

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