

The Salem Witch Trials and Halloween

(October 2019)

Salem, MA, is a charming city north of Boston. It's known for something very important: Halloween. During the month of October, more than half a million visitors flock to Salem. That large number makes up about 30% of Salem's total annual tourists. This is impressive but not totally surprising for a place that's fully decorated for the spooky season by October 1. By then, there are already bats, skeletons, and other creepy decorations perched in windows; pumpkins and jack-o-lanterns on every doorstep; and costumed entertainers just about everywhere you look. Another common theme running throughout Salem at any given time of year, but especially at Halloween, is witches. A silhouette of a witch graces the sides of the city's police cars, a statue of a famed TV witch is located downtown, and local stores carry everything you need to concoct a potion. This seems lighthearted and fun, but there's another more somber reason Salem is directly tied to Halloween and witches. You see, Salem, known as America's Witch City, was the tragic setting of the Salem witch trials.

In 1692, a group of young girls began experiencing what were called "fits and convulsions." The public said the innocent girls were bewitched to behave in such a manner. As soon as

those words were uttered, hysteria and panic began to spread throughout the area. Just about everyone was pointing fingers at everyone else and accusing them of witchcraft. In the end, more than 200 people from Salem and surrounding towns were accused and thrown in prison. Many of those individuals were put on trial and found guilty.

During the trials, 20 people were executed for their supposed witchy crimes. Most were hanged on Gallows Hill while one man, Giles Corey, was pressed by large stones. Poor Giles held out under that tremendous weight for three days, but then he passed away. Despite the pain he endured, Giles never admitted guilt and stayed silent throughout his torture. Several other people died in prison due to horrible conditions. By May 1693, the trials had ended, and in 1702, the General Court declared they had been unlawful. In 1957, the state of Massachusetts formally apologized for the events of 1692.

The witch hysteria is long over, but it's still very much a part of Salem. If you have the opportunity to visit, there are countless places to learn about and pay homage to the victims of the witch trials. Some of the more prominent ones include the Witch House and the Salem Witch Museum. The Witch House is the only building with a direct connection to the trials that remains standing. One of the trial judges of that time, Jonathan Corwin, lived in the house. The Salem Witch Museum is a great place to go to learn about the witch trials from the

point of view of the victims. Of course, there are other interesting and fun places to visit in Salem, including the Witch Dungeon Museum, the New England Pirate Museum, the Salem Wax Museum, and the Witch History Museum.

Yes, Salem is fun and exciting during the spooky season. There's a lot to do, see, hear—and eat! However, despite all the celebrating and revelry, it's important to take a moment to reflect upon the innocent lives that were taken all those years ago. After all, the witch trials are one of the main reasons Salem is known as America's Witch City and why it has such a strong link to Halloween.

Teacher Resources – Vocabulary

Potential Words for Further Study: These words not only help with comprehension of the passage, they also appear more frequently in a wide spectrum of reading, especially in academic text. Therefore, further study of the meaning of these words may be beneficial. The words on this list can be incorporated into subsequent lessons.

Wilson Reading System Vocabulary Level: AB

annual (adj) happening or appearing once a year; yearly

link (n) anything serving to connect or tie

theme (n) a recurring, unifying subject or idea; motif, often one used decoratively

Words for Quick Discussion: Consider discussing these words as they are encountered to help students comprehend the passage. A quick discussion in student-friendly language while reading the text is best.

Wilson Reading System Vocabulary Level: B

bewitch (v) to cast a spell over

convulsion (n) a violent, involuntary contraction or spasm of the muscles

hysteria (n) a psychiatric condition variously characterized by emotional excitability, excessive anxiety, sensory and motor disturbances, or the unconscious simulation of organic disorders, such as blindness, deafness, etc.

perch (v) to place or set on or as on a perch

silhouette (n) any dark shape or figure seen against a light background

somber (adj) earnest and solemn; grave

Definition Source: Collins English Dictionary. Retrieved from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english>

Text Easability:

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