

COTTON MATHER AND THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS: SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

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KYLE ROBERTS: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Kyle Roberts, and I'm the Executive Director of the Congregational Library & Archives.

Welcome to today's virtual program, "Cotton Mather and the Salem Witch Trials: Separating Fact from Fiction," a virtual roundtable with Marilynne Roach, Rachel Christ-Doane, and Tricia Peone.

For those of you who are regular watchers of our programs, you'll realize that this is kind of unusual. We're doing a program in the middle of summer. We usually take the summer off. But this was such a great topic, and we had the opportunity to have such great speakers come together, that we figured we'd give it a try. And as it turns out, there's about 400 of you who've signed up to see this program. So thank you all for being here today.

To begin, I want to acknowledge that the Congregational Library & Archives resides in what is now known as Boston, which is in the Place of the Blue Hills, the homeland of the Massachusetts people, whose relationships and connections with the land continue to this day and into the future.

For those of you joining us for the first time, the Congregational Library & Archives is an independent research library. Established in 1853, the CLA's mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual, intellectual, civic, and cultural dimensions of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in the 21st century.

We do this through free access to our research library of 225,000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts, and our digital archive, which has more than 140,000 images, many drawn from our New England's Hidden Histories project.

Throughout the year, we offer educational programs and research fellowships for students, scholars, churches, and anyone interested in Congregationalism's influence on the American story. Please do check out our website, congregationallibrary.org, to learn more about what we do and for news of forthcoming events.

New England's Hidden Histories, which this program is brought to you today as part of this series, is a digital project of the Congregational Library & Archives. It digitizes and provides access to early New England Congregational church records.

The project comprises an online collection of manuscript Congregational church records from approximately 1620 to 1850. In this wonderful collection, you'll find letters, sermons, diaries, conversion narratives, church disciplinary records, account books, baptisms, membership lists, marriages, and deaths, as well as, as you'll see to hear... see today testimony from the Salem witch trials.

So far, over 140,000 pages of material have been digitized and nearly 20,000 or maybe closer to 25,000 pages have been transcribed.

The CLA has also a large collection related to the Mathers. The CLA created and recently revised a research guide and bibliography, which you can explore on our website.

Now I'm gonna introduce our speakers in the order in which they're going to appear.

So first up, I'll turn it over to Tricia Peone, Project Director of New England's Hidden Histories at the Congregational Library & Archives. She's previously worked at Historic New England, where she was a research scholar for Recovering New England's Voices project. She has also previously worked as a university lecturer, teaching classes on the Salem Witch Trials, early New England, and public history, and is a researcher for cultural heritage organizations.

Her research focuses on early modern magic and witchcraft, and her work on this subject has appeared in journals, books, blogs, and on radio and television. She holds a PhD in history from the University of New Hampshire with a specialization in the early modern Atlantic world and the history of science.

Our second speaker is Rachel Christ-Doane. She is the Director of Education at the Salem Witch Museum. She holds a BA in History from Clark University and an MA in History and Museum Studies from Tufts University. As Director of Education, she trains museum docents, works with students and teachers, creates educational programming, oversees exhibit curation, and engages in a range of research.

Her recent publications include "The Salem Witch Trials Memorial: Finding Humanity and Tragedy," published by *Smithsonian Folklife* in 2022; and "The Untold Story of Dorothy Good, Salem's Youngest Accused Witch," published by *American Ancestors* in 2023.

And our final speaker is Marilynne Roach, who is a writer, researcher, illustrator, and lecturer who has so far written nine books on topics ranging from Thoreau at Walden to the Salem witchcraft trials.

She was an associate editor on the definitive *Records of the Salem Witch Hunt* and a member of the Gallows Hill Project that proved the correct location of the 1692 hangings. This discovery was actually so important that it was included in *Archeology Magazine's* list of the world's ten most important discoveries of 2016.

Roach's *The Salem Witch Trials: A Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Community Under Siege* is considered the Bible of the Salem witch trials' scholarship.

So I think you will agree that you're not only gonna have a fantastic set of presentations today, but you're going to have a great list of books to pick up after this event and to read throughout the remainder of the summer.

So let me introduce, let me welcome Tricia Peone up, who's going to give you a little kind of orientation. Then we'll have Rachel, and Marilyn, and then Tricia will come up again at the end. So...

TRICIA PEONE: Thank you. Thanks, Kyle.

Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for joining us today. I'm thrilled that you're all here to hear about Cotton Mather and the Salem Witch Trials.

So I'm sure many of you know that puritans and witchcraft are inextricably linked in most people's understanding of early American history. Puritan ministers wrote some very influential treatises about witchcraft in the 17th century, and ministers were often the arbiters in cases of suspected witchcraft in New England. And Cotton Mather, for better or worse, is the most well-known puritan minister. He is arguably probably one of the most recognizable names in early American history.

So here he is today on TV. He was on, there was a series a few years ago called *Salem* on WGN. And this is the actor who played Cotton Mather. You can see in this promotional image a modern view, a modern interpretation and portrayal of Mather. And there he is, an image of him on a shirt. And, believe it or not, some Cotton Mather perfume, which you can purchase. And then here he is in the Marvel Universe.

So there are many Cotton Mathers we could talk about. But I think these images really demonstrate his presence, what a presence he is in popular culture today.

But is this an accurate portrayal? Did he really shoot lightning out of a giant cross as portrayed in this Marvel Team-up?

So our roundtable today will consider why Cotton Mather is so famous. He's often been portrayed as a witch hunter, as an instigator of the trials. Today, we'll find out about what he actually did during the trials before and after, what he wrote, and what he believed about witchcraft. And we'll have plenty of time for your questions at the end.

And I will be back after Rachel and Marilynne. So I'm gonna turn it over now to Rachel.

RACHEL CHRIST-DOANE: So excited to be here to be part of this event.

I hope that it's all right for me to confess that as we were preparing for this presentation, we came to find that Tricia, Marilynne, and I all own this copy of Spider-Man with Cotton Mather portrayed in this kind of very interesting, fictionalized way.

We are going to start our talk today a couple of years before the Salem Witch Trials with a very important case that gives us some essential context as we talk about Mather's involvement in 1692.

Now in 1689, Reverend Cotton Mather finished his first notable book-length publication, which is entitled *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions*. So in this work, he described the bewitchment of the Goodwin children of Boston and the subsequent witch trial of an Irish Catholic widow known only as Goodwife Glover.

This was an important and very influential moment for the young minister who, at 25 years old, had the opportunity to witness a bewitchment case firsthand, confirming many of the fears he held about the looming threats of the invisible world and powers of the devil.

So the events that led Mather... led to Mather's influential work began in the summer of 1688, when a mysterious illness erupted in the home of Boston Mason John Goodwin. His 13-year-old daughter, Martha, was taken with violent fits after a confrontation with the family's washer woman about a suspected theft.

Now during this argument, the laundress' mother had evidently stepped in and the quote unquote, "bestowed very bad language on the adolescent in defense of her daughter." This mother, Goody Glover, is described as an ignorant, scandalous old woman in the neighborhood.

Now, according to Mather's account, her, "miserable husband before he died, had sometimes complained of her that she was undoubtedly a witch, and that whenever his head was laid, she would quickly arrive unto the punishments due to such a one."

Now, all that's known of this woman beyond this description is that she was poor, she's Irish, she's Catholic, and she primarily spoke Gaelic. Now, we don't know her first name. We don't really have any other description of her beyond this.

Now, this exchange evidently triggered a violent physical response from Martha Goodwin. It was understood that her fits were not the result of epilepsy or cataplexy, which were both known conditions at the time.

This was something else. It was something dangerous, something unnatural.

Now, over the next several weeks, four of the six Goodwin children also began to show signs of this illness. A doctor was soon called in, and he declared their behavior to be caused by a hellish witchcraft.

Now this was a reasonable, yet very alarming diagnosis for the time.

We should remember, in 17th century New England, a witch was believed to be an ordinary person who had done the worst thing imaginable. They had forsaken God and covenanted with the devil. They would use harmful magic, known as maleficium, and they would use this to cause all manner of hardships and misfortunes.

This was a deadly serious crime, a capital offense. And though suspicions of witchcraft were very common in colonial New England, we should remember Massachusetts courts were typically quite hesitant to issue convictions.

Omitting the Salem witch trials, only 16 trials are known to have resulted in conviction in colonial New England. Now typically, we should remember magistrates and ministers were an important stopgap preventing the ever-present fears and suspicions of the populace from escalating into full blown witch hunts.

Now, this sickness, or as it was called, affliction, was disturbing to the many witnesses who gathered to observe the bewitched Goodwin children.

In his work, *Memorable Providences*, Mather gives us a detailed description of their behavior, claiming "sometimes they would be deaf, sometimes dumb, and sometimes blind, and often, all this at once. Their bodies contorted in unnatural positions. They screamed, making piteous outcries, that they were cut with knives, and struck with blows that they could not bear... their heads would be twisted almost round."

Very extreme scenes.

And though their tortures persisted throughout the day, they would actually lessen at about 9:00 or 10:00 each night, which allowed the children to eat and sleep peacefully.

So John Goodwin soon lodged a formal complaint against Goodwife Glover. As a social outsider in nearly every way, and one who had had a vitriolic exchange with the first afflicted youth, she was what we would consider to be a natural target.

Now, we should remember both men and women, young and old, poor and affluent could be accused. Women who pushed against social boundaries or made others feel uneasy or uncomfortable were particularly vulnerable when suspicions of witchcraft arose.

Goodwife Glover is promptly arrested after the accusation is lodged. Though she appears to have at least understood English, she spoke only Gaelic and communicated through the aid of an interpreter once she was incarcerated.

Evidently she gave unsatisfactory answers when asked if she believed in God and was unable to recite the Lord's Prayer. Even more damning, small rags stuffed with goats' hair and other ingredients were found in her house when it was searched. These were thought to be poppets, a form of malevolent magic. Speaking through her interpreter, Glover acknowledged she had used the rags to hurt the children from afar.

In one scene, with a kind of fascinating resemblance to the Salem courtrooms just a few years later, the afflicted children were present when Goodwife Glover was handed these rags. And as soon as they were within her grasp, one of the children was reported to be overcome with violent convulsions in a very dramatic scene. The magistrates called for that to be... experiment to be repeated, and they found that it produced the same results over and over again.

Now, according to Mather, it was long before she could, with any direct answers, plead to her indictment. And when she did plead, it was with confession rather than denial of her guilt.

Now, a confession was the clearest evidence that could be produced during a witchcraft trial. It was the strongest path to a conviction.

A panel of physicians was examined... was assembled to examine her to judge if she was of sound mind. And they found that she was.

And as a result, Goodwife Glover is found guilty of practicing witchcraft and sentenced to death by hanging. This was the first fatal witchcraft trial in Massachusetts Bay Colony in decades.

Now, Cotton Mather questioned the condemned woman on two occasions after her execution. Again, speaking through the medium of an interpreter. According to Mather, she never denied her confession, but she was loathe to offer further elaboration.

She eventually admitted to attending meetings with the devil and four other witches. But as he continued to press her, she paused for a long time before saying "they" would not give her leave to answer.

And when he demanded to know who "they" were, she said "they" were her spirits or her saints. In his account, Mather acknowledges the Irish word could be interpreted with either meaning.

Their interview concluded with the minister praying with the condemned woman.

On her way to the gallows, Goodwife Glover allegedly said "the children should not be relieved by her death, for others had a hand in it as well as she."

This foreboding prediction would prove to be correct as the children's torment continued after the execution. They made animal noises, barking like dogs and purring like cats. They pretended to fly through the room, flapping their arms like wings. They complained they were struck by invisible forces showing red marks on their bodies.

Many of these strange behaviors would be repeated by the afflicted witnesses during the Salem witch trials in 1692.

Now eventually, one of the boys claimed to see the apparition of three or four persons, though he could only identify one of the phantom figures. Some believed the devil could produce spectral representations of a witch. These apparitions could travel great distances, pinching, pricking, biting, and threatening, and were invisible to all but their unwitting victims.

However, not all found these spectral reports to be credible. And as we shall see in just a moment, many cautioned against this evidence, believing the devil could take the shape of an innocent person.

Now, according to Mather, when the Goodman boy struck at this apparition, credible reports confirmed a similar wound appeared on a "obnoxious woman in town."

However, in an essential contrast to the events of 1692, Mather did not give her name, explaining, "I will not expose her lest we wrong the reputation of the innocent by stories not enough inquired into."

Ultimately, these spectral reports came to nought and another victim was not accused of witchcraft in 1688.

Now, we should note this was not the only time Mather refused to publicize the names called out by an afflicted person in the throes of apparent bewitchment. In fact, he emphasized this point in a sermon preached to his Boston congregation, which he included in *Memorable Providences*.

He cautioned his parishioners, "suppose that a person bewitched should pretend to see the apparition of such and such. Yet this may be no invaluable argument of their being naughty people."

He continued, "warning, take heed that you do not wrongfully accuse any person of this horrible and monstrous evil. An ill look, or a cross word will make a witch of many people. There has been a fearful deal of injury done in this way in this town."

Now, as the children's affliction continued, Reverend Mather ultimately decides to take the oldest daughter, Martha Goodwin, to temporarily live in his home. Until now, other obligations have kept him from spending extensive time with the afflicted children. So this was his opportunity to observe their behavior firsthand and assess the efficacy of ardent prayer.

Though Martha recovered for a time once taken into the minister's home, her illness soon returned and her behavior grew wilder still. Now the stories of her time in the Mather house paint a striking picture of her dramatic behavior.

She choked on a ball as big as a small egg that was lodged inside her windpipe. She claimed to have been brought an invisible horse by demonic spirits, and she rode about the room on this alleged horse. She appeared to be bound by an invisible chain which dragged her from the seat towards the fireplace.

All the while, Mather sought to help the child, both as a concerned minister and as a scientist. He noted that he might easily "be too bold and go too far," but felt this was an opportunity to learn more about the devil's powers.

So he conducted several experiments testing hypotheses about the devil's telepathic power, among other elements of the invisible world. Though he found inconclusive results with these tests.

Now, ultimately, this experience had a very significant impact on this young minister. He resolved "never to use, but just one grain of patience with any man that shall go to impose upon me a denial of witches or of devils... or devils or witches."

In the years that follow, Reverend Mather often reminded his congregation about the dangers of the invisible world. They must remain ever vigilant, he warned, or witches and their master... of witches and their master, the prince of power and air.

Now, it's fascinating to consider the close connections between the behavior exhibited by the Goodwin children and the afflicted witnesses during the Salem witch hunt.

Mather's work, *Memorable Providences*, was published only three years before the Salem witch trials and was distributed far and wide for all to read. It's unclear if Reverend Samuel Parris of Salem Village owned a copy of this book, but the family would have at the very least been aware of this sensational case.

And with that, I will now turn the floor over to Marilynne.

MARILYNNE ROACH: Well, Cotton Mather is, as we've heard, all too often portrayed as breathing fire and brimstone, one might say not unlike a dragon, while leading a mob against any supposed witch with a pitchfork in one hand and a torch in the other.

You can forget that.

For one thing, he lacked the authority. Although witchcraft involved spiritual infractions of concern to the churches, the apparent effects of it caused physical harm. Therefore, witchcraft was a felony tried by civil courts.

Convicted felons were hanged, and in 1692, the "witch" hangings occurred between 8 am and noon. So forget the torches.

In 1689, Mather had, as Rachel just described, written *Memorable Providences*. So, which I might add that this occurred... that this case occurred under the administration of Sir Edmund Andros, when non-puritans also held positions of authority.

And Mather and his wife Abigail, had cared for the eldest Goodwin daughter, and in the course of the whole trial, and in the end of observing the Goodwin children, Mather learned names that he did not reveal in his book or elsewhere.

Of course, the fact that the invisible world of spirit was a reality interlaced within the ordinary material world was a given within the culture, and not just within the puritan worldview.

At the same time as the Goodwin-Glover case, Cotton was managing the large congregation of Boston's Second Church during the four-year absence of the senior minister, his father Increase Mather.

By early 1692, Increase was at sea, returning from England with the new charter he had negotiated for Massachusetts. Not perfect by any means, but it allowed for legal government retaining some measure of self-rule so they could begin trying them.

By then the witch scare was already spreading beyond Salem Village, a threat greater than the spells of one or two local malcontents, and possibly, as people feared, a conspiracy of witches, a concerted attack by the devil and his followers against puritan New England. It seemed as plausible a threat as the concurrent attacks on the frontiers of English settlement by the French and their Wabanaki allies.

On April 29th, Cotton held a day of private prayer and fasting on behalf of "the horrible enchantments and possessions broke forth upon Salem Village; things of a most prodigious aspect."

Early in this new crisis, he had advised separating the recently bewitched victims from each other and offered to care for some of them, as he had in the Goodwin case, to see if prayer and fasting could effect a cure. But nobody accepted this offer. For his own sake, that was probably just as well.

For he also prayed for his own health on that same day. It was "lamentably broken" he thought, by overwork and neglect. He tended to push himself when he ought to have been resting. Twice, within a year, he had endured bouts of "fiery fevers" that left him plagued with "illness and vapor, an aguish indisposition."

Increase Mather, new Governor Phips, and the charter landed at Boston, May 14th to find the four jails in three counties already sorely overcrowded with "witches," suspected "witches." You can imagine air quotes around "witch."

On the 27th, Phips established a temporary Court of Oyer and Terminer to deal with the backlog of cases. One of the nine judges on the court was a member of Mather's Second Church, John Richards, who seems to have invited Cotton to take a more direct part in the upcoming trials, as an observer and advisor perhaps, a role the minister declined due in part to "an overthrow of my health," especially if the task involved traveling, as it likely would do.

You'll know that, if you remember the maps, that this began with Boston to the south and Salem to the northeast, or a half-day's trip on horseback, at least. So it's not someplace you could just drop in.

Nevertheless, on May 31st, Cotton sent a detailed letter of advice, emphasizing the untrustworthiness of "spectral evidence," the tormenting visions reported by the bewitched victims.

"I must humbly beg you that you do not lay more stress upon pure spectre testimony than it will bear," he advised. He said "the court needs good, plain, legal evidence" the specters attacking the afflicted girls represented actual witches and not just shapes the devils counterfeited to falsely implicate the innocent. A person's permission for the use of their representation is not necessary. Rather, what is the actual source of the victim's torments? A devil alone, or a neighbor willfully collaborating with a devil? This is the... this is a vital distinction. A credible confession could count against a suspect, yet it must be credible and not "the result only of a delirious brain or a disordered... discontented heart."

Apparent witch marks on a suspect or wounds on the victims should be diagnosed by a trained physician. For suspects who confessed and truly renounced the devil, might the law perhaps allow lesser punishments than death, such as scourging?

However, Cotton couched his advice in exceedingly polite and deferential terms. A young man, he was 29, and Richards 67, speaking respectfully to his elders as he tended to do.

Unfortunately, the situation called for the stern voice of a minister telling a parishioner what was what.

Richards shared the letter with the other judges who did not take offence at Mather's advice. They ignored it.

After the first trial, conviction, and execution, one of the nine judges (Saltonstall) quit the court. Temporarily uncertain, the government asked the Boston area ministers for their advice.

On June 15, Cotton composed their group response: "The Return of Several Ministers." As before, he cautioned against the reliance on spectral evidence, stressing the need for "a very critical and exquisite caution, lest by too much credulity for things received only upon the devil's authority, there be a door opened for a long train of miserable consequences, and Satan got an advantage over us."

The "Return" advised that the questioning of suspects should involve as little "noise" and public display as possible, refuted the use of dubious folk remedies such as the touch test, and stressed the dangerous unreliability of spectral evidence.

But the letter ends with the assumption that the court knows what it's doing and advises "the speedy and vigorous prosecution of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious according to the direction given in the laws of God and the wholesome statutes of the English nation, for the direct detection of witchcrafts," meaning English laws of evidence, not folk methods, not hearsay, and not spectral evidence.

Instead, the court ignored all of the precautions and proceeded with vigorous prosecutions that resulted in the July 19th execution of five more "witches," all declaring their innocence.

Cotton, still trusting the good sense of the judges, appeared relieved to hear that soon after the hangings of these five, five suspects from Andover confessed and confirmed the existence of a witch conspiracy. Confessions were made under duress and in great confusion, but Mather didn't know that, nor had he attended any of the trials.

John Foster, a member of the Governor's Council and on a committee to rewrite Massachusetts' laws, per order of the new charter, asked if Mather had changed his mind "about the horrible witchcrafts among us?" He had not.

Mather replied on August 17th, again stressing the unreliability of spectral evidence. Devils are "capable of exhibiting what shape they please," even potentially Mather's own, which actually did happen.

Unfortunately, Mather still trusted that “the excellent judges” had, as they claimed, additional “most convincing testimonies” and other material against the accused they had so far tried and condemned.

Nevertheless, in case of judicial doubt, Cotton queried, might the courts apply reprieves, or offer bail, or in a worst case, exile?

Mather's diary refers to “my journeys to Salem,” but does not detail them. We can be sure of only one specific day that he was there: August 19th, two days after the letter, to attend the execution of Rev. George Burroughs, presumed ringleader of the witch conspiracy.

A greater crowd than usual converged on that occasion, including several other ministers, as well as merchant Thomas Brattle -- merchant... mathematician, so forth. Somebody who knew what was going on.

Burroughs had ended his life with pertinent last words and a perfect recitation of the Lord's Prayer, supposedly impossible for a witch, so once he swung enough of the crowd turned restive, perhaps questioning and objecting to the execution of a minister, that Cotton Mather, being on horseback, felt compelled to address the throng...

According to later critic Robert Calef, who was probably not present. He had addressed restive crowds that might turn into mobs earlier in his life after the Governor Andros' ouster in a very upset situation in Boston.

In Calef's account, Cotton reminded the crowd that Burroughs was not an ordained minister, which was true, and that outward appearances were not always trustworthy. Supposedly, using the quotation, “the devil has often been transformed into an angel of light.”

Cotton could have added, the real Cotton could have added that the Lord's Prayer test was mostly folklore and misuse of scripture.

Back in Boston, Judge Samuel Sewall learned of the reaction to the day's hangings and made note of it in diary, an uncommon occurrence. “Mr. Burrough by his speech, prayer, protestation of his innocence, did much move unthinking persons, which occasions their speaking hardly concerning his being executed.” Then, even rarer, he added his judgment in the margin: “Doleful! Witchcraft.”

As Sewall's brief contemporary diary note makes clear, Burroughs' last words did spark criticism of his execution among some of the witnesses, so something unusual happened at the gallows that day.

Neither Sewall nor Brattle mentioned Mather's presence in relation to Burroughs, and Brattle, though sympathetic toward the doomed, makes no mention of Burroughs at all. Brattle did

say that the condemned earnestly implored Cotton Mather to pray with them before they died, which he did when other ministers, such as Nicholas Noyes, refused.

Brattle wrote his account within weeks of the event, while Calef composed his longer work five years later when he proved himself to be a hostile source on everything relating to the Mathers.

On September 19th, the day of what would turn out to be the last hangings, though they didn't know that yet, Cotton Mather attended a meeting at Samuel Sewall's Boston home along with Chief Justice / Lieutenant Governor William Stoughton, Clerk of the Court Steven Sewall, Judge John Hathorne, and Salem magistrate John Higginson Jr.

Due to rising public displeasure over the handling the trials, which also jeopardized the implementation of the new Charter government, the Massachusetts administration needed to present its view of the problems confronting the witch trial court as the justices had experienced it.

Governor Phips, who had left the problem in his lieutenant governor's hands -- the lieutenant governor was also the Chief Justice -- needed to justify the summer's events to England lest the crown think he couldn't handle his promotion.

A publication was in order to counter criticism, and who better to write it than young Mr. Mather.

Cotton, ever eager to be helpful, may have volunteered, but certainly accepted the assignment to write the book and asked Steven Sewall to provide him with copies of a selection of trial papers. However, this government authorized *Wonders of the Invisible World* proved more of a headache than its author had anticipated.

While copies of the trial papers were slow to arrive, Mather assembled a patchwork of relevant past sermons and essays to his manuscript, including warnings against spectral evidence. He evidently rushed finished sections to the printer as soon as he completed them, while he waited and waited for the source material to arrive from Salem. Not a good way to compose a coherent work.

He finally received copies of testimonies from five cases, likely chosen by the court with material defending the accused, like Elizabeth How, omitted. Cotton readily accepted the guilt of the five.

His book appeared at the same time as Increase Mather's *Cases of Conscience*.

Both volumes assumed the presence of an actual diabolical threat. Both warned against the use of spectral evidence while accepting the judges' assurances that they had used other

evidence. Both assumed that at least some of the condemned were indeed guilty. And both felt the justices were decent conscious men.

But *Cases of Conscience* more sternly denounced the court's acceptance of spectral evidence and emphasized that people were killed because of this.

Most of the reading public assumed that Cotton approved of everything the court had done, everything that had gone wrong, and that he wanted the witch hunt to continue, which was not true. But it was the impression the book presented, and he had written it.

As matters transpired, the only person to whom the chaotic book was a real danger was the author, Cotton Mather.

After the January 14, 1697 Public Fast apologizing for the 1692 debacle, Cotton was troubled by thoughts that "divine displeasure must overtake my family for my not appearing with vigor enough to stop the proceedings of the judges when the inextricable storm from the invisible world assaulted the country."

He, and one may charitably assume the judges also, had had good intentions in 1692. Nevertheless, we should remember that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

TRICIA: Thank you Marilynne. And thank you, Rachel.

So we've heard about before and during the Salem witch trials. What happened to Cotton Mather and his reputation after the trials?

Well, he certainly continued to discuss witchcraft.

In his *Magnalia Christi Americana*, published in 1702, Mather characterized the trouble at Salem as, "a prodigious possession of devils, which it was then generally thought had been by witchcrafts introduced."

So he argued in that treatise that God was punishing New Englanders for their wickedness, for using divination and other types of magic, for reading what he called wretched books, and so on.

And his emphasis here is interesting. He interprets Salem as both witchcraft and possession. It's... it's two of those things. It's a very important distinction. It's not one or the other. It was both.

So not long after the trials, as Marilynne noted, he was attacked by Robert Calef. He was also attacked by British authors such as Francis Hutchinson, who was a Church of England minister, in his 1718 treatise, *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft*. So Hutchinson

attributed the Salem witch trials to the writings of Cotton and Increase Mather, as well as Richard Baxter. And he characterized their writings, like *Memorable Providences* and *Wonders of the Invisible World*, as being, "frightful stories that filled the people's minds with great fears and dangerous notions."

But Robert Calef's attacks on Mather were much more personal and more public. Calef argued that belief in the powers of the devil and of witches was, "pagan and popeish." So he's basically calling Mather a pagan and a Catholic who's imagining the devil is as powerful as a god.

And interestingly, in his debates with Calef, Mather's own library, his book collection, becomes part of their debate. Calef says that he had only had, he was a merchant... he had only had scraps of reading. He could only borrow books on witchcraft from others.

Cotton Mather offers to help by inviting Calef to come to his library and peruse his collections.

Calef demurs, and he wrote back quite a zinger. He says he already had the only book that he needed, the Bible.

Mather then one-ups him a little bit and sends a copy of Richard Baxter's *Certainty of the World of Spirits* in an attempt to convince Calef of his error, and that he had underestimated the powers of the invisible world.

Now after Salem, Mather still really wants to make a name for himself, not just in the colonies, but in London and in Europe. He referred to America as an infant country, entirely destitute of philosophers.

So he continues to write letters, between 1712 and 1724, he writes dozens of letters to members of the Royal Society in London, which are collectively referred to as his "Curiosa Americana." He writes them on diverse topics, but a lot of them are about wonders, and curiosities, and the invisible world. There's ghost stories, there's sea serpents, monstrous births. He talks about dreams and the power of dreams and apparitions.

And he based these letters on his personal observations, as well as information from reliable correspondence that he had across New England. He was nominated for fellowship in the Royal Society in 1713. And excerpts of these letters were printed in the Society's *Philosophical Transactions*.

When he was elected, Mather wrote that it was, "a marvelous favor of heaven, and he hoped it would put him above the contempt of envious men." It did not.

So in the aftermath of a smallpox epidemic in Boston in the early 1720s, Mather was experimenting successfully with inoculation, based on knowledge of West African medicine from Onesimus, a man he enslaved who had been purchased by his congregation for him. And so during this inoculation crisis, Mather gains notoriety once again.

The practice was so controversial that someone tried to kill Mather by throwing explosives into his home. His credibility, his reputation were attacked again, and he himself drew parallels again to the way his reputation was attacked during the witch trials. In fact, a Boston apothecary wrote a letter to the Royal Society insulting Mather and questioning whether or not he had ever really been elected a fellow.

In a letter to Hans Sloane, Cotton Mather disparaged everyone who was opposing him. He lamented, "but how many lives might have been saved if our unhappy physicians had not poisoned and bewitched our people with a blind rage that has appeared very much like a satanic possession against the method of relief and safety in the way of smallpox inoculated?" So his enemies again, he's comparing this to these invisible enemies of satanic possession and bewitchment.

Spectral evidence continued to trouble him for decades after the Salem witch trials. He still wrote about it. In a letter in 1712, he said that he... to a doctor, to a physician in England, he wrote that he still was unaware of any infallible rules to determine whether a spectre that appeared could appear in the shape of an innocent person, if it needed the devil's permission, or, you know, he said, there was never really a way.

He had still not found a way decades later to determine whether or not you could always or ever really be sure what a spectre was representing. So I think if we truly want to understand his worldview and the beliefs of many of his contemporaries, we have to be more uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Some of his views we don't recognize today as logical or true, but he was an investigator, an experimenter, a collector, and an absorber of knowledge. In his words, "the improvement of knowledge in the works of nature is a thing whereby God and His Christ is glorified."

So even though what we've talked about here today, we're saying that Cotton Mather certainly didn't singlehandedly cause the Salem witch trials in the way that he's often been presented in the media, and in film, and in literature.

Right, if you removed him completely from the scene, the trials still would have happened. So even though he's not exactly the villain of the story, that does not make the trials any less of a tragedy.

Often people prefer have kind of a simple explanation for Salem with heroes and villains, but it's not that easy. And hopefully we've given you some new things to consider.

If you want to learn more, we have a lot of materials here at the CLA.

These are some of our Mather shelves. These are writings by Cotton Mather and Increase Mather, mostly. So as many of you know, the Congregational Library, we have a very strong connection to the Mathers. So as the national library of Congregationalism, we're part of his legacy. Our collections include Cotton Mather's works, Increase Mather's works, other family members.

And through our new New England's Hidden Histories project, we have a lot of other Mather materials that have been digitized and published online through partnerships with institutions that also hold Mather materials such as the American Antiquarian Society and the Massachusetts Historical Society.

You can see that image on the left is a page from one of Cotton Mather's diaries, which we hold at the CLA, and the image on the right is one of his sermons. So those are some of the notes he prepared for a sermon he gave in December of 1692, and that's held by the American Antiquarian Society.

The library has also prepared a pretty remarkable research guide, which is our Cotton Mather Bibliography. It includes a chronology of his, what, 400 treatises, published works in his lifetime and posthumously. It contains lists for further reading about Cotton Mather, as well as talks in our series.

The library holds an annual Cotton Mather Lecture every February, which is the month of his... both his birth and his death.

And we've also got a newly updated Salem Witch Trials research guide, which is our, the library's special contribution to Salem scholarship, is that we've pulled together church records, personal papers of people and places who were involved in the trials, and you can review them here. There's links to other primary sources as well as secondary sources, and some recommended readings.

We also have a collection of really lovely late 19th and early 20th century books on Salem history that have truly beautiful bindings. You can see a couple of them there.

So the Congregational Library is a really wonderful place to immerse yourself in research of the Mathers and the Salem witch trials. You can visit us or go on our website to learn more.

And now some of you have been typing away in the Q&A, I see. So we're going to switch over. And Kyle, if you could bring everybody up. So, let's see.

We've got a question from Patricia Vondal, who has asked us... She says thank you for this fascinating presentation. And she wants to know about the role of pastors in calming down

populations in Massachusetts to prevent widescale community witch hunts. And she wants to know... she does in her hometown of Chelmsford, Mass., the second minister did convince the community that a woman was not a witch. And so she's interested to know more about the role that ministers played in, as she says, calming down accusations of witchcraft.

Can one of you speak to that? I think she asked Rachel, but I think, Marilynne, you'll both know answers to this question.

RACHEL: I mean, so just to speak, kind of in a general sense, as I said, witch trials generally didn't get particularly out of control in colonial New England. Certainly not like what we see in Europe, in continental Europe and Scotland. Things were a little bit calmer here.

And that has a lot to do with the government, the ministry kind of being closely connected to that, of course, in the colonies.

So, for example, if we look at a parallel witch hunt that's happening in 1692 in Stamford, Connecticut, there is a very similar event that happens where a young woman who is a servant is overtaken by this strange kind of mysterious illness. A midwife in that case is called in, looks at her, says that she is bewitched. And this kind of leads to, I believe it's two women are accused of witchcraft and put on trial.

And it's fascinating that this is happening the same year as the Salem witch trials with a very different result. Whereas in that case, the evidence is very closely considered by the magistrates. Things are handled in a very more cautious way. So, I mean, broadly speaking, it's the ministers and the magistrates, again, the kind of leaders of the communities who would urge caution in the evidence that's used and things like that. So we saw an example from that from Mather.

But if we look to those other cases, we see that very careful conversation about evidence that's being... that's going on within the magistrates and also with the ministry.

Marilynne, I don't know if you have anything else to add to that.

MARILYNNE: Well, it makes me think of Rev. Samuel Willard. He was the minister at the Second... Third Church in Boston, where Samuel Sewall worshiped, and a number of the judges.

Earlier in his career, he had been in Groton out to the west, and a servant girl in his household said she was possessed, thought... said that she was being bewitched by a neighbor, whom she names. And he keeps a close eye on her, observes what's going on with her affliction. But eventually, she turns out to be possessed, when the devil making her trouble speaks through her.

So it didn't become a court case, and you could see that this was all based on what seemed at the time to be the devil's lies.

But he was, I would say, more of a calming voice in Boston in 92. He and his son, apparently, the son definitely, helped some of the persons escape. He got into trouble for that. But that... the fact that he'd helped some people break out from the jail, that is the son.

But yes, he was helpful enough so that his spectre, Samuel Willard's, was reported. But, there was enough doubt among the magistrates listening to that testimony that the, the afflicted or the possessed devils could not make his image actually hurt people who just... it just stood there. So he escaped that rather narrowly.

But yes, ministers were generally accounting for it.

TRICIA: There was even, there's another... if I can add another case much later in New Hampshire in the 1790s where a woman is accusing people... she seems to be afflicted or possessed potentially, and she's accusing people of witchcraft.

And people in the town are coming to her and asking her to name who is afflicting her.

And the minister, Rev. Church, he writes a petition, and he has several other men of importance in the town sign it. And they say, let's use caution. The devil is still active. We believe in witches, but we must remember to be cautious.

So I think that, you know, this interest in witchcraft certainly continues long after Salem. Nobody's gonna be executed in New England after that. But ministers still are arbitrating these cases for their communities. They're often the most learned men in a community, especially in more rural areas. And so even as late as the 1790s, a minister is being called upon to decide what's happening in his community.

Is it witchcraft? Is it a possession? Is it a natural illness?

So we've got some, a lot of really great questions in the chat. And we'll see if we can get to some more because there's some questions in here about some of the common misconceptions of the Salem witch trials.

And there's a question here from Yvonne Jocks who asks, she says, there don't seem to be as many records and transcripts from Oyer and Terminer trials in Salem Town as from the earlier examinations in the Village. She says, is this just my imagination, or have some records been lost?

MARILYNNE: Yes.

Whatever the record book was for the Oyer and Terminer court is missing. It was around for a while because the legislature, when they were being petitioned to reconsider cases and clear people, which they eventually did, they basically were consulting the Oyer and Terminer records.

But at some point, it's gone.

It could be, well, the usual explanation is that descendants wanted to hide the facts, and everything, and so on.

But I think it could very well have been missing during the Revolutionary War, if not walked off with by, say, a British officer the way Bradford's *Plymouth Plantation* suddenly turned up in England.

Or burnt in the, in the Stamp Act riots because Thomas Hutchinson, who wrote *The History of Massachusetts*, includes a bunch of material on witch trials, some of which he's quoting from documents that no longer exist.

He had some of the actual records in his house, and the house got demolished by a mob. So I hope it turns up somewhere.

TRICIA: You never know. We might find more material someday.

One of the questions is a question I think people who write about the Salem witch trials hear a lot. It's a persistent question, so I'm gonna ask it.

What happened to the theory years back that the possessed people had been infected by a spoiled crop of grain, also known as the ergot theory and ergotism?

Will one of you take that one?

MARILYNNE: Rachel, you want that one?

RACHEL: Sure. Yeah.

So this is just a persistent theory we can't seem to shake loose.

I will say that we actually have a whole blog about this on our website if anybody's interested in kind of a more detailed breakdown.

The short of it is this was a theory that was proposed by one researcher in the 70s. She was an undergraduate student at the time, wrote an article that was published in *Science* magazine speculating that convulsive ergotism is what caused the behavior of the afflicted.

So for those who don't know, ergot is this fungus that grows on rye or wheat. If you ingest it, you will become very sick. And you will also experience symptoms that in some ways align with what we see from the afflicted witnesses: spasms, to a degree hallucinations, rigidity, things like that. So she is speculating that maybe this is what's causing the afflicted behavior.

Very immediately, there's a response from the historians of the Salem witch trials that this doesn't make sense if we look at the actual evidence of the Salem witch trials.

To just name a couple of elements here, the... this is impacting your grain source, right? So everyone in the house would have been eating from that same source. So why are just one or two people coming down with an affliction in a house with other people?

And why is the affliction hopping large geographic distances, right? So the largest number of people accused of witchcraft was actually in Andover, which is about 20 miles away from Salem. And you, so you see the affliction sprang up there with no, like, chain.

So you... if it was this kind of true medical explanation, we would be able to see it more definitively. And there are other elements that help us kind of debunk this theory.

But, and I will say Margo Burns, who is a wonderful historian who worked on the *Records of the Salem Witch Hunt* with Marilynne, she has a whole lecture, the ergot theory as well, that is very much well worth a watch.

She talks about how ergot, the ergot alkaloid is, what LSD is derived from... the drug LSD. So essentially when this theory was proposed, there was this kind of splashy news that kind of hit the AP and went, for lack of a better term, viral, that LSD causes the Salem witch trials. Girls tripping... you know, things like that. And that's just such a splashy headline that it spread like there was no tomorrow.

And to this very day, it's still running rampant through pop culture.

So a really good way to test if literature or what... any sort of pop culture interpretation of the Salem witch trials has done any amount of research is to see how they present the ergot theory. If they are presenting it as a possibility, you know that that researcher hasn't done enough, hasn't really looked enough into the scholarship.

So, and again, there's a lot more to that. So definitely check out those resources.

TRICIA: Thank you.

Yeah, I think it's unfortunate because I think PBS, one of... there was like an *American Experience* episode on the Salem witch trials and they unfortunately gave some airtime to the, to that theory. I think they brought it back. So that was...

RACHEL: Can't get rid of it.

TRICIA: So I've got a question. You know what? And I, and I'm sorry we didn't do this, but could we give a brief definition of spectral evidence?

It's hard to give a brief definition, but can we?

MARILYNNE: Well, the person who could see things, spectres... and a spectre's like the ghost of someone, only they're still alive. And only the victim can see them. So they can't be corroborating evidence really.

Besides the fact that you can't really tell if it's their actual spectre or just a vagary produced by the devil. But if it's just a vision, the source cannot be verified. So it really shouldn't be used as evidence.

Can you add anything more to that?

TRICIA: I think, and Cotton Mather, Cotton Mather differentiated, too.

He said sometimes like the ghosts of a murder victim could appear along with a spectre.

But the part of the difficulty too, is that they were just never sure, you know, is the spectre appearing because the witch has this power to send out her spirit to appear and attack people? Or is this spectre, this vision appearing because the devil is, you know, is using the spirits that he has as the prince of the air and his power over the invisible world to make a spirit, a spectre, appear that it's not connected to a person who's been accused.

It's a, it's a tricky one. And it's, yeah.

This is an interesting question from TJ who asks, can you talk about the relationship or dynamic between Cotton Mather and Rev. Samuel Parris during and after the trials?

Did they, did they discuss the trials that we know of? Or write to each other? I don't know of any letters between them.

MARILYNNE: Because of the geographic distance, although Parris had lived in Boston before he went to Salem Village, when he was being a merchant. And they didn't move up to Salem Village until sometime in the year that the Glover-Goodwin case.

But I don't know. I mean, they must have crossed paths sometime. I don't recall anything written up.

TRICIA: We've got a question from Cotton Mather scholar Reiner Smolinski asking, what did people believe about how a witch can cause the afflicted to experience pain and hurt? How did the witches' alleged power work?

MARILYNNE: I guess, if someone was a real witch, allied with the devil, they at least are under the impression that the devil's given them powers to do things.

But the more orthodox view, if I understand it correctly, was that the imps and minor devils are doing it and letting the witch think that they're in charge.

Either way, they're culpable, but...

TRICIA: I think Mather wrote about, you know, he had, Mather read a lot of what we would call scientific literature now, but was the literature of natural philosophy in his time.

And he had, I think he called it, and actually Reiner would know better than me. But, he called it this plastic, like a plastic element, that kind of spirit matter.

MARILYNNE: Plastic as in malleable.

TRICIA: Exactly. Yeah.

And that the... within the invisible world, there was a way that the devil could sort of essentially bend matter and make out of nothing to cause, you know, appearances or to cause harm.

There's a lot of really interesting history of science literature on how these theories worked in the 17th century. So I think that's part of it, too, that there's this, sort of these invisible forces, essentially that the witch was able to harness through the devil's aid to afflict people.

But often that actually, in the trial accounts they describe a lot of squeezing. You know, that one of the accused witches would be squeezing their clothes or squeezing their hands. And when they did that, the afflicted in the courtroom... or the, you know, wherever they were holding examinations, would like that that power was what was causing them harm, right? Is that...?

MARILYNNE: Yeah, it somehow connected the spirit world and the physical world so that...

Stick pins in the doll and the victim feels it. Somehow.

RACHEL: And we should note that there's kind of, there's kind of a difference in the way that the populace is thinking about witchcraft and the way the ministry is thinking about it. Like there's kind of distinct differences.

Whereas, you know, Cotton Mather and the ministry are thinking about it in these kind of, I mean, scientific terms. They're trying to really get into, you know, the powers of the devil, the power, you know, the natural forces that are involved.

The populace is thinking about it in terms of day to day like misfortunes that are happening to you, right?

So that was their biggest concern, was not necessarily the, you know, the covenant with the devil and the signing his book. They're more concerned with someone who is using a poppet, like in Glover's case, to hurt their child or has caused their cattle to go sick, you know, go mad by, you know, doing X, Y, and Z.

So there's kind of a popular folk understanding of using malevolent magic that certainly gets wrapped up in with the ministry's approach. And we see that being played out during the Salem witch trials.

They're kind of trying to mesh those two views together in the courtroom.

TRICIA: We've had a question about... I don't think we mentioned Samuel Sewall, one of the magistrates, and his apology in front of his fellow members of his church, his congregation, his formal apology for his role in the trials.

So we've had a question about that and whether Cotton Mather ever commented on that or ever did anything similar.

MARILYNNE: I think his remark about feeling that maybe bad things would happen to his family, too, and he makes that right around the same time, or maybe it was the same day.

They were... Of course, Mather would have been holding a service in the Second Church. Sewall's in the Third Church across town. But I'm sure that the news traveled. If he had known people, and the news traveled. He... a footnote that I read somewhere thought that maybe that's what triggered his worry about it that evening, when he regretted that he hadn't done enough.

TRICIA: A question for Rachel, and I think we've got time for maybe one or two more quick questions.

A question for Rachel from Vicki, who says she was struck by the story of Goodwife Glover, who is marked as culturally other and unruly. Do you find that this was the case for women during the trials? She notes that this was certainly the case for trials under King James and Matthew Hopkins.

Relatedly, any good feminist reading of the witch trials that you would recommend?

RACHEL: So, if we're looking at broad trends in witch hunts, not just in Salem, but throughout the early modern period, as I said, you do kind of see a trend towards the "other" being scapegoated, being accused of being a witch.

So people who are pushing against social boundaries, who make others feel uncomfortable, So these can be women, frequently are women, not exclusively, of course, but women who kind of make people uncomfortable.

They're argumentative. They've, you know, they're doing something socially taboo, like being poor. You know, people who are beggars, they make their neighbors feel uncomfortable. They're fighting with their husbands. They've, you know, had a child out of wedlock.

Things like that are not necessarily going to produce a witchcraft accusation. But if there's misfortune, and particularly they're involved in a confrontation, that can draw suspicion towards them. That's something that we see fairly commonly.

So we do see this during the Salem witch trials. Quite a few of the people who are accused kind of fit the profile.

Bridget Bishop had been suspected of witchcraft, of course, very famously before the Salem witch trials. And she is an argumentative woman. You know, she's got, she's publicly fighting with her husband.

Susanna Martin fits the profile. Sarah Good fits the profile.

Of course, other people during the Salem witch trials who are kind of unusual suspects, are also named. But it is certainly a really interesting element of the story of witch trials.

Kind of the classic book to go to is Carol Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*. She focuses on New England witch hunts, witch trials, and specifically the kind of gender element of them, why women are kind of targeted at a high rate during those trials. So if you're interested in learning more, definitely read Karlsen's book as a place to start.

TRICIA: Yeah, I still recommend Karlsen, too. That's one of my favorites on the trials.

So we're at 2:10. Thank you everyone. We've had... we've got a ton of questions that we don't have time for. There's some great questions about libraries in the Q&A as well. So we will save these questions and see what we can do with them at a later date.

So thank you very much to our panelists and thank you to all of you for joining us today.

And we hope that we'll see you again in February for our annual Cotton Mather Lecture, if not sooner..