



Enslaved Africans and the Salem witch trials (Events described: 1692)

The famous witch hunt in the Puritan settlement of Salem, Massachusetts, grew out of claims by several white girls, mostly in their teens, that local women were appearing to them in spectral form (invisible to everyone else) and inflicting pain on them. Charged with witchcraft, some of the accused confessed, thereby escaping the threat of a death sentence if the court judged them guilty but also triggering an expanding spiral of further accusations, interrogations, and confessions. By the time colonial authorities intervened to bring an end to the trials, 150 accused witches had been arrested and 20 executed.

Though all of the individuals executed were white, the accused included three enslaved women of color: an indigenous Caribbean woman, called Tituba, and two women of black African ancestry, known as Mary Black and Candy. Mary Black's origins are unknown, but Candy had been transported to New England from Barbados. Presented below are slightly abridged versions of the court's questioning of the two black women; those interrogations are prefaced by a short excerpt from Cotton Mather, a white Puritan intellectual, who exemplifies a propensity among white colonists to associate black slaves with devil-worship and witchcraft. Like many other accused witches, Mary Black and Candy were imprisoned for a time but then released as the witchcraft panic subsided.

1. Cotton Mather: "Very many" enslaved Africans traffic with devils (1706)

All the commandments in the Bible which bespeak our charity to the souls of others and our endeavor that the souls of others may be delivered from the snares of death—every one of these oblige us to do what we can for the souls of our Negroes. [...] 'Tis a most horrid and cursed condition wherein your servants are languishing until Christianity has made saving impressions upon them. A roaring lion who goes about seeking whom he may devour hath made a seizure of them. Very many of them do, with devilish rites, actually worship devils or maintain a magical conversation with devils. And all of them are more slaves to Satan than they are to you, until a faith in the Son of God has made them free indeed.

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2. Examination of Mary Black (April 1692)

Q. Tell me, be you a witch?

A. (Silent.)

Q. How long have you been a witch?

A. I cannot tell.

Q. But have you been a witch?

A. I cannot tell you.

Q. Why do you hurt these folks?

A. I hurt nobody.

Q. Who doth?

A. I do not know.

Her master, Benjamin Putnam, saith a man sat down upon the farm with her about twelve months ago.

Q. What did the man say to you?

A. He said nothing.

Q. [*To the girls who accused Mary Black*] Doth this Negro hurt you?

Several of them said yes.

Q. Why do you hurt them?

A. I did not hurt them.

Q. Do you prick sticks?

A. No, I pin my neckcloth.

Q. Well, take out a pin, and pin it again.

She did so, and several of the afflicted cried out they were pricked. Mary Walcott was pricked in the arm till the blood came, Abigail Williams was pricked in the stomach, and Mercy Lewis was pricked in the foot. [...]

And upon [...] seeing what we did then see, together with the charge of the afflicted persons, then presently we committed said Mary Black.

* * *

3. Examination of Candy (July 1692)

Q. Candy! Are you a witch?

A. Candy no witch in her country. Candy's mother no witch. Candy no witch, Barbados. This country, mistress give Candy witch.

Q. Did your mistress make you a witch in this country?

A. Yes, in this country, mistress give Candy witch.

Q. What did your mistress do to make you a witch?

A. Mistress bring book and pen and ink, make Candy write in it.

Q. What did you write in it?

[She said that s]he took a pen and ink, and upon a book or paper made a mark.

Q. How did you afflict or hurt these folks? Where are the puppets you did it with?

She asked to go out of the room and she would show or tell, upon which she had liberty, one going with her. And she presently brought in two cloths, one with two knots tied in it, [...] which being seen by Mary Warren, Deliverance Hobbs, and Abigail Hobbs, they were greatly affrighted and fell into violent fits; and all of them said that the black man, and Mrs. Hawkes, and the Negro stood by the puppets, or rags, and pinched them and then they were afflicted.^a And when the knots were untied, yet they continued as aforesaid.

A bit of one of the rags being set on fire, the afflicted all said they were burned and cried out dreadfully. The rags being put into water, two of the forenamed persons were, in dreadful fits, almost choked, and the other was violently running down to the river but was stopped.

^a *Mary Warren, Deliverance Hobbs, and Abigail Hobbs (Deliverance's daughter) were accused witches who had confessed and were now collaborating in accusing others.*

"Mrs. Hawkes" is Margaret Hawkes, Candy's mistress. Margaret Hawkes and Candy had been accused of witchcraft together; Candy then joined in accusing Hawkes.

"The Negro" is Candy. "The black man" is an apparition of the devil.

All of the accused women named here were eventually released.

Sources:

1. [Cotton Mather], *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), 6, 14-15, https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Negro_Christianized_an_Essay_to_Exc.html?id=4xZhAAAAcAAJ. Public domain, Google-digitized.
2. Examination of Mary Black, April 22, 1692, Massachusetts Archives Collection, vol. 135, no. 20, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, MA. From a digital transcript created for the Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project, <http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/n15.html>. The material presented in the Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive is provided freely for non-commercial educational purposes.
3. Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts-Bay, from the Charter of King William and Queen Mary, in 1691, until the Year 1750* (Boston: Thomas & John Fleet, 1767), 33-34, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015073767124>. Public domain. Available also, in digital transcript, at the Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project, <http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/n23.html>.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. A marginal note in the manuscript record of Mary Black's examination has been incorporated directly into this edited presentation of the text. Underlining in the manuscript omitted. Q-and-A formatting added to Mary Black's examination, modeled after the source publication for Candy's examination. Damaged text in Mather reconstructed. Additional sentence breaks inserted into some selections for readability. Grammar, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and typography (italics) emended in line with modern American conventions. As part of that modernization, the word *clout* emended to *cloth*. An abbreviated name spelled out. Non-standard grammar in Candy's recorded speech retained from the source publication.

The word *Negro*, lowercase in the source publication for Candy's examination, has been capitalized here for consistency with the usage of the other documents. The words *devils* and *devilish*, capitalized in Mather, have been converted here to lowercase, along with several other words capitalized in that source per antiquated convention.

These edited excerpts are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publications listed above.



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