



The Rebecca Nurse homestead is located in Danvers, Massachusetts. Nurse was the oldest woman, at age 80, to be hung on suspicion of witchcraft in 1692. left Salem becomes a tourist hotspot come the month of October. Pictured here is Salem's oldest graveyards, with a witch Ferris wheel in the background. right Photos by Erin Crowell



# Revisiting the Salem Witch Trials

## 'May thy souls rest in peace'

By Erin Crowell

October settles over the New England coast, bathing its small towns in warm colors of red, orange and gold. I chase the foliage by car, taking a 2,500 mile road trip out East through New York, Vermont and down along the shores of Connecticut and Rhode Island.

With Halloween fast approaching, a stop in Salem, Massachusetts seems appropriate. So I plug the address into the GPS on my dashboard—Margaret, as I've named it—and let her even, monotone voice guide me to the coastal town famous for the witch trials of 1692.

Located just north of Boston, Salem is home of the 20 men and women who were tried and punished by death on suspicions of witchcraft near the close of the 17th century.

When picturing Salem—a place of rich U.S. colonial history—I envision a small town buried in maple trees, a single main road leading visitors to a town square and a sign that reads, "Salem, site of the 1692 witch trials. May thy souls rest in peace."

From there, travelers would be directed via free pamphlet to a handful of rickety houses, museums and shops, manned by one grey haired and adorable local whose great, great grandmother's godmother was one of the tried victims.

Imagine my surprise.

### WITCH WORLD

After exiting the commuter-ingested Highway 128 into gridlocked Salem, it takes me another 20 minutes to enter the downtown area.

It's a constant play on words in this town: *Monster Mini Golf*, *Witch Ice Cream*, *Wicked Dry Cleaners*. Scary is a business and everyone's looking to make bank.

Since I don't have an exact destination, Margaret leaves me wandering aimlessly, looking for any sign of the real Salem. While the attractions are many, the authenticity is few and far between.

An illustrated map directs me to the



The Salem witch museum receives thousands of visitors each year. The museum contains information on the Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

following amenities: The Salem Witch House, Salem Witch Museum, The Witch Dungeon Museum, The Witch History Museum, World of Witches Museum, Spellbound Museum, The New England Pirate Museum, Pioneer Village, The Salem Trolley, Count Orlok's Nightmare Gallery, Nightmare Factory, the Wax Museum, Haunted Village and a slew of other must-see exhibits claiming to provide total access to the history of Salem and the historic events of 1692 – for a minimal fee.

It's getting dark, so I look for shelter instead.

Throwing away the plan of staying in the capacity-filled state park campground, I relegate myself to a Motel 6—one of the only places that accepts dogs—in the quiet town of Danvers, located just minutes away from bustling Salem.

It's a Wednesday and every week the Danvers running club hosts a community 5k fun run.

*What the heck?* I decide.

The group of 30 some runners, including myself, takes off in the dark through the neighborhood streets, finishing at a local landscape/gardening business where there's a small hot potluck and cold beer for everyone.

"You came all the way from Michigan for this?" asks the enthusiastic Brad between sips. "What are you doing all the way out here?"

I tell several of them I wanted to see Salem. It's almost Halloween, right?

"Oh, you're actually in the town where things went down," says Aaron. "Danvers is really where it's at."

### THE REAL SALEM

The unassuming town of Danvers, Massachusetts (then known as Salem Village) has little to no witch advertising – no psychic palm readers or wicked ice cream parlors. If they exist, it's quiet and off the beaten path.

Aaron tells me briefly about Rebecca Nurse, the oldest woman to be hung during the 1692 trials. The 80-year-old woman's homestead is located directly behind the building we stand in – actually, Aaron notes he's related to Nurse in some distant way.

Nearby is the family burial ground, including the grave of victim George Jacobs, one of just a handful of men accused of witchcraft during the trials.

Aaron tells me he most admires Giles Corey, also of Salem Village, who after being accused of witchcraft was sentenced to stone pressing -- a torture technique where a board is placed on the victim's chest and stones are added, suffocating the person to death.

"Lay more!" Corey had defiantly declared.

Danvers was the location of the original Salem Village Meeting House where many of the witch examinations took place. Today, one of the only real linkages Salem has to the trials (besides its few residents who were accused; and Gallow Hill, the location of their hanging) is the house of witch trial Judge Jonathan

Corwin.

Salem Village became independent from Salem in 1752, dividing into the regions of Peabody, Danvers and Beverly – and while old Salem Village wanted to mend and be forgotten as *the* place where such ghastly events took place, Salem embraced it.

"When Salem wanted all the recognition and notoriety, Danvers was like, 'Here, you can have it,'" says T.R., another fun run member. "They saw an opportunity and ran with it – it's pretty ridiculous how much of a tourist trap that place is."

### RELIGION & PARANOIA UNLEASHED

Rumor has it the accusations of witchcraft were started when a young Cuban servant girl had shared with others her knowledge of voodoo. A sickness took hold of several young girls in the community and many Christian followers saw it as a takeover by the devil – fueled more so by then popular "Memorable Providences," a book written by Cotton Mather, who claimed to have witnessed witchcraft in Boston.

Rev. Samuel Parris was considered a pivotal character in the trials, providing names of "Satan's workers" to be tried. He was described as self-serving with knee-jerk reactionary behavior – ready to throw accusations at anyone who did not follow his parish.

While the witch hysteria only lasted a year, it was a time of much paranoia and accusation between family and neighbors, enemies and friends, where over 120 people were accused of witchcraft and 20 were killed for that belief.

"If it was the last moment I was to live, God knows I am innocent," said victim Elizabeth Howe.

"Oh Lord, help me! It is false. I am clear! For my life now lies in your hands," cried Rebecca Nurse.

"If it be possible no more innocent blood be shed...I am clear of this sin!" said Mary Easty.

Had the victims known about their infamy before their demise, would they have been proud or ashamed of us? Has the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 served as an example of what paranoia can do to a community? To a nation? What have we gained from the events of 1692 besides a haunting tale for our children at Halloween or a place to buy some quirky witch knick-knacks?

In a 2008 Salem News article, Tom Dalton writes, "This old city, some say, is locked in an eternal wrestling match with itself. Is this the historic seaport of art and culture, or the 'Witch City' of psychics and ghost tours?"

The city rejected a request by a paranormal research team from Rhode Island to conduct a ghost hunt in the Witch House (Jonathan Corwin's house), saying it "would be in bad taste to allow ghost hunters to go inside an historic, 17th-century house that is tied to such an important and tragic event."

"We have to have respect for the gravity of the injustice that occurred in 1692," said Park and Recreation Commission board member Chris Burke.

Yet, Salem's police patrol cars bear the image of a witch and children are sent to Witchcraft Heights School.

Perhaps the scariest aspect of Salem is how such a tragic past could create a positive future – a sense of pride and profit. After all, tourism is the number one import for Salem, providing substantial profit to small businesses and the town itself (The Witch House made a \$175,000 profit that year).

The next morning I wake early and drive to the homestead of Rebecca Nurse. The early sun casts shadows through the empty grounds and over the dew-saturated grass. It's quiet here, and somewhere in that quiet—while scanning the old buildings and crosshatched fence—a wave of sorrow and respect sweeps through me.

*This is Salem*, I think to myself.