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A Petition for Rebecca Nurse

Elyssa Tardif 00:03

Immediately, I notice a kind of ragged edges of the document and if I didn't know the date, I would already think it's old, this kind of yellowed paper. And you notice right away, there are many names. There are accounts, in fact, 39 signatures on this document. So, the text itself is pretty short and really the important part of this is really the list of names the signatures and these are neighbors, family members, people who knew Rebecca Nurse very well who are attesting to her innocence.

Katy Morris 00:42

[Intro music fades in] This is Katy Morris.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:50

This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Katy Morris 00:51

And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:58

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history.

Katy Morris 01:04

Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:18

In this episode, we are looking at the documentary record of the Salem Witch Trials. Most of us have some familiarity with the extraordinary events that unfolded there in 1692, beginning when a group of Salem residents suffered troubling afflictions and accused their community members of practicing witchcraft. Over the course of 1692 into 1693, more than 200 individuals in the community were accused of witchcraft. A large number were imprisoned for months, and in the end, 20 people were put to death.

Katy Morris 01:51

This disturbing tale of early America has fascinated generations and become a familiar story to many. But what was it like to witness this history firsthand and to even find yourself accused of witchcraft? What evidence might be mounted against you and what could be done to defend your reputation? To consider some of these questions, we will take a close look at the story of Rebecca Nurse, a respected woman in her 70s, who was accused of witchcraft by 12-year-old Abigail Williams, the niece of Salem Minister Samuel Parris. We'll learn about Rebecca's story through the original petition documents and printed trial records held in the MHS collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:31

To understand the story, we shall speak with MHS Director of Education and Early American literary scholar Elyssa Tardif.

Elyssa Tardif 02:38

This is a moment in time that seems incredible. How could this possibly have happened?

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:44

And MHS Chief Historian, Peter Drummey.

Peter Drummey 02:48

I think it's one of the most interesting problems in American history because it'll always be with us.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:55

Together, we shall explore Rebecca's individual experience and the role her community played in both persecuting and defending her. Could we start by having you talk about the world of 17th century Salem?

Peter Drummey 03:12

Well, let's step back a minute and think of the world of colonial New England. In Massachusetts Bay, there's been essentially a hiatus in government for almost three years. There's a general sense of anxiety and confusion within politics, military affairs, Maine settlements, which are part of Massachusetts have been attacked and overrun. So, there are many refugees within Massachusetts from the Maine frontier. So that's the big picture. But within Salem itself, which is an important place in Massachusetts, except for Boston, that's probably the largest place. This only means about 2000 people. It's not right to call it urban, but it's more built up with more business activity and overseas activity than almost any other place except Boston itself. The largest proportion of people face the ocean and are involved in shipbuilding, overseas trade, the commercial life. Whereas Salem village is much more country community devoted to agriculture. So, you have town and country combined into one community. There's tensions within the small community. The 17th century Puritans are disputatious. They're always taking each other to court about just about everything. So, we actually have quite a detailed record of who is suing who about trespass or taking wood from someone else's lot over the town bounds where property bounds lie. It's not peculiar to Salem, or Salem village. This is throughout New England. So, these things I'm talking about the general anxiety and the local tensions are real and they contribute to this, but they don't explain it because they're true, essentially everywhere in Massachusetts Bay at the time.

Elyssa Tardif 05:03

Salem at this time, primarily, you have white English colonists who are living there. You also have enslaved African American men and women, and you have native indigenous people as well, some of whom were enslaved by the white colonists. So certainly, though there were commonalities life

would have been very different. And you would have faced different limitations and different freedoms depending on your status in that society. I think it's important to know that this was not as dour and sort of stayed a society as we might think. When we imagine the Puritans, it's drab clothing, it's, you know, religious, strict upbringing. And that's true to some extent. But I think it's really important to know that life really centered on the community and what was in the community's best interest. We are all about individuality today. And that was very much not the case, then that was certainly a matter of survival. Their reputations were really important. That was the way that you could get goods on credit. I think it's also important to think about for women, especially how important the home was and when I think about the freedoms and limitations that women might had at this time, it's interesting to think about what they actually would have seen as limitations. I think, for me, the fact that I would be always tending a fire 24/7 seems really scary and terrible, and I would want to like run out of the house immediately. But I think there was certainly a source of pride in being able to be expected to run the house, take care of the home, take care of the livestock, the children. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the wonderful historian talks about women as deputy husbands. So, women did have a sort of subscribed role of the men were the head of the household. But when they weren't there, men were away on business, women were not only welcomed, but expected to step into some of the roles that typically men would have.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:25
What about the religious world?

Peter Drummey 07:10
Puritan New England, everyone's life is entirely determined by religion. This is not necessarily a theocracy, but the minister of the congregation is probably the only college educated person in a town. And this is before things like newspapers started appearing not long after but haven't started appearing yet. So, he's both the spiritual leader and important leader in the town, and also often the source of information from elsewhere. But all that being said, it's still a place where this is a bible reading society, both boys and girls learn to read as a matter of course. This is a very literate society because being able to read the bible is so central to the idea of this religion, probably less people can

write because that's not essential. But people are very well versed in the bible, and they're often looking to the bible to determine the manner of life and questions about the existence of Satan and witchcraft. Those are all things that people are taking from their religious instruction.

Elyssa Tardif 08:29

For people at this time, I mean, they're constantly trying to figure out whether or not they're saved. It was a Catholic thing that your good deeds would lead to salvation, not so for the Puritans. The reason to live a good saintly life would be because that in itself might assure you that you were saved. But it certainly wasn't going to be because you did those things. Everything was predetermined. They're always looking for signs. They're looking for signs that God is displeased with them. They're looking for signs that other folks might be in covenant with the devil, which is then causing their own misfortune. So, there was the visible world that they could see. There was a very significant, invisible world that they can only sometimes see but was really responsible for many of the major natural disasters, livestock dying, you know, whatever sort of misfortunes or fortunes that were happening, were really due to whether or not you were in God's favor, or if you were straying from him and perhaps tempted by the devil in some way, committing some kind of sin.

Katy Morris 09:37

Knowing a little bit about the social and spiritual world of Salem, we asked Peter and Elyssa to walk us through the first afflictions.

Peter Drummey 09:46

Beginning very early in 1692, there were unusual occurrences within the household of Samuel Parris, the minister in Salem village, his very young daughter and niece.

Elyssa Tardif 09:59

Betty Parris and Abigail Williams, her cousin

Peter Drummey 10:03

Both started acting strangely, strangely, for their time, strangely for our time.

Elyssa Tardif 10:11

They're about 12 and nine at the time, and they begin to have fits.

Peter Drummey 10:16

Hearing voices, seeing visions, being attacked by invisible forces.

Elyssa Tardif 10:23

Their parents don't quite know what to do. They don't know what kind of sickness this is.

Peter Drummey 10:29

And Samuel Parris has at least two enslaved people within his household Tituba and John Indian.

Elyssa Tardif 10:37

One of the neighbors asks Tituba and John Indian to bake a witch cake, which is essentially rye bread that they mix with the urine of the afflicted girls, and then they feed to the family's dog. The idea here is that this will show us who is afflicting these young women, and so they accused Tituba of afflicting them.

Peter Drummey 11:00

And there's sort of a contagion that spreads quickly to involve a relatively large number of girls who start increasingly to accuse people of being the causes of their injuries, scratches and pinches, and pin pricks and bites.

Elyssa Tardif 11:20

I'd love to read one of the observations of the affliction just to give really a sense of what this would have looked like to the observer. So, this is Abigail Williams. She is about 12 years old, and

this is in January of 1692. "She had a grievous fit. She was at first hurried with violence to and fro in the room, sometimes making as if she would fly, stretching up her arms as high as she could and crying, 'wish, wish, wish,' several times. Presently after she said, 'There was Goody Nurse,' and said, 'Do you not see her? Why there she stands,' and said 'Good Wife Nurse offered her the book. But she was resolved she would not take it saying often 'I won't, I won't, I won't take it. I do not know what book it is. I am sure it is none of God's book. It is the devil's book for I know.' After that she ran to the fire and began to throw firebrands about the house and run against the back as if she would run up the chimney. And as they said she had attempted to go into the fire in other fits." I feel like this is a really illustrative example of the kinds of afflictions that you have. There's a sense that she's going to be flying through the air. So, there's an immediate connection to the devil who was known as the Prince of the Air. And then she also accuses someone in this description of the afflictions while she's accusing good wife Nurse Rebecca Nurse. And so, we start to see this happening quite a lot where the accusations will name one or more people and they are pretty much immediately arrested brought in for examination.

Katy Morris 13:13
It sounds terrifying. If that happened today, I think the parents would feel extreme terror. What is happening? Did it feel as terrifying as it sounds? Do you think to these families when this happened?

Elyssa Tardif 13:25
I think it was probably terrifying. I also think that it was kind of part and parcel to their mindset at the time. This is a moment in time that when people learn about it seems like an outlier seems extraordinary, unusual, incredible. How could this possibly have happened? And it is unusual in some respect. But certainly, there have been other witchcraft trials. There were many outbreaks in Europe to the idea of witchcraft and accusing someone of witchcraft, convicting someone in witchcraft was not unusual for people of Salem at this time. What became unusual about this was that evidence that in the past would not have led to a conviction did so in this case. I think what's important to note is that the initial accusations come from girls and teenagers. And it's only when

those accusations are legitimized by male gatekeepers essentially that they gained credence. So Reverend Parris believes this pretty much very soon after that this is likely witchcraft. And so, he's taking detailed notes about the afflictions that are happening. It's really because of the men that decide that these are credible that complaints get legally filed, and then the magistrates will have to act on those.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 15:00
As the afflictions mounted, how would Salem officials decide to handle the accusations? How would the courts assess the presence of witchcraft? We asked Elyssa and Peter to bring us into the Salem meeting house and walk us through the proceedings.

Peter Drummey 15:15
By early in the spring of 1692, there are formal hearings before magistrates, interrogating people who are accused of witchcraft and very quickly people are indicted and in prison, and there are trials within a few months, first of a single individual. And then trials of over courses of days of a number of different people. The Royal Governor who is arrived in the spring of 1692, William Phips, he sets up a special court, a court of oyer and terminer. This is in May of 1692, which is both discovery investigation and then taking judicial action. So, it's sort of a grand jury and court of justice combined together and appoints mostly substantial men. There are essentially no trained lawyers in Massachusetts at this time. So, he appoints a well-educated men of substance, mostly from Boston to serve on this court but because men are judging and taking down the records of this, this is all through the writings and records kept by men who are involved in this. We have testimony by women, both as accused as accusers, and also people who came to the defense of neighbors and friends or family members who had been accused, but all that's through a filter of someone else recording it. And these are not trained recorders. And there's much written evidence of the interviews, interrogations, trials, but it's a combination of being direct testimony taken down, and then paraphrasing of other things that went on. And this is almost all recorded by people who believe that these people are guilty. So, it's an it's a good substantial record, but it's one that has a shape to it.

Elyssa Tardif 17:15

This is also an unusual set of trials because we allow the public to be part of the examinations. And this is really crucial, because we think about sort of the most damning evidence that people have. It's really the afflictions that people were able to witness during the examinations that later become really the strong evidence for conviction. You needed two witnesses to an act of witchcraft for it to be considered proof that someone was a witch. And so, these public examinations provided exactly that. There are groups of women who conduct physical searches on the accused witches. So, they are looking for any abnormalities in their body that would be considered a devil's mark or a witch's mark. So, you have not only this group of afflicted young women, older women, sometimes men who are there who are literally having fits as the examinations are going on. But then you have the whole community that has come to fill up the meeting house. They're waiting outside the door; they're looking in the windows. It's this huge crowd of people. So, you can imagine quite loud lots going on. There's like lots of interruptions. Some of the recorders say, you know, there was more that happened but it was so loud and so tumultuous, we just didn't get everything down. And so, you can imagine that this becomes a very different kind of trial when you have these fits in the afflicted there who join in not only are they loud because they're having these fits at the time, but they will question the people who are being examined. There's like conversations that they will have with them. It's almost a sort of collaborative process where most everyone is essentially ganging up on the accused person. When you see that in the records of the examination how desperate the situation was for them. How much out of control they seem to feel as they were being questioned, and then also how often resigned they were that their innocence was not assured by any means nor was their voice going to be accepted as truth.

Katy Morris 19:23

Let's move to the experience of a specific woman, Rebecca Nurse. Tell us about who she was, what we know about her and what happened to her during this time.

Elyssa Tardif 19:34

Rebecca Nurse is about 70, 71 at the time of the trials, and she is really well thought of in the town. She's really one of the first surprising folks who are accused. The earlier people are more of the sort of usual suspects, women who live on the fringes of the society when people try to help them, they rebuffed that help. So that was a sort of foreign idea. And so, then you have someone like Rebecca Nurse who is called out by Abigail Williams. And so, this is really surprising to a lot of people. Now, I think it's helpful to think about Rebecca in terms of her family as well because they really figure very prominently in the trials. Not only is Rebecca accused, but her sister Sarah Cloyce and another sister, Mary Eastey are also accused, both Rebecca and Mary are executed, but Sarah is not. And the reason that the kind of entire family gets involved is because they try very hard to come up with and gather evidence after her examination, to have ready for the trial. So, they have several weeks between the time that Rebecca is examined by the court, and then by the time the trial happens, and so they are getting depositions from people. They are asking Samuel Sewall for records from the court so that they can come up with some kind of defense for her. And it's helpful to remember too, that defendants could not have access to a lawyer at this time. So, you didn't have that as part of your defense. There were petitions that the family sent on behalf of Rebecca Nurse stating that no one had ever suspected her anything like this before begging, you know, for consideration of that.

Peter Drummey 21:20

We have a collection of documents that were given to us in 1860, kind of accumulation of things, affidavits, and testimony. And in this collection, there are documents about the case of Rebecca Nurse, including two petitions, perhaps the more interesting petition is signed by 39 people. So, this is a substantial number of neighbors and people who knew her on her behalf, which is, I think, doubly interesting, because, of course, here's a larger number of people kind of standing out from their community and coming to her defense. And it's also interesting that it's signed, not by the same number of women and men, and they're mostly couples, but it's really the heads of other households, you know, coming to the defense of the matriarch of this Nurse family. And I think that Rebecca Nurse, I think she was a great grandmother at the time, I think she had eight surviving

children, which would be remarkable for that time. Now, neither of these are dated, but it's clear that Rebecca Nurse has been accused. But perhaps this is before she's tried. And there's only a matter of brief weeks between those two, I mean, these this is justice, what is of justice that works very rapidly, accusation, trial, execution, taking place in a matter of just a few weeks. So, we can have a feeling of about when this was. So, this sort of at the height of the witchcraft hysteria, here's people who stood out on behalf of a neighbor. There's not much good to find in this story. But this is perhaps a place where there is something that is worth remembering. And that there were people who within the limits of what they could do stood up to this.

Elyssa Tardif 23:17

The text itself is pretty short and really, the important part of this is really the list of names, the signatures, there are a few counts. In fact, 39 on this document. These are names of neighbors, family members, people who knew Rebecca Nurse very well who are really attesting to her innocence. And I think just as a kind of a physical object, I noticed the kind of ragged edges was kind of a yellowed paper. And when you're not used to reading 17th century handwriting, it can look like a language other than English, when you when you first look at it, and then as you squint, you can start to see some letters or words that look familiar. There's some smudges, you know, maybe from when people are holding it then or possibly the many people who have held it since 1692. You notice they're different ink that's being used here. So, you get a sense that you're going from one house to another maybe you know, getting the signatures. So, they didn't all happen at once.

Katy Morris 24:16

Yeah, it looks maybe folded too. Does it look like that to you?

Elyssa Tardif 24:21

Yes. You have to wonder if it had been folded at the time. I mean, certainly it would have been folded later on. And I think that's kind of an interesting line of thinking too is sort of how did this petition that was, you know, signatures were gathered, it was possibly presented in court as evidence

and then what happens to it after you know, how is it that we're able to look at it today, I find kind of astounding that we've even had, you know, we don't have a full record but amazing that we even have what we do have and then you really can get a sense of the act of writing. Sometimes the ink is very thick sometimes It's very thin and for me this really feels like a portal into this moment that the signatures are being gathered of that kind of common experience allows you to glimpse even a little bit what it was like for these people who maybe seem a little two dimensional to us. But I think when we look at the material culture, like this petition that they created and used and passed around, and kind of all signed, it becomes three dimensional, they become three dimensional, they become kind of more human to us. And then what we can learn from this is that community was really at the heart of lived experience, at this time. The fact that when someone was experiencing this dire situation, someone like Francis Nurse's wife is going to be put on trial, they've just witnessed the execution of someone who was also convicted. And the fact that the sort of response to this is to go to your neighbors, you know, as to enlist the help of your family and friends, I think really speaks to what their priorities were and how crucial community was, I think, to people at the time.

Peter Drummey 26:07

Supporting either by direct evidence or sign a petition testifying to the good character of someone accused of witchcraft could get someone into very bad trouble essentially being accused him or herself. And in the case of Rebecca Nurse, two of her sisters came to her defense, and they were both accused of witchcraft. And one of them was one of the last people executed as a witch. So, Rebecca Nurse was accused, tried and executed, and then one of her sisters, Sarah Cloyce, and accused and jailed her other sister Mary Eastey was tried and executed as well. So that's the burden. Now, it wasn't necessarily when you signed a petition on someone's behalf in early in the spring of 1692, that those implications were clear to everyone. But I think there was both there could be real criminal consequences, and there certainly must have been enormous amount of peer pressure to separate yourself from someone who had been accused.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:21

Learning how some of Rebecca's community rallied to her defense, even at great personal risk, we wondered how those efforts would impact her trial. We asked Peter and Elyssa to share with us the course of her examination and verdict.

Elyssa Tardif 27:34

Rebecca Nurse's examination is one of the ones that is the most compelling to me, and really is feels just so tragic. She is a woman who is in quite poor health. She is hard of hearing and there is a physical search of her body, and they find what they think is sort of an extra piece of skin. And she writes to them after she petitions and says, "May I have another search because they misunderstood, they thought that this is a witch's mark, and actually, it's due to childbirth." It really tugs at the heart that this is not only the violation of having your body being inspected in this way, but something that very likely was a source of pride for her, the children that she bore and then this becomes something that's suspicious of her covenanting with the devil. Of course, knowing you know, she wouldn't have known at the time, but for us now, knowing kind of what her fate was, it's really quite heartbreaking. You can sense her desperation, as they are questioning her. I'll read a little bit of it and as often happens during these examinations, whenever the accused would do something physically, whether you stretch out their hands or adjust their handkerchief that would cause fits in the afflicted. And so, this happens with Rebecca Nurse, she stretches out her hands to God, the afflicted have fits and the magistrates have said to her, "Do you not see these afflicted persons and hear them accuse you?" She says, "The Lord knows I have not hurt them. I'm an innocent person." So, the magistrate responds, "It is very awful to all to see these Agnese and you an old professor thus charged with contracting with the devil by the effects of it, and yet to see you stand with dry eyes when these are so many." And she says, "You do not know my heart." They asked her later, "Do you think these suffer voluntary or involuntary?" She says she cannot tell. And they say that is strange. Everyone can judge. So, they're, they're constantly trying to trap them into messing up and to being inconsistent somehow in their answers. And so, she seems to know that as well. And so, she says, "I must be silent." I interpret that as you know, she's given up in a sense. I mean, there's

clearly nothing that she can say that they will believe her innocence and so there's not much more that she can say in her defense.

Katy Morris 29:59
Where is Rebecca Nurse in the trials that are happening? Is she one of the first? Has she seen these executions happening? Like where is she in this acceleration of accusations?

Elyssa Tardif 30:11
She's toward the beginning, but she's certainly not the first. So, Bridget Bishop is the first. She goes to trial and she is convicted and executed and Rebecca Nurse makes up really the second session of this. So, it's not yet clear as it will be later that if you confess you are not going to be executed. So that's often well, we don't know for sure, in a lot of cases, but it seems like because there's so many confessions kind of toward the end of the trials as because people understand that that's where the trajectory is not enough time has passed for her to sort of be aware of this. So, it's still quite early on. I think knowing that they have several weeks to prepare for the trials. I have to imagine gave the family some hope that something could be done. There's a deposition that I do want to talk about from Sarah Nurse, Rebecca's daughter. Sarah is 28 at the time, and she testifies that she saw Goody Bibber, so Sarah Bibber is an adult woman who is one of the afflicted she saw Goody Bibber pull pins out of her clothes, hold them between her fingers and then clasp her hands around her knees and cried out that Goody Nurse had pricked her. So, this is the only extant written record we have of someone saying that these afflictions were counterfeit. I mean, so that's pretty striking in and of itself that you can imagine, with the throngs of people that are in this meeting house, Rebecca's family is obviously there as well for examination and her daughters there watching very closely the afflicted as they are having fits.

Peter Drummey 31:46
Rebecca's trial is so grotesque that essentially, it's relatively straightforward that everyone is innocent of witchcraft. But Rebecca Nurse was found not guilty by the jury that tried her. And this is a trial in a large community space, the meeting house full of witnesses, people have just gathered

for the show, so to speak. And so, when her not guilty verdict is announced, there's a great hubbub in the courtroom, and then the afflicted girls who are there all go into fits and say they're being attacked by her and Rebecca Nurse, apparently, as far as you can decipher what happens next. She apparently didn't know exactly what had happened and sort of asked a question that at least some members of the panel of justices who are trying the case understood to be an admission of guilt, which seems like an odd thing to say, as you're found not guilty. But nevertheless, the judge presiding, told the jury to reconsider their verdict. Now asking a jury to reconsider their verdict was not unheard of in English law or in American colonial law, but usually it worked in the other direction, where the judge thought that there had been some sort of miscarriage and asked the jury to decide again, but to decide someone you found innocent was in fact, guilty is really extraordinary. And that's what happened. Governor [William] Phips briefly reprieved her death sentence, and then was persuaded pressured to change that reprieve. So, she was executed in the summer of 1692. The efforts of her neighbors and friends and people who knew her were to no avail, and she was not saved nor was her sister who was accused separately. But it's hard not to think the accusation was simply the contagion of this idea of conspiracy where one person is accused and that person's accused.

Katy Morris 34:05

I feel like the way I usually hear this story is about the sort of current energy that builds around these cases and how quickly it sweeps through this community. It's a really different experience to hear it from an individual perspective, how it played out for one person, it's a really different feeling for me, is that the case for you?

Elyssa Tardif 34:32

Yeah, definitely. Because I mean, if you think about it, she would have been very well aware of these accusations beginning in January, and it's not 'til March that she's examined and then not until July that she's executed. So, I think that I think you're exactly right. I think the public sense of this is that this is just like the fervor right of like the, you know, the hysteria of this and really like the trials themselves did not move more quickly than normal. This would not have been particularly

unusual at the time. But I do think for, especially for people who were not put on trial until the summer until September, which is when the last executions happened. This would have been a really long year, it would have been especially long for the accused people who basically were languishing in jail until 1693, when they finally were reprieved. So, their trials happened even after September, no one was executed in those further trials. But for many people, I mean, including Tituba, who is accused in January, she's not released until 1693. So, she spends the entire year in jail, which is not a great situation. I mean, it's really as bad as you might imagine. I mean, for the most part, people are chained. These are dark rooms. Sickness is easily passed. They're crowded. They probably smell really badly. They're obviously they're away from their family.

Peter Drummey 35:58

The people who are accused are a whole range of different individuals. There are about three quarters of people accused are women. And there are people who range in age from women in their 70s and 80s. There's at least one child, a mother Sarah Good, accused of witchcraft and her four or five year old daughter also accused and imprisoned, never charged, and never tried. But Dorothy Good is essentially questioned and here she is in prison, the child in prison, she's questioned by these judges appointed in this special court. And she points out that she has a familiar a snake. Witches are understood to have sort of animals that accompany them. So, she says she has a snake. And she says she also has a witch's mark. She she's has a red spot between her fingers, well, like which people say resembles a flea bite well, she'd been in prison for God's sake.

Katy Morris 37:10

What are some of the ways that historians have tried to explain these events?

Elyssa Tardif 37:16

There isn't one reason why this happens. People are so fascinated by what could have been afflicting these women. Why did that happen? And I think really the answer is that there are many factors: political, social, psychological, that contributed to the community being in this moment.

Peter Drummey 37:35

Historians looked very closely at economic forces at work. This division within the town land ownership and relative position in society or perhaps there was an organic explanation of this that the foodstuffs they were eating rye was infected by some sort of naturally induced hallucinations that that would explain.

Elyssa Tardif 38:01

And you have to consider the trauma that many of the folks involved in the trials would have undergone. So, the King Philip's War, King William's War. Many of the accusers were either witnessing or hearing stories of people's bodies being ripped apart, being burned alive. It's really no big surprise then to see people, young women especially being afflicted by this very kind of physical experience.

Peter Drummey 38:30

It's been endlessly fascinating to historians. The body of evidence has remained relatively fixed. Interpretation of it is remarkably different. And I think it's one of the most interesting problems in American history because it always be with us.

Katy Morris 38:57

[Outro music fades in] To view the objects in this episode, and to learn more, visit our website at www.masshist.org/podcast. You can also email us with your questions and comments to podcast@masshist.org. If you enjoyed the show, help us spread the word and share the podcast with your friends. Stay up to date with our latest episodes by subscribing on Apple, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. The Object of History is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We want to thank Anne Bentley, our Curator of Art and Artifacts, Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian and MHS Director of Education and Early American literary scholar Elyssa Tardif. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Kai Engel. See our show notes for details. Thanks for listening.