

# Witches, Witchcraft, and Witch-Hunting in Early America\*

Stanford University  
Summer 2026

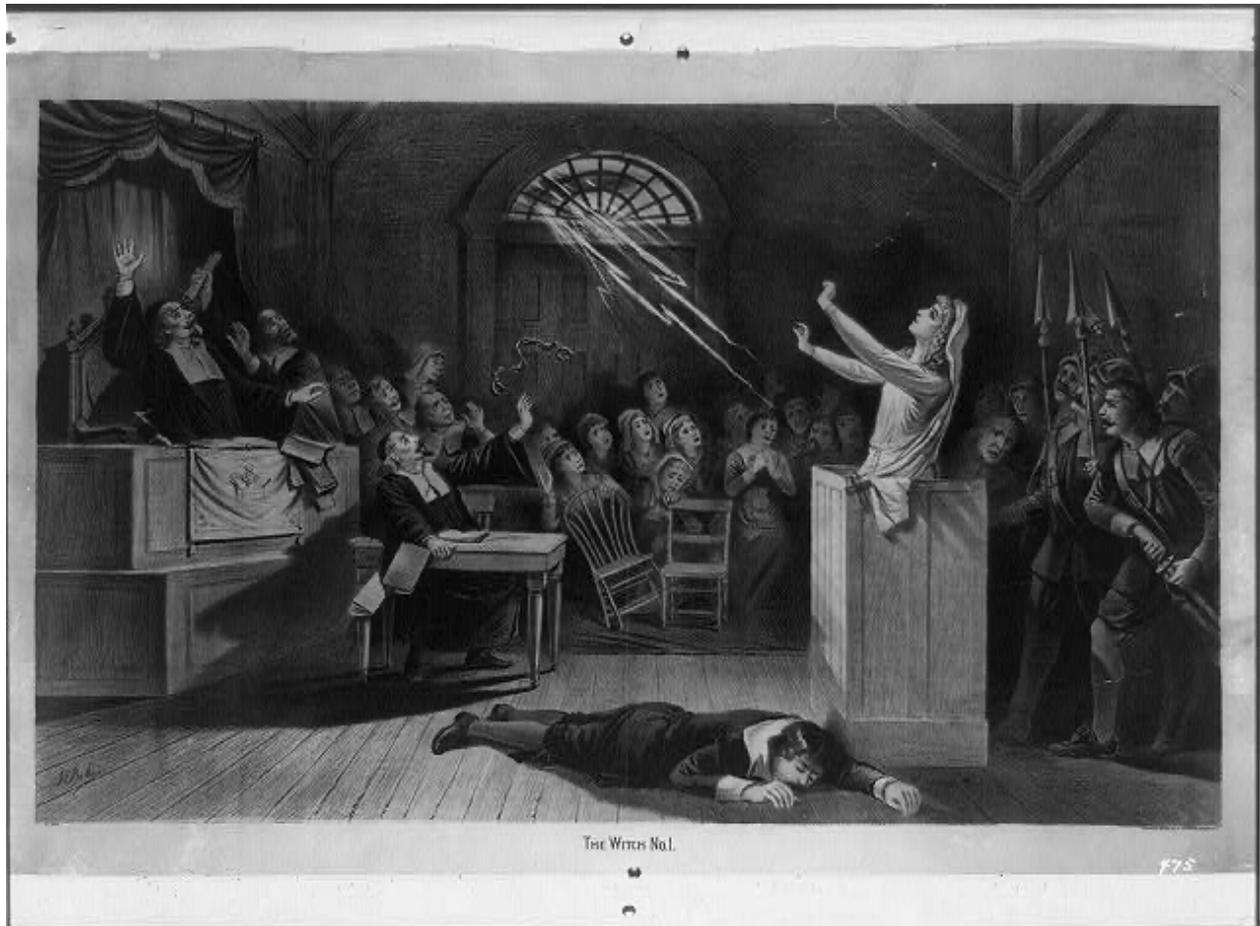


Figure 1 - J. E. Baker, The Witch No. 1, c. 1892 (Library of Congress)

Tuesday and Thursday, tbd

Instructor: Johanna I. Mueller, [jmlr@stanford.edu](mailto:jmlr@stanford.edu)

Office Hours: tbd

*\*preliminary syllabus – subject to change*

## Course Description

As the seventeenth century drew to a close, the town of Salem Village in colonial Massachusetts was in a state of crisis. In early 1692, a group of girls began exhibiting strange behaviors, deemed by a doctor to be supernatural in origin. When interrogated, they confirmed the Puritan colonial officials' greatest fears: their "afflictions" were signs of Satanic possession. The girls claimed they had been the victims of witchcraft; and they knew exactly who was to blame. Over the course of the next few months, the numbers of victims of witchcraft, and those accused of "afflicting" them, rose dramatically, fueling widespread concerns about a diabolical plot threatening to destroy Salem's "godly" community. Between 1692 and 1693, more than two hundred people were accused of practicing witchcraft and twenty were executed. Although this witchcraft crisis was over almost as quickly as it emerged, it left deep marks on Salem, New England, and the American imagination.

What happened here? How did ideas of witchcraft and Satanic possession fit into the Puritans' larger world view? Who was accused of practicing witchcraft and why? Focusing on these and other questions, this course explores the history of witchcraft and witch-hunting in colonial North America and the broader Atlantic World. Over the course of the term, we will read contemporary diary entries, letters, sermons, and trial transcripts to gain a better understanding of the experiences and belief systems of victims, accusers, magistrates, and Puritan clergy involved in events such as the Salem Witch Trials, as well as lesser-known incidents of witchcraft and possession. We will aim to make sense of these phenomena within the religious, cultural, and social context of early New England and the Atlantic World, paying close attention to questions of power, gender, race, and colonialism.

## Course Requirements

- **Attendance and Participation (30%):** Weekly attendance and thoughtful participation in class discussion. I recognize that participation looks different for everyone and will build in opportunities for participation to take a variety of forms. If you find that you need to miss a class or cannot attend in person, please let me know in advance and we will work with you to either join by Zoom or to catch you up separately on what you missed.
- **Weekly Responses (25%):** Beginning in Week 2, you will post a short response to our classroom discussion forum on Canvas. What stood out to you about the reading(s)? What questions do you have? Which aspects are you most excited to discuss in class? Your response should be up by 9pm on Monday night.
- **Primary Source Report (20%):** For this assignment, you will select a primary source—such as a letter, speech, diary, newspaper, or an artifact—related to the course themes that you find particularly interesting. Your paper should be 3-5 pages in length (double-spaced, 12pt), describe the source's nature, content, context, and provenance, and assess what it illuminates about the history of witchcraft. You will have an opportunity to discuss your primary source with other students in class before turning in this assignment. Due on Saturday, July 26.
- **Final Project (25%):** In the second half of the quarter, you will work on a research project based on your Primary Source Report. You will gather additional related primary sources, choose a book written by a scholar on your topic, and produce a paper 6-8 pages in length. On the last day of class, each student will give a short and informal presentation about their research. The final project is due on Thursday, August 20.

**\*Final Project Alternative (25%):** Instead of writing a traditional essay, students may choose to engage with the material in a creative format (also called an “[unessay](#)”), such as a poem, a short story, a reflection, an op-ed, a podcast episode, a drawing/painting/sculpture, etc.). Note that this option will also have a written component, in which you will elaborate on the connection between your primary source(s) and your “unessay.” We will discuss this option in more detail early on in the quarter!

## Grading

- 97-100, A+
- 94-96, A
- 90-93, A-
- 87-89, B+
- 84-86, B
- 80-83, B-
- Etc.

## Access and Accommodations

Stanford is committed to providing equal educational opportunities for disabled students. Disabled students are a valued and essential part of the Stanford community.

If you experience disability, please register with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate your needs, support appropriate and reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Academic Accommodation Letter for faculty. To get started, or to re-initiate services, please visit [oae.stanford.edu](http://oae.stanford.edu).

If you already have an Academic Accommodation Letter, I invite you to share your letter with me. Academic Accommodation Letters should be shared at the earliest possible opportunity so we may partner with you and OAE to identify any barriers to access and inclusion that might be encountered in your experience of this course.

*\*Please note that this syllabus is a “living document.” That means that I may occasionally make changes to accommodate learning needs and goals over the course of the quarter. If I do make any changes, I will be sure to let you know with plenty of advance notice.*

# Schedule

*All readings will be available online via the Stanford Library or on Canvas.  
Please make sure to read before class.*

## Week One – What is Witchcraft?

**Tuesday, June 23**

Introductions & Syllabus Review

**Thursday, June 25**

Readings: Hutton, “The Global Context,” in *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (2017).  
Games, *Witchcraft in Early America*, 1-21.  
Encyclopaedia Britannica entry on “Witchcraft.”

## Week Two – “Religion,” Witchcraft, and Colonialism in the Atlantic World

**Tuesday, June 30**

Readings: Games, *Witchcraft in Early America*, 21-48.  
Godbeer, “Divining, Healing, and Destroying,” in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 132-145.  
Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998).

**Thursday, July 2**

Primary Source(s): Documents in *Witchcraft in Early America*, 109-127.

## Week Three – A World of Wonders

**Tuesday, July 7**

Readings: Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 1–15.  
Weisman, “Witchcraft and Puritan Beliefs,” in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 77-89.

Hall, "A World of Wonders," in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 89-96.

#### **Thursday, July 9**

Primary Source(s): Increase Mather, *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (selection).

### **Week Four – Accusers and the Accused**

#### **Tuesday, July 14**

Readings: Demos, "Accusers, Victims, Bystanders: The Innerlife Dimension," in *Entertaining Satan*, 153-210.

Cohn, "The Non-Existent Society of Witches," in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 49-60.

#### **Thursday, July 16**

Readings: Demos, "The Mind of Our Town," in *Entertaining Satan*, 213-246.

Demos, "Communities: The Social Matrix of Witchcraft," in *Entertaining Satan*, 275-312.

### **Week Five – Witchcraft and Gender**

#### **Tuesday, July 21**

Readings: Kent, "Masculinity and Male Witches in Old and New England," 323-336.

Reis, "The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul in Puritan Tradition," in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 322-328.

Karslen, "The Economic Basis of Witchcraft," in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 337-346.

Morris, *Under Household Government: Sex and Family in Puritan Massachusetts* (selection, tba).

#### **Thursday, July 23**

Primary Source(s): Demos, ed., "Proceedings of Excommunication against Mistress Ann Hibbens of Boston (1640)," 222-239.

Samuel Willard, "Two Sermons on Women and the Devil," in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 300-305.

Heinrich Krämer, Jacob Sprenger, "Why Women are Chiefly Addicted to Evil Superstitions," in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 289-296.

***Primary Source Report due on Saturday, July 26.***

## Week Six – Salem Possessed?

**Tuesday, July 28**

Readings: Demos, *Entertaining Satan* (selection, tba).  
Games, *Witchcraft in Early America*, 55-76.  
Upham, “Witchcraft at Salem Village,” in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 430-437.  
Breslaw, “Tituba’s Confession: The Multicultural Dimensions of the 1692 Salem Witch-Hunt,” in *Witches of the Atlantic World*, 444-454.

**Thursday, July 30**

Primary Source(s): Documents in Games, *Witchcraft in Early America*, 175-196.

## Week Seven – Conjure, Magic, and Power

**Tuesday, August 4**

Readings: Games, *Witchcraft in Early America*, 48-55.  
Rucker, “Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion,” *Journal of Black Studies* (Sept. 2001).  
Thornton, “Cannibals, Witches, and Slave Traders in the Atlantic World,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (April 2003).

**Thursday, August 6**

Readings: Chireau, “Conjure and Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic,” *Religion and American Culture* (1997).

## Week Eight – Myth and Memory

**Tuesday, August 11**

Readings: Morrison, Schultz, eds., *Salem: Place, Myth and Memory* (2004) (selections, tba).  
Elie Wiesel’s [Salem Witch Trials Memorial Dedication Speech](#) (1992).

**Thursday, August 13**

Final Project Presentations

***Primary Project due on Thursday, August 20.***