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“YOUR POOR AND HUMBLE PETITIONER”: POLITICAL AGENCY IN THE
PETITIONS OF THE ESSEX COUNTY WITCHCRAFT CRISIS, 1692-1712

by

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ABSTRACT

“YOUR POOR AND HUMBLE PETITIONER”: POLITICAL AGENCY IN THE PETITIONS OF THE ESSEX COUNTY WITCHCRAFT CRISIS, 1692-1712

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This thesis contextualizes the witchcraft crisis of 1692 within the realm of late seventeenth-century popular politics by examining how residents of Essex County utilized petitions to navigate a period of societal turmoil and, ultimately, bring an end to the witch trials. Although the civic dimensions of witch-hunting in New England certainly have not been ignored, historians have yet to connect colonists' response to the witchcraft crisis with the growth of the public sphere. Similarly, both personal and collective petitioning in Massachusetts Bay Colony has received minimal scholarly attention. Putting this essential political process in conversation with witchcraft brings a trend of local political activism to light. Drawing upon petitions issued by ordinary people from 1692 through 1712, this thesis identifies the social, economic, and legal arguments that petitioners used to attack the validity of the witch trials and the far-reaching consequences of unchecked witch-hunting on Essex County towns. It contends that the extraordinary circumstances of the witchcraft crisis afforded such individuals an

unprecedented opportunity to assert their political agency, and that petitioning allowed local communities to hold their colony government responsible for their role in perpetuating the negative side effects of the witch trials. Petitioners' efforts to overturn the witch trials, seek exoneration for the falsely accused, and demand accountability from colonial administrators demonstrate that residents of Essex County were agents of political change and that the witchcraft crisis is an integral example of how witch-hunting intersected with regional politics.

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1692, ten accused witches huddled together in the drafty jailhouse of Ipswich, Massachusetts to prepare a petition for the colony's General Court.¹ New Englanders seeking political redress normally relied on men, especially ministers, to compose such letters, but in this instance, the accused turned to one of their own: widow Sarah Vincent, once a respected resident of Gloucester. Vincent had practice with this sort of writing, as well as the experience of being labeled a witch. Neighbors had accused her of malevolent magic in 1653, and she extricated herself (and three other women) from the charge by writing a petition to her town selectmen.² Perhaps, then, that is why the petition from Ipswich Jail is written in her hand and not that of a local minister, nor even one of the three accused men who added their signatures to the letter. Her familiarity and success with combatting witch-hunting through political means might have encouraged the nine other signees to support female authorship of their complaints. Vincent's history in clearing her name through political writing suggests that petitions were a critical means of contesting witchcraft allegations. The unusual scope of the 1692 crisis, however, prompted residents of Essex County to not only petition as individuals, like Sarah Vincent had done nearly forty years ago, but also to unify as a collective against the devastating effects of witch-hunting.

¹ Sarah Vincent et al., "Petition of Ten at Ipswich, c. Oct. 1692," in *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 697-698. The following imprisoned accused signed the petition authored by Sarah Vincent: Hannah Bromage (Haverhill), Rachel Clinton (Ipswich), Elizabeth Dicer (Boston), Mary Green (Cambridge), John Howard (Rowling), John Jackson Sr. (Rowling), John Jackson Jr. (Rowling), Margaret Prince (Gloucester), and Abigail Row (Gloucester).

² Puritan ideology considered malevolent witchcraft to be magic performed with the intent to cause damage, harm, or death to an individual or their property. William Preble Jones, *Four Boston Grandparents: Jones and Hill, Preble and Eveleth and Their Ancestry* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1930), 83.

Decades of scholarship on the Salem witchcraft crisis have revealed the social and religious factors that led to Vincent and her companions' imprisonment. Much of this scholarship builds on Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's foundational work, *Salem Possessed*.³ Their study identified the deep-running factional lines in the Salem community to show that witch accusations reflected a larger pattern of community strife and personal disagreements. Mary Beth Norton, Richard Hite, and others have expanded the geographic scope of the crisis to demonstrate how social factors endemic to life in Massachusetts encouraged witch-hunting throughout Essex County.⁴ Norton, in particular, uncovers how warfare against indigenous peoples in Maine captured the imagination of Essex County, inciting survivors and their neighbors to act out against the perceived threat of Satan infiltrating their godly utopia.⁵ These studies complement related work on the gendered, ethnic, and theological systems that defined puritan society.⁶

As Emerson W. Baker argues, however, this specialization obscures how broader structures both informed these perceptions and, in some cases, overturned them.⁷ Baker's more holistic approach suggests that a synthetic study of regional politics—the governing

³ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

⁴ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002); Richard Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem: The Andover Witch Hunt of 1692* (Hyattsville, MD: Westholme Publishing, 2018).

⁵ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 4.

⁶ See Margo Burns, "'Other Ways of Undue Force and Fright': The Coercion of False Confessions by the Salem Magistrates," *Studia Neophilologica* 84, no. 1 (2012): 24-39; Erika Gasser, *Vexed with Devils: Manhood and Witchcraft in New and Old England* (New York: NYU Press, 2017); Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Marilynne Roach, *The Salem Witch Trials: A Day-by-day Chronicle of a Community Under Siege* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004).

⁷ Emerson W. Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

practices that allowed residents to respond to day-to-day life in Essex County—would expose the witchcraft crisis’s larger implications for local political affairs. Scholars have not ignored witch-hunting’s civic dimensions, but their analysis has emphasized imperial politics, especially how colonial issues surrounding the Massachusetts charter of 1691 fit into the realm of empire.⁸ This method explains how looming political figures like Governor William Phips or famed theologian Cotton Mather participated in ending the witch trials, but fails to include how regular people asserted their political agency during the crisis. More broadly, these studies miss the intertwined nature of regional politics in Essex County and the witchcraft crisis of 1692.

Vincent’s own history reminds us that the events of 1692 were not isolated in time but fit into the broader context of seventeenth-century popular politics and the shift of political discourse into the public realm. According to historians like Peter Lake and Steven C.A. Pincus, the English Revolution, which took place roughly fifty years before the events of 1692, transferred ownership of political discourse from the seat of privilege and secrecy to the authority of public opinion.⁹ In the public domain, the general

⁸ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 64-68. See also: David S. Lovejoy, *The Glorious Revolution in America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 240-250; Carla G. Pestana, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 152-155.

⁹ Peter Lake and Steven C. A. Pincus, *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). See also: M. J. Braddick and John Walter, *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: Order, Hierarchy, and Subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); David Coast, “Speaking for the People in Early Modern England,” *Past & Present*, no. 244 (2019): 51–88; Martha L. Finch, *Dissenting Bodies Corporealities in Early New England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Stephen Foster, “The Massachusetts Franchise in the Seventeenth Century,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1967): 613-623; Tim Harris, *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500-1850* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Ethan H. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Alan Tully, “The Political Development of the Colonies after the Glorious Revolution,” in *A Companion to the American Revolution*, eds. Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 29-38; Michael P. Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Winship, *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

populace could debate partisan interests in the hopes of influencing national and local policies. Though these changes grew out of civil disputes in London, they began to impact New England at the same time Vincent engaged in colonial politics by writing her first petition.

The transition of politics to the public sphere has garnered considerable analysis as scholars attempt to assess the political processes that allowed more widespread participation in the English Atlantic world. Most often, this has been done through an assessment of the franchise, who did—and, more often, who did not—have the right to contribute to the public sphere by voting or holding public office. For instance, in Massachusetts Bay Colony, scholars have identified how certain town building practices and puritan concepts of communalism encouraged political accountability for “free adult men of the colony belonging to a Protestant religious community.”¹⁰ These political practices, which facilitated participation while demarcating who could openly hold power, lie at the heart of witch hysteria in New England. The inherently social nature of witchcraft accusations has obscured this connection, but understanding the events of 1692 requires that scholars reconnect those events to parallel developments in the public sphere.

In the early modern English Atlantic world, ordinary people like Vincent participated in regional politics by writing petitions. Though many of these petitions took the form of formal written documents, they also existed as personal letters, verbal pleas, public sermons, and even as notes written in prayer books. Despite the crucial place of petitioning in the emerging realm of the public sphere, little scholarship has addressed

¹⁰ Gleb V. Aleksandrov, “A Civil Body Politick: Governance, Community, and Accountability in Early New England,” *Frontiers in Political Science* 4, no.1 (2022): 2.

this means of political expression. This study builds on the pioneering work of scholars like R.W. Hoyle, David Zaret, and others who have demonstrated how private individuals and communities utilized petitions to peacefully express grievances.¹¹ As opposed to other forms of political participation, like rioting and insurrection, petitions were the key mechanism for demonstrating political unrest to the state without the intent to escalate discontent into political violence.¹² Given that seventeenth-century governing entities perceived petitions as an “apolitical flow of information on local conditions” between the state and the populace, scholars have analyzed petitions merely as a mode of communication rather than assessing their weight as a political process.¹³

A study of the witchcraft crisis, which generated an unusual abundance of petitions, reveals how political participation curbed witch-hunting in New England and how petitions empowered colonial settlers as agents of political processes. David D. Hall asserts that an analysis of petitions would serve to broaden our perspective on how methods other than the franchise afforded people the opportunity to weigh in on town

¹¹ R. W. Hoyle, “Petitioning as Popular Politics in Early Sixteenth-Century England,” *Historical Research: the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 75, no. 190 (2002): 365–389; David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Zaret, “Petitioning Places and the Credibility of Opinion in the Public Sphere in 17th-Century England,” in *Political Space in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. Beat Kumin (London: Routledge, 2009), 175-196; Zaret, “Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion in the English Revolution,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (1996): 1497-1555. See also: Sharon Achinstein, “Women on Top in the Pamphlet Literature of the English Revolution,” *Women Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1, no. 2 (1994): 131-164; Derek Beales, “Joseph II, Petitions and the Public Sphere,” in *Cultures of Power in Europe during the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Hamish M. Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 249-268; Julian Hoppit, “Petitions, Economic Legislation and Interest Groups in Britain, 1660–1800,” *Parliamentary History* 37, no. 51 (2018): 52–71; Mark Knights, “‘The Lowest Degree of Freedom’: The Right to Petition Parliament, 1640–1800,” *Parliamentary History* 37, no. 1 (2018): 18–34; Amanda Whiting, “‘Some women can shift it well enough’: a Legal Context for Understanding the Women Petitioners of the Seventeenth century English Revolution,” *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 21, no. 4 (2004): 77-100.

¹² John Walter, *Crowds and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 20 and 57.

¹³ Zaret, “Petition-and-Response and Liminal Petitioning in Comparative/Historical Perspective,” *Social Science History* 43, no. 3 (2019): 432.

building policies, but laments that “petitions deserve more attention than is given to them...and await their historian.”¹⁴ Hoping to expand on Hall’s theory, Adrian Chastain Weimer gives brief attention to how the English Restoration motivated colonists to engage in petitions that targeted saving foundational political practices in New England.¹⁵ Similarly, Jenny Hale Pulsipher examines the transatlantic petitions passed between the General Court in Massachusetts and the English Parliament.¹⁶ Though these studies demonstrate the role petitions played in spreading public opinion, their narrow scope does not capture the complexity of the petitioning process. While New England petitioners were certainly concerned with state policies that threatened civil liberties, more so, they were troubled by regional politics that affected the day-to-day lives of members in their local communities. Average residents of Essex County were heavily influenced by the desire to maintain stability in their nascent societies and petitioners provided a variety of evidence to counteract potential factionalism in their communities. A study of the witchcraft petitions, which utilized a combination of social, economic, and legal complaints, is essential to providing a more nuanced view of what drove colonists to engage in public political practices.

Following the accusation and imprisonment of over two hundred members from their communities in the summer of 1692, residents of diverse backgrounds in Essex County repeatedly petitioned the General Court asking to relieve the accused and

¹⁴ David D. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 72.

¹⁵ Adrian Chastain Weimer, “The Resistance Petitions of 1664–1665: Confronting the Restoration in Massachusetts Bay,” *The New England Quarterly* 92, no. 2 (2019): 221–262. See also: Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 235-280; Hall, *Ways of Writing: The Practice and Politics of Text-Making in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 149-189.

¹⁶ Jenny Hale Pulsipher, “*Subjects unto the Same King*”: *Indians, English, and the Contest for Authority in Colonial New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 40-66.

questioning the legality of witch-hunting. I will argue that the witchcraft petitions issued in Essex County between 1692 and 1712 reveal how average New England colonists navigated social upheaval collectively through political participation—by petitioning their colony government. The petitioning process allowed entire towns to unify against the destabilizing effects of the witchcraft crisis to denounce factionalism and seek solidarity in their communities.

The petitions and supporting primary documentation this study relies on most come primarily from *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, an extraordinary transcription project edited by Bernard Rosenthal.¹⁷ Rosenthal's comprehensive collection reproduces documents with their original idiosyncrasies and contains every known surviving document (980 in all) directly related to the witchcraft crisis.¹⁸ Though the formative events of the crisis took place in the summer and fall of 1692, the social, economic, and legal circumstances that encouraged the hysterical factionalism of Essex County witch-hunting expanded beyond these temporal parameters, and so too do the petitions that brought about its end. Ranging from 1692 through 1712, at least 112 petitions were drafted by townspeople living in Essex County who took issue with the widespread effects of witch-hunting.¹⁹ These petitions cannot be fully understood without reference

¹⁷ Bernard Rosenthal and Margo Burns, *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Norton, "Essex County Witchcraft," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 65, no. 3 (2008): 483-488.

¹⁹ This is particularly significant given that the number of documented petitions received by the General Court during the same period amounted to roughly 243 total, meaning that nearly half of all petitions resulted from the witchcraft crisis.

to their authors, co-signers, and beneficiaries.²⁰ The fact that petitioning was a form of enfranchisement available to all people within the English Empire is apparent in the witchcraft petitions. While many of the petitions bear the name of a minister—usually the hand that penned the grievance—as a collection, none are constrained to a particular socioeconomic class, gender, occupation, or religious creed.²¹ Therefore, this project will not focus on a single demographic but will utilize these petitions as a collection to demonstrate how all members of society united to address witchcraft allegations in Essex County.

This project consists of four chapters tracing how regular people in Essex County utilized petitions to participate in popular politics during the witchcraft crisis by refuting factors that affected the stability of their communities. Chapter 1 discusses the earliest petitions where suspected witches and their communities pleaded for the General Court to release prisoners accused of witchcraft based on humanitarian appeal. These petitions focused on the long-term physical and psychological effects of imprisonment and drew upon puritan ideas of innocence and sympathy to request that the colonial assembly liberate incarcerated witches. In Chapter 2, as humanitarian appeals began to gain momentum, petitioners turned to address the financial impact that the imprisonment of

²⁰ In addition to the Rosenthal collection, the other archival depositories used in this project include: *Andover, Massachusetts Town Meeting Records, 1656-1709*, ed. S. Forbes Rockwell Jr. (North Andover, MA: North Andover Historical Society, 1961); Archives Collection (1629-1799), The Massachusetts Archive, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Boston, MA; Commons and Lords Collection, c. 1293-2019, British Parliamentary Archive, Houses of Parliament, London, UK; Early Vital Records of Massachusetts from 1600 to 1850, The Massachusetts Vital Records Project, Boston, MA; Gateway to the Past Collection, William Salt Library, Staffordshire Records Office, Staffordshire, UK; Gloucester Town Records, 1642-1715, Gloucester City Archives, Gloucester, MA; *Historical Sketches of Andover*, ed. Sarah Loring Bailey (North Andover, MA: North Andover Historical Society, reprint 1990); *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts* Vol. 1-9, ed. George Francis Dow (Salem: Essex Institute, reprint 1975); *The Probate Records of Essex County Massachusetts* Vol. 3-5, ed. George Francis Dow (Salem: Essex Institute, reprint 2018); *The Records of the Town of Cambridge (formerly Newtowne) Massachusetts, 1630-1703*, ed. Edward J. Brandon (Cambridge: City of Cambridge, 1901); Topsfield, Massachusetts Town Records, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA.

²¹ Zaret, “‘Invention’ of Opinion,” 1536.

the accused and overall witchcraft crisis had on towns in Essex County. These petitions expressed the need to absolve the accused and end witch-hunting to restore economic stability to the region. Accusations of financial jealousy and central government collusion in the witch trials propelled the arguments of concerned parties. Chapter 3 explores how Essex County petitioners, after achieving minimal attention from the first two rounds of petitions, added critiques of the court system to their objections, hoping to bring witch-hunting to an end. By focusing on elements of coerced confession and spectral evidence, laypeople and local ministers worked together to successfully draw the attention of the General Court and shift power out of the hands of Oyer and Terminer judges and back into regional administrators. Chapter 4 chronicles how many of the formerly accused continued to entreat the General Court sporadically over the two decades following the end of the witchcraft crisis. Opponents of the trials were elected to positions of local power, and favoritism towards political activism was seen across Essex County towns. The petitions of this period demanded restitution for negative experiences during the trials and combined the humanitarian, economic, and legal concerns of earlier petitions to request that their attainders be overturned. Together these chapters reveal how entire communities in Essex County asserted their political agency against the destabilizing effects of the witchcraft crisis and reflect how the petitioning process played an invaluable role in allowing everyday people to participate in eradicating witch-hunting in late seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony.

CHAPTER I:
LEGAL INNOCENCE, PURITAN SYMPATHY, AND THE SOCIAL PITFALLS OF
SUSPECTED WITCHES

Nearly five months after accusations of witchcraft befell Essex County in 1692, members of the General Court were contending with the first petition to refute the indictment of a suspected witch. The letter presented witness statements professing the innocence of accused witch Mary Bradberry on account of her long history as an upstanding citizen of Salisbury.²² Written by her husband, Thomas, the petition beseeched the court to provide clemency on the grounds that Mary was suffering under false allegations. Over one hundred of Mary's neighbors signed the petition refuting her status as an accused witch by testifying of her "courteous & peaceable disposition." Men and women of differing social standings set aside their everyday squabbles to work together with the Bradbury family to exonerate a member of their town who was "willing to doe for them [her neighbors] wt laye in her power," and thus, asserted her positive reputation as evidence of her innocence. Furthermore, the collective expressed that imprisonment was not only a "hazard of her health," but a danger to the stability of her family and the larger community. If someone with as reputable of character as Mary could face a prison sentence—or worse, death—for a crime most did not believe she committed, then anyone in Salisbury could be subjected to the same unfair treatment.²³ Although the Bradbury petition did not achieve its goal of acquitting a woman of witchcraft, it stood as the first of many attempts by Essex County residents to sway the

²² Thomas Bradbury, "Petition in Support of Mary Bradbury, Jul. 22, 1692," in *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 483-484. From this point forward, all future references to documents in Rosenthal's *Records of the Salem Witch Trials* shall be shortened to *Records* for clarity.

²³ John R. Sutton, "Stubborn Children: Law and the Socialization of Deviance in the Puritan Colonies," *Family Law Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1981): 57.

court through a trusted political process. The humanitarian terms presented by Mary's supporters—innocence through reputation, the puritan concept of sympathy, and the connection between punishment and social cohesion—would be utilized by early petitioners to rebuke the negative consequences of witch-hunting. Petitions became the seminal response to the inherently legal nature of the witch trials in the ideological landscape of Essex County.

To call upon the favor of the court through political writing was not rare in the English Atlantic world. Despite the important place of petitioning in English history, petitioning in New England has yet to be explored with any depth. While the Bradbury petition was the first witchcraft petition to sit before the General Court in 1692, it was just one of many letters issued on behalf of suspected criminals that year. The request to release Bradbury joined previous documents lobbying for the help of colonial administrators in overturning the guilt of an accused party or soliciting reformed sentencing.²⁴ Although the contents suggest specificity to the witch trials, the form and rhetoric utilized by Thomas Bradbury is not wholly different from other contemporary legal petitions. David Zaret asserts that most letters of redress involving crime and punishment followed a template of “submissive introduction of addressor to addressee, narrative of situation, specific request,” thus implying the universality of petitions as a common form of political activism.²⁵ The similarity between other letters to the General Court and the Bradbury appeal suggests that witchcraft petitions were systematic in approach. David D. Hall’s analysis of earlier cases of witch-hunting in New England supports the formulaic nature of witchcraft petitions. When compared to letters issued in

²⁴ Douglas Greenberg, “Crime, Law Enforcement, and Social Control in Colonial America,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 26, No. 4 (1982): 299.

²⁵ David Zaret, “Petition-and-Response,” 437-438.

1692 and later, petitions composed for Eunice Cole of Hampton and Elizabeth Morse of Newbury presented the same subservient introduction followed by boilerplate reasoning for the release of suspected witches.²⁶ Residents of Essex County recognized the witch trials of 1692 as part of a larger political refutation about the lawfulness of witch-hunting.

The concept of innocence in New England society directly aligned with the presentation of a consistent and reputable history. There was no stronger legal defense than the possession of a good name. Peter Hoffer has acknowledged that construction of a positive, and therefore defensible, reputation rested upon three pillars valued by puritan society: conduct towards others, visible piety, and moderate wealth.²⁷ Respectable behavior concerning neighbors included holding one's tongue from gossip, playing the role of a community-oriented good Samaritan, and adhering to a strict code of social cohesion.²⁸ New England towns demanded homogenization of the community, and any individual that transgressed behavioral norms through malicious actions or contrarian opinions risked running awry of the law. William Pynchon, an original proprietor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, criticized the oppressive nature of New England social standards, asserting that society sought to "make criminals" of God-fearing colonists.²⁹ Officials of Massachusetts Bay Colony declared Pynchon's opinions heretical and banned

²⁶ "Petition for Eunice Cole, May 3, 1665," in *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History 1638-1693*, Second Edition, ed. David D. Hall (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 217-218; William Morse, "Petition for Elizabeth Morse, Jun. 4, 1680," in *Witch-hunting in New England*, 254.

²⁷ Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials: A Legal History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 83-84.

²⁸ Marilyn J. Westerkamp, "Puritan Patriarchy and the Problem of Revelation," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1993): 578.

²⁹ William Pynchon, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* (London: J.M., 1650), Early English Books, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, MI, accessed Nov. 15, 2023, quod.lib.umich.edu.

his book, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*, from the colony.³⁰ Despite the book being labeled as a blasphemous danger to the state, its argument revealed that some recognized the hypocrisy of puritan values. A hypocrisy that promoted ideas of equity and personal agency while simultaneously imposing behavioral constraints that limited the expression of dissident opinions.³¹ Proper behavior was coupled by church membership, which provided a public display of a commitment to biblical values. Association with the church coincided with wealth that evidenced the “good stewardship and self-discipline qualities that Puritans appreciated.”³² Riches spoke of divine intercession in the profitability of one’s life while affording individuals social capital to perform charitable actions. Material wealth was to be redistributed back into the towns by supporting practices, such as publishing and charity, which promoted religion and protected communities from impiety.³³ Being able to identify any of these attributes made refutations of criminal deeds more acceptable before legal bodies.

The Bradbury letter drew upon the typical uniformity of most seventeenth-century petitions, with arguments resisting allegations of witchcraft resting upon the puritan tenants of innocence. Because of the failure of the group petition, Mary Bradbury issued her own plea to the General Court in September of 1692. Her petition follows the tradition of asserting her innocence by evidence of her history as a civilly obedient member of her community. Rather than relying on the accounts of others, Mary herself claimed that she could not be a witch as she had “endvo’ed [endeavored] to frame [her]

³⁰ David M. Powers, *Damnable Heresy: William Pynchon, the Indians, and the First Book Banned (and Burned) in Boston* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 191.

³¹ Hall, *A Reforming People*, 10-11.

³² Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 82.

³³ Mark A. Peterson, *The Price of Redemption: The Spiritual Economy of Puritan New England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 24.

life according to ye rules” of puritanism and societal standards in New England.³⁴ Having met the expectations for a virtuous woman, a covenant with the Devil ran contrary to her yearslong existence as a cordial and pious churchgoer. Furthermore, she suggested that her “brethren & neighbo’s know...the truth and uprightness of [her] heart,” and as such, she had proven her innocence by helping her community to grow prosperously as one of its founding members. Reference to her charitable work provided legitimacy that was traceable through financial documents.³⁵ Through mentioning her obedience to puritan principles and sharing her wealth for the betterment of the community, Mary felt that a petition discussing her lifestyle accounted for her innocence.

However, holding prominent status was a double-edged sword. Jealousy over material wealth inspired witch accusations just as much as it presented a way for petitioners to assert their innocence. Clashing views about visible financial prosperity demonstrate the paradoxical nature of puritan ideals that were the foundation of New England society.³⁶ Mary, described as a woman of noted “business capacity, energy, and influence,” would fall victim to the Carr family who sought to exploit this contradiction.³⁷ Town records suggest that Mary Bradbury had run astray against two of the Carr heirs, James and John, in 1679.³⁸ As young men, both James and John had vied against Mary’s sons in a battle of courtship for the hand of two local ladies. Unable to compete with the wealth and reputation afforded by marriage to a Bradbury, the Carr men were turned away as suitors. Identifying Mary as the source of their romantic frustrations,

³⁴ Mary Bradbury, “Plea of Mary Bradbury, Sept. 9, 1692,” in *Records*, 620-621.

³⁵ “List of Donations to the Town Covenant Church, May 15, 1672,” Archives Collection (1629-1799), vol. 122, no. 220, Massachusetts State Archive, Boston, MA.

³⁶ Hall, *A Reforming People*, 16 and 30.

³⁷ Charles W. Upham, *Salem Witchcraft: With an Account of Salem Village and a History of Opinions on Witchcraft and Kindred Subjects* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, reprint 2000), 468.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 225-227.

the Carrs filed a complaint of witchcraft against the Bradbury matriarch. The same year as their unrequited confessions, the men claimed that Mary had bewitched “a blue boar to dart at the legs of a horse” ridden by their father, George Carr, with the intent of causing harm.³⁹ Though the case was immediately dismissed with little effort on Mary Bradbury’s part, the past allegation would resurface during her trial in 1692.

Twelve years later, the Carrs, now joined by the testimony of afflicted girl Ann Putnam Jr., alleged that Mary Bradbury was up to her old tricks of disrupting the livelihood of their family through *maleficium* (harmful magic). Despite the Carrs accusing Bradbury as a unified force, the youngest Carr son, William, broke ranks with his family to attest to her innocence. Married to Elizabeth Pike, the sister of Mary Bradbury’s eldest daughter-in-law, familial connections might have motivated William to refute claims of witchcraft. Not only did William assert a deposition in court that his father had never said “any thing of Mistress Bradbur(ly) nor any body else doing him hurt,” but also he, alongside his wife, signed the petition written by Thomas Bradbury proclaiming Mary’s innocence.⁴⁰ Despite the best efforts of Mary and her supporters, the petitions spurred no action from the General Court and the Bradbury matriarch was sentenced to hang for her supposed crimes. Even though the formal redress system provided by colonial administrators failed to provide justice for Mary Bradbury, the plight of an elderly woman from a reputable background did not escape the notice of her community. Backed by powerful friends, Bradbury escaped from prison, and with the help of her neighbors, remained in hiding until later petitions brought about the end of witch-hunting in 1693.

³⁹ “Deposition of James Carr v. Mary Bradbury, Sept. 9, 1692,” in *Records*, 621; “Deposition of Richard Carr & Zerubable Endicott v. Mary Bradbury, Sept. 9, 1692,” in *Records*, 622.

⁴⁰ “Deposition of William Carr for Mary Bradbury, Sept. 7, 1692,” in *Records*, 604.

Additional pleas of innocence expose how suspected witches who failed to align with puritan notions of femininity were vulnerable to criminal accusation. Petitioning became a way for women to subtly address the unfair social constraints of puritan society.⁴¹ Writing in the days following Bradbury's conviction, fellow accused woman, Ann Pudeator, supplied petitions to the General Court attesting to her good virtue and casting doubt on her role as a suspected witch. Again, like Bradbury, she was a wealthy, respected resident of Salem. Ann Pudeator, however, was no stranger to defending her name in court through petition. Nearly ten years before the Essex County witchcraft crisis, Pudeator (then known as Ann Greenslade) was accused of two counts of murder by means of witchcraft.⁴² She was suspected of using her position as a midwife to torment her former employer, Isabel Pudeator, to death in 1676 and then remarrying Isabel's widower, Jacob, only to have him meet the same fate eight years later. Inheriting her husband's vast wealth, Pudeator hired a lawyer to pen a petition asserting her innocence by submitting record of church attendance, a resourceful tactic that led the town's selectmen to overturn her case.

The incident indicated Pudeator as someone willing to go against the idealistic conception of womanhood in puritan society, which would make her an easy target for future ostracization. The new wealth that Pudeator came into allowed her to present a trail of evidence that proved her charitableness and her signature among church attendees proved at least a surface-level attempt to adhere to societal demands. Nothing, however, could defend her from allegations that she had slighted the normative standards of her society by first, marrying her employer, and second, advancing to a higher social class.

⁴¹ Isaac Reed, "Why Salem Made Sense: Culture, Gender, and the Puritan Persecution of Witchcraft." *Cultural Sociology* 1, no. 2 (2007): 209-234.

⁴² Frances Hill, *A Delusion of Satan: The Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials* (Boston: Da Capo, 1997), 205.

While marriage in colonial Massachusetts was designed to mirror the biblical covenant between God and man, unions were regarded as a civil matter.⁴³ Laws required couples to issue a public announcement of their intent to wed two weeks before unions, a standard that was ignored in the Pudeator marriage.⁴⁴ The act made the sudden death of Isabel look suspicious and served as an affront to necessary marriage codes. It was considered an even greater offense to marry outside of your means. Unions were to be kept between families of the same social level as interclass marriage threatened the hierarchical structure of Essex County towns.⁴⁵ A self-employed woman becoming the matriarch of a family of town proprietors raised more than a few eyebrows. Pudeator's failure to abide by typical puritan conduct would be remembered when she would plead her innocence against witchcraft years later.

Instead of soliciting the help of legal professionals as she had done previously, Pudeator chose to assert her own agency by penning a personal rebuttal in 1692. Female petitioning became an integral part of the process that would eventually overturn the witch trials as it simultaneously afforded women the chance to make their political voice known during a period of social unrest.⁴⁶ Although it was not unheard of for women to write their own petitions, as seen with Mary Bradbury and Sarah Vincent, it was still rare in the late seventeenth-century. Sharon Achinstein emphasizes that the growth of the public sphere afforded women a more prominent place in political affairs and that polarizing events provided a space for individuals not traditionally recognized as having

⁴³ Constance Furey, "Relational Virtue: Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and Puritan Marriage," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 42, no. 1 (2012): 201.

⁴⁴ "Marriage Record of Jacob Pudeator and Ann Greenslade, 1676," in *New England Marriage to 1700*, FamilySearch, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:FH1R-7J7>.

⁴⁵ Margaret Murányi Manchester, *Puritan Family and Community in the English Atlantic World: "Being Much Afflicted with Conscience"* (Milton Park, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 28.

⁴⁶ Amanda Whiting, *Women and Petitioning in the Seventeenth-Century English Revolution: Deference, Difference, and Dissent* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2015), 294.

power to assert their agency.⁴⁷ The witch trials were one such catalyst propelling female voices, both as victims and political agents, to be heard by colonial administrators. This theory is reflected in the upsurge of women writers participating in the production of petitions between 1692 and 1712, with most female-authored letters relating back to witch-hunting in Essex County. Following this trend, Pudeator was not encouraged by witch hysteria itself but the pronounced political dimensions of the crisis to issue a self-written petition.

Empowered to express herself through her own words, Pudeator followed the pattern of the Bradbury petitions in defending her innocence by record of her upstanding civic character. With no reference to her previous brush with the law, her plea stated that her occupation as a midwife was “bound in duty” to the people of Salem and that any evidence found to disprove this was “altogether false & untrue.”⁴⁸ This statement implied that if the General Court were to dismiss her petition and continue on with a conviction, then they were choosing to favor the account of “known Lyars” over a woman proven to be a fundamental part of her community. Carol Karlsen, however, argues that Pudeator’s position as a midwife exposed her to witch allegations rather than proved her innocence of them. In seventeenth-century New England, midwives stood as a “reminder of the power that resided in women’s life-giving and life-maintaining” responsibilities.⁴⁹ Midwives were viewed to have knowledge over the prevention of death, a power reversal that countered patriarchal beliefs of male authority. Additionally, women who profited off midwifery came into direct competition with accoucheurs and male physicians, which

⁴⁷ Achinstein, “Women on Top,” 154.

⁴⁸ Ann Pudeator, “Petition of Ann Pudeator, Sept. 15, 1692,” in *Records*, 658-659.

⁴⁹ Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 144.

challenged the puritan conception of the subservient woman.⁵⁰ The tradition of accusing midwives of witchcraft was an enduring legacy of colonists' English roots. In England, women exclusively dealt with the birth of infants and childrearing. With the infant mortality rate in early modern Europe exceeding one-fifth of all children, midwives were a convenient scapegoat for bereaved parents.⁵¹ The death of a child could be blamed on sorcery performed by midwives in order to sacrifice unbaptized newborns in the name of the Devil.⁵² As such, the profession of midwife invited suspicion of diabolic behavior. Pudeator's inflammatory admission to her past as a midwife, which was read before a gathering at Beadle's Tavern in Salem, did little to sway the opinion of her audience and never reached its intended destination of the General Court.⁵³

Pressuring colonial administrators to nullify accusations of witchcraft based on supposed innocence proved fruitless. Although requesting pardons for innocence gained little traction with colonial administrators, the witchcraft petitions that covered this topic are still valuable. The "innocence petitions" reveal how Essex County residents interpreted puritan standards of appropriate behavior, especially for women. Moreover, the bulk of this type of petition were female-authored. An analysis of these petitions displays how women utilized the all-inclusive nature of English petitioning to assert their political authority and combat gendered accusations of witchcraft.⁵⁴ The lack of response from the central government speaks more to the ambiguous governing practices of influential figures than the skill of petitioners. For now, petitioning only appeared to be

⁵⁰ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 146.

⁵¹ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*, Fourth Edition (New York: Routledge, 2016), 134.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, 539; "Testimony of Sarah Churchill, Mary Warren, Elizabeth Hubbard, Ann Putnam Jr., Sarah Bibber, & Mary Walcott v. Ann Pudeator, Sept. 6, 1692," in *Records*, 607-608.

⁵⁴ Whiting, "Some women can shift," 79.

profitable for ordinary people when governing bodies felt responsible to respond with patriarchal benevolence.⁵⁵ To earn the attention of the General Court, petitioners would have to consider strategies which would demonstrate that local politics had influence over the stability of the entire colony.

After receiving minimal attention from political figureheads, petitions transitioned from references of legal innocence to calling upon the idealistic notion of puritan sympathy. While the former petitioners only focused on reversing charges just against themselves, Mary Esty begged the Court of Oyer and Terminer to reconsider the guilt of all suspected witches in Essex County. Knowing herself to be innocent, the petition implored magistrates and ministers alike to “do to the uttmost of [their] Powers in the discovery and detecting of witchcraft, and witches” so that “no more Innocent blood be shed.”⁵⁶ Her words carried the subtle accusation that the dealings of the judiciary were a miscarriage of justice while cloaking her admonition in humanitarian terms that brought the plight of the accused to light. Esty established the need of benevolent intercedence by concluding the petition with a reminder that many of those whom they condemned were nothing more than “poor dying Innocent persons.” This rebuttal concentrated less on due diligence to combat witchcraft allegations and more on colonial administrators’ civic responsibility to their communities.

The humanitarian sentiments found in the Esty letter follow a long English tradition of petitions being utilized to garner the sympathy of ruling figures. Mark Knights indicates that petitioners portrayed themselves as hapless victims of civic disputes, who could only be saved through the actions of a benevolent political

⁵⁵ David Coast, “Speaking for the People in Early Modern England,” *Past & Present*, no. 244 (2019): 67.

⁵⁶ Mary Esty, “Petition of Mary Esty, Sept. 15, 1692,” in *Records*, 557-558.

benefactor.⁵⁷ By using the deferential language of the “poor and humble servant,” ordinary people participating in petition writing were able to assert their agency without inciting fear of rebellion against colonial administrators.⁵⁸ The Esty petition evokes this theme by requesting that the court mediate on the behalf of witches who were yet to stand trial. The petition was read aloud as Esty’s last testament moments before her execution as a final emotional plea for present magistrates to show mercy for other suspected witches unjustly condemned to die.⁵⁹ Although Esty’s letter did not prevent her fate from hanging at the gallows alongside other innocent victims of witchcraft, her prose profoundly affected the way other Essex County residents began to view witch-hunting. In the coming months, other petitioners would utilize Esty’s words to bolster their own condemnations of the witchcraft crisis with the hope that “New England [could] still be saved from itself.”⁶⁰

Sympathy, however, was a more complex sentiment in puritan society than mere patriarchal benevolence. It was an intricate system that employed theological and emotional understandings of which members of their community should be afforded grace. Abram C. van Engen’s groundbreaking study on the centrality of sympathy to puritan culture emphasized that communities prioritized showing charity toward “weak and ordinary Christians.”⁶¹ Calvinist notions, as exemplified in John Winthrop’s “A

⁵⁷ Mark Knights, “‘The Lowest Degree of Freedom’: The Right to Petition Parliament, 1640–1800,” *Parliamentary History* 37, no. 1 (2018): 19.

⁵⁸ Zaret, “‘Invention’ of Public Opinion,” 1514.

⁵⁹ Esty, “Petition,” 657-658; “Mary Esty, Executed, September 22, 1692,” in *The Salem Witchcraft Papers, Volume I: Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692*, eds. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1977), 45.

⁶⁰ Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 345.

⁶¹ Abram C. van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 89.

Modell of Christian Charity,” preached unity among the saints to assure the survival of the colony.⁶² Individuals that reflected the puritan ideal of communalism were worthy of receiving empathy from the community they helped build. Members of the covenant that served as stewards of divine will were the potential recipients of personal, financial, and legal leniency.⁶³ It is important to note that van Engen’s discussion of gender oversimplifies what constituted acceptable female behavior. An examination of witchcraft petitions, which address how the view of feminine virtues impacted a woman’s ability to gain sympathy, are an integral addition to the historiography on gender in puritan society.

The witch trials, which primarily targeted women, incorporated ideas of feminine appropriateness: family, obedience, and civility. Women in puritan society were tasked with being the “knit,” which kept fledgling towns together.⁶⁴ To receive the sympathy that van Engen suggests, M. Michelle Jarrett Morris contends that women were expected to not only uphold the puritan virtues of all the saints, but also were given the responsibility of maintaining harmonious relationships between her kin and their neighbors.⁶⁵ Erika Gasser explains that women with ornery disposition or with histories as quarrelsome neighbors failed to fulfill their societal role, and were thus cast as witches.⁶⁶ Additionally, money further impacted women’s behavior. The wealthy were required to show “mercy” and “charity” while “patience and deference” were demanded

⁶² John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity, 1630,” in *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1-3.

⁶³ van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans*, 44.

⁶⁴ Winthrop, “A Modell,” 3.

⁶⁵ M. Michelle Jarrett Morris, *Puritan Women in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 54.

⁶⁶ Gasser, *Vexed with Devils*, 58.

of the poor.⁶⁷ However, women who came from fortunate financial circumstances were subject to witch accusation because their access to wealth ran contrary to the gendered power paradigm.⁶⁸ Society was even more unforgiving to women of destitute status. Despite the Calvinist values promoting charitable acts, women who requested financial relief from their communities were regarded as a burden on town infrastructure.⁶⁹ Poor, and especially elderly, women became the face of the earliest witch allegations. Failure to achieve any of these demands on femininity and finance opened individuals up to witchcraft allegations. Conversely, in the eyes of the law, individuals that conformed to the proper behaviors of their social status were worthy of civic grace, and therefore, defensible by petition.

Aware that a successful defense must draw upon the sympathies of her community, Sarah Cloyce joined the petitioning process with a letter detailing her history as a well-behaved resident of Topsfield. Imprisoned alongside her elder sister, Mary Esty, Cloyce indicated that both women possessed “vnblemished” records when it came to their “rapport with Neighbours,” “care of the familie,” and role as a “goodwoman.”⁷⁰ The petition evoked the traditional feminine behaviors that proved her and her sister’s loyalty to the covenant. Furthermore, as “present Christian womens,” the sisters adhered to the theological demands of puritan culture. Church membership added an additional level of refute when it came to clarifying how the women seamlessly followed the conduct that was anticipated of them. The address concluded that others could stand witness to their claims of good stewardship and that many would “testify of a Longest and best

⁶⁷ Winthrop, “A Modell,” 5-6.

⁶⁸ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 128.

⁶⁹ Karlsen, *Shape of a Woman*, 77.

⁷⁰ “Goodwoman” was the term for a married woman during this period, and the inclusion of this in the Cloyce defense indicates the importance of positing her position as a faithful wife to clearing her name. Sarah Cloyce and Mary Esty, “Petition, Sept. 9, 1692,” in *Records*, 620.

knowledge of us being persons of good report.”⁷¹ Calling upon the sympathies not only of the General Court, but also the wider community, the Cloyce petition requested grace in exchange for obeying puritan societal standards.

Inspired by the widely publicized Cloyce petition, the first largescale transition to prioritizing the welfare of those negatively impacted by the effects of witch-hunting in Essex County occurred on the morning of September 22, 1692. The execution of Andover resident Samuel Wardwell profoundly impacted the perception of the witch trials in the minds and hearts of his community. Before Wardwell’s death, Andover had given itself over to intense witch-hunting, with nearly eighty percent of the town involved in accusing, confessing, or otherwise contending with the effects of witch-hunting since early summer.⁷² Wardwell, along with his wife and eldest daughter, confessed to maleficium against their neighbors, although Wardwell himself would later recant his confession.⁷³ With Samuel Wardwell hanged, his wife imprisoned, and their property seized by order of the court, several of the young Wardwell children were left destitute. The fate of these children first sparked concern in Andover for the consequences of the witch trials.

The community, especially its selectmen, feared what Wardwell’s execution meant for the safety of the children. Rather than perceive his death as the culmination of a successful witch-hunt, the Andover elite grew distressed by the state of those deeply affected by the witch trials and even turned to the court sitting at Ipswich for direction. On September 26, just four days after Wardwell’s execution, the selectmen of Andover petitioned the court on behalf of his children. The petition suggested that the absence of

⁷¹ Sarah Cloyce and Mary Esty, “Petition, Sept. 9, 1692,” in *Records*, 620.

⁷² Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem*, 86.

⁷³ Burns, “Undue Force and Fright,” 36; Samuel Wardwell Sr., “Examination of Samuel Wardwell, Sept. 1, 1692,” in *Records*, 674.

Samuel and Sarah Wardwell left “several small children who [were] incapable of provideing for themselves.”⁷⁴ The selectmen implied that the children were “now in a suffering condition” and called upon the court to return enough of their father’s estate so that the children might live comfortably.⁷⁵ Although the selectmen likely hoped to push the accountability of the children off on the court, it became clear that certain Andover citizens were now making moves to protect those associated with witchcraft rather than persecute them.

On September 28, the court denied the Wardwell children access to their father’s estate but were granted a reprieve from their poverty by being placed in the homes of distant relatives from neighboring towns.⁷⁶ While the outcome of the court’s decision was less than satisfactory, the Andover selectmen did attempt to attend to the needs of those struggling under the weight of witchcraft. Up until Wardwell’s execution, the Andover elite generally sought to eradicate witchcraft in their community to secure the puritan covenant and protect the afflicted from the torments of malefic magic.⁷⁷ The purported “compassion” that had once encouraged Andover residents to testify against the Wardwells now pushed them to reconsider the consequences of their actions when the welfare of the accused’s innocent children was at stake.

Though asserting innocence and evoking sympathy were central to the argument of many early petitions, this type of refute slowly receded to focus on the widespread effects that imprisonment had on the stability of family structures and the health of the

⁷⁴ John Abbott and John Aslabee, “Petition of the Andover Selectmen, Regarding the Children of Samuel Wardwell, Sept. 26, 1692,” in *Records*, 674.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Placement of the Wardwell Children of Andover, Sept. 28, 1692,” in *Historical Sketches of Andover*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1880, ed. Sarah Loring Bailey (North Andover, MA: North Andover Historical Society, reprint 1990), 220–221, accessed Jan. 24, 2023, <http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/archives/ecca/large/ecca2096r.jpg>.

⁷⁷ Godbeer, *The Devil’s Dominion*, 204–205.

accused. Authorities sought less to punish suspected sinners than they wished to bring outcasted members back into the fold of puritan society. An accused witch's innocence mattered far less to colonial leadership than their ability to reintegrate themselves into their local communities.⁷⁸ With this in mind, petitioners shifted to concentrate on how witch-hunting disrupted the ability for even those who were found not guilty to resume their place as productive residents of Essex County. The witchcraft petitions evolved to reflect this ideology and turned to concentrate on how prolonged imprisonment had the potential to disrupt formal society.

Widespread concern for the accused, especially over those who awaited trial in prison, first arose during this period of reevaluation. The first formal petition concerning the imprisonment of the accused was issued from the pen of John Osgood Sr. of Andover to the General Court on October 12, 1692.⁷⁹ Osgood, who actively participated in Andover politics as a selectman and militia captain, gathered eight other prominent men from his community and made a plea to the General Court on behalf of their incarcerated wives and daughters. The petition attempted to appeal to the humanity of the court and draw sympathy for the stark condition of their loved ones. Notably, the petitioners depicted the accused as suffering women. They emphasized this by declaring "the distressed Condition of [their] wives and Relations in prison at Salem who [were] a Company for poore distressed creatures."⁸⁰ At the very least, the group sought to have their accused relations released on bond to allow them to be "more Tenderly Cared for" while awaiting trial.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Benjamin C. Ray, *Satan and Salem: The Witch-Hunt Crisis of 1692* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 118-119.

⁷⁹ John Osgood, "Petition of John Osgood of Andover and Eight Others on Behalf of Their Wives and Relations, Oct. 12, 1692," in *Records*, 687-688.

⁸⁰ Osgood, "Petition, Oct. 12, 1692," in *Records*, 687-688.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

The horrific conditions of Massachusetts Bay prisons were well-known to the average resident of Essex County. It was not unheard of for an inmate to expire from the harsh circumstances of prison life, and the signers of this petition were aware of this possibility. Janet Haines Mofford discusses the horrible realities of prison life in late seventeenth-century New England, asserting that prisons “were deplorable, aggravated by the stench of unwashed bodies, *nightjars* (or chamber pots), rotting food, and vomit.”⁸² These conditions were further exacerbated by overcrowding, and at the time of the witch trials of 1692, more than one-hundred-fifty people were crammed into Essex County prisons.⁸³ Forced to endure the attacks of vermin and subjected to rampant disease, the accused were hardly fit to stand trial, much less remain in prison awaiting the will of the court.⁸⁴ With the condition of their wives and daughters in mind, the Andover petitioners were the first to appeal to the court on these grounds.

Knowing that the pardon of eleven potential witches would never earn court approval, this early petition sought only to remove the accused from the hold of such deplorable conditions and not to “take them out of the hands of Justice.”⁸⁵ Osgood and others argued that a fair trial would be impossible if the accused were too ill to attend court or died before judicial measures could occur. By this account, continuing the witch trials was permissible as long as the accused could remain in their homes while the proceedings took place. In a brief discussion on the effectiveness of witchcraft petitions, Emerson Baker suggests that the petitioners needed to ingratiate themselves to the court, and questioning the judicial process, at least at this time, was secondary to the release of

⁸² Janet Haines Mofford, *The Devil Made Me Do It!: Crime and Punishment in Early New England* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2012), 187.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Four accused witches died while in prison. Marilynne Roach, *The Salem Witch Trials: A Day-by-day Chronicle of a Community Under Siege* (Lanham, Maryland: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004), 400.

⁸⁵ Osgood, “Petition, Oct. 12, 1692,” in *Records*, 687-688.

the accused.⁸⁶ While much of the language in the petition appears deferential to indifferent judges, the petitioners' argument was clear: if the court failed to grant a reprieve, the conditions of prison life were just as likely to condemn the accused to death as a courtroom.

The petitions that spoke of the ill effects of prison life drew upon literary tropes popular in puritan sympathetic literature. In both personal and persuasive writing, individuals were employing language meant to draw out an emotional response from the reader.⁸⁷ Thomas Brattle, a Boston merchant, utilized evocative prose in his letter to an unnamed clergyman on October 8, 1692. In a well-defended attack on the witch trials, Brattle illustrated the crisis as a “shadow of the Devill looming ov’r shackld elder women, shivering childs, the rags of the too poore of mind.”⁸⁸ To further elucidate the horrific effects of imprisonment on the psyche of the accused, the letter introduced the case of Salem Village resident, Rebecca Jacobs. Having visited with Rebecca’s family and attending to her in jail, Brattle’s description of her case painted the picture of an unfairly incarcerated woman with a long history of mental difficulties.⁸⁹ Rebecca, portrayed as an “ignoramous,” was utilized to demonstrate how the trials were ineffectually subverting witchcraft and more successfully punishing a woman unable to represent herself in the court of law. Evidence refuting the acceptability of Rebecca Jacobs as a deserving prisoner efficiently exploited “sentimental techniques” in literature

⁸⁶ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 189-190.

⁸⁷ Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, 2011), 76.

⁸⁸ Thomas Brattle, “Letter to an Unnamed Clergyman, Oct. 8, 1692,” in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, ed. George Lincoln Burr (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1914), 164, Explore History, <http://explorehistory.ou.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Thomas-Brattle-to-an-Unnamed-Clergyman.pdf>.

⁸⁹ Brattle, “Letter to an Unnamed Clergyman, Oct. 8, 1692,” in *Narratives*, 166; “Census of Prisoners and Dates of Prison Transfers, May 23, 1692,” in *Records*, 319-320.

popular in late seventeenth-century New England.⁹⁰ The letter would have enduring relevance on the witchcraft crisis as it became widely circulated around Boston before being disseminated into other New England towns.

Brattle's sympathetic description of Rebecca Jacobs and his admonition of prison sentences for the accused, was preceded by the petitions of her daughter, Margaret Jacobs, and aging mother, Rebecca Fox. Accused and imprisoned alongside her mother, seventeen-year-old Margaret referred to Rebecca as a "poor Woman [who] is very Crazy" that needed to be returned home to receive the proper care for her ailments.⁹¹ The Salem jail, which Margaret described as "a confined loathsome Dungeon," worsened her mother's already precarious mental condition, an argument which suggested that associated trauma threatened to derail their ability to reintegrate back into Salem society following their hopeful acquittals. In her letter, she pleaded with her father to write a petition on their behalf expressing that the poor conditions of jail life caused greater suffering than mere time could overcome. An absolution would not come from George Jacobs Jr., however, as witchcraft allegations against him forced him into exile until the trials were overturned.⁹²

Despite the disappearance of George Jacobs Jr., the plight of Rebecca and Margaret did not fall on deaf ears. The matriarch of the Jacobs family, Rebecca Fox, refused to abandon her sick daughter and young granddaughter to perish in jail. The first of Fox's petitions reaffirmed the acceptable place of social reprimands in puritan society but assured the Chief Judge for the Court of Oyer and Terminer, William Stoughton, that

⁹⁰ van Engen, 169.

⁹¹ Margaret Jacobs, "Letter to George Jacobs Jr. from Prison, Aug. 20, 1692," in *Records*, 549.

⁹² "Warrant No. 2 for the Apprehension of: Daniel Andrew, George Jacobs Jr., & Elizabeth Colson, Sept. 10, 1692," in *Records*, 625.

her daughter did not qualify under those terms.⁹³ Punishment in puritan society was used as a means of controlling social cohesion. Through shaming, individuals were inspired to repent, and falsely confess, to be rehabilitated back into society.⁹⁴ Additionally, the sentencing of accused witches did not match the supposed crime. The witch trials were already abnormal for the length they held the accused incarcerated. Sentences for most criminals lasted no longer than several months unless the crime in question raised concerns of future intent to commit premeditated murder.⁹⁵ Three months later, a second petition by Fox confronted readers with the reality that Rebecca had “for many months now lyen in Prison...a Person Craz’d, Distracted & Broken in mind.”⁹⁶ There was no hope for Rebecca to ever learn from punishment, and an execution meant the death of a woman well-known to be ill. A punishment meant to homogenize errant behaviors and reintroduce the accused back into the fold held no weight if the victim was mentally unfit or failed to survive castigation.

As Thomas Brattle pointed out in his condemnation of the witch trials, the consequences for many in the events of 1692 were fatal rather than corrective.⁹⁷ Most cases of convicted witchcraft in Essex County prior to the witchcraft crisis resulted in a “warning out” from the town like Mary Webster in 1684 or had charges dismissed like

⁹³ Rebecca Fox, “Petition for Rebecca Jacobs, Sept. 10, 1692,” in *Records*, 630-631.

⁹⁴ Mofford, *The Devil Made Me Do It!*, 104.

⁹⁵ Howard Schweber, “Ordering Principles: The Adjudication of Criminal Cases in Puritan Massachusetts, 1629-1650,” *Law & Society Review* 32, no. 2 (1998): 370.

⁹⁶ Rebecca Fox, “Petition for Rebecca Jacobs, Dec. 6, 1692,” in *Records*, 708.

⁹⁷ Brattle, “Letter, Oct. 8, 1692,” 163.

John Godfrey in 1658.⁹⁸ However, it was common knowledge that in 1692 “some have dyed already in Prison, and others have been dangerously sick.”⁹⁹ This was in direct opposition to not only the historical precedent, but also to the ultimate goal of punishment as reconciliation. The unusual nature of the witchcraft crisis provided a window for colonists to become more politically active as necessitated by the dangerous threat that punishment, imprisonment, and potential death posed to society.

The ordinary residents of Essex County were not alone in their concern for the imprisoned accused. On the very same day that John Osgood and the other male elite of Andover petitioned the General Court on behalf of their wives and daughters, Governor William Phips sent a letter to the Privy Council addressing the future of the Court of Oyer and Terminer. Following a stint upon the Maine frontier, Governor Phips claimed to discover a county embroiled in witchcraft controversy upon his return to Boston. He expressed the fear that “wrongs [were being done] unto the Innocent,” and to prevent a miscarriage of justice, he must put a “stop to the proceedings of the Court.”¹⁰⁰ While Governor Phips’s act certainly was motivated in no small part by political gain, the closing of the Court of Oyer and Terminer presented a countywide desire to reexamine the witch trials and reconsider the guilt of the accused.

Though the shutdown of the court had not been the petitioners’ original goal, it did provide time for further petitions to gain momentum. While Massachusetts Bay officials were grappling with the instability of their judicial system, more objectors joined

⁹⁸ A “warning out” constituted town administrators pressuring an accused party to resettle elsewhere. Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts* (Boston: Printed by R.P., 1689), Early English Books, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo;idno=A50139.0001.001#:~:text=Title%3A-,Memorable%20providences%20relating%20to%20witchcrafts%20and%20possessions%20a%20faithful%20account,Boston%2C%20very%20lately%20and%20sadly;“Trial%20of%20John%20Godfrey,%20Jun.%2012,%201658,”in%20In%20the%20Shadow%20of%20Salem,67.>

⁹⁹ Fox, “Petition, Dec. 6, 1692,” in *Records*, 708.

¹⁰⁰ William Phips, “Letter of William Phips to Privy Council, Oct. 12, 1692,” in *Records*, 686-687.

the petitioning process; with them came new grievances to be harnessed in future letters.¹⁰¹ Though petitioners would continue to beseech the court and government for the physical welfare of the imprisoned accused, the focus of many petitions would shift to the economic impact of the witch trials on the greater regional population. Without the immediate fear of execution for their loved ones, the petition process would evolve past simple appeals of humanitarian support and into a complex rebuttal of witch-hunting in Essex County.

¹⁰¹ John M. Murrin, “Coming to Terms with the Salem Witch Trials,” in *The Enduring Fascination with Salem Witchcraft*, ed. John B. Hench (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 2003), 343, accessed Jan. 31, 2023, <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44539519.pdf>.

CHAPTER II: THE ENTANGLEMENT OF TOWN ECONOMICS AND WITCHCRAFT

Economic tension had long-highlighted the politics of towns in Essex County. Witch-hunts, both in New England and Europe, often occurred in areas of financial devastation.¹⁰² Massachusetts Bay Colony, which was contending with a period of intense economic change, became a fertile environment for witch accusations. The ambiguous legal status of the colony and broadening inequity brought out anxieties about the potential decline of New England towns. Distrust in the central government, exacerbated by issues with the colony's charter, encouraged economic animosities and even produced claims that the state intended to use the witch trials to weaken town autonomy.¹⁰³ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum contend that, in puritan thought, economic prosperity or hardship had moral ramifications.¹⁰⁴ Failure to measure up to patriarchal puritan standards of financial success and social harmony—wealthy widows, indigent beggars, or individuals who had publicly squabbled over finances—were subject to suspicion of malefic or diabolic activity. Individuals who either possessed extreme wealth or abject poverty became the targets of allegations as neighbors attempted to utilize the witch trials for economically advantageous reasons.¹⁰⁵ Concerns about land availability, a commodity that was rapidly becoming exclusive to early proprietors of the colony, incited jealous neighbors to accuse affluent individuals of witchcraft in hopes of

¹⁰² Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 148-151.

¹⁰³ Samuel Sewall, "Journal Entry, Dec. 1, 1696-Jan. 14, 1697," in *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, 420-464, Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, accessed Nov. 13, 2023. https://saalem.lib.virginia.edu/diaries/sewall_diary.html.

¹⁰⁴ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 105.

¹⁰⁵ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 96.

profiting from colonial policies about the redistribution of land seized from convicted witches.¹⁰⁶

However, scholarship on the witchcraft crisis has generally ignored that not all economic worries resulted in factionalism. Recognition that witch-hunting was damaging town economies as well as threatening personal assets, encouraged communities across Essex County to politically band together against the witch trials. Examination of the witchcraft petitions uncovers that opponents of the witch trials, and even some former accusers, exercised their political voice to seek town stability over continued factionalism. On one hand, the episode of the witch trials served to exacerbate financial disputes, and on the other, worked to unify a discordant community under a singular cause. The heightened pressure of the witch trials exposed all levels of society to economic instability, and colonists responded by demanding accountability from political officials through the well-tried method of petitioning.

An analysis of formal grievances passed between Essex County residents and the colonial government from this period divulges how the ordinary process of petitioning on economic grounds became entangled with witchcraft. To petition over economic issues was one of the foundational ways that regular people asserted their political agency against the tumult of witch-hunting in the English Atlantic world. A precedent for petitioning Parliament about financial disagreements involving witchcraft existed since the onset of the English Civil War. Under the Cromwellian regime, interest groups—both professionally organized and situational conglomerates—were urged by town officials to engage in formal communication with governing figures about local concerns involving

¹⁰⁶ James F. Cooper, “Higher Law, Free Consent, Limited Authority: Church Government and Political Culture in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts,” *The New England Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (1996): 218.

“pecuniary sorcery.”¹⁰⁷ The notion of pecuniary sorcery, first established by the Act Against Witchcraft in 1604, categorized cases of maleficium that attempted to “exercise any invocation or conjuration of any evil and wicked spirit to destroy, waste, or impaire any Cattell, or Goods of any person.”¹⁰⁸ Rather than allowing disputing parties to solve their differences amongst themselves, the interim government hoped to circumvent personal conflicts over pecuniary sorcery devolving into economic situations which could destabilize the central administration.

Threatened by a wave of witch-hunting that emerged in the vacuum of the Civil War, the Long Parliament doubled down on the ideals presented in the Petition of Right (1628) drafted by the House of Commons under the contentious rule of Charles I. The bill protected individuals from being taken advantage of by financial directives issued from the central government while simultaneously establishing the practice of petitioning without fear of duress.¹⁰⁹ In his new position as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Oliver Cromwell declared that the Clerk of the Peace from each shire was required to publicly read the Petition of Right on the first Sunday of every month prior to the start of church service.¹¹⁰ A print copy of the text, which was placed in a local common area (either a house of worship or a meeting hall), was made available to all literate members of the community. Michael J. Braddick explains that access to legal and

¹⁰⁷ Julian Hoppit, “Petitions, Economic Legislation and Interest Groups in Britain, 1660–1800,” *Parliamentary History* 37, no. S1 (2018): 55; Philippa Carter, “Work, Gender and Witchcraft in Early Modern England,” *Gender & History* (2023): 1-18.

¹⁰⁸ James I, “An Act against Conjuration, Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits, 1604,” trans. John Levin, National Archives UK, London, UK, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/early-modern-witch-trials/an-act-against-witchcraft/>.

¹⁰⁹ “Act of Parliament: Petition of Right, Jun. 7, 1628,” Center for Study of the American Constitution, University of Wisconsin-Madison, accessed Feb. 26, 2023, https://archive.csac.history.wisc.edu/2_The_Petition_of_Right.pdf.

¹¹⁰ Braddick, “Administrative Performance: The Representation of Political Authority in Early Modern England,” in *Negotiating Power*, 179.

official texts helped to legitimize the Long Parliament's call for petitions in the eyes of the public, and as a result, political awareness was heightened among ordinary people.¹¹¹ Under the encouragement of the Cromwellian government, everyday people began to partake in this process concerning witchcraft. The transition to a governing body that sought to cultivate the public sphere while side-stepping any inclination for outlying towns to oppose the centralization of state power provoked Parliament to intercede in cases of unchecked witch-hunting. To ensure that towns were cooperating with the desires of the Cromwellian government, state marshals toured the countryside searching for evidence of economic upheaval. These officials reported that economic division that arose from witchcraft accusations posed a significant threat to destabilizing communities, and potentially, the entire regime.

The Cromwellian government determined that cases of witchcraft that concerned economic issues fell under the jurisdiction of the state rather than local governments. From the mid-seventeenth century onwards, Old England and New England petitioners would expect the central government to handle cases that entangled economics with witchcraft. In response to these findings, the Trier Ordinance issued a statute that required cases of pecuniary sorcery, which would normally be set before aldermen, to be legally redirected to the sitting Parliament.¹¹² Municipal shires found to be in violation of this decree faced the risk of incurring a central takeover and imprisonment, which records indicate was strictly enforced in the early days of the regime. Petitions requesting the audience of the parliamentary court to preside over cases of witchcraft increased

¹¹¹ Braddick, "Administrative Performance," in *Negotiating Power*, 178

¹¹² "An ordinance of the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament: Together with rules and directions concerning suspension from the sacrament of the Lords Supper in cases of ignorance and scandall. Also the names of such ministers and others that are appointed triers and judges of the ability of elders in the twelve classes within the province of London, Oct. 20, 1645," Early English Books, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, MI, accessed Sept. 10, 2023, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo2;idno=A83316.0001.001>.

threefold. Bound by ideas of benevolent paternalism and seeking to stem mounting concerns about economic stability, the Cromwellian government was incredibly responsive to witchcraft petitions. It became a cultural belief, then, that it was the responsibility of the central government to mediate financial disagreements, and English citizens recognized that petitions, witchcraft or otherwise, held political weight.

When establishing how residents of Massachusetts Bay Colony would interact with the colonial government with regards to addressing economic troubles, they turned to their English roots for guidance. As first and second-generation immigrants, the efforts of the Cromwellian interim government to address monetary disputes, particularly its stance on pecuniary sorcery, were still fresh in their memory. Instead of directing their concerns towards Parliament, Massachusetts Bay colonists adapted to this form of petitioning by presenting local grievances to the closest root of central power: the General Court sitting in Boston. New England towns functioned on a delicate balance between local and central authority. While towns dealt with social disputes between residents, “selectmen turned to the colonial government for advice” when arbitrating economic matters, especially those that caused greater communal or regional strife.¹¹³ Much like the earlier Long Parliament, colonial administrators in Massachusetts Bay Colony sought to mediate financial disputes in order to maintain stability and avoid dissention during the crucial period of colony building. By promoting the use of petitions to relay critical information about local problems to appointed magistrates, economic troubles turned inherently political and became an integral part of colonial administrative practices.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), 114.

¹¹⁴ Barry Levy, *Town Born: The Political Economy of New England from Its Founding to the Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 18.

Puritan ideology further promoted the use of petitions as a viable source for dealing with financial grievances. To this effect, Adrian Chastain Weimer asserts that New England petition campaigns “fit well with a longer history of puritan petitioning” that dated back to the 1640s in England and was further cultivated as a constitutional culture developed in New England.¹¹⁵ This theory supports that the petitioning process popularized during the aftermath of the Civil War had a direct correlation on the manner with which residents of Essex County would respond to economic fallout in their communities as evidenced by their willingness to petition the General Court in good faith. Contemporary historian, Paul Moyer, affirms Weimer’s conclusion by expounding that the 1640s English petitions deliberating over pecuniary sorcery served as an example not only for how to attend to the entanglement of economic affairs with witchcraft but also as a template for how to entreaty the government for financial compensation.¹¹⁶ Therefore, when residents of Essex County began compiling their grievances for the General Court about the various economic strains that witch-hunting had on individuals and their communities, petitioners were participating in a well-known formal process in the English Atlantic world.

Economics and witchcraft were deeply entwined in late seventeenth-century New England. Many of the witchcraft petitions point to financial difficulties present in Essex County towns prior to the boom of witch-hunting in 1692. When reviewing the complaints of accusers and petitioners alike, a trail of economic dissension becomes apparent. Boyer and Nissenbaum contend that the late seventeenth century was rife with economic trouble, which allowed for a contentious space where individuals could take

¹¹⁵ Adrian Chastain Weimer, *A Constitutional Culture: New England and the Struggle Against Arbitrary Rule in the Restoration Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), 136-137.

¹¹⁶ Paul Benjamin Moyer, *Detestable and Wicked Arts: New England and Witchcraft in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 58.

advantage of past financial disputes with their neighbors.¹¹⁷ Other scholars have expounded on their foundational model by characterizing that New England, in the period immediately preceding the witch-hunt, was inundated with the economically devastating effects of a little ice age, the financial drain of an on-going frontier war, and the first signs of socioeconomic disparity among residents.¹¹⁸

However, this perspective fails to assess the hermeneutic influence seventeenth-century economics and witchcraft had on each other. While it is true that towns contending with economic difficulties were a rife space for witch accusations, it is also imperative to explain that witch-hunting often led to further financial ruin for communities.¹¹⁹ Witch-hunting itself could become a scapegoat to blame all economic issues upon, and some towns rallied together to denounce the cost of witch trials. Past historiography has emphasized the divisive effect that monetary woes had on facilitating a tumultuous environment rich for the growth of witch-hunting. Recent studies by Franklin Mixon and Kamal Upadhyaya further contend how disparity birthed witchcraft allegations. The 1692 calamity was the result of the central government, town parishes, and single complainants' attempt to utilize the turbulent economic environment to increase personal wealth.¹²⁰ Building upon this notion, historians of early modern Europe maintain that social-climbing and economic inequity incited a resurgence of witch trials

¹¹⁷ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 108-109.

¹¹⁸ Charles Lee, "Public Poor Relief and the Massachusetts Community, 1620-1715," *The New England Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1982): 580-582.

¹¹⁹ William Monter, *Frontiers of Heresy: The Spanish Inquisition from the Basque Lands to Sicily* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 272-273.

¹²⁰ Franklin G. Mixon and Kamal P. Upadhyaya, "The Economics of Puritanism's Treatment of Bewitchment: Exorcism as a Potential Market-Pull Innovation?" *European Journal of Law and Economics* 50, no. 2 (2020): 203-222.

between 1640 and 1710.¹²¹ Cases of individuals pretending to be bewitched for financial gain or accusing neighbors motivated by greed were especially prominent in continental Europe in the early seventeenth century and England in the post-Civil War period.¹²² A more comprehensive examination of the witchcraft crisis divulges that economic tensions were just as unifying as they were acrimonious.

Sympathy for the rights of the accused and their ability to healthily reintegrate back into the community soon shifted into unease about the financial situation that the event in its entirety laid upon New England. Anxieties over past economic squabbles between neighbors, fear that the recently rechartered central government was conspiring to overthrow town leadership, and the need for the witch trials to stop draining vital community resources pushed individuals to assert their political voice.¹²³ Whether individuals were arguing for their own financial security or for the monetary stability of their towns, economic concerns fueled Essex County residents to petition the General Court. The petitions beginning in mid-October of 1692 reflected the petitioners' desire to set aside previous economic differences and oppose the witch trials as a politically unified force.

Outside of the earliest suspected witches, who were identifiably social outcasts, nearly all charged with witchcraft came from the wealthiest and most influential families

¹²¹ Johannes Dillinger, "Germany – 'The Mother of the Witches,'" in *The Routledge History of Witchcraft* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 143.

¹²² Thomas Paman, "Confession, Feb. 28, 1629," Early Modern Witch Trials, National Archives UK, London, UK, accessed Sept. 23, 2023, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/early-modern-witch-trials/pretending-to-be-bewitched/>; Joan Guppie, "Accusation of Robert Gibbs, Judith Gibbs, Richard Shepard and Margaret Abington, Dec. 1605," Early Modern Witch Trials, The National Archives UK, accessed Sept. 23, 2023, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/early-modern-witch-trials/accused-by-neighbours/>; Hans De Waardt, "Witchcraft and Wealth: The Case of the Netherlands," in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian Levack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 234-236.

¹²³ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 74; Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 199-207; Weimer, *A Constitutional Culture*, 134.

of the region.¹²⁴ Initial Massachusetts Bay settlements prioritized the puritan notion of equality, but as these communities evolved out of religious bastions and into more complex metropolitan centers, governing bodies implemented town-building practices that favored generational wealth.¹²⁵ When the population of New England boomed in the mid-seventeenth century, original proprietors benefited from the fledgling agricultural-commodity based economy. Charles I's colonial directive that granted each family a plot large enough to be self-sustaining was scrapped with the overthrow of the royal government; an influx of immigrants demanded that remaining land availability be conserved for necessary town institutions.¹²⁶ The desire to redistribute wealth took form in witchcraft accusation, a theory that, according to the journal of Andover resident and colonial magistrate Simon Bradstreet, did not go unnoticed by Essex County elites.¹²⁷

The way wealth and power first shaped the pattern of accusation, and later political rebuttal, in Essex County is best exemplified by the fate of the Dane family in Andover. As early settlers, the Dane family grew exponentially wealthy compared to many of their neighbors. Able to make financial gains with several strategic marriages, the Danes came to own a substantial percentage of the town's land.¹²⁸ On this note, both Philip J. Greven and Barry Levy agree on the importance of patriarchal landownership to

¹²⁴ Ray, *Satan and Salem*, 205-206.

¹²⁵ John Frederic Martin, *Profits in the Wilderness: Entrepreneurship and the Founding of New England Towns in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 143.

¹²⁶ Charles I, "Grants for Lands in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Main from Charles I, King of England, and the Council of Plymouth Between 1618 and 1639," Archives Collection (1629-1799), vol. 003, no. 438, Massachusetts State Archive, Boston, MA; Martin, *Profits in the Wilderness*, 145.

¹²⁷ Simon Bradstreet, "Journal Entry, Mar. 11, 1693," in *The New England Historical & Genealogical Register and Antiquarian Journal*, vol. 9, edited by S.G. Drake (Boston: The New England Historical and Genealogical Register, 1855), 67, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://books.google.com/books?id=EgPVAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q=67&f=false>.

¹²⁸ Philip J. Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 46 and 52; Abbot, *Our Company Increases Apace*, 110.

the function of early New England society. Essex County families who were able to maintain and expand their lands under “long-lived, controlling fathers” could amass greater influence over town institutions, and ultimately, over other residents.¹²⁹

Therefore, as landownership equated success, the Danes stood apart from many other landholders in Andover.

The Danes’ influence not only sat in their financial security but in their access to power. The family patriarch, Francis Dane Sr., had served as parish minister for over forty-four years by 1692 and wielded the considerable power and admiration of his parishioners for several decades. Reverend Dane led the Andover community without much fanfare until 1682, when at sixty-five years old, whispers of his senility encouraged a smattering of parishioners to request a new minister.¹³⁰ Reverend Thomas Barnard, a fresh graduate of Harvard and a contemporary to Cotton Mather, took up the mantle. Reverend Dane, however, defended his post and demanded that his salary be paid in full as he had never agreed to step down as minister. When the congregation failed to comply, Reverend Dane took his case to the General Court. Ultimately, the court decided to split the £80 salary between Dane and Barnard as they would remain co-ministers in Andover until Dane either retired or died. The court proceeding cost the town more than their combined salary, and in a show of defiance, the income was split unevenly between Dane (£30) and Barnard (£50).¹³¹ Despite Dane’s frail health, he lived fifteen more years and collected the divided salary for every one of them.

¹²⁹ New England towns adhered to a patriarchal system of landownership where sons delayed independence while fathers maintained control over family lands for several generations – the earliest settling patriarchs would become the wealthiest and most politically powerful members of the town. Greven, *Four Generations*, 98; Levy, *Town Born*, 5.

¹³⁰ Richard Latner, ““Here Are No Newters”: Witchcraft and Religious Discord in Salem Village and Andover,” *The New England Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (2006): 107-108.

¹³¹ Claude Moore Fuess, “Witches at Andover,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 70 (1950): 16.

Elinor Abbott cites the disagreement between Reverend Dane and the Andover community as foundational to the undercurrent of economic strife that would culminate in the months governed by the witch trials.¹³² Perhaps remembering this financial slight, many Andover residents turned against Reverend Dane and his family in the summer of 1692. Of the Andover forty formally tried for witchcraft, twenty-seven of them were connected by birth or marriage to Reverend Dane.¹³³ Even the Reverend himself would be accused of consorting with the Devil, although his accusation never touched the courtroom floor. It comes as no surprise then that Reverend Dane signed, if not authored, nearly all the Andover petitions. Conversely, Salem's minister, Reverend Samuel Parris, encouraged his parishioners to accuse anyone they suspected of diabolic behavior despite public favor souring against the witch trials.¹³⁴ As the father of an afflicted girl, Reverend Parris played an integral part in inciting Salem residents to search for "Devils to be found among the Saints," and many of the so-called witches found in his midst were individuals who had publicly spoken against him.¹³⁵ Reverend Parris never wavered on his stalwart support of witch-hunting until criminal charges of negligence forced him to apologize in 1694.¹³⁶ The opposite reactions of two Essex County reverends demonstrate how town ministers could inflame witch-hunting just as much as they could choose to speak out against it.

¹³² Elinor Abbott, *Our Company Increases Apace: History, Language, and Social Identity in Early Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2007), 149.

¹³³ Latner, "'Here Are No Newters,'" 106.

¹³⁴ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 172.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 35; Samuel Parris, "Sermon, Mar. 27, 1692," in *The Sermon Notebook of Samuel Parris, 1689-1694*, eds. James F. Cooper and Kenneth P. Minkema (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1994), 150.

¹³⁶ Parris, "Sermon over Meditations of Peace, c. Nov. 1694," *Sermon Notebook*, 33.

It was common for ministers to author petitions in the New England colonies. As towns were built upon puritan theology, ministers functioned equal parts as spiritual mentors and civic leaders. Ministers tended to be among the most well-educated and politically active members of their communities. As elite men of reputable status, ministers were formally trained in the language of petitioning and frequently took up the role as scribe for petitioners who wished to beseech the help of the General Court but lacked the eloquence of a trained scholar.¹³⁷ Reverend Dane was more than just the source of early economic division in Andover, he was a graduate of King's College at the University of Cambridge with a history as a primary-level educator prior to his transition into the ministry.¹³⁸ He was uniquely qualified to lead his town's residents through the petitioning process and appeared to utilize his strengths as a professional writer to produce some of the most articulate petitions of the witchcraft crisis. A review of the handwriting from the original petitions of Andover, courtesy of Margo Burns and Matti Peikola, reveals that Reverend Dane played an active part in the petitioning process for his town as a writing clerk and, likely, included many of his own views about the financial situation of his struggling community.¹³⁹

Knowing that economics lay at the heart of many of the town's troubles, some of which he had caused himself, Reverend Dane evoked the presence of financial hardship in his petitions. Dane's first appeal to the General Court over economic disparity comes from a petition dated October 18, 1692. Just as the petitions that came before, Dane first

¹³⁷ Michael J. Braddick and John Walter, "Grids of Power: Order, Hierarchy, and Subordination in Early Modern Society," in *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society*, eds. Michael J. Braddick and John Walter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37.

¹³⁸ "Cambridge Record of Francis Dane (DN633F)," Cambridge Alumni Database, University of Cambridge, accessed Mar. 3, 2023, <https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search-2018.pl?sur=&suro=w&fir=&firo=c&cit=&cito=c&c=all&z=all&tex=DN633F&sye=&eye=&col=all&maxcount=50>.

¹³⁹ Margo Burns and Matti Peikola, "Linguistic Introduction – Recorders," in *Records*, 69-71.

addressed the inhumane environment of the Salem prison, but he quickly moved along to focus on the families financially impacted by the witch trials. He asserted that the convictions had left “several poor families” without men to earn a livelihood and homes without wives to tend to them.¹⁴⁰ As a result, the general economy of the town was left disrupted. The “distressed condition” of these families was a financial burden on the whole town as the affected sought aid from the community.¹⁴¹ Though many of the accused were affluent, the financial strain of the trials and the absence of conventional earnings left even the most well-off struggling.

Reverend Dane then turned to address the fiscal impact that prison fees had on the economic sustainability of the community. Massachusetts Bay prisons required inmates to pay for boarding, court transportation, and even the rental of manacles.¹⁴² This additional burden on families who were already financially stressed only served to upend the community further. Reverend Dane noted that he had seen how the fees left “neighbors...to be impoverished & ruin'd by the great charge...to maintain such of their families as are in Prison.”¹⁴³ Here he asked that the accused not only be removed from prison for their safety but also for the financial security of their families, and overall, Andover.

Other Andover residents shared Reverend Dane's concern for the economics of the community. Unlike earlier petitions, the one from October 18 contained signatures from all socioeconomic levels of Andover society. The absence of forty members of their small community of nearly six hundred greatly impacted the economics of the town for

¹⁴⁰ Francis Dane Sr., “Petition of Twenty-six Andover Men on Behalf of Their Wives and Daughters, Oct. 18, 1692,” in *Records*, 690-691.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Mofford, *The Devil Made Me Do It!*, 189.

¹⁴³ Dane, “Petition of Twenty-six Andover Men,” in *Records*, 690-691.

all residents. Abigail Faulkner Sr., for example, addressed the economic impact that her absence and prison fees had on her own family in her request for aid. Faulkner, the youngest daughter of Reverend Dane, wrote directly to Governor William Phips, hoping for a pardon. In her letter, Faulkner pleaded that her imprisonment put her family in a perilous financial situation. She claimed that her “six children [had] little or nothing to subsist on” without her to care for their needs.¹⁴⁴ With her husband, Francis Faulkner, in ill health, the children and finances were entirely dependent on her. Faulkner ominously concluded her appeal by asserting that if her fees were not absolved and her case not pardoned, “We shall all perish.”¹⁴⁵ Ultimately, Governor Phips would grant her pardon. Still, Faulkner would continue to petition for years for financial compensation from her stay at the Salem prison and costs incurred by the witch trials.

Righting past economic wrongs through witchcraft allegations prompted the accused to defend their good name, and the wealth associated with it, through the familiar petitioning process. Concerns of the accused and accusers alike about failing finances did not stop at their neighbors. Equally as alarming, towns looked to their colonial government with a suspicious eye.¹⁴⁶ Regular residents across Essex County communities feared that a conspiracy was afoot; the newly instituted Massachusetts government under the 1691 charter sought to use the witch trials as an excuse to steal economic prosperity from the towns and into state control.¹⁴⁷

Abigail Faulkner’s warning about those doomed to perish seems particularly poignant in the case of Mary Parker, another resident of Andover with a long legal

¹⁴⁴ Abigail Faulkner Sr., “Petition of Abigail Faulkner Sr. for a Pardon,” in *Records*, 704-705.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Jon L. Wakelyn, *America's Founding Charters: Primary Documents of Colonial and Revolutionary Era Governance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), 323.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 325.

history before the General Court.¹⁴⁸ Suspected alongside Samuel Wardwell, Parker was found guilty of maleficium despite protesting her innocence and hung for her supposed crimes prior to the issuance of the first witchcraft petition. Two months after her death, sons John and Joseph Parker would write a petition admonishing what they felt were the economic dimensions behind the execution of their elderly mother. The affluent widow of a sizeable estate, Mary Parker was described by her sons as “an original proprietor of Andover,” and as such, was a figure of notable wealth within her community.¹⁴⁹ John and Joseph identified that while they each were bequeathed with considerable acreage in northern Andover following their father’s death in 1685, it was Mary’s name that remained on the deed, a fact well-known to the assizes court in Boston, which had presided over the on-going legal battle for her land inheritance. It was this land, the men claimed, that earned their mother the envy—and “vengeful deceit”—of the colonial Massachusetts government.¹⁵⁰

The Parker family’s fear that Mary’s execution resulted from land envy was founded in the geographical affairs of Massachusetts Bay Colony. By the late seventeenth century, land was becoming scarce in Essex County. As towns continued to grow and the population flourished, successive generations of nuclear families contended with one another for material resources.¹⁵¹ The patriarchal landownership that was popular amongst puritan townships allowed patriarchs to amass substantial amounts of property, with single families sometimes owning upwards of thirty percent of the farmable land per

¹⁴⁸ Abbott, *Our Company Increases Apace*, 48; Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem*, 34-35.

¹⁴⁹ John and Joseph Parker, “Petition of John and Joseph Parker for Restitution for Mary Parker, Nov. 7, 1692,” in *Records*, 700.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Scott McDermott, *The Puritan Ideology of Mobility: Corporatism, the Politics of Place and Founding of New England Towns Before 1650* (Cambridge, MA: Anthem Press, 2022), 165-167.

town.¹⁵² Christopher W. Hannan notes that newly immigrated families and sons not identified as the primary heir were left to battle over the small portion of cleared land not controlled by one of the original proprietary patriarchs.¹⁵³ The inaccessibility of land led Essex County residents to seek more extreme measures for acquiring land grants. While some turned to the frontier wars in hopes of usurping lands from Indigenous communities, others turned inward, making enemies of their more securely established neighbors. The most fearsome of opponents, though, were not considered to be the townspeople allaying their complaints, but the royally-appointed Governor's Council who was overseeing them.¹⁵⁴

Anxieties around the trustworthiness of the General Court become especially poignant when considering that the most common types of petitions put forward in the years preceding the witchcraft crisis requested that they review and redistribute property among plaintive parties.¹⁵⁵ Prior to the collapse of the 1629 charter in the Glorious Revolution, the General Court was comprised of delegates elected by puritan freedmen from each Massachusetts town. Under this system of governance, town leadership had a respected voice within the colonial legislature, and as a result, more confidence in the

¹⁵² Greven, *Four Generations*, 48.

¹⁵³ According to land ordinance laws in Massachusetts Bay Colony, only first-born sons were given full rights of land inheritance following the death of their fathers. Although special arrangements could be made for sons who were second-in-line or for wives to retain property as regents, most were forced to find their own way when it came to landownership. Mary Parker, who was named permanent regent over the legal ownership of her husband's properties after his death, is an outlier to this policy and one that did not go unnoticed by her peers. Christopher W. Hannan, "Indian Land in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 29, no. 2 (2001): 3.

¹⁵⁴ Alan Tully, "The Political Development of the Colonies after the Glorious Revolution," in *A Companion to the American Revolution*, eds. Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), 33.

¹⁵⁵ Cooper, "Higher Law, Free Consent, Limited Authority," 218.

morality of the state government.¹⁵⁶ The General Court was allotted power over the treasury, and towns maintained marginal control over the outcome of economic disputes by voting in trusted legislators.¹⁵⁷ However, newly instituted monarchs, William III and Mary, sought to bring colonial assets under the authority of the royal government. The new charter, which arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1691, transferred authority out of the hands of colonists and back into the seat of monarchical power. Although the reorganized General Court retained operation over monetary issues, proceedings were now supervised by a Governor's Council, who were royally appointed. Qualification for appointment further required land ownership rather than covenant membership, which led town authorities to question whether the state was willing to collude with nefarious attempts to usurp lands for personal benefit.¹⁵⁸

The history of Mary Parker and her husband, Nathan shows that past experiences where wealth had been flaunted before the General Court could be used as an excuse to target someone in 1692. The couple stood as defendants in a robbery trial that evolved into a significant land dispute case in 1658. Nathan, as a town proprietor and scrivener by trade, was entrusted with keeping many of the town's legal records in his possession for safekeeping. One such record was the apprenticeship agreement between fellow Andover residents, Hopestill Tyler and Thomas Chandler.¹⁵⁹ For reasons unbeknownst, the Tyler

¹⁵⁶ Cornelius Dalton, *Leading the Way: A History of the Massachusetts General Court, 1629-1980* (Boston: Massachusetts Secretary of State, 1984), 29.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

¹⁵⁸ Sewall addressed discussions he administered between town selectmen and the Massachusetts legislature, identifying a recurrent theme that New England residents feared that the royal charter sought to upend the economic prosperity of towns and redistribute finances into the pockets of royally-appointed officials. By his admission, the witch trials further agitated these claims, and the belief that there was collusion between the government and accusers became rampant. Sewall, "Journal Entry," in *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, 420-464.

¹⁵⁹ Nathan Parker, "Contract of Apprenticeship between Thomas Chandler and Hopestill Tyler, 1651," in *Early Records of the Parker Family of Andover*, ed. Charlotte Helen Abbott (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2002), 6.

family wished to break the contract and sought to do so by stealing it from the Parker home. While the robbery was thwarted by concerned neighbors, the Tyler family stood trial for their attempt to forcibly enter the Parker residence.¹⁶⁰ It was during this period that Job Tyler, the father of Hopestill, filed a petition requesting land compensation for the humiliation his family had endured by being brought to trial by the Parkers.¹⁶¹

Despite the immediate refusal of the General Court to address the unfounded demands of Job Tyler, the incident gave evidence to the vulnerability of some landowners and, as sons John and Joseph suggested, potentially led to Mary Parker's wrongful execution.

The Parker sons drew a direct correlation between the witchcraft accusation against their mother and other Essex County residents' desire for land acquisition. Individuals formally accused and tried before the Court of Oyer and Terminer were subject to having their private property and finances seized by the central government. In some cases, the apprehended wealth was redistributed amongst the town, leaving accusers to financially benefit from turning in the wealthier members of their communities, while some lands acquiesced became property of the state.¹⁶² The Parker petition suggested that Mary's accuser—Job Tyler's step-granddaughter, Martha Sprague—had “divin-d a great misdeed to seise [their] mothers Estate” and that she had “made an agreement with ye Marshal” to receive financial compensation for her testimony.¹⁶³ Furthermore, the men argued that the marshal demanded an additional ten pounds from each of them for questioning his royal authority to repossess a “condemned's” property. As marshals were approved by the Governor's Council,

¹⁶⁰ Enders A. Robinson, *Salem Witchcraft and Hawthorne's House of Seven Gables* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1992), 255.

¹⁶¹ Job Tyler, “Petition of Against Nathan and Mary Parker, Nov. 1658,” in *Parker Family*, 7.

¹⁶² Ray, *Satan and Salem*, 175-176.

¹⁶³ Parker and Parker, “Petition, Nov. 7, 1692,” in *Records*, 700.

collusion between a regular resident and a state official alluded to a conspiracy between witchcraft and the colonial government.

Belief that royally appointed officials had a hand in exacerbating witch-hunting did not stop with the claims of the Parker brothers. Others came forward with additional petitions to support claims of economic collusion. The Parker petition not only stirred up unrest in Andover, but also in the neighboring towns of Lynn and Reading. Thomas Hart wrote the General Court, accusing that it was not his “decriped Mother” who engaged in a “Sinfull practice,” but that the court knowingly “engaged in the Drugery of Satan” by trying to usurp the lands of an old Christian woman from beneath her.¹⁶⁴ By late 1692, petitioners began to argue that the work of the Devil was not being done through witchcraft, but by greedy administrators. This type of accusatory language is seen again in the case of Sarah Rice, whose husband admonished the General Court for doing nothing to prevent the Court of Oyer and Terminer from repossessing the finances and land meant for the “Support and preservation of her & myne life,” and asserted that it was not too late for the governor to step in to save them all.¹⁶⁵

A dual belief emerged in a colonial government that was simultaneously a patriarchal benefactor and immoral entity. Both English law and puritan values promoted faith and obedience to figures of authority. As such, residents of Essex County believed that state authority was beholden to acts of patronage and godly charity.¹⁶⁶ Mark Knights remarks petitions of the same period in England lacked the acerbic finger-pointing that Essex County residents directed at the culpability of their own institutions.¹⁶⁷ Following

¹⁶⁴ Thomas Hart, “Petition of Thomas Hart for Elizabeth Hart, Oct. 19, 1692,” in *Records*, 691-692.

¹⁶⁵ Nicholas Rice, “Petition of Nicholas Rice for Restitution for Sarah Rice, Oct. 19, 1692,” in *Records*, 692.

¹⁶⁶ Zaret, “Petition-and-Response,” 442.

¹⁶⁷ Knights, ““The Lowest Degree of Freedom,” 24.

the political turmoil of the Glorious Revolution, the ambiguous state of Massachusetts law did not inspire everyday people to trust the power of the state. Under the new 1691 charter, the franchise no longer required church membership, more power was consolidated under royally-appointed governors, and the colony was denied the right for self-governance.¹⁶⁸ The blatant dismissal of covenant membership and town politics, infringed upon puritan values. Uncertainty about the future security of puritanism pushed some residents of Essex County to regard new royal officials as “ambitious, self-seeking demagogues.”¹⁶⁹ Therefore, this phenomenon seems to originate in puritan ideology supported by a town-born system that encouraged political participation and a populace that preferred local leadership over monarchical benevolence. The public sphere was evolving to include more complex refutations of governing bodies, the political tumult of the witch trials bringing this change into stark light.

Mounting economic concerns altered the way residents of Essex County perceived the witch trials, and everyday people asserted their political voice to oppose them. Even individuals who had originally benefitted from the witch trials reorganized as petitioners. George Herrick, an Essex County marshal for the Court of Oyer and Terminer, delivered three accused witches to the Ipswich Jail on December 10, 1692. He promptly returned home to write a letter to the Massachusetts Governor bemoaning the economic strain of the witch trials. Once a staunch proponent of the trials and self-proclaimed “master witch-huntsman,” Herrick’s complaint identified that the negative financial side effects of witch-hunting on himself and his community outweighed any

¹⁶⁸ “The Charter of Massachusetts Bay, 1691,” The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, New Haven, CT, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mass07.asp.

¹⁶⁹ Richard Cust, “The ‘Public Man’ in Late Tudor and Early Stuart England,” in *Public Sphere*, 136.

potential justice to be enacted against the perceived evils of suspected witchcraft.¹⁷⁰ Serving and ferrying the accused to-and-from prison for the past nine months had “taken up [his] Whole time and made Incapeable to get any thing for the maintenance of [his] Porre famally,” and alleged that it was too “dangerous & difficulte” for the general populace to support continued court proceedings.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, the letter drew attention to the widespread monetary issues that the events of 1692 had brought upon Essex County, asserting that ordinary families were falling into destitution as a result of the upheaval and resolute focus of officials on purging the New England countryside of maleficium.

As the petition process moved forward, the objections of the Essex County petitioners grew out of simple pleas intending to invoke sympathy for the incarcerated and into a fully-fleshed economic refutation of the witch trials. By arguing that the witch trials disrupted both the social and financial prosperity of their towns, the petitions touched on issues that concerned the security of all Essex County communities. Dissenters of the trials were coming together to petition for the stability of the accused, accusers, and communities alike. Soon even the dueling ministers, Dane and Barnard, would set aside their differences to join hands with the likes of the Parker brothers and George Herrick to begin a new round of petitions.¹⁷² Although the petitions to this point received little attention from the General Court, they would gain the respect of other witch trial resisters and work as one part of a larger petition process that would come to

¹⁷⁰ John Dunton, “Journal Entry, Mar. 27, 1686,” in *Journal of John Dunton in Herrick Genealogy: A Genealogical Register of the Name and Family of Herrick*, ed. Jedediah Herrick (Columbus, OH: Privately Printed, 1885), 42, <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=8UItAAAAYAAJ&rdid=book-8UItAAAAYAAJ&rdot=1&pli=1>.

¹⁷¹ George Herrick, “Petition, Dec. 10, 1692,” in *Records*, 710-711.

¹⁷² “An Act Against conjuration, Witchcraft, and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits, Dec. 14, 1692,” in *Records*, 713-714.

question the legal authority of the Court of Oyer and Terminer in Massachusetts Bay Colony.

CHAPTER III:
CHALLENGING THE LEGALITY OF WITCH-HUNTING

By the winter of 1692, the witchcraft crisis had produced nearly twenty petitions to colonial administrators addressing various grievances about the welfare of the accused and the difficult position of Essex County's local economy. In times of colonial stability, maintaining control over the spread of dissent stimulated the state to be responsive to all manner of petitions.¹⁷³ However, with the central government distracted by structural issues ignited by the ambiguous state of the colony charter, the General Court had remained uncharacteristically silent against the barrage of discontent. Rather than dissuade petitioners' efforts, the lack of response only pushed them to continue their crusade against the diabolic crisis that threatened to upend the stability of towns across the region. Criticism of the social and economic dimensions of witch-hunting gradually gave way to an assessment of the legal procedures that supported "unfaire tryals" against accused witches.¹⁷⁴ Petitioners hoped that complaints against the judicial system, a product of central power, would garner the interest of the state better than mere local concerns.

While Essex County communities still readily believed in the existence of witches, their feelings of what evidence was used in court to attain witchcraft convictions began to change. The validity of confessions to maleficium were reconsidered as opponents of the witch trials questioned how freely they were given. Spectral evidence, and its prolific use in convicting witches during the 1692 crisis, came under intense scrutiny by petitioners. Previous historiography has elevated the part that noteworthy

¹⁷³ Hall, *Ways of Writing*, 150-151

¹⁷⁴ John Osgood et al., "Petition of Andover Residents for the Accused, Dec. 6, 1692," in *Records*, 707.

theologians played in eradicating spectral evidence as a viable source for conviction.¹⁷⁵ This perspective, however, erroneously attributes the end of spectral evidence exclusively to a set of well-known ministers while simultaneously minimizing the impact that regular people had on this process. Everyday men and women decried the exploitation of spectral evidence several months before Increase Mather's influential study, *Cases of Conscience*, rallied ministers to contest court rulings.¹⁷⁶ Ministers positioned themselves in opposition to the dealings of the Court of Oyer and Terminer to regain social capital among their congregations. To maintain power, ministers would have to join ordinary people in critiquing spectral evidence. As the unified petitioners became bolder with their criticisms, a countywide movement against the use of coerced confession and spectral evidence to ascertain conviction gained traction. Ordinary people were soon critiquing the validity of the court system, and by extension, the political foundations of puritan society.¹⁷⁷

Petitioners concentrated on countering legal confessions, which were foundational to the conviction of witches in the English Atlantic world. As it was understood by English Common Law, confession was an accused's voluntary admittance to a suspected crime.¹⁷⁸ Under English law, a confession required the defendant to utter an oath of

¹⁷⁵ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 156 and 200-203; Hoffer, *The Salem Witch Trials*, 129-131; Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 80; Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem*, 180-185.

¹⁷⁶ Increase Mather, *Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits Personating Men, Witchcrafts, Infallible Proofs of Guilt in Such as Are Accused with That Crime. All Considered According to the Scriptures, History, Experience, and the Judgment of Many Learned Men* (Boston: printed and sold by Benjamin Harris, 1693), Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project. University of Virginia Library of Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA, accessed Mar. 5, 2021, <http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/speccol/mather/mather.html>.

¹⁷⁷ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 196-198.

¹⁷⁸ "An Act for the Punishment of Criminal Offender, 1692," in *Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay, 1634-1779*, eds. Nathan Dane, William Prescott, and Joseph Story (Boston: T.B. Waite & Co., 1814), 139, Internet Archive, accessed Nov. 15, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/chartersgenerall00mass/page/138/mode/2up?q=139>.

admittance before a justice of the peace and a minimum of two additional witnesses. The confession only became legally binding when a judge documented the verbal deposition, and the confessor endorsed their testimony as not having “belyied the truth.”¹⁷⁹ Colonial courts did not require confessions to be substantiated by corroborating evidence, and hearsay of an accused held as much weight in determining innocence as verifiable evidence did. Furthermore, the court only needed to present a statement from a justice of the peace, the reports of two corroborating witnesses, or the accused’s own confession to achieve conviction.¹⁸⁰ Due to difficulty of access to high court administrators and the unreliability of acquiring witnesses, prosecutors favored using confession as the primary source to acquire a witchcraft verdict. As admissions of guilt were often left unverified in cases of witchcraft, the use of such means would soon be condemned by opponents of the witch trials in Essex County.

The speed of the confession process made it an attractive, although dangerous, means of conviction. Expediency came of particular importance during the witch trials when an increase in judicial traffic necessitated swift rulings. If prosecutors could convince the accused to implicate themselves of maleficium, judges could be quickly freed up to address other legal matters—witchcraft or not—that required their attention. Criminal lawsuits required several months of court proceedings to determine an accused’s guilt, but immediate confessions allowed for cases to be completed in a matter of days.¹⁸¹ Confession only required a brief examination before a judge, which freed

¹⁷⁹ S.M. Kassin, “False confessions: From Colonial Salem, through Central Park, and into the Twenty-first Century,” in *The Witness Stand and Lawrence S. Wrightsman, Jr*, eds. C. Willis-Esqueda and B. H. (New York: Bornstein Springer Science + Business Media Publisher, 2015), 56.

¹⁸⁰ Russel K. Osgood, “John Cark, Esq., Justice of the Peace, 1667-1728,” *Colonial Society in Massachusetts* 62, no. 4 (1984): 119.

¹⁸¹ Angela Fernandez, “Record-Keeping and Other Troublemaking: Thomas Lechford and Law Reform in Colonial Massachusetts,” *Law and History Review* 23, no. 2 (2005): 239.

prosecutors from having to present evidence, cross-examine witnesses, and farm jurors to ascertain a defendant's guilt. The state, which sought to quell regional descension before it resulted in wider destabilization, encouraged the court to push for confessions.¹⁸² It was common knowledge that confessions propelled the colonial legal system, and petitioners grew leery of the political implications of supposed confessions to witchcraft.

With the Court of Oyer and Terminer established to extract confessions from accused witches, men and women in Essex County were soon implicating their involvement in malefic practices. People were compelled by a number of reasons to falsely admit their guilt of covenanting with the Devil. Firstly, many confessions were acquired under duress. Despite the English Bill of Rights abolishing "cruel and unusual punishment" in 1689, colonial administrators still employed it in the latter half of the seventeenth century.¹⁸³ Secondly, confession to an alleged crime in puritan society historically resulted in lesser or completely absolved punishment.¹⁸⁴ Lured by the benefits of confession, accused witches belied their innocence hoping to be reintegrated back into formal society if not save their lives altogether. However, this would also put known confessors at jeopardy if later witchcraft cases were to arise and potentially open them to ostracization.¹⁸⁵ Lastly, the psychology behind repressed religious guilt compelled individuals to confess or fear the consequences for their immortal soul. The culture of confession was further fostered by ministers, who advised their congregations to

¹⁸² Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 92.

¹⁸³ "English Bill of Rights - An Act Declaring the Rights and Liberties of the Subject and Settling the Succession of the Crown, Feb. 13, 1689," The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/england.asp.

¹⁸⁴ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 214-215.

¹⁸⁵ Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 85-86.

acknowledge their crime to avoid worse punishment and to “unburden their Spirit.”¹⁸⁶ As the trials progressed, documented confessions became available for public scrutiny.¹⁸⁷ Residents of Essex County began to recognize that many were compelled to confess for reasons other than guilt, and built rebuttals upon them.

The most consistently addressed concern was that their neighbors and themselves had confessions extracted by force. In a letter from the Salem prison, John Proctor described the court’s utilization of torture in explicit detail. He personally witnessed the abuse of two young men, who “would not confess any thing till they had tyed them Neck and Heels till the Blood gushed out at the Nose and would have kept [them] so 24 hours if one more Merciful than the rest had not taken pity” on them.¹⁸⁸ Proctor’s claim that the court intended to torture confessions out of people was substantiated by other petitioners who spoke of examiners “mocking and spitting” in the faces of elderly women, and one adolescent girl claimed that all the accused awaiting trial were physically “press’d, urg’d, and affright’d” to confess until they were “weeping, relenting, and bleeding” while doing so.¹⁸⁹ Torture, in its many forms, was utilized by the Massachusetts legal system.¹⁹⁰ Colonists would not have been surprised to hear that witches were experiencing torture while imprisoned. However, the intensity of the methods that the Court of Oyer and

¹⁸⁶ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 156-157; Richard J. Ross, “Puritan Godly Discipline in Comparative Perspective: Legal Pluralism and the Sources of ‘Intensity,’” *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 4 (2008): 987.

¹⁸⁷ Morris L. Cohen, “Legal Literature in Colonial Massachusetts,” *Colonial Society in Massachusetts* 62, no. 7 (1984): 265.

¹⁸⁸ John Proctor, “Petition from Prison, Jul. 23, 1692,” in *Records*, 486.

¹⁸⁹ Increase Mather, “Recantations of Mary Osgood, Eunice Frye, Deliverance Dane, Abigail Barker, Mary Tyler, Sarah Wilson Sr., Mary Bridges Sr., Mary Marston, Sarah Churchill, Hanna Post, & Mary Post, Oct. 19, 1692,” in *Records*, 693-695; Rebecca Eames, “Petition for a Pardon, Dec. 5, 1692,” in *Records*, 705-706.

¹⁹⁰ Mofford, *The Devil Made Me Do It!*, VIII.

Terminer used against people of all ages and genders was unprecedented, and therefore unacceptable, in Essex County.

Interrogatory torture was permissible under puritan standards as long as the methods used were not “Barbarous or Inhumane.”¹⁹¹ Though legally vague, this phrase was generally understood to mean any torture that brought forth blood or endangered the life of the defendant was prohibited. In the case of witches, as opposed to central European standards that engaged in extreme forms of mutilation, colonial Massachusetts primarily used forced sleeplessness without bodily harm called *tormentum insomniae*.¹⁹² When sleep deprivation failed to achieve a confession, the accused was simply warned out of the community rather than executed. Therefore, after it came to light that confessions were being given under more extreme measures, residents of Essex County grew suspicious of their validity. Scientific inquiry concluded as of the 1680s that the long-held belief that a person subjected to physical pain during an examination could only profess the truth was proven wrong.¹⁹³ By the 1690s, it was public knowledge that an individual exposed to intense physical torture was just as likely to perjure themselves before the court as they were to be honest. Confessions, by law, were to be obtained voluntarily. Those who challenged the authenticity of confessions argued that the court’s use of extreme and prolific torture evoked the accused to “out of distress, profess the guilt of the heinous crime of witchcraft.”¹⁹⁴ If given under duress, repentance was null and

¹⁹¹ *The Book of the General Lawes and Libertyes Concerning the Inhabitants of the Massachusetts*, 1648, ed. Richard S. Dunn (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 1998), 22.

¹⁹² Malcolm Gaskill, “Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England,” *Past & Present*, no. 198 (2008): 67.

¹⁹³ John H. Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof Europe and England in the Ancien Régime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 192.

¹⁹⁴ John Hale, Nicholas Noyes, Daniel Epps Jr., and John Emerson Jr., “Petition for Dorcas Hoar, Sept. 21, 1692,” in *Records*, 673.

void. More concerning, however, were petitioners' fears of a political structure that advocated for its legal system to engage in inhumane policies.

The Court of Oyer and Terminer, thereby extending to the Massachusetts Bay government, came under scrutiny for using torture to settle a regional crisis. In Separatist theology, government sponsored torture was a practice of the Catholic state.¹⁹⁵ Animosity towards Catholicism propelled puritan society, and aspects of political policies everyday people deemed unfavorable were considered to come from collusion with the Pope. Petitioners compared torture-coerced confessions to the "Popish Cruelties" of Catholic nations.¹⁹⁶ A reference to the Spanish Inquisition, which was collectively denounced as heretical by most of English society, was a serious claim to allay against the colonial government.¹⁹⁷ Historians have yet to draw the intimate connection between tortured confession, the witch trials, and emerging attitudes towards a state potentially "corrupted" by Popish fantasies. This fear is especially apparent in the accused who were petitioning in bulk from prison that "under the Guille of Popish Barbarism," they were compelled to "confess several things contrary to Conscience and Knowledge."¹⁹⁸ It was punishment rather than the truth that persuaded individuals to confess, violating the voluntary requirement for confessions, and alerting petitioners that not all professed witches were guilty.

Others, however, gave way to confession before torture could be applied. Confession in New England had historically allowed an accused to bypass the harsh

¹⁹⁵ Matthew J. Nowak, "New England's God: Anti-Catholicism and Colonial New England," MA thesis, John Carroll University (2015), 91.

¹⁹⁶ J. Proctor, "Petition," in *Records*, 486.

¹⁹⁷ Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 84-88 and 203.

¹⁹⁸ M. Jacobs, "Letter," in *Records*, 549.

countermeasures of the court extracting guilt.¹⁹⁹ Criminal charges in puritan society were designed to rehabilitate rather than punish. Courts sought confessions to maintain an avenue to integrate reformed dissenters back into their communities.²⁰⁰ As previous experience would suggest, confessors believed that public admission to a crime would save them from further punishment. After receiving a letter from her sister being tried for witchcraft ahead of her, Ann Pudeator folded to the pressure of the court.²⁰¹ Rather than be “whipt and likewise” as she had heard others had been, she perjured herself. More accounts indicate that they had “falsely accused themselves” out of fear of being “hang’d if [they] did not confesse.”²⁰² Petitioners argued that many had implicated themselves of witchcraft to preserve their lives rather than to clear their conscience of committing heinous acts inspired by the Devil. False confession was rapidly, and worryingly, becoming rampant in New England.

Concerned members of Essex County communities had come to the conclusion that the growth of false confession by accused witches was a byproduct of the secular court’s approach towards confessors. The historiography behind legal confession in colonial Massachusetts suggests that judges offered leniency to those who were deferential to the court and indicated a desire to abide by the stringent rules of puritan society. Emerson W. Baker asserts that confession “reinforced the authority of the court,” and perpetuated the colony’s goal of establishing a morally reformed community.²⁰³ Through an admission of guilt, confession legitimized the need for the court. Then, it was the court’s function to prevent “back sliding people” from destabilizing the authority of

¹⁹⁹ Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 55-56.

²⁰⁰ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 190.

²⁰¹ Pudeator, “Petition,” in *Records*, 659.

²⁰² Mary Tyler, “Recantations,” in *Records*, 693.

²⁰³ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 190.

the central government and offer individuals moral reformation to assure a colony built upon salvation.²⁰⁴ Those who confessed recognized the social merits of doing so. Reprimands in petitions support Baker's theory that confessors were motivated by a government hoping to justify its institutions. An interrogation process defined by its "extrem urgency" to produce confessors was at fault for frightening the accused into professing lies against their innocence.²⁰⁵

With confessions recognized as an outcome of unrestrained judicial power, naysayers of the witch trials looked to other sources of authority that were encouraging confession. Ministers, in their position as political and ecclesiastical leaders, were identified by petitioners as troublesome proponents of confession. A religious compulsion to confess was perpetuated by ministers, who provided the accused with no other alternative.²⁰⁶ Malcolm Gaskill asserts that clergymen urging suspected witches to admit to maleficium had English roots. Dating back to the English Civil War, ministers saw it as their responsibility to "discerne and find" real witches so that no innocents "may be put to death."²⁰⁷ If confessing protected innocent people from the gallows at the cost of marring their reputations, then supposedly the ends justified the means. Therefore, petitioners brought up serious concerns that many of those who confessed to witchcraft did so under guidance of their ministers. Margo Burns claims that nearly all the accused confessed to witchcraft under the assumption that those who confessed were protected

²⁰⁴ John Bowles, "General Court Session, Mar. 13, 1690," in *The Glorious Revolution in Massachusetts, Selected Documents, 1689-1692*, ed. Robert E. Moody (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1989), 221.

²⁰⁵ Osgood, "Petition," in *Records*, 690.

²⁰⁶ Gasser, *Vexed by Devils*, 74.

²⁰⁷ Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy* (London: John Murray Press, 2005), 147-148.

from death.²⁰⁸ Supporting this claim, Benjamin C. Ray explains that husbands encouraged wives and parents persuaded children to immediately confess to acts of diabolism, hoping that confession would grant them clemency from the gallows.²⁰⁹ When these personal connections failed to produce confessions, ministers were solicited to encourage the accused to profess their guilt. This led to a disproportionate number of confessing witches compared to English towns caught in the haze of witch persecution.²¹⁰

The petitioners addressed confession narratives in their objections to the guilt of the accused-confessed. Reverend Thomas Barnard, who was one of Essex County's staunchest proponents of the confession method at the onset of the crisis, changed his position by early 1693.²¹¹ Upon seeing the impact of his actions on the state of his community, Barnard withdrew his support from planned confessions. Instead, he partnered with his long-time rival, Francis Dane Sr., to bring stability back to the town central to both their lives. Together the two ministers sought to overturn the confessions of their congregation. In a January 1693 petition, Barnard claimed that when the witch trials had just begun, many well-intentioned relatives “took great pains to persuade [the accused] to own what they were” and that he had unwittingly condemned his flock when he “urged [the accused] to confess themselves guilty.”²¹² In a striking change of tone, Barnard accepted his responsibility in the conviction of the Andover accused. The fifty-two other Andover residents, men, and women of all levels of society, who signed off on the petition undoubtedly agreed and acknowledged their own accountability.

²⁰⁸ Burns, ““Other Ways of Undue Force and Fright, ”” 25.

²⁰⁹ Ray, *Satan and Salem*, 119-120.

²¹⁰ Burns, ““Other Ways of Undue Force and Fright, ”” 12.

²¹¹ Robinson, *Salem Witchcraft and Hawthorne*, 173-176.

²¹² Thomas Barnard and Dudley Bradstreet, “Petition for Mary Osgood, Eunice Fry, Deliverance Dane, Sarah Wilson, Sr, and Abigail Barker, Jan. 3, 1693,” in *Records*, 738-740.

Reverend Dane's statement to the General Court supported Barnard's call to revisit confessions. Similarly, the minister claimed that through the Devil's designs, the accused witches were "too much urged to Confesse" and that those who pushed others to falsely confess did so in hopes of sparing their loved ones.²¹³ However, the statement also claimed the court was just as responsible for false confessions as the Devil himself. Having spoken to the confessed, his daughters among them, Dane asserted that supposed witches incriminated themselves due to the harsh questioning of the court.²¹⁴ Given the formulaic nature of witchcraft confessions, Burns contends that the consistency of narrative across multiple confessions indicated at least some level of court collusion.²¹⁵ Leading questions and presumed guilt caused some of the accused to accidentally incriminate themselves in court. These questions, paired with the community pressure to seek a confession, would later cause confessors to recant their guilt.²¹⁶ Reverend Dane declared the court and all others who pushed false confessions to be "unworthie friends" to those who languished in prison for their well-intentioned mistake.²¹⁷ Despite this monumental step towards recognizing the religious dimension behind false confession, the case of Andover was exceptional. Other town ministers would continue to push for their congregations to admit their guilt until the mid-spring of 1693 before joining in the rhetoric begun by Barnard and Dane. Confessions, deeply entangled with the religious

²¹³ Dane, "Statement by the Rev. Francis Dane," in *Records*, 734-735.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Although confession of this period followed a boilerplate format, the particular elements of confessors' stories were remarkably similar. The confession usually described attendance at a mock Sabbath, the signing of the Devil's book, and ended with the accused implicating other witches. This type of language was indicative of the puritan conception of Satan while additional allegations helped shift the blame to other parties. Burns, "'Other Ways of Undue Force and Fright,'" 35; Ray, *Satan and Salem*, 118.

²¹⁶ Robinson, *Salem Witchcraft and Hawthorne*, 176; Mather, "Recantations," in *Records*, 693-694.

²¹⁷ Dane, "Statement by the Rev. Francis Dane," *Records*, 734-735.

compulsion to confess, would dip into the world of ghostly specters before petitioners could assure their innocence.

Confession to witchcraft often described supernatural events. In a legal setting, this type of language was known as spectral evidence. Testimony of this kind was based on unverifiable evidence that a witch's specter could appear before an afflicted to cause the victim harm or reveal supernatural powers imbued to them through a covenant with the Devil. In 1648, the General Court distributed a collection of acts colloquially known as the *Body of Liberties*. The pamphlet defined witchcraft as a capital offense, and the statute declared spectral evidence as permissible only when substantiated by more reliable forms of evidence.²¹⁸ While regular people in Massachusetts were well-informed about the law, few were likely aware of the more intricate nuances of the legal code. However, individuals in positions of power—town selectmen and local law enforcement—would have been familiar with the pamphlet and aware of the conditions that permitted spectral evidence to be admissible.²¹⁹ Although there was legal founding for use of spectral evidence in cases of witchcraft, town records suggest that no one in New England was solely convicted by it prior to 1692.²²⁰

Following the implementation of a new colony charter in 1691, original laws governing the Massachusetts legal system were abolished, and in their absence, the judiciary functioned without guidance. Judges in all cases, but especially witchcraft, used their own discretion when instructing juries how to “weigh any piece of evidence but could not tell juries what they must believe.”²²¹ Hysteria fostered by cultural ideas of

²¹⁸ *The Book of the General Lawes and Libertyes*, 34.

²¹⁹ G. B. Warden, “Law Reform in England and New England, 1620 to 1660,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1978): 684.

²²⁰ Latner, “Here Are No Newtters,” 102.

²²¹ Hoffer, *The Salem Witch Trials*, 75.

rampant diabolism facilitated accusers laying charges of spectral mischief on their neighbors. Seeking to resolve the regional panic as swiftly as possible, the Court of Oyer and Terminer chose to accept spectral evidence, if it was corroborated by two witnesses, as an adequate means for determining a suspected witch's guilt. Accusers, confessors, and concerned towns collectively realized that spectral evidence was impossible to refute. The improbability of overturning evidence that was only visible through testimony led to its validity being questioned across a wide swath of Massachusetts society. An in-depth review of petitions issued across Essex County reveals that it was ordinary colonists rather than ministers who were first to assert that spectral evidence had no logical place in the Massachusetts legal system, and the people convicted by this method were likely innocent.

To discredit spectral evidence as a viable source for conviction, petitioners looked outward to validate their claims. A comparative analysis of Massachusetts Bay Colony and England yields a better understanding of the unprecedented use of spectral evidence as the sole means of judgment in the English Atlantic world. Even though colonists in Massachusetts were resolute in the local institutions that governed their day-to-day lives, as English citizens, respect for the universal rules of the Common Law was paramount. In opposition to the policies of the Court of Oyer and Terminer, spectral evidence was used sparingly in England. Spectral evidence or indications of magic were required to be approved by a jury before they could be presented to a judge in criminal cases of witchcraft.²²² Furthermore, evidence of specters could only be included in court proceedings when, much like the *Body of Liberties* suggested, it was presented with less circumstantial proof. Aware of this discrepancy between English law and local practice, petitioners contended that the Court of Oyer and Terminer had been “inraged and

²²² Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 92 and 198-199.

incensed against [them] by the Delusion of the Devil.”²²³ When confessions were unattainable, spectral evidence guided judges to make snap decisions about guilt that was contrary to the way that witchcraft cases were handled in the wider empire. Failure to abide by the standards of English law caused residents of Essex County to become dubious of the structure of their current legal system and encouraged them to express skepticism about the court’s rulings on witches.

The legal restraints put on spectral evidence in England made the use of an inquisitorial approach to coerce confession of diabolic activity against oneself or others unattractive. As a result, courts rarely prosecuted criminal cases of witchcraft in the late seventeenth century.²²⁴ Confessions of specters only developed into convictions in England when rural communities sought to settle vendettas against accused witches by ignoring the law and perpetrating unsanctioned violence, a practice that was denounced across the Atlantic world.²²⁵ Petitions from the 1692 witchcraft crisis compared the unsuppressed use of spectral evidence to vigilante justice. Since spectral evidence could not be disproven, people could use accusations of supernatural activity to take revenge for old disputes. The accused believed that they were “Condemned already before the Tryals” due to the court’s disproportionate valuation of spectral evidence, a charge they could never fully counter.²²⁶ Fear of a trial built on unfair evidence drove petitioners to allay their concerns to the General Court. Allegations that the court had “sayd nothing against the Diuells delusions,” alluded to a system that had fallen prey to the guile of

²²³ “Delusion of the Devil” was an interchangeable phrase that petitioners utilized to rebuke the court for use of spectral evidence. The theory behind this thought was that the devil had falsely persuaded the court to believe accusations of spectral misconduct.

²²⁴ Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 201.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ J. Proctor, “Letter,” in *Records*, 486.

Satan.²²⁷ A court that respected spectral evidence diverged from English Common Law, and people were beginning to recognize that the courts were on the cusp of dissolving into civil disorder. The failing court system coincided with Massachusetts's charter problems, which perpetuated fears about the colony's legal status and central government's ability to properly rule.

Dissenters of the trials drew upon the outcome of the 1662 witch trial in Bury St. Edmunds, a landmark case in English witchcraft history, to debunk spectral evidence. The well-publicized trial that took place at Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk County, England became common knowledge in colonial Massachusetts through two pieces of writing published in Boston and disseminated around neighboring communities, *A Tryal of Witches* (1682) and *Memorable Providences* (1689).²²⁸ The first of these works was a pamphlet anonymously published twenty years after the trials detailing an eye-witness account of the proceedings that took place before an Assize court. An unknown gentleman explained that the jury was prepared to acquit the defendants, Amy Duny and Rose Cullender, of witchcraft until a court attendee encouraged the sitting jury to weigh their judgment more heavily upon spectral than exculpatory evidence. It was concluded that the jury was swayed by false information to condemn the women despite "nothing material to any thing was proved against them."²²⁹ Several years later, Cotton Mather popularized this case through the release of *Memorable Providences*. His description of the case reiterated much of *A Tryal of Witches* rhetoric about the Bury St. Edmunds trial

²²⁷ Eames, "Petition," in *Records*, 706.

²²⁸ Although *A Tryal of Witches* indicates that the trial took place in 1664, this is a misprint. The case took places over several months from late 1662 into early 1663.

²²⁹ *A Tryal of Witches, at the Assizes Held at Bury St. Edmonds for the County of Suffolk; on the Tenth day of March 1664. Before Sir Matthew Hale Kt. Lord Chief Baron of His Majesties Court of Exchequer*, Digital Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/witchcraft097>.

but departed in his interpretation of spectral evidence. Since the verdict against Cullender and Duny was taken before well-respected judge, Thomas Hale, Mather inferred that spectral evidence taken in its extreme was still permissible by English law.²³⁰ He and other ministers would double down on this position when skepticism against the 1692 witch trials began to circulate, a choice that would alienate him from his parishioners.

When presented with opposing theories about spectral evidence, petitioners diverged from the prevailing opinion of ministers. Rather than seeing the Bury St. Edmunds case as definitive proof that spectral evidence was an integral part of English law, they determined that the jury had been tainted in favor of it by the influence of an outside participant.²³¹ Whereas Mather claimed that the proceedings of the Court of Oyer and Terminer “resembled the witchcraft there,” petitions took the stance that the case was a judicial “outligger.” An *outligger* was a medieval legal term for an idea, practice, or person that existed outside of recognized law. It was, therefore, unbecoming of the court to make decisions based on spectral evidence alone. Affronted, first, by ministers encouraging false confession and again by their mistaken choice to back spectral evidence, residents lost faith in the infallibility of their religious leaders. Criticism of the court was joined by apprehension about the ministers that supported the system, and by extension, the place of theology in politics. If spiritual mentors could be so grievously wrong about a practice that “misrepresented the truth...against credited people,” petitioners reasoned that their counsel over other aspects could also be ill-advised.²³² Spectral evidence, and the subsequent mistrust of it, inspired those touched by the witch

²³⁰ Mather, *Memorable Providences*.

²³¹ “Petition for Mary Osgood, Eunice Frye, Deliverance Dane, Sarah Wilson Sr., and Abigail Barker, Jan. 3, 1693,” in *Records*, 739.

²³² “Petition for Mary et al.,” in *Records*, 739.

trials to question societal norms and to address their anxieties about them through political avenues.

An air of uncertainty around judicial and religious figures of authority emboldened everyday people to investigate spectral evidence as a cultural phenomenon. The acceptance of spectral evidence was deeply rooted in societal views towards the supernatural. Richard Godbeer's groundbreaking study, *The Devil's Dominion*, explored the relationship between magical belief and religious faith in New England. He successfully portrayed Massachusetts Bay Colony as a world riddled with anxiety and insecurity, where ministers encouraged spiritual accountability while offering no recourse for fear of ever-present diabolical threats.²³³ This type of theology encouraged, first, for believers to justify evil outside the self, and second, for layfolk to seek magic to soothe anxieties induced by religious fervor. During the witch trials, this magic took the form of spectral activity. An accuser that turned petitioner admitted that she had fabricated her testimony about an experience with a witchy specter, "much like Myself and the ot'her yung girls...perform'd when We not want our Fathers and Mothers knowne of our Fears."²³⁴ Magic, or at least the belief of it, served as a catharsis from the pressures of a society looking to find diabolism under every doorstep. As puritan theology converged with the layfolk's interpretation of magic, petitioners identified that magic was a form of liberation, and in the case of the witch trials, petitioners argued that this release resulted in "Utterers wronging the truth wt stories of Apparitions."²³⁵ Changing perceptions about

²³³ Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion*, 100.

²³⁴ John Higginson, "Examination of Mary Barker, Aug. 29, 1692," in *Records*, 560-561; Higginson, "Examination of Mary Marston, Aug. 29, 1692," in *Records*, 564-566; Marston, "Recantations," *Records*, 694.

²³⁵ Thomas Putnam, "Letter to Samuel Sewall, Sept. 19, 1692," in *Records*, 671.

the role of magic in daily life for New England residents impacted their willingness to perceive spectral images as a sufficient form of evidence.

Essex County, and Massachusetts Bay society at large, utilized the witch trials as an opportunity to critically appraise customs fundamental to puritan ideology by critiquing them through political writing. Still, the relationship between political institutions and religion would never recover to its once delicate balance of English colony and puritan paradise. Judges from the Court of Oyer and Terminer were correct about the threat the witch trials posed to their control. Witch-hunting would topple John Winthrop's dream of New England ever achieving its status as an impenetrable "city upon a hill."²³⁶ However, it was the central government's mismanagement of the trials that would sully the idea of a perfect theocracy rather than the malice of witches. In this vacuum, displaced ministers sought to bridge the gap between religion and power by positioning themselves in opposition to the judiciary. In order to regain legitimacy, theologians would have to rejoin with their parishioners as political partners or risk losing their foothold in puritan society indefinitely.

Recognizing that they had alienated their congregations with their refusal to critically examine the validity of spectral evidence and associated confessions, Essex County ministers and beyond turned to assaying the fundamentals of witch-hunting. In the case of spectral evidence, theologians reversed their initial support. By the end of 1692, ministers were publicly demonstrating increased cynicism towards its legitimacy in court.²³⁷ Influential Boston minister, Increase Mather, made his incredulity known when

²³⁶ John Winthrop, "A Modell."

²³⁷ Samuel Willard, *Some Miscellany Observations on our Present Debates respecting Witchcrafts, in a Dialogue between S. and B. By P.E. and J.A.* (Philadelphia: William Bradford for Hezekiah Usher, 1692) in "Other Ways of Undue Force and Fright," 35, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www-tandfonline-com.libproxy.uhcl.edu/doi/pdf/10.1080/00393274.2012.668070>.

he released his book, *Cases of Conscience*, in late 1692.²³⁸ The book openly discredited the use of spectral evidence as a defining verdict in cases of witchcraft and strictly urged caution against its use in court. It was Mather's fear, among others, that the weight of spectral evidence had unfairly convicted innocents of crimes which they did not commit.²³⁹ Mather asserted that the Devil could very well masquerade in the form of an innocent accused; therefore, specters could result from the Devil's illusions rather than damning evidence. Despite many months of silence on the matter, Mather ultimately concluded, "better that Ten Suspected Witches should escape, than that one Innocent Person should be Condemned."²⁴⁰

Mather was not alone in his critique of spectral evidence. Other prominent Massachusetts Bay ministers openly denounced presenting spectral evidence in court; Andover Reverends Dane and Barnard joined the crusade in a petition from January of 1693. Echoing the sentiments of Increase Mather, the petition defended the innocence of five Andover women and firmly asserted that their convictions were only reliant on the "misrepresentation of the truth of now suspect evidence."²⁴¹ Coupled with this petition was Reverend Dane's statement on the witch trials and their disproportionate use of spectral evidence. Instead of speaking as a crowd as his earlier petitions had done, Dane imparted his personal belief that "many Innocent persons [had] been accused, & Imprisoned, on the Conceit of Spectre Evidence."²⁴² He supported this stance by asserting that simply being called a witch did not make you one, and those who cried witch were

²³⁸ Although the front page of Increase Mather's original print of *Cases of Conscience* reads 1693, the work was circulating in the colony as early as December of 1692; Murrin, "Coming to Terms," 343.

²³⁹ Increase Mather, *Cases of Conscience*, 8.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 38.

²⁴¹ Barnard and Bradstreet, "Petition for Mary Osgood et al.," in *Records*, 738-740.

²⁴² Dane, "Statement by the Rev. Francis Dane, Regarding Some of the Andover Accused, Jan. 2, 1693," in *Records*, 734-735.

merely under the illusions of the “Devils subtilty.” The statement concluded by declaring any continued use of spectral evidence as a “stumbling block” to salvation.²⁴³ Although slow to start, ministers local and otherwise were now petitioning denunciations of supernatural happenings as reliable evidence.

Regular residents of Essex County were the first to identify the legal fallacies behind spectral evidence, and the latent support of Massachusetts ministers legitimized their concerns to the General Court. Unease about the proceedings of the Court of Oyer and Terminer led to its closure in October 1692, and a review of Essex County’s holistic disapproval developed into its complete dissolution in January 1693.²⁴⁴ Writing to the King’s Council sitting at the Court of Whitehall, Governor William Phips referenced the many petitions that had arrived on his desk during the bleak days of the witch trials. He asserted that the pleas of Essex County layfolk had impassioned him to consider overturning the witch trials through “protestations of Spectres” and “dissatisfaction wt Confessions.”²⁴⁵ The colonial government was encouraged to doubt spectral evidence, and when this concern was allayed to the royal court, their anxieties were confirmed. As such, Phips wrote to the Superior Court, which was now overseeing the remainder of witchcraft cases in Salem, denouncing the use of spectral evidence as a viable source for conviction.²⁴⁶ In many ways, petitioners’ refutations of spectral evidence proved that regular people were more familiar with English Common Law and its history with witchcraft than historiography has suggested. By indicating inconsistencies in colonial law and earning the opinion of well-trusted ministers, petitioners turned public opinion against use of spectral evidence, and ultimately, the active persecution of witches.

²⁴³ Dane, “Statement, Jan. 2, 1693,” in *Records*, 734-735.

²⁴⁴ Norton, “*Essex County*,” 11.

²⁴⁵ William Phips, “Letter to the Court at Whitehall, Jan. 26, 1693,” in *Records*, 800.

²⁴⁶ Phips, “Letter to George Corwin, Apr. 26, 1693,” in *Records*, 813-814.

Gone were the highly deferential and subservient pleas of petitioners, and in their place were strict demands for the General Court's attention and action. The movement against unchecked witch-hunting was ultimately successful; by February 1693, nearly all the accused were reprieved or acquitted by Governor Phips, and May saw the trials come to an end.²⁴⁷ Gathering a collection of evidence against the witch trials, the appeals of Essex County petitioners evolved to bring a definitive close to the active persecution of witches using highly specialized evidence: false confession and spectral. The conclusion of the witch trials, however, did not signal the end of the transformative social, economic, and legal arguments that petitioners utilized to critique their local and state governments. Ordinary people that asserted their political agency to refute witch-hunting in Essex County were regarded favorably in the decades following the trials, and the town selectmen and local ministers who supported them would be rewarded with further access to political power in Massachusetts townships.²⁴⁸ Under their leadership, Essex County would continue to evolve as a politically active community, and petitioners would carry on issuing their grievances about the long-lasting effects of the 1692 witch trials well into the eighteenth century.

²⁴⁷ Phips, "Letter to the Earl of Nottingham, Feb. 21, 1693," in *Records*, 809-811.

²⁴⁸ Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem*, 197.

CHAPTER IV:
AGENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE WITCHCRAFT
CRISIS

Following the end of the witchcraft crisis of 1692, Essex County communities continued to be affected by the long-term political consequences of witch-hunting. Historians have largely forgone analysis of the towns affected by the witch trials after the last acquittal of accused witches—the Barker family—in May of 1693.²⁴⁹ This dearth of scholarship fails to encompass the transformative impact of the crisis, as years later, people were still contending with the fallout of the witch trials. A new emphasis on the civic activity of Essex County towns in the two decades following the conclusion of the trials underscores how the crisis concerned more than just fears about witches and reconceptualizes it as a significant political event. Town leadership reorganized to support those who actively participated in the process that brought the trials to a close.²⁵⁰ Political change within towns to support vocal opponents of the witch trials—and by extension the central government—depicted an ideological shift in preference towards politically active leaders. Individuals proceeded to petition the Massachusetts Bay Colony government about outstanding social, economic, and legal issues that persisted in the aftermath of the witchcraft crisis. Recognizing the power of petitioning, residents of Essex County continued to regularly submit grievances to the General Court over concerns related to the witch trials through 1712. Many petitioners, including town governments, sought restitution for losses incurred during the height of the witch-hunt. Appeals for compensation from the state were joined by requests for the reputations of

²⁴⁹ “Court Record of the Trial of Mary Barker, May 10, 1692,” in *Records*, 824-825; “Court Record of the Trial of William Barker Jr., May 10, 1692,” in *Records*, 826-827.

²⁵⁰ Philip Gould, *Covenant and Republic: Historical Romance and the Politics of Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 175.

accused witches to be restored by the reversal of legal attainders. Petitioning efforts extended past the accepted end date of the trials in 1693, thus broadening the temporal parameters of the crisis and revealing the inherently political nature of the witch-hunt.

Although some victims of the witchcraft tragedy would permanently leave Essex County, most individuals remained to rebuild towns left devastated by the side effects of the witchcraft crisis.²⁵¹ The crucial rebuilding process that took place on the local scale has often given way to analysis of the wider impact of the trials on the colonial government. However, an in-depth examination of town politics in the aftermath of the witchcraft crisis is essential to understanding, not only how individual communities recovered from the trials, but the role that survivors played in the resulting institutional reorganization. Those who stayed were forced to contend with lingering issues—social tensions, economic uncertainty, and questionable leadership—caused by the upheaval of 1692. The same foundational concerns that plagued Essex County during the height of the witch craze left communities vulnerable to further disorder on one hand and open to positive institutional change on the other. Social divisions appeared between the majority, who either openly revoked their backing or expressed a distain for the trials from the start, and those who showed unremitting support of the Court of Oyer and Terminer.²⁵² The resulting factionalism created new issues for town governments to contend with internally while simultaneously beseeching colonial administrators to help with ongoing problems concerning the consequences of the witch trials. For regular people, one resolute notion became clear—the conclusion of the witch trials did not signal the end of tumult for communities upended by witch-hunting, nor did it allude to the dissolution of the political activism that accompanied it.

²⁵¹ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 230.

²⁵² Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem*, 179.

It has been a historiographical trend to associate the end of the witchcraft crisis with the stabilization of the Massachusetts Bay Colony government. Once the ambiguous legal status of the colony was resolved by the charter of 1691 arriving in Boston, anxieties about the future of New England began to ease. Although the new charter ushered in some institutional changes to self-governance, according to historian Emerson W. Baker, its arrival signaled that a puritan society founded on the tenets of Calvinism was still viable.²⁵³ With this security, the vacuum of tension which encouraged witch-hunting was deflated. Similarly, Mary Beth Norton asserts that as warfare on the Maine frontier began to wind down, fears of confrontation with Indigenous groups lessened the desire for colonists to take their concerns out on others through witch accusations. She goes as far to claim that “had the Second Indian War on the northern frontier somehow been avoided, the Essex County witchcraft crisis of 1692 would not have occurred.”²⁵⁴ Contentious issues surrounding puritan social structure, town economics, and doubts about the trustworthiness of the central government continued to affect Essex County communities after the war, and therefore, counter Norton’s conclusion. This perspective, which focuses on intercolonial politics, does not account for the all too important role of political exchange between the state and local governments. Town politics in the two decades following the witch trials are all too telling of how the impact of the crisis long outlasted concerns about constitutional stability.

When restoring their towns, residents of Essex County were first confronted with the challenge of how to handle the social rift between various factions in recovering communities. Historians have typically drawn the boundary between these two parties as the obvious accuser and accused. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum assert that deep-

²⁵³ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 43.

²⁵⁴ Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*, 298.

rooted social disparity which predated the start of the trials influenced the pattern of allegation and would continue to do so for only a handful of years after the crisis.²⁵⁵ A reduction of factional conflict sprung forth in communities once ravaged by infighting when the financial consequences of the witch trials helped to universally band the wealthier accused and their less financially stable accusers. With economic discrepancy addressed, communities were able to collectively focus on healing social wounds and turn their attention towards entering the eighteenth century in relative peace.²⁵⁶ Peter Hoffer and Norton support the Boyer and Nissenbaum argument, even going a step further to include that the accused faction was joined by accuser apologists against those who doubled-down on the necessity of the witch trials.²⁵⁷ According to this theory, stability was achieved through top-down institutional changes due to the Massachusetts Bay charter rather than the actions of regular people who experienced the lived consequences of the witchcraft crisis.²⁵⁸ Again, focus on the social response to stress being alleviated by the stabilization of the central government does not account for adjustments to town-based politics. On the local level, tension remained high between the region and the state as well as among new factions that stemmed from the witchcraft crisis.

While the delineation between accuser and accused identified by previous scholars is a logical conclusion to draw, this thesis suggests that a more accurate division lay between those who remained silent against the acts of the Court of Oyer and Terminer and those who were politically outspoken against continuing persecution. Prior to the end of the witch trials, petitioners devoted little time to discrediting the testimony of afflicted

²⁵⁵ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 180-181.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

²⁵⁷ Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 137-146.

²⁵⁸ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 327-329.

individuals or anyone who encouraged witch-hunting. With the lives of the accused no longer in jeopardy, more attention was dedicated to recognizing who, and who did not, support the trials. It was understood that by not speaking out against the court, personal gain was valued over communal unity and local stability.²⁵⁹ This post-crisis division provides a more nuanced view of town social politics given that not all accusers remained so for the full duration of the trials. Some accusers would renounce their support of witch-hunting once the trials began to impede the daily life of their communities. Margaret Jacobs, who originally implicated her own mother among others of witchcraft, would later petition that none of the people she accused were “guilty...of the crime of witchcraft, nor any other sin that deserves death from man.”²⁶⁰ Individuals like Jacobs who revoked their accusations would later be regarded as defenders of suspected witches. Conversely, non-repentant accusers and “fence-sitters” were consigned to the status of social pariah. Communities kept a dubious eye to anyone who attributed “wicked Acts to the Innocent.”²⁶¹ False accusations were considered to be a “waste against the peace” of Massachusetts Bay Colony and an unnecessary “consumption” of community funds.²⁶² For residents of Essex County, being an accuser did not matter as much as being a vocal repentor. The inherently political nature of witch-hunting stimulated activism, and those who actively participated in the public sphere during the crisis were soon to be rewarded for their civil diligence.

²⁵⁹ Marilynne Roach, *Six Women of Salem: The Untold Story of the Accused and Their Accusers in the Salem Witch Trials*, (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2013), 373-376.

²⁶⁰ Margaret Jacobs, “Plea of Margaret Jacobs, Jan. 4, 1693,” in *Records*, 743.

²⁶¹ “Court Record of the Trial of Margaret Jacobs, Jan. 4, 1693,” in *Records*, 744.

²⁶² Sarah Cole and Jane Lilly are the first accused witches to have their indictments overturned with language that alluded to the unfair constraints that unfounded allegations of witchcraft placed on Essex County communities. Both would be officially cleared by royal proclamation on February 3, 1693. “Indictment of Sarah Cole (of Lynn), for Afflicting Mary Brown, Jan. 31, 1693,” in *Records*, 801; “Indictment of Jane Lilly, for Afflicting Mary Marshall (Returned Ignoramus), Jan. 31, 1693,” in *Records*, 802-803.

The social discrepancy between political activists and those who abstained from openly objecting to the witch trials made itself known in the first election cycle following the closure of the Court of Oyer and Terminer. In the spring of 1693, the annual pre-Easter elections were held in towns across Essex County.²⁶³ A wide swath of local positions was up for election, and the role that individuals played in refuting the witch trials would prove to be an issue of paramount importance in the selection process. Electors were committed to cleansing local governments of anyone with potential sympathies towards the trials. Multiple communities affected by witch-hunting purged old leadership associated with the unremitting persecution of witches.²⁶⁴ In towns like Andover, Gloucester, and Topsfield—the communities which saw the highest level of accusation outside of Salem—even neutrality was considered too dangerous to permit access to power. The three towns at the epicenter of the witchcraft crisis went as far as to spurn long-time officeholders who, rather than asserting their support for, only failed to be vocal about their opposition to the proceedings of the court in 1692.²⁶⁵ Those newly elected to major political and judicial offices were a variety of individuals with diverse backgrounds that appeared to have a single unifying factor—all of them had signed at least one petition decrying the temporary Court of Oyer and Terminer and the ill-effects

²⁶³ Kenneth A. Lockridge and Alan Kreider, “The Evolution of Massachusetts Town Government, 1640 to 1740,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1966): 557.

²⁶⁴ Ernest W. King and Franklin G. Mixon Jr., “Religiosity and the Political Economy of the Salem Witch Trials,” *The Social Science Journal* 47, no. 3 (2010): 680.

²⁶⁵ “Record of Town Meeting, Mar. 5, 1693,” in *Andover, Massachusetts Town Meeting Records, 1656-1709*, ed. Forbes Rockwell (North Andover, MA: North Andover Historical Society, 1961), 389, Internet Archive, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/andovermassachus00unse/page/388/mode/2up?q=389>; “Record of Town Meeting, Mar. 6, 1693,” in *Town Records of Topsfield, Massachusetts, 1659-1778*, vol. 1, ed. George Francis (Topsfield, MA: Topsfield Historical Society, 1917), 80-81, Internet Archive, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/townrecordsoftop01tops/page/80/mode/2up>; “Record of Town Meeting, Mar. 24, 1693,” in *Gloucester Town Records, 1642-1715* (Gloucester, MA: Selectmen of Gloucester, 1715), 178-179, Internet Archive, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/GLOTownRecords16921715Images/page/n178/mode/1up>.

of witch-hunting.²⁶⁶ Opposition to the witchcraft crisis was regarded favorably by voters, and the results of the election suggest that political activism was to be rewarded with access to positions of power.

Despite petitioners only representing a small portion of the population able to hold office, dissenters of the witch trials filled nearly every political position in Essex County. The disproportional allotment of positions to dissidents of the witchcraft crisis is particularly notable given that town elections historically produced minimal turnover. Prior to the first election cycle after 1692, selectmen performed duties for their communities in consecutive terms with an average of fifteen years of uninterrupted service.²⁶⁷ When turnover did take place, positions were passed on to sons who had come of age. T.H. Breen asserts the exclusivity of officeholding and the limited nature of town franchise was encouraged by a property oligarchy.²⁶⁸ Although most town meetings, as defined by the General Court in 1658, allowed individuals with and without freeman status to air their concerns, this action only afforded them minimal access to political power.²⁶⁹ In reality, titles of leadership were only available to the select few, and elections would continue to profit the landholding elite. As such, the pseudo-nepotistic transfer of positions kept political power primarily in the hands of affluent, early proprietor families.²⁷⁰ The trend of reelecting the same faces and their kin to office only makes a noticeable change in Essex County after the witchcraft crisis.

²⁶⁶ Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem*, 178.

²⁶⁷ Lockridge and Kreider, "The Evolution of Massachusetts Town Government," 561.

²⁶⁸ T.H. Breen, "Who Governs: The Town Franchise in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1970): 473.

²⁶⁹ "Freemanship Laws, May 1658," *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, vol. 4, ed. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff (Boston: Colonial Massachusetts Historical Society, 1853), 336, Internet Archive, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/recordsofgoverno41mass/page/336/mode/2up?q=336>.

²⁷⁰ Breen, "Who Governs," 474.

A history of petitioning, especially against an event which affected multiple levels of society, provided evidence of good stewardship towards the community. Residents of Essex County appreciated others presenting the willingness to assert a political voice against local adversity, which was reflected in electoral patterns in the years immediately following the end of the trials. Between 1693 and 1697, the importance of petitioning was reinforced by political supporters of the accused consistently being voted into office at the exclusion of former unapologetic accusers.²⁷¹ Many new officeholders were the first in their families to achieve a position in their town governments. Instead of property oligarchs, the new faction that maintained power were those who not only expressed their disdain for the handling of the witch trials but also were willing to place themselves in a precarious political position by becoming active members of the petitioning process. When compared to the elections of other counties in Massachusetts Bay Colony, like Middlesex and Suffolk, Essex County stands as an outlier to the historical inclination of electing property oligarchs.²⁷² Therefore, it can be concluded that the witchcraft crisis had a significant impact on the way that local leadership was perceived by their constituents. Politically active members of society were chosen with confidence to be new leaders of their communities. The election of petitioners displayed how residents of Essex County desired leaders that were familiar with the public sphere with a political history that demonstrated commitment and accountability to their communities.

The trend of favoring politically active leadership also lent itself to the other center of power in puritan communities: religious authority. Ministers who legitimized

²⁷¹ Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem*, 180-181.

²⁷² Samuel Drake, *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts: containing carefully prepared histories of every city and town in the county* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1880), 75, 83, and 183, Internet Archive, Nov. 13, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/historyofmiddles01drak/page/171/mode/2up?q=property>; Justin Winsor, *The Memorial History of Boston, including Suffolk County, Massachusetts, 1630-1880* (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1880), 89, 218, and 547, Internet Archive, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/memorialhistory01jewegoog/page/n17/mode/2up?q=suffolk>.

the petitioning process in the latter days of the witch trials were exalted by their communities. Francis Dane Sr., the most prominent ministerial opponent of the trials, would remain in high regard in Andover. After the end of the witchcraft crisis, Dane held sermons chastising supporters of the trials for failing to come to the aid of their neighbors whose “Names [they] Exposed to Infamy and reproach.”²⁷³ Members of his parish victimized by the trials requested Dane, now known as a prolific petitioner, to write the General Court on their behalf. Writing until his death in early 1697, Dane issued a series of short petitions requesting for individual indictments of accused witches to be reviewed under charges of slander.²⁷⁴ Fellow Andover minister, Thomas Barnard, wrote of Dane’s death. His account detailed how the loss of the town’s longtime minister left the community mourning a man who “in times of Dark was unafraid to Bear ye Light.”²⁷⁵ The positive legacy of Reverend Francis Dane Sr. demonstrates the value that Andover residents placed on leadership that helped promote individual political agency. Other Essex County ministers that denounced the witch trials—John Hale of Beverly, William Hubbard of Ipswich, and Joseph Capen of Topsfield—maintained the confidence of their parishioners. Although initial supporters of the witch-hunt, all would express their disapproval of the trials before the end of 1693.²⁷⁶ As such, each would maintain their foothold in town politics well into the eighteenth century.

²⁷³ This was originally part of a sermon written by Francis Dane prior to his death in 1697, however the sermon was later converted to a petition by his son-in-law, Francis Faulkner, and issued to the General Court in 1703. Francis Faulkner and Francis Dane Sr., “Petition of Francis Faulkner et al., Mar. 2, 1703,” in *Records*, 849.

²⁷⁴ Francis Dane, *Commonplace Book* (Andover, MA: handwritten, 1648-1697), 280-282, American Ancestors Digital Library and Archives, accessed Nov. 13, 2023, <https://digital.americanancestors.org/digital/collection/p15869coll26/id/1017>.

²⁷⁵ Barnard, “Journal Entry, Feb. 19, 1697,” in *Early Records of the Barnard Family of Andover*, ed. Charlotte Helen Abbott (North Andover, MA: North Andover Historical Society, 1904), 12, Memorial Hall Library, Andover, MA, Nov. 12, 2023, <https://mhl.org/sites/default/files/files/Abbott/Barnard%20Family.pdf>.

²⁷⁶ “Petition of Ministers from Essex County, Jul. 8, 1703,” in *Records*, 851.

However, not all ministers in Essex County would maintain their previous place of power. Individuals who failed to support town efforts to overturn the witch trials faced backlash, and in some cases, were recused from their role as local minister. The minister to receive the most criticism for his support of the witch trials was Reverend Samuel Parris of Salem. Acknowledged by his community as one of the instigators behind the mass accusation of witches, complaints of the minister's behavior during the crisis arose. His encouragement of witch-hunting without remorse earned him the ire of his congregation, and new selectmen allocated issues that would normally go to the town minister to the requested council of outside clergymen.²⁷⁷ Petitioners requested for his removal by asserting that the relationship between Parris and the town was irreconcilable. One grievance against Parris claimed that "points of doctrine delivered in his preaching" led to the start of the witch trials, and that innocents lost their lives while he refused to change course to prioritize the community.²⁷⁸ Attempts to repair Parris's reputation by the General Court and other more sympathetic ministers proved futile. By 1696, when the firebrand minister agreed to step down from his role, he was all but chased from the town.²⁷⁹ Boyer and Nissenbaum discuss how Parris's dispossession as minister was foundational for the town to move forward from the witchcraft crisis. Without him at the helm of Salem religious thought and politics, effort could be put towards repairing the community rather than continual strife with its surly minister. Purging leaders who threatened the future stability of towns or demonstrated an inclination to return to the days of witch-hunting were systematically removed from their positions, and in their place, political activists were beginning to guide their communities into recovery.

²⁷⁷ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 230.

²⁷⁸ "Petition of Grievances Against Samuel Parris, c. Nov. 1694," in *The Salem Witch Hunt*, ed. Richard Godbeer, 171-172.

²⁷⁹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 114-115.

Despite Essex County residents' seeming new confidence in their elected officials, the poor economic situation of local communities restricted their ability to move past the oppressive constraints of the witchcraft crisis. The tumultuous events of 1692 left the financial stability of towns in shambles. As a result, a primary focus of newly elected selectmen was to contend with the economic constrictions that witch-hunting had placed on local industry, farm culture, and institutional charity. Late seventeenth-century New England towns, while typically self-sufficient, were ill-equipped to handle the widespread financial devastation that an anomalous event like the witchcraft crisis could bring.²⁸⁰ Local officials resorted to asking colonial administrators for monetary aid to cover the negative impact that the witch trials had set upon the county. On top of supplications for restitution from town governments, new leadership encouraged the former accused and other individuals affected by the consequences of the trials to petition for personal compensation from the General Court.²⁸¹ With local governments overseen by political activists, the witchcraft crisis facilitated a second wave of mass participation in the public sphere.

Economic concerns, which had spurred accusation and later reconciliation in the witchcraft crisis, continued to trouble Essex County for the following two decades. Although the trials had culminated and witch-hunting had ceased, the near year that communities spent under persecution left deep financial scars. The political economy of New England towns complicated the ability for financially devastated communities to come back from monetary pitfalls. Towns were built upon "local xenophobia," meaning that regional pride came at the expense of isolating neighboring counties—this included

²⁸⁰ Mixon, *Public Choice Economics and the Salem Witchcraft Hysteria* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 102-103.

²⁸¹ Issac Esty Sr., "Petition for Restitution, May 25, 1709," in *Records*, 854.

trade and labor.²⁸² Local xenophobic ideology expected for individuals to be devoted to the maintenance of the town, including its residents. Loyalty to town dynamics emphasized valuing the productivity of the community above one's personal needs, which created tightknit, relatively immobile communities.²⁸³ Under this policy, economic activities were contained to towns within the same region. Wages were kept relatively high compared to their English counterparts, but labor was in perpetual shortage.²⁸⁴ With nearly eighty percent of communities accusing, confessing, or otherwise implicating themselves to witchcraft, essential jobs were left vacant.²⁸⁵ As a result, towns across Essex County saw a drop in productivity, and by extension, a dip in the already struggling local economy. The witch trials severely impacted the productivity of the town labor force, leaving communities vulnerable to the same type of divisionism that wrought witch allegations. Town authority feared that financial discrepancies were soon to lend themselves to social disorder.²⁸⁶ Recognizing that new social tension over economic problems could lead to a reprisal of the witchcraft crisis, town governments sought to ameliorate the poor financial state of their overall communities as quickly as possible. The elected officials of Essex County towns would reprise their role as witchcraft petitioners to demand financial accountability from the colonial government.

Economic issues that went beyond the scope of witch hysteria were at the core of petitions developed by town governments in the years after the trials. In many cases, town clerks wrote petitions to request that people receive compensation for their prison

²⁸² K.D.M. Snell, "The Culture of Local Xenophobia," *Social History* 28, no. 1 (2003): 3.

²⁸³ Levy, *Town Born*, 86.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁸⁵ Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem*, 86.

²⁸⁶ I. Esty, "Petition for Restitution," in *Records*, 854.

stays.²⁸⁷ Borrowing the jail-keeper's catalogue of fines incurred by incarcerated individuals, lists were drafted detailing the sum of charges spent to detain an accused witch. Petitions of this type implored colonial administrators to reimburse "charges for Tryall," "discharge Bail," "Provisions Expended in prison," and in one case, "a hogshead of Rum" lost while in transport to the jail.²⁸⁸ When parties brought their concerns about prison fees to selectmen, these short petitions were systematically sent to the General Court. With pockets of disgruntled residents requesting financial aid from town institutions to cover individual expenses, leadership sought to avoid further financial strain and redirected problems to the state. The same could be said of petitions written by constables and sheriffs to ask colonial administrators for payment for transferring the accused to and from the jail. During the witch trials, accused witches were forced to pay law enforcement for their time spent in transport.²⁸⁹ As such, many people requested that their funds be returned directly from the source. Again, the judicial arm of towns subverted these payments to the state, implying that the charges for moving accused witches only came at the behest of the Court of Oyer and Terminer.²⁹⁰ These petitions argued that failure to compensate individuals for transportation costs endangered not only town economics, but also distracted sheriffs from performing their duties. Town governments were acutely aware that the state should be held accountable for financial

²⁸⁷ Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 143-144.

²⁸⁸ "Petition of Sarah (Bridges) Preston for Restitution, Sept. 13, 1710," in *Records*, 862; "Petition of John Barker for Restitution for Mary Barker, Sept. 13, 1710," in *Records*, 861; "Petition of John Barker for William Barker Jr., Sept. 13, 1710," in *Records*, 861; "Petition of Philip English for Restitution, Sept. 13, 1710," in *Records*, 866-868.

²⁸⁹ Mofford, *The Devil Made Me Do It!*, 147.

²⁹⁰ William Starling, "Account for Payment, Mar. 26, 1694," in *Records*, 841-842; Timothy Phillips, "Petition to Recover Expenses, Mar. 18, 1697," Massachusetts Archive Collection, vol. 135, no. 110, Massachusetts State Archive, Boston, MA.

burdens imposed on residents of Essex County due to choices made by colonial administrators during the witch trials.

While it was not unusual for the central government to intercede in local disputes to prevent disunity in Massachusetts Bay Colony, it was unusual for towns to collectively request monetary aid from colonial administrators. Historians have focused on the self-isolating nature of New England towns, leaving the political conversation between town governments and colonial administrators under-analyzed. Adrian Chastain Weimer has begun the all too important process of investigating how town politics influenced responses from the central government. By her argument, town governments were “deeply protective of local decision making” and were only spurred to communicate with central authority when local institutions came at risk.²⁹¹ The tumultuous nature of the witchcraft crisis, or more accurately its destructive aftermath, was one such case. Requests for monetary aid were simple, one- or two-line letters sent to either the General Court or new acting governor, William Stoughton.²⁹² Instead of providing compensation, during a General Session meeting in December 1693, the Governor’s Council decided to allot all fiscal responsibility for the special Court of Oyer and Terminer upon fourteen towns in Essex County.²⁹³ While the central government was still in denial about their accountability, town governments prioritized economic stability by ignoring the financial demands of the Governor’s Council.

Local leadership advised the former accused and other individuals affected by the witchcraft crisis to seek restitution from colonial administrators. By shifting the locus of individual grievances to the central government, towns were able to protect local

²⁹¹ Weimer, *A Constitutional Culture*, 131.

²⁹² Levack, *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 114.

²⁹³ “Bill to Towns for Courts of Oyer & Terminer and Other Matters, Dec. 29, 1693,” in *Records*, 839-841.

financial reserves from doling out additional payments to victims. Additionally, the rerouting of petitions to the General Court assured that the central government would have to confront their culpability in the negative outcome of the witch trials.²⁹⁴ Petitions of this type typically fell into one or two categories: requests for the return of seized property or compensation for damages inflicted by the witch trials. Samuel Wardwell Jr., the son of an executed witch and one of the children the Andover selectmen had petitioned for in 1692, claimed that the witch trials caused his family to fall into destitution. In a 1710 petition, Wardwell asserted that the seizure of his father's estate and his mother's inheritance greatly impacted the family's livelihood.²⁹⁵ Farmers by trade, with their generational lands revoked and livestock detained, Wardwell argued that he, his siblings, and later his pardoned mother were forced into poverty. He sought restitution not only for the possessions taken by the sheriff in the fall of 1692 but also for the expenses incurred by his parent's prison fees.²⁹⁶ His plea was one of many seeking monetary compensation for a parent. Few accused witches had their personal possessions returned once they were released from prison and even fewer families had their ownership of confiscated lands restored. At a time when land was a determinant of power and security, petitioners argued that the loss of physical property affected their position in society as well as their ability to navigate an economy soured by unrestrained witch-hunting.

Although "stolen" property was the focus of much political fanfare, other victims of the witchcraft crisis received damages that went beyond the loss of property.

Petitioners would revisit complaints about the physical and psychological damages of the

²⁹⁴ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 260.

²⁹⁵ Samuel Wardwell Jr., "Petition of Samuel Wardwell Jr. for Reversing Attainder and for Restitution of Sarah Wardwell, Feb. 19, 1710," in *Records*, 903.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

trials from the first petitions issued to the General Court in early October of 1692. Accused witches, who had spent time incarcerated while awaiting trial, spoke of the long-term consequences that imprisonment had on their health. Some, like Sarah Bishop, complained of physical infirmities exacerbated by the conditions of jail life. Despite not being convicted of witchcraft, Bishop was held in the Boston prison for nine months while judges waited for her to freely confess. In this time, she contracted “an unknown ill,” which left her “weeake...wt grat damidg [weak with great damage]” to her health even into late 1710.²⁹⁷ Petitioning for restitution for wrongful imprisonment was a standard practice in the seventeenth century. Grievances from previous cases of unjust incarceration in New England were met with compensation from the central government.²⁹⁸ If the falsely accused party could demonstrate that an infraction had been perpetrated by the legal system or that their case had been overturned in court, reimbursement for time spent in jail was afforded by colonial administrators to the offended party.²⁹⁹ Despite the central government’s attempts to avoid responsibility for the witch trials, petitions expressing how jailtime ordered by the Court of Oyer and Terminer impacted the lives of the imprisoned was another step towards holding colonial administrators accountable for the crisis. Therefore, it was not unreasonable for the imprisoned-accused to expect restitution, especially when it had occurred under the supervision of the state.

Petitions asserting the grander psychological effects of the witch trials would extend past the accused. The impact of imprisonment affected not only those confined to jail, but also families left in distress at their absence. The children of executed witches,

²⁹⁷ Edward Bishop, “Petition of Restitution for Himself and Sarah Bishop, Sept. 9, 1710,” in *Records*, 856.

²⁹⁸ “Petition of Richard Child, 1637,” in *Winthrop Papers, 1631-1637*, vol. 3, ed. Arthur Meier Schlesinger (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1930), 175-176; Hall, *Ways of Writing*, 152.

²⁹⁹ Mofford, *The Devil Made Me Do It!*, 189.

Giles and Martha Cory, explained to the General Court that they “[could not] sufficiently Exspress Griffe [grief] for the loss of mother and father,” and as such, whatever the government owned them in compensation for the death of their parents could never be fully repaid.³⁰⁰ Rather than a request that the state pay for the loss of their family estate or for the prison fees for their parents, the Cory children and their relatives demanded that the central government be accountable for the unnecessary period of bereavement that they were forced to endure after the execution of their loved ones. Pleas for reparations for emotional damages opened the witch trials to debate about the role the state should play in responding to issues of a psychological and emotional nature.³⁰¹ According to other petitioners, the answer was yes; the government was responsible for their heartache.³⁰² The movement to hold the central government financially accountable for the witch trials represents that regular people acknowledged the role that colonial administrators played in exacerbating the crisis for local communities.

Prior to the witch trials, it was rare for New Englanders to petition about emotional damages. Cases that involved an emotional component were often constrained to anxieties around an unfair dip in reputation, and compensation was sought from local parties found guilty of slander rather than government institutions.³⁰³ As there was no precedent for how to handle cases of psychological distress, colonial administrators would turn to preconceived notions of puritan sympathy to respond to letters of this type. It was the responsibility of puritan leaders to curtail negative feelings toward the state.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ John Moulton, “Petition for Restitution for Martha Cory & Giles Cory, Sept. 13, 1710,” in *Records*, 865.

³⁰¹ Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 136.

³⁰² Elizabeth Proctor, “Petition for John Proctor, May 27, 1696,” in *Records*, 844; Isaac Esty Sr., “Petition for Mary Esty, Sept. 8, 1710,” in *Records*, 855; Mary How and Abigail How, “Petition for Elizabeth How, Sept. 9, 1710,” in *Records*, 856.

³⁰³ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 158.

³⁰⁴ van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans*, 25.

Managing the emotions of disgruntled colonists was the easiest way to prevent the colony from falling into dissolution, therefore, apologies were in order. On 20 July 1703, the General Court expressed their condolences to the families of executed witches and asked that residents of Essex County not regard the colony with “Infamy and Reproach” for their deaths.³⁰⁵ While the apology was nothing more than simple acknowledgement that some people had lost their lives to witch hysteria, it represented a small step towards colonial administrators taking accountability for the witchcraft crisis. The former accused and their families recognized that the central government was at fault for carrying out the witch trials with little regard for people’s safety, and therefore, they were due compensation for the negative effects that the entire event continued to impose upon their lives. It would only be a matter of time before the central government would completely cave to the weight of petitions asking for culpability.

Issues brought upon Essex County by the witchcraft crisis persisted for twenty years after the witch trials concluded. By expanding the temporal parameters of the crisis, the political dimensions of the witch trials come to light. Local institutional reorganization coupled with prolific petitioning efforts reveal how communities engaged in political activism to make their concerns known in the public sphere. Rather than the stabilization of the colony’s legal status under the new charter in 1693, a more accurate indicator for the end of the witchcraft crisis was the General Court’s decision to reverse the attainders of all accused witches. In English law, a bill of attainder was the metaphorical “death” of a person’s credibility and reputation after committing a capital crime.³⁰⁶ Individuals who had this stain upon their record were considered dead in the

³⁰⁵ “Order of the General Court Concerning a Bill of Attainder of Abigail Faulkner Sr. et al., Jul. 20, 1703,” in *Records*, 852-853.

³⁰⁶ J. R. Lander, “I. Attainder and Forfeiture, 1453 to 1509,” *The Historical Journal* 4, no.2 (1961): 120.

eyes of the law, meaning that they had no legal recourse, right to property, or means to defend oneself against future accusations of maleficium. Even more troubling, attainders were considered hereditary and could be passed on to one's children. The act of witchcraft, which was considered treasonous by the colony's legal code, could invoke a bill of attainder.³⁰⁷ With the futures of accused witches and their descendants at stake, attainders became a central issue to the latter days of the crisis. In their efforts to overturn these attainders, petitioners would bring an end to the legal use of spectral evidence, find the state accountable for proceedings of the Court of Oyer and Terminer, and ultimately, bring closure to the witchcraft crisis.

While many of the petitions issued in the twenty years following the Salem Witch Trials dealt with restitution, more importantly, residents of Essex County sought the reversal of their attainders. It comes as no surprise that one of the first to petition against their attainder was Abigail Faulkner Sr. of Andover. Described as the "spirited daughter of the stalwart pastor, Reverend Dane," Faulkner first petitioned for a reversal of her attainder in 1700.³⁰⁸ She complained that the attainder "defaced [her] Reputation," exposed her to future accusations, and "cast Odium upon [her] Posterity."³⁰⁹ Faulkner was consumed by the fear that the active attainder endangered both her and her children to other potential witch-hunts. Baker notes that the language of Faulkner's petition was inflammatory, placing blame on both the afflicted and the court.³¹⁰ Rather than "inflammatory," the language of Faulkner's petition quite rightfully demanded culpability from her central government. By asserting her own political agency, the petition expressed the common belief that the Massachusetts Bay Colony government should be

³⁰⁷ *The Book of the General Lawes and Libertyes*, 34.

³⁰⁸ Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem*, 192.

³⁰⁹ Abigail Faulkner Sr., "Petition of Abigail Faulkner Sr., Jun. 13, 1700," in *Records*, 847-848.

³¹⁰ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 245-246.

responsible—and responsive—to its citizens. Though the court began accepting its place in the witch trials by the eighteenth century, judges were still unwilling to take accountability for the imprisonment of innocents.

Despite the state's initial show of ambivalence, attainders—and the claims of spectral evidence that invoked them—would continue to come under fire by petitioners. Three years later, Faulkner petitioned to have her attainder absolved. Joined this time by the families of Sarah Wardwell of Andover and Elizabeth Proctor of Salem Town, the petition again asked for the General Court to reconsider the state of their attainders.³¹¹ The women's petition was bolstered by an additional plea from Essex County ministers requesting the court "to clear the good name and reputation of some who have suffered."³¹² With unexpected expediency, the General Court agreed to reverse the women's attainders. On 8 July 1703, a bill was passed to formally acquit Faulkner, Wardwell, and Proctor of witchcraft and their credit was reinstated. Furthermore, the petition also moved the court to declare "no Spectre Evidence may hereafter be accounted valid" in determining cases of witchcraft.³¹³ Spectral evidence, which had played such a significant part in convicting witches, was overturned by the petitioning efforts of formerly accused witches. While seeking retribution for their own suffering, Faulkner and the other petitioners helped overturn the practice that led to a miscarriage of justice in 1692.

After Faulkner's success, many residents across Essex County sought restitution and reversal. Over the next decade, countless more accused sent petitions to the General Court on behalf of themselves, their relatives, or other members of their community.

³¹¹ Faulkner and Dane, "Petition of Francis Faulkner et al., Mar. 2, 1703," in *Records*, 848-849.

³¹² "Petition of Ministers from Essex County, Jul. 8, 1703," in *Records*, 851.

³¹³ "An Act for the Reversing the Attainder of Abigail Faulkner Sr. et al., May 26, 1703," in *Records*, 850.

Drawing upon the humanitarian, economic, and legal objections presented in earlier appeals, the new petitions used nuanced arguments to assure their objectives. Nearly all Essex County residents who petitioned after 1703 received credit or compensation. On 19 February 1712, Mary Osgood was the last living witch to receive a reversal of her attainder, effectively ending the communication between individuals accused during the witch trials and the central government.³¹⁴ It is befitting that the political process, which played a vital role in bringing the witch trials to an end, also brought restitution for all involved. With many receiving their requested restitution and nearly all bills of attainder absolved, petitioners successfully held their colonial government accountable for its part in the witch trials. After twenty years and over one hundred petitions, the Essex County witchcraft crisis came to a close in Massachusetts Bay Colony.

³¹⁴ “Attainder Reversal of Mary Osgood, Feb. 19, 1692,” in *Records*, 902.

CONCLUSION

The petitions of the 1692 witchcraft crisis reveal that residents of Essex County were active participants in fostering the political landscape of late seventeenth-century New England. Everyday people asserted their agency by contributing their voices to contentious issues in the public sphere. Civil unrest triggered by witch-hunting provided petitioners with an unprecedented opportunity to critique the foundations of puritan society and the Massachusetts Bay Colony government at large. The multifaceted nature of the witchcraft petitions disclose how politics were deeply intertwined with colonists' social, economic, and legal understanding of the world around them. Concepts of puritan innocence and sympathy inspired people to engage in political discourse. Factors that originally sparked economic division were transformed to unify communities in order to protect town autonomy from the perceived threat of the central government. The judiciary, empowered by the state, was subject to critical examination when its actions ran contrary to the statutes and securities stipulated by English law. Resistance against factionalism and unfair court proceedings birthed a culture of local political activism that rewarded individuals who challenged phenomena that jeopardized social stability. The witchcraft petitions, thus represent an enduring legacy of personal and collective agency across a wide swath of Massachusetts Bay society.

Although closure had been achieved for the witch trials of 1692, future cases of witch-hunting would inspire additional petitioning in Massachusetts Bay Colony. Essex County never experienced witch persecution on the same scale as was seen in the seventeenth century, but towns still contended with occasional bouts of minor witch

accusations.³¹⁵ Women at the polar ends of the economic scale and social pariahs of either gender continued to be the scapegoat for community anxiety. Like their predecessors, accused witches of the early eighteenth century utilized political writing to subvert unjust allegations of maleficium. Rather than suggesting innocence, petitions of this period attacked the state's failure to protect its people from "Suspicion of the aforesaid Crime [of witchcraft]."³¹⁶ In the eighteenth century, New England witches were less concerned with the mechanics of witch-hunting than they were with holding figures in power accountable for preventing future miscarriages of justice against innocent persons. Evolving ideas about the function of governments left both local and central administrators beholden to critiques of political responsibility.³¹⁷ If town selectmen did not immediately throw such cases out of court for their lack of validity, most accused witches were saved from execution by the state's positive response to requests for a pardon.³¹⁸

By 1750, when the key actors of the witch trials were gone, it became permissible for writers to openly mock the fundamentals of witch-hunting and the associated belief that the legal system could control a crime that intellectuals were beginning to believe likely did not exist.³¹⁹ The work of petitioners in 1692 led to the General Court prohibiting the use of spectral evidence as a primary means of conviction.³²⁰

³¹⁵ Peter Maxwell-Stuart, "Witchcraft and magic in eighteenth-century Scotland," in *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe*, eds. Owen Davies and Willem De Blécourt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 118.

³¹⁶ Margaret Casnoe, "Petition Regarding Philip English, Jul. 18, 1738," in *Records*, 918.

³¹⁷ Jon Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 119.

³¹⁸ Philip Gould, "New England Witch-Hunting and the Politics of Reason in the Early Republic," *The New England Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (1995): 65.

³¹⁹ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 263.

³²⁰ "Order of the General Court, Jul. 20, 1703," in *Records*, 852-853.

Additionally, loosening ties to puritan values circumvented cases of mass false confession promoted by Calvinist anxieties and well-intentioned, but ultimately harmful, ministers.³²¹ A vocal opposer of the witch trials in his own writing, future governor Thomas Hutchinson led the Massachusetts legislature to “consider the circumstances of the persons and families who suffered in the calamity of the times in and about the year 1692.”³²² An interest in the witchcraft crisis made Hutchinson familiar with the petitioning process that brought about its end. He included a brief mention of petitioners in his volume on the history of Massachusetts Bay, heralding them for ushering in “the zeal against witchcraft.”³²³ Witch-hunting in New England had all but trailed off by the enlightened age of the 1760s, but the political agency asserted in witchcraft petitions continued to represent how ordinary people played an integral part in this transition.

As witch-hunting slowly receded into the cultural memory of New Englanders, petitions concerning witchcraft shifted their focus toward memorializing victims of the 1692 witch trials and beyond. Anxieties stirred up by the witchcraft crisis left a generational scar on the surviving children and grandchildren of accused or executed witches. Descendants of George Burroughs, a minister and one of the nineteen innocents hung for witchcraft in Salem, petitioned to the General Court on behalf of all the slain accused. The letter, dated 28 March 1750, requested that the state government admit their responsibility in the “Blood shed” by the Court of Oyer and Terminer, and that the dead should be officially recognized as the “most deplorable of Victims cut off in the fatal

³²¹ Paul R. Lucas, "Presbyterianism comes to Connecticut: The Toleration Act of 1669," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 50, no.2 (1972): 129.

³²² Thomas Hutchinson, *History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay: From the Charter of King William and Queen Mary, in 1691, Until the Year 1750* (Boston: Thomas and Fleet, 1767), 12, Internet Archive, accessed Nov. 1, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/historyofprovinc00hutc>.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 58-60.

Catastrophe in the Year 1692.”³²⁴ Although Burroughs and most others had received restitution for financial losses and their bills of attainder had been overturned, no formal apology had been issued by the Massachusetts Bay government for the accusation and death of falsely accused residents of Essex County.³²⁵

The petition, the last of its kind to grace the desk of the Massachusetts Bay colonial court, represented petitioners’ attempt to hold the government accountable for its mistaken support of the witch trials. Memorialization was not only to exonerate the names of the accused but to serve as a concrete reminder of how petitions could influence the realm of memory and public politics. Even though Governor Jonathan Belcher and his council set up committees to review the witch trials in the mid-eighteenth century, the Burrough descendants and other relatives of accused witches would have to wait two more centuries to receive their requested apology. In 1957, 2001, and 2017, additional rounds of petitioning led to the state Legislature exonerating more of the accused and ordering days of remembrance for those who lost their lives to witch-hunting.³²⁶

Elizabeth Johnson Jr., the granddaughter of Reverend Dane, had her name cleared of the charge of witchcraft by petition efforts as recently as 2022.³²⁷ Today, activist groups continue to petition the Massachusetts state government to exonerate the names of accused witches who have, for one reason or another, been omitted from earlier apologies. Petitions continue to provide regular people with a political voice and

³²⁴ Thomas Newman, Abia Holbrook Jr., and Elias Thomas, “Memorial and Petition for George Burroughs, Mar. 28, 1692,” in *Records*, 919.

³²⁵ Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 255.

³²⁶ Steve LeBlanc, “Massachusetts group wants to clear the names of hundreds of accused witches from 400 years ago: ‘We’d like an apology,’” *Fortune*, last modified Oct. 31, 2023, accessed Nov. 1, 2023, <https://fortune.com/2023/10/31/massachusetts-justice-group-clear-names-salem-witchcraft-trials/>.

³²⁷ Vimal Patel, “Last conviction in Salem Witch Trials is Cleared 329 Years Later,” *The New York Times*, last modified Jul. 31, 2022, accessed Nov. 7, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/31/us/elizabeth-johnson-witchcraft-exoneration.html>.

heightened agency even into the twenty-first century. New England petitioners set a precedent for “defending local liberties” and holding governments accountable to their people that endures not only past the witchcraft crisis, but also into the political culture of modern-day activists.³²⁸

While petitions of the witchcraft crisis are not a comprehensive examination of all written political participation in New England, they do provide a glimpse into how regular people asserted their agency during times of societal turmoil in late seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony. Petitions, as a vehicle of political expression, afforded colonists the opportunity to enter the public sphere and assert their own ideas of how their communities should be structured. Furthermore, the witch trials presented opposers with the chance to critique regional issues while simultaneously expecting—and holding—their central government accountable in times of widespread unrest. Supplementary research is necessary to understand the proliferation of petitioning on the social, economic, and legal aspects of New England towns, but here, this thesis has given a brief insight into how petitions enabled everyday people with the political ability to overturn the witchcraft crisis of 1692. Residents of Essex County were agents of political processes, and as such, “poor and humble petitioners” left an indelible mark on the institutional culture of Massachusetts Bay Colony.

³²⁸ Weimer, *A Constitutional Culture*, 7.

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