Phoebe Chandler, a 12-year-old girl, was sent out by her mother to fetch beer for some thirsty workers. As she walked to get it, a voice came out from the bushes and asked her what she was doing and where she was going. Phoebe thought the voice sounded like Martha Carrier, a grouchy neighbor in the town. She looked around and saw no one. Scared, she ran fast to get away from there. A few hours later, Phoebe’s mother sent her out to do another chore. As she walked, she heard the same voice. The voice told her that in a few days she would be poisoned. Within a few days, her arm had swollen and was in a great deal of pain. Was this merely a coincidence? Another man in town had a real-life encounter with Martha Carrier. They argued over some land, and it seemed to this man that Carrier put a curse on him. Within days he suffered from a swollen foot and sores. When Carrier was arrested, these ailments went away. Was Martha Carrier a witch? Did she have magical power to hurt her neighbors?

While not everyone believed in witches during colonial times, there were some who definitely did believe. The Puritan church believed in the supernatural. They believed that if there was a God, there was also a Devil who actively roamed about. Throughout New England, various people were accused of being witches. Many of these cases were brought to trial. But these cases were hard to prove and many of the judges ruled against the accusers. Many places in Europe allowed the accusers to torture the defendants in hopes of getting the truth out of them. A popular test in England was to dunk the defendant under water to see if she would float. A real witch, according to the court, would float. These types of tests were banned entirely in New England. It was harder to get the evidence needed in the colonies because it was against the law to torture the defendants. What sets Salem apart from the other colonies is that the Salem courts convicted and hanged 19 people. The courts in Salem really believed that the accused were witches.

What would drive people to accuse their neighbors of being witches? Could these people have really been witches? Or did some get accused because of jealousy or vengeance? What caused the accusers’ strange outbursts? Did the young accusers like getting attention? Did they feel guilty for dabbling in some folk magic? Did they see something that scared them while using a little folk magic? Because people’s motives cannot be known, we can only speculate.
The Salem Witch Trials

Background Information (cont.)

In 1688, just four years before the Salem incident, a Boston family by the name of Goodwin struggled with their children. These children began acting out in strange ways. A doctor was called to evaluate the children. He came to the conclusion that the children were suffering from witchcraft. The maid was blamed for bewitching the four children. A famous minister named Cotton Mather arrived at the home in hopes of helping these afflicted children. The maid was brought to trial, convicted, and hanged. Mather wrote a book on his experience with the Goodwin children. It was widely read in the colonies, especially by young people.

Folk magic was big among the colonists. Many colonists used astrological charts to tell the future. Some carried charms for good luck, while others used rituals to help them interpret God’s will. Some of these colonists were members of the Puritan church. Week after week the minister of the church would condemn the use of these evil things. Was it possible that some of the young girls might have dabbled in these practices as a form of rebellion against their Puritanistic families and felt guilty?

Salem, Massachusetts, was a small town established by the Puritans in the 1600s. The Puritans saw themselves in combat with the world. If it was not the neighboring tribe of Indians, then it was the Devil. The town of Salem was sharply divided. The Puritans wanted to protect their simple way of life; the merchants wanted to expand their way of life in Salem. Salem soon split into two towns: Salem Town, where the merchants lived, and Salem Village, where the Puritans lived. Conflicts arose from inheritance battles over land. Courts ruled in favor of the wealthy merchants. There were many families affected by these decisions in the Puritan church. No doubt that the children from these afflicted homes heard about these conflicts and how their families had been slighted. Could the trials have stemmed from vengeance or jealousy?
A minister named Samuel Parris was elected to serve the Puritan church in Salem Village. He had previously tried to prosper as a Salem Town merchant, but failed. (Could he have been just as bitter as many of the families in the Puritan church?) The people in Salem believed he was just the right minister for them. Parris had a nine-year-old daughter and 12-year-old niece. Early in 1692, they suddenly started behaving strangely. It was reported that they were pinched and bitten by something invisible. Their bodies convulsed and twisted in unnatural positions. They appeared to be tormented by something unseen. Other people were more skeptical. They reported that these girls crawled under chairs and into holes. They muttered silly speeches that made them look ridiculous. Both the skeptic and the believer did agree on one key point: these girls were experiencing the same thing as the Goodwin children experienced. Did these girls read Mather’s book? Were they good at mimicking? Or was something sinister invisibly lurking in the town?

Their afflictions were contagious—but only those living in Salem Village, not Salem Town, were affected. Some began suffering from bites, pinches, and disturbing fits. The skeptics said they were good at drama. At the center of the fits or drama were several young ladies. They were a 12-year-old named Ann Putnam, her mother, their servant named Mercy Lewis, a relative named Mary Walcott, a physician’s niece named Elizabeth Hubbard, and a 22-year-old servant named Mary Warren. Instead of questioning, “What did I do that allowed the devil to torment me?” they began asking, “Who is using the devil against me?”

Parris had a slave from the Caribbean named Tituba. She was an Indian woman. The colonists had bad feelings toward the Indians already. Was it possible that they wanted to make this Indian woman the scapegoat for these troubled feelings? The tormented girls named Tituba as the source of their torment. They named Sarah Good, too. She was a poor woman in her late 30s who was not well-liked by the community. Even her husband claimed that she was a witch. They also labeled Sarah Osborne, a woman who was caught living with a man after her husband died and had skipped church for more than a year. The tormented girls could not have picked a better assortment of witches: an Indian, a woman no one liked, and a woman whom people gossiped about. These were just the types of people many believed were witches. On February 29, the law stepped in and brought these three women to a pretrial hearing. From this point on, the crisis in Salem escalated, until 19 people (including both men and women) were hanged for witchcraft.
Rebecca Nurse’s Trial

Directions: Rebecca Nurse was a devout church member. Even so, it was a common belief at the time that witchcraft ran in families. Years before, Rebecca's mother was accused of being a witch. It never went to trial, but the people never forgot it. Rebecca was also known at times to argue with her neighbors. One argument took place over a group of pigs wandering into her yard. Nevertheless, Rebecca had an outstanding reputation. Her husband had been a financial success, too. The couple was a symbol of the prosperous Salem Town. When the split took place in Salem, he sided against the Salem Village. Ann Putnam's mother led the charge against Rebecca. While sick in her home, a minister visited Ann's mother. She was under some sort of attack that left her completely stiff. Then she began flailing her arms and legs and yelling for Rebecca Nurse to be gone. An argument took place between the invisible spirit of Rebecca and Ann's mother. The minister witnessed all of it—and Rebecca would answer for it in court.

The judge liked and respected Rebecca Nurse. He pleaded with her to confess so that they would not have to convict her. Rebecca stood her ground and insisted she was innocent of the charges.

Judge  (talking to Ann Putnam) Tell us if you have seen this woman hurt you.
Ann       Yes, she beat me this morning.
Judge     Abigail, did this woman hurt you?
Abigail   Yes.
           (Ann's mother cries out that Rebecca has hurt her, too.)
Judge     Goody Nurse, there are two people here, Ann Putnam and Abigail Williams, who say that you hurt them. How do you respond?
Rebecca   I can say that before God I am innocent. God will clear my name.
Judge     We all hope that you are innocent, but if you are guilty, God will discover it. Kenny, what do you have to say?
Kenny     When Rebecca came into my house, I was seized with sickness.
Judge     Here are not only these three witness, but also the wife of Mr. Putnam, Ann's mother. She said that you tempted her to turn away from God, and that you also hurt her.
Rebecca   I am innocent of this charge. I haven't left home in eight or nine days.
Rebecca Nurse’s Trial (cont.)

Ann’s Mother  Didn’t you bring the black man with you? Didn’t you tell me to tempt God and die? *(Faints and is so overcome that she must be carried from the courtroom.)*

Rebecca  Oh Lord, help me! *(She raises her hands, but when she does, three in the audience cry out as if she hurts them. Those around her cry out in pain every time she moves.)*

Mary Walcott  She hurt me, too. *(Elizabeth Hubbard says that she was hurt, also. Others in the crowd howl and cry out in pain.)*

Judge  What do you say to these two grown adults? They say you have hurt them.

Rebecca  God knows that I have not hurt them. I am innocent.

Judge  It is so awful to see all the suffering in these people, yet you stand there with dry eyes, unaffected by it all.

Rebecca  You do not know what is in my heart and how I feel.

Judge  You would do yourself a favor if you would only confess and give God the glory.

Rebecca  I am as innocent of these charges as an unborn baby would be.

Judge  You only need to confess and give glory to God. If you are innocent, I pray that God will clear you. But if you are guilty, I know he will discover it. Give me a straight answer: are you familiar with any of these spirits?

Rebecca  No. I am only familiar with the spirit of God alone.

Judge  What do you say to these charges that a black man whispered in your ear and yellow birds flying all about you? What do you say to these charges?

Rebecca  It is all false. I am clear of these charges.

Judge  Could it be possible that you are a witch but haven’t been tempted yet?

Rebecca  No. *(People in the crowd fall into terrible fits and cry out.)*

Judge  Do you think these people are making this up? Are they making themselves suffer?

Rebecca  I cannot tell.

Judge  That is a strange answer. Everyone can judge for himself or herself.

Rebecca  I must be silent on this issue.
Rebecca Nurse's Trial (cont.)

Judge They say you hurt them. If you think they are making this accusation up, then you must hate them and see them as murderers.

Rebecca I cannot say what I think about it.

Judge Well, then, say if you think they are really suffering.

Rebecca I do not think they are pretending that they are suffering.

Judge If you knew they were suffering, why did you never visit them at their homes?

Rebecca I was afraid that I would fall into fits, too. (People in the crowd fall into loud fits as Rebecca moves her arms.)

Judge Do you believe these people are bewitched?

Rebecca Yes, I do think so.

Judge Why won't you admit that you are doing this to them?

Rebecca Would you want me to lie?

Judge Mrs. Putnam says that your spirit came to her and caused her fits. What do you think of this?

Rebecca I cannot help if the Devil appears to people using my body. (Rebecca holds her neck to one side, and Elizabeth Hubbard's neck follows her in the same position, as if being controlled by her. Abigail cries out that Rebecca will break her neck.)

Follow-Up Note: After a lengthy trial, the jury found Rebecca Nurse innocent on these charges. When this was announced, the courtroom erupted in anger. The judge and the accusers did not accept this decision. The jury became hesitant of its decision, and the judge asked the jurors to review the case one more time. The jury changed its verdict. Rebecca Nurse was hanged on July 19.