Important Persons in the Salem Court Records

Categories:
- Executed
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People and Topics

Biographical Data

Samuel Parris

One of the most notorious personalities in Salem, the Rev. Samuel Parris represents some of the danger of religious power when wielded by self-centered and deceptive individuals. To others, his antipathy towards his opponents in Salem Village was simply a small factor in the larger picture of the Salem witch trials. In either case, the persecution of "witches" began in his household, and through that point extended deeply into the American psyche. One cannot help but question the amount of responsibility that Parris, who began preaching about the work of the Devil in his parish holds for the events of 1692.

Images :

A detailed view of the miniature portrait of the Rev. Samuel Parris.

Massachusetts Historical Society.

Full Essay

Rev. Samuel Parris

Written by Seth Ragosta, 2002

Salem Witch Trials in History and Literature

An Undergraduate Course, University of Virginia

Fall Semester 2002

Born in 1653 as the younger son of a London cloth merchant, Samuel Parris began his life in the shadow of others. By his father's death in 1673 when Samuel was twenty years old, it was clear that he would need to leave England for any chance at financial independence and success. Failing at business in a Caribbean sugar plantation and later in business activities in Boston, Parris eventually decided to join the ministry and look for an appropriate parish in New England. His search culminated at the little village of Salem where the local elders offered the ministry church.
The position was ideally what Parris needed, but he was aware the past conflicts over the village minister and took nearly a year to make his decision. As he knew, the village had gone through three other ministers in relatively quick succession, and no one before Parris had been deemed worthy to be ordained. During this year of negotiations Parris wrangled for his salary and benefits, in the process creating an exceptional amount of animosity towards him within certain village factions. By demanding more pay and benefits such as ownership of the village minister's house, free firewood, and bonuses for any outsiders preached to on Sundays, Parris indicated an important trait in his personality. He saw his position as something demanding and deserving respect above all else. In Parris' mind, by not deferring to his needs and desires those who opposed him marked themselves as people against traditional reverent attitudes towards the church. This may have contributed to his support and to the torrent of witchcraft accusations throughout 1692. He did not trust those who did not follow the world order as he saw it, and was fearful of the influence of outsiders on the village itself.

Parris' preaching had a major hand in creating the divisions within the village that contributed to the accusations of 1692. During the crisis, he declared the church under siege by the Devil, who was assisted by "Wicked & Reprobate men." This was during the last sermon his daughter Betty and niece Abigail heard before they became "afflicted." As Mary Beth Norton puts it in In the Devil's Snare, almost undoubtedly those "wicked" men were among Parris' detractors and opposition within the community. Parris believed in his moral superiority and was determined to draw battle lines. Even as early as November of 1691, the minister called on churchgoers to "Sit thou at my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool." He intended to have his supporters and the church unified against anyone that would dare speak against him.

As some historians believe, Parris and other adults around him may have had a major hand in "picking" some of the accused. Through either direct order or indirect insinuation, Parris may have chosen not only those who represented an unusual or disliked position in the village, but also those who supported his enemies and critics.

Parris himself had a major part in the actual trials, serving as a witness who submitted legal complaints about the girls' sufferings. Along with other prominent men, Parris testified about the attacks of Rebecca Nurse against Ann Putnam Sr., Jr., Mary Walcot and Abigail Williams. He declared that at the trial when Nurse's hands were freed, "some of the afflicted were pinched and upon the motion of [Nurse's] head and fingers some of the afflicted then and there affirmed that they saw a black man whispering into [Nurse's] ear." As questionable as the girls' claims may have been to any observer, the support and testimony of such an influential and educated man could not have done anything but strengthen their claims. Unlike the ministers in nearby Ipswich, Rowley, and Beverly, who stepped forward to defend some of the accused, Parris was clearly filled with "credulity and pitiless zeal," as Marion Starkey aptly puts it.

While Parris' actions, or lack thereof, certainly demonstrate a rather reprehensible character, it would be a mistake to assume that contemporaries believed the same. Indeed, in 1695, two years after the end of the trials, Parris still garnered a majority of town support. This demonstrates not only the ambiguity of the trials in late 17th century imaginations, but also the influence that Parris held within the community. While much of the village did support him to a certain degree, it should also be noted that Rebecca." He's family and others directly accused the minister of providing names to the court, and many people had strong misgivings about his place in the trials. By 1696 village sentiment and growing irritation finally forced Parris out of town in favor of Reverend Green, a man who genuinely wanted to heal Salem and started the village on the long and uncertain road to recovery.

While the trials eventually extended well outside Parris' control and ability to predict, he undoubtedly holds a position of importance regarding their genesis. Historians Boyer and Nissenbaum in their well-known history, Salem Possessed, define Parris as a "reference point" from which to view the trials and their beginning. He was seen in the village as a dividing line between two groups, in his mind the believers and true Christians of his small congregation versus the suspicious and dangerous people who would not join it. He represented the hatred in the village that enabled people to attack each other so horribly. By naming specific individuals and pushing certain accusations, Parris earns responsibility as one of the most tarnished characters in the history of Salem's story. As Miller represented him in The Crucible, the Rev. Samuel Parris was the embodiment of self-serving and small-minded reactionary behavior. If we are not careful to guard against those like him, our freedom and the sanity of society are in jeopardy.


Marion Starkey, The Devil in Massachusetts, 1949.