

Solution for Survival

Your Name

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Alternative Options.....	1-3
Benefits of Pleading Guilty.....	3
Examples of Those Who Plead Guilty.....	3-5
Negative Results of Confessing.....	5
Conclusion.....	5-6
End Notes.....	7
Appendix.....	8-9
Bibliography.....	10-11

Summary

The Salem Witch Trials of 1692 were a series of unfortunate events that resulted in the hanging of nineteen innocent people and many brutally unfair court procedures (Linder, "The Witchcraft Trials in Salem: A Commentary"). Under the circumstances, how were any of the accused released from their awful fate? Once accused of being a witch, pleading guilty was the best option for survival. This was true because the alternative options were frequently unsuccessful or complicated, everyone had the ability to plead guilty, and confessions had few negative results (Linder, "You're Accused!"). A review of cases involving those accused of being witches reveals that those who chose not to confess suffered horrible consequences and unspeakable manners of death.

When accused of witchcraft, what is there to do? In the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, there were not many choices. Existing options consisted of pleading guilty, pleading not guilty, refusing to stand for trial, becoming pregnant, and fleeing Salem. While the majority of these brought nearly certain death or posed major complications, pleading guilty had only the issue of a moral conundrum (Linder, “You’re Accused!”). Conversely, with a confession to being a witch and willingness to testify against another, the judges either released the accused, e.g., Mary Lacy, or at least spared them from execution (Cory Family Society). For these reasons, among others listed in this paper, once accused of being a witch, pleading guilty was the accused's best way to avoid a horrible death.

Of all choices available, why was pleading guilty the best? One might think that the most morally correct and seemingly obvious option would be to plead not guilty. It would appear as though proof of innocence would be the best chance at saving one’s life. In some cases, the court did find accused witches to be not guilty, such as Nehemiah Abbott, Jr. (The Salem witchcraft papers, Volume 1: verbatim transcriptions of the legal documents of the Salem witchcraft outbreak of 1692.)

However, this was not as simple as it may seem. If the accused pleaded not guilty, the law required a trial before a court that already believed in the accusations, and without a lawyer or any witnesses on behalf of the accused (Linder, “You’re Accused!”). Additionally, in the Court of Oyer and Terminer, judges primarily based their decisions on supernatural attributes¹ (Cory Family Society). Thus, although the accused might genuinely be innocent, the circumstances made it highly difficult to prove.

¹ These supernatural attributes included “witch marks” and spectral evidence (Linder, “You’re Accused!”).

Additionally, the judges condemned the accused to execution if they believed that the suspected witch lied to the court in any manner whatsoever to prove innocence. Such was the case of Martha Cory. As stated by the Cory Family Society:

When the girls first mentioned the name of Mrs. Cory, Edward Putnam and Ezekiel Cheever went to see her about the matter, March 12th. They saw Ann Putnam on the way, and asked her what clothes Mrs. Cory wore when her apparition appeared to her as Ann had said. Ann said that she was so blinded she could not see. Arriving at the Cory house, Mrs. Cory said to them, "I know what you have come for. You are come to talk with me about being a witch, but I am none. I cannot help people talking about me." She inquired whether the afflicted had attempted to describe her clothes. This last statement was deemed to be supernatural, and was used in her trial later on (Cory Family Society).

In Cory's trial, when the judge questioned this statement, she first stated that her husband had warned her that the girls might have attempted to describe her clothing. When her husband denied doing so, and the court asked the question again, Cory refused to answer the question (See Appendix A). Cory's jury returned with a guilty verdict shortly after the change of the original statement (Cory Family Society).

Refusing to stand trial was another possible choice, but it resulted in an even worse fate, if possible. Giles Corey took this path and because of his decision not to stand trial, he received the harshest punishment by law. This penalty, known as *peine forte et dure*, involved piling heavy stones upon a body, crushing it to death. (Linder, "You're Accused!")

The last two options were becoming pregnant or fleeing Salem. These both had the potential to end well, but each had major complications. It is true that pregnancy stalled the accused's execution, but in some cases, after the birth of the child, the courts executed both the accused and her child because the newborn, having the blood of a witch, was wicked by default (Metcalf). Fleeing Salem had no negative consequences if successful, but it was only an option available to those with enough money or influence to find a way to escape. These were not available choices for many of the accused (Linder, "You're Accused!").

However, pleading guilty had a much different consequence than any of these other options. As stated by Douglas Linder, "The Puritans believed that once a person made a full confession, his or her fate should be left in God's hands, not man's" (Linder, "You're Accused!"). This belief was the reason that confessing was the best possible way to avoid punishment. The court ordered no executions in cases where the accused confessed. Once the accused gave a confession, jails separated the so-called witches from other prisoners and judges used them to testify against and identify other "witch" citizens. Why were accusations so much more important in the confession of a guilty witch than in a statement of another townspeople? National Geographic describes this as follows: "If you confessed that you were a witch, as Tituba did, they could use this as prima facia¹ evidence [against another]" (National Geographic).

A good example of the above statement is the case of Mary Lacy. As recounted by the Cory Family Society:

Mary Lacy of Andover was accused of witchcraft and admitted to it. She said "me and Martha Carrier did both ride on a stick or pole when we went to witch meetings at Salem

¹ Prima facia evidence is a Latin term meaning "a fact presumed to be true unless it is disproved" (Farlex).

Village." Ironically, those who confessed to being witches were not executed, but many of those who denied witchcraft were hung. Mary Lacy was allowed to go free after her "confession" but she had damned Martha Carrier in the process. Martha was hung a few weeks later" (Cory Family Society).

Fifty-five people confessed to witchcraft during the Salem Witch Trials. A prime example was Tituba. Many consider Tituba to be the reason behind the Salem Witch Trials. She was among the first three witches to be accused. One website recounts Tituba's confession:

Before an excited crowd, all of whom believed in the possible existence of witchcraft and in a personal devil, Sarah Good, Sarah Osburn, and Tituba were brought in. In spite of the "afflicted children" who charged them with hurting them, the first two steadfastly maintained that they had made no compact with the Devil, had not hurt the children, and were innocent; but the surprising thing is that Tituba admitted that she did serve the Devil; that her fellow prisoners were witches; also that they rode around on broomsticks accompanied by familiar spirits and did all sorts of injury. Ti[t]uba confessed to seeing the devil who appeared to her "sometimes like a hog and sometimes like a great dog". What's more, Tituba testified that there was a conspiracy of witches at work in Salem (Cory Family Society).

The most interesting part of this situation is that of the three, Tituba was the only one to survive the witch trials. Tituba's master sold her to another slave owner, and no one has found any other records of her (National Geographic).

Another example of a confessed witch was Deliverance Hobbs. After her young daughter Abigail testified against her, she admitted to pinching three of the "afflicted" girls at the Devil's

command and flying on a pole to attend a witches' Sabbath in an open field. She testified, along with fellow confessed witch Mary Warren, that Bridget Bishop was “one of them,” and Bishop's jury returned with a guilty verdict (Linder, “The Witchcraft Trials in Salem: A Commentary”). She then began to confess to anything that the masses would suggest¹. Hobbs even acted as a witness against her own husband (Linder, “Deliverance Hobbs”).

The case of Margaret Jacobs is another interesting story. After her confession, she stated, “[...] They told me if I would not confess I should be put down into the dungeon and would be hanged, but if I would confess I should save my life” (Maddox). Jacobs shows how confessing allowed accused witches to remain on the good side of the legal system, even though the community would thereafter perceive them as evil.

There were two negative results of confession, both involving morals. The first was that in order to accuse someone, the confessed witch must knowingly hurt an innocent person. Additionally, by accusing more and more people, the Salem Witch Trials continued. Accusations of confessed witches extended the length of the saga of the Salem Witch Trials, because without their testimony, courts might not have had enough evidence to convict and hang many innocent citizens. However, this thesis is not about whether confessing was the ethically right choice. It simply states that pleading guilty to being a witch saved the accused's life.

In conclusion, after considering the disastrous consequences of pleading not guilty, refusing to stand trial or becoming pregnant and the unlikely ability to flee Salem, pleading guilty to witchcraft and testifying against others provided the greatest likelihood of surviving such an accusation. A review of the above-cited cases reveals that time after time, the court spared the confessors, while it executed the majority of the remaining suspects. The choice was

clear: regardless of moral issues, confession was a ticket to survival.

End Notes

- ^{1.} In her original, greatly detailed testimony, Deliverance Hobbs never mentioned George Burroughs. However, once the court charged Burroughs as a witch, Hobbs named him as the leader of the witch covenant meetings. This clearly shows that Hobbs was willing to do anything to stay on the good side of the judges (Linder, "Deliverance Hobbs").

Appendix

A. The Trial of Martha Cory

- Craft 100
How could you tell them that the child
was bid to observe what clothes you
wore when some came to speak
Cheever. Interrupted her & bid her
with a eye to go down. Put on
-red the matter
M^r. Hall: Who told you that
K He said the child said
Cheer: you speak falsely
Then Dr. Putman read again
M^r. H. Why did you ask of the child told
clothes you wore
My husband told me the others told
who told you about the clothes & why
did you ask that question
Because I heard the children told
clothes the others wore
Gordon: How did you tell her
The old man denyed that he had help
Did you not say your husband told
you so
K - the children now look upon them.

(Trask)

M. H. and M. Hath are referring to Judge Hathorne; K. refers to Martha Cory; and Cheever is referring to one of the witnesses against Cory, Ezekiel Cheever (Hall).

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