

Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school



Bridget Bishop, circa 1650

**“I have done no
witchcraft....I am as
innocent as the child
unborn...”**

**—Bridget Bishop, Convicted of
Witchcraft**

Note: *The Salem witch trials (1692 – 1693) were a notorious and dark moment in American history, resulting in thirty convictions and the execution of fourteen women and five men. Today, almost no one knows the names or the stories of those who died or the 200 people accused of witchcraft. A few years ago, I visited the site where the witches were hanged or pressed to death. Read on to see a photo I snapped!*

In 1692, tavern keeper and possible midwife Bridget Bishop wasn't the first to be accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts, but she has the distinction of being the first to die.

Born Bridget Magnus in England in the mid-to-late 1630s, information about her is sparse and debatable. Much of what is known came from her neighbors' testimonies at trial. She married three, possibly four times. Her first marriage took place in 1660, and she outlived her first and second husbands. The first died either before or shortly after she immigrated to the Massachusetts colony, where her infant child also died.

Bishop [remarried](#) in 1666. This second marriage to Thomas Oliver later provided much of the fodder for her undoing. The couple lived in what was called Salem Town. Her neighbors suspected that she was an abused wife, as she often appeared in public with bruises. It was also believed that she was an abusive wife because she frequently argued

in public with her husband, including on the Sabbath, which was illegal and against all social norms of propriety.

On one occasion, the pair were formally charged and sentenced to pay a fine or stand in the public square as punishment. Oliver's daughter from a previous marriage paid her father's fine but not her stepmother's, leaving Bishop to stand alone in the square in penance. Oliver died in 1679, and Bishop inherited his lands. Soon after, Bishop's stepchildren claimed that she had bewitched their father to death. Charges were later dropped for lack of evidence. The date of Bishop's third marriage is unknown.

Bishop was also accused of sorcery in 1680 by an enslaved man who claimed that her spirit had pinched him. He also accused her of stealing eggs and frightening horses. She was cleared of the charges until the witch hysteria erupted in January 1692.

[According](#) to materials from the Salem Witch Museum, when the daughter and niece of a local minister were suddenly taken ill, the girls made strange, guttural sounds, clutched their heads, and experienced violent physical contortions. When remedies of prayer, fasting, and medicine failed to heal them, the parents concluded that the only explanation was witchcraft. By the end of February, the girls [named](#) three local women as their tormentors, and the witch hunts began.

Word about the girls' plight spread like wildfire throughout Salem and the surrounding villages. Instantly, similar symptoms mysteriously felled others, and victims reported being stabbed, choked, and jabbed by hostile spirits. Finger-pointing and investigations ensued, resulting in 200 people being jailed on suspicion of witchcraft.

In Puritan New England, there was a strong belief in the devil and his ability to inhabit the bodies of unsuspecting people. An outbreak of smallpox had recently claimed many lives, and the British colonists lived under the constant threat of attack by Native tribes and their French allies. Some feared it was the end of days or worried that their hardships were Satan's handiwork.

Now in her late fifties to early sixties, Bishop was arrested on April 18, 1692. Although she was not the first to be charged, more accusations were leveled against her than against anyone else. Her trial marked the first time that she met her accusers face to face and that she learned of her crimes. In a packed courthouse, while several of the young, afflicted girls moaned and writhed in pain, Bishop was [questioned](#):

“Q: Bishop, what do you say? You stand here charged with sundry acts of witchcraft by you done or committed upon the bodies of Mercy Lewis and Ann Putman and others.

A: I am innocent, I know nothing of it, I have done no witchcraft I am as innocent as the child unborn.

Q: Goody Bishop, what contact have you made with the Devil?

A: I have made no contact with the Devil. I have never seen him before in my life.”

In all, ten neighbors [testified](#) against her, charging that she had pressured the afflicted girls to “sign the Devil's book.” Men who had worked on her house a few years earlier reported finding dolls stuck with pins in her cellar, while other men reported that her spirit had visited them at night and that she had sent demons in the form of pigs and flying monkeys. Others contended that whenever she was around, trouble followed. One man had previously accused her of theft, and others reported that items such as spoons and

money disappeared in her presence. Bishop was also suspected of killing her two previous husbands, in part because she had been convicted of arguing in public with one of them.

Even though Bishop was the proprietor of two taverns, she remained a member in good standing of her church until her death. Perhaps it was Bishop's flamboyant lifestyle and colorful dress that made her an easy target.

[Known](#) to drink and entertain guests until late in the evening, Bishop had been seen playing [shovelboard](#) — outlawed by the Puritans as gambling because it involved sliding coins across a wooden table. Her habit of stepping out wearing a black cap and a fancy bodice adorned with colorful lace also served as evidence against her. A local merchant who dyed cloth for a living [claimed](#) that Bishop had brought him unusual pieces of lace to dye, items unbefitting of a "plain and honest woman." He further accused her of causing his son to fall ill. Even Bishop's brother-in-law claimed that Bishop "sat up all night conversing with the Devil" and that "the Devil came bodily into her."



"Execution of Bridget Bishop at Salem, 1692,"
illustration by Joseph Boggs Beale, circa 1885

It took the townspeople just eight days to charge, try, convict, and execute Bridget Bishop. As crowds looked on at her hanging, Bishop professed her innocence one last time, but apparently failed to show remorse.

A few judges doubted the accusations and her conviction and even sought guidance from the courts in Boston. But it made no difference. Rather than quell the hysteria that had polarized the town, Bishop's

execution marked the first of nineteen that soon followed.

Less than a year later, some accusers began to recant their testimonies, claiming that the devil had made them say such things. The trials ended in 1693, and four years later, the Massachusetts General Court ordered a day of fasting and prayer to atone for the colony's wrongs against its own people. One judge, Samuel Sewall, and twelve jurors apologized for their actions in the convictions and executions. They were the only ones who admitted any wrongdoing.

In 1711, some of the accused were pardoned, and the victims' families were compensated. Still, it took more than 300 years before Bridget Bishop was exonerated by legislation passed in the State of Massachusetts in 2001. The very last of the state's accused witches, Elizabeth Johnson Jr., was finally [exonerated](#) in 2022.

As for my visit to Salem, it may be hard to make sense of my photo, but it's the only one that "fogged" up. What do you think those ghostly outlines might be?



Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask yourself: Has my style of dress ever been weaponized against me?

Ask a friend: What do you suspect are things that we accept as fact today, but that, like witchcraft, may one day be viewed differently?

What I'm reading: [Ariel Lawhon's](#) *The Frozen River*, a novel based on the journals of real-life midwife [Martha Ballard](#), in Hallowell, Maine. Ballard delivered more than 1,000 babies and never lost a mother. It's a gripping read. If you prefer non-fiction, check out the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, by [Laurel Thatcher Ulrich](#).



I specialize in the life and times of reproductive rights activist, Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). In 2020, [Time](#) magazine included her among the nine most important women in American history. I curate Dennett's family archive, and am at work on a novel about her life. In 2024, my manuscript was named runner-up in [Book Pipeline's General Fiction category](#).

My essays have been published in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and more. I live in the Wasatch Mountains near Salt Lake City with my husband and black lab, Hank.

If your business, book club, school, church, or social group needs a speaker, [reach out](#). My passion is sharing the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women.
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