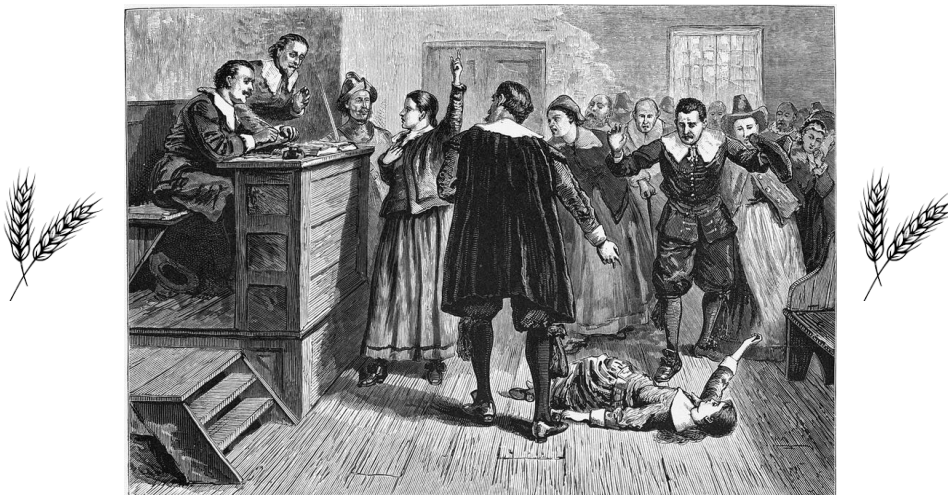


The Salem Witchcraft Trials and ‘Moldy Bread’: A Case Study in Fake News

Presented by Margo Burns



Witchcraft at Salem Village, an engraving by William A. Crafts (1876), features accuser Mary Walcott on the courtroom floor.

A New Hampshire Humanities event hosted by New Ipswich Historical Society

On April 2, 1976, *Science Magazine* published an article by Linnda R. Caporeal which posited that during the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials, the visions of specters and painful physical sensations described by the girls who claimed to be afflicted by witches could have been caused from eating bread made with flour tainted by ergot, a naturally occurring fungal hallucinogen that grows on rye grain under certain growing conditions. While experts immediately debunked this claim – the historical and medical data used to support the hypothesis was cherry-picked – the claim went viral in a pre-Internet age. More than four decades later, belief in this false narrative is still pervasive. Margo Burns will unpack how this explanation about a lurid chapter in American history was born and cemented in the public imagination. It is a case study in how mass media induces people to buy into “fake news.”

A retired educator, animator, and lifelong fan of cartoons, **Margo Burns** is the 10th-generation great-granddaughter of Rebecca Nurse, who was hanged in Salem in 1692 on the charge of witchcraft. She is the project manager and an associate editor of *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), which is the definitive collection of transcriptions of the legal records of the episode.

Sunday, October 29 at 2:00 p.m.
New Ipswich Library (6 Main Street)

For more on Burns’ bio, visit our website: www.newipswichhistoricalsociety.org.

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