



From Suspicion to Verdict: Evidence Governance in Colonial Witchcraft Prosecutions

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ABSTRACT: Margaret Jacobs's letter of 3 January 1693 (preserved in Robert Calef's later compilation) captures the uncertainty and coercive pressures confronting the accused during New England's witchcraft crisis. This article reframes colonial witchcraft prosecution as an inquiry into the philosophy of evidence and institutional rationality: how communities under threat interpret misfortune as actionable claims, and how legal procedures stabilize suspicion into verdicts. Moving beyond Salem-centered scholarship that treats 1692 as paradigmatic, the article examines a wider colonial landscape and argues that witchcraft functioned as a gendered explanatory idiom through which illness, adversity, conflict, and misfortune were moralized and attributed to supernatural agency. While accusations disproportionately targeted women and proceedings often relied on spectral claims and other unstable proof-forms, prosecutions unfolded within distinct provincial legal frameworks. Evidentiary standards, procedural pathways, institutional filtering, and outcomes diverged across colonies and decades, as local institutions mediated wider Atlantic legal and theological currents in determining credibility and admissibility. Bringing less-studied catalysts—fortune-telling and “cunning” practices—into the same analytic frame as war, political instability, clerical influence, and Puritan discipline, the article shows that what mattered was not belief in the abstract but the governance of credibility: whose testimony counted, which inferences were permitted, and how uncertainty was managed (or exploited) as juridical fact.

Keywords: Spectral evidence; evidentiary governance; evidence regimes; procedural cascades; credibility; gender; colonial legal history; defamation

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1. Introduction

Beliefs and practices associated with witchcraft have appeared across many societies and historical periods, but colonial British America did not generate a single, uniform “witchcraft story.” Prosecutions were unevenly distributed across colonies and decades, and the meaning of “witchcraft” itself shifted with local legal procedure, ecclesiastical discipline, and—remarkably—the evidentiary cultures through which communities converted suspicion into actionable claims. Scholarship has nevertheless tended to center Salem, in part because the 1692–93 crisis produced an unusually dense archive and because Salem acquired an outsized cultural afterlife. “Salem” thus often functions as shorthand for colonial witch-hunting more generally, standing in for earlier, smaller, and procedurally varied cases. In some jurisdictions, “witch” talk most often surfaced as defamation, with courts disciplining accusers for reputational injury rather than treating maleficium as a prosecutable crime; in others, magistrates and clergy were more willing to translate fear and misfortune into criminal procedure.

This article considers Salem not as an isolated eccentricity but as an extreme episode that makes visible a broader philosophical problem: how institutions under crisis authorize and stabilize claims as “evidence,”

and how credibility is distributed when proof is structurally hard to secure. Witchcraft prosecution functioned as a mechanism for managing uncertainty. Communities organized misfortune, illness, conflict, and loss through available vocabularies of causation and blame, and accusations gained traction when they could be made legible within locally credible proof-forms. These proof-forms were rarely “scientific” in any modern sense; they were social and institutional—reputation evidence, clerical interpretation, and, in Salem most visibly, contentious practices such as spectral evidence. The central analytic claim is that belief alone does not explain prosecutorial intensity. The salient factor was how belief interacted with governance, church discipline, war and frontier insecurity, household conflict, and legal administration: conditions that determined whose words counted, what kinds of claims were admissible, and how quickly suspicion could harden into indictment.

The direction of accusation is analytically revealing because it shows how evidentiary regimes can amplify social asymmetries. Witchcraft allegations mapped local anxieties onto particular bodies and social roles. Accusations clustered around figures associated with household vulnerability and suspect expertise, especially healers, midwives, and those rumored to practice divination or experimental arts that could be redescribed as illicit magic. Women bore the greater burden of suspicion, though men were also accused, sometimes independently and sometimes through association within households and kin networks (Demos, 2008, p. 60). Rather than treating this pattern as a transhistorical story about “women and superstition,” the article inspects it as historically specific: gendered expectations about speech, authority, labor, and moral danger made certain women socially available for blame, especially where communal discipline and legal procedure reinforced one another. In this sense, gender operates not only as a demographic pattern of accusation but also as an axis of credibility and interpretive authority.

Regional comparison sharpens these points. Witchcraft prosecutions were more frequent in New England than elsewhere in British North America, especially compared with the Middle Colonies, the Chesapeake, and the southern mainland colonies. One reason was institutional context: New England’s Puritan establishments sustained stronger regimes of moral discipline and communal surveillance, whereas the Middle Colonies’ plural religious landscapes diffused ecclesiastical authority and limited coordinated disciplinary enforcement. Variation also existed within New England itself. Massachusetts and Connecticut shared Puritan foundations yet diverged in political arrangements and legal administration in ways that determined how accusations moved through courts. Massachusetts often restricted political participation more tightly than Connecticut, where governance was comparatively less dependent on church membership, and Connecticut’s early constitutional tradition—often associated with the Fundamental Orders—formed part of its distinct institutional profile (Taylor, 2002, p. 271). These differences mattered in moments of crisis. In Massachusetts, the Court of Oyer and Terminer, created under Governor William Phips in 1692 to manage a surge of cases, became notorious for evidentiary volatility, including the broad admission of spectral evidence and limited procedural safeguards for defendants. The prosecutions peaked that year: nineteen people were hanged, and Giles Corey was executed through *peine forte et dure* after refusing to enter a plea (McCabe, 1874, p. 225). More than 200 people were accused, over 150 were imprisoned, and at least five died in jail while awaiting trial. Salem’s distinctiveness lies not only in scale but also in the court’s willingness to treat controversial evidence—especially spectral claims—as admissible in a context where clerical interpretation, neighbor depositions, and moralized readings of misfortune could become mutually reinforcing (Mather, 2018, p. 84).

The sections that follow develop this argument through a mechanism-driven sequence rather than a catalogue of explanatory factors. First, I define evidentiary regimes (the locally authorized proof-forms and credibility rules that determine what counts as actionable proof) and procedural cascades (the feedback details by which examinations, depositions, and confinement can augment suspicion into conviction). Second, I model Salem as an extreme case that makes procedural accelerants and brakes visible: a permissive evidentiary posture and coercive confinement can generate a self-reinforcing escalation of accusations, whereas later tightening of admissibility and executive action can interrupt that escalation and force a contraction of prosecutions. Third, I test the framework comparatively across pre- and post-Salem episodes in New England and beyond, including jurisdictions where witchcraft talk was rerouted into

noncapital remedies such as reputational litigation. This comparative strategy sharpens the article's contribution: it explains not only why crises escalated, but why escalation was often limited even where belief and accusation were present.

2. Theoretical Overview of the Main Concepts

This article treats colonial witchcraft prosecution as a problem of interpretation and evidentiary culture, not only as a matter of belief. "Witchcraft" is approached here as an explanatory idiom: a culturally authorized vocabulary that translated misfortune—illness, accidents, crop failure, and interpersonal conflict—into intelligible causal narratives by assigning agency to diabolic collaboration and malicious intent. In this frame, accusation is not simply superstition erupting into violence; it is a social mechanism of crisis-management that organizes uncertainty into culpability and converts diffuse anxiety into a punishable enemy.

A second concept is local credibility and proof-forms. Colonial prosecutions did not proceed on "evidence" in a modern forensic sense; they turned on what communities and courts could stabilize as credible: reputation testimony, neighbor depositions, ministerial understanding, bodily "signs," and—most controversially—affliction narratives and spectral claims. "Spectral evidence" is treated not as an eccentric detail but as an epistemic flashpoint: it marks the point at which the court's authority can authorize the unverifiable, allowing private experience and communal rumor to acquire procedural force.

A third concept is gender as an institutional and explanatory category. Gender affected who was available for suspicion and how ambiguous bodily states became legible as diabolic harm. Rather than treating women's overrepresentation as a timeless story about "women and superstition," the article reads it historically: gendered expectations about speech, authority, labor, care, sexuality, and household order helped determine whose testimony counted, whose conduct appeared suspect, and whose misfortune could be narrated as evidence against them. In this sense, witchcraft prosecution becomes a window onto how colonial governance and religious discipline produced gendered vulnerability.

Finally, the article uses a regional-Atlantic concept of legal variation. It assumes no single "colonial" legal logic. Prosecution intensity depended on how local courts, executive officials, church discipline, and frontier insecurity interacted with broader English and European legal currents. The goal is not to dissolve Salem's specificity, but to explain why Salem became a culminating evidentiary crisis within a wider landscape of uneven prosecution, uneven restraint, and uneven archival survival. These concepts also allow the article to re-sort familiar historiographical variables into analytic roles. Rather than treating war, disease, religious conflict, or economic strain as direct "causes" of witchcraft belief, the framework treats them as threshold-shifters that widen credibility, expand admissibility, and intensify testimony-production—the conditions under which suspicion is most likely to harden into indictment. The payoff is explanatory portability: the same model accounts for both escalation and restraint¹.

3. Methodology

The article uses a qualitative, comparative historical method that combines close reading of primary records with regional comparison across British North America. It treats witchcraft cases as institutional episodes—points where private conflict, religious interpretation, and legal procedure converge—and asks what conditions allow suspicion to become actionable prosecution.

The method proceeds in three linked steps:

I. Contextual case analysis. It reads exemplary pre- and post-Salem cases (across multiple colonies and jurisdictions) to identify recurring sequences: misfortune, narration, accusation, examination and deposition, admissibility decisions, verdict. This allows the study to distinguish belief from prosecutorial momentum, and to show how outcomes depended on local governance and evidentiary thresholds.

II. Discourse-analytic attention to categories. The analysis tracks how terms such as *affliction*, *specter*, *mark*,

¹ See Table 1.

covenant, maleficium, and “cunning” practice functioned as bridging concepts between theology, communal rumor, and legal reasoning. This makes it possible to show how ordinary events were redescribed as diabolic action and how certain interpretive templates became legally productive.

III. Comparative institutional mapping. Without attempting exhaustive quantification, the article compares colonies and subregions (especially within New England, but also beyond it) to clarify how courts differed in procedure, executive intervention, and willingness to treat contentious materials as proof. The comparison is used to explain variation—why similar suspicions sometimes remained defamation or social conflict, and at other times became capital prosecution.

Because the archive is uneven, the method is explicitly interpretive and source-critical. It prioritizes authenticated records where available (examinations, depositions, warrants, indictments, diaries, ministerial writings), and it marks where later summaries risk inflating outcomes or smoothing uncertainties. The aim is to produce claims that recur across cases without erasing local difference: the article advances a mechanism-based explanation (how accusations gain legal traction) rather than a single-cause account (why people “believed”). To make the evidence-regime argument legible (and to ensure the article does more than survey prior explanations), the table below offers a transparent sample coding of episodes referenced in the narrative. Its function is analytical: to show how different proof-forms, gatekeeping structures, and procedural endpoints interrelate in practice, and to highlight “negative cases” in which suspicion does not culminate in capital prosecution.

4. Discussion

In Massachusetts Bay, witchcraft prosecutions should be distinguished from the colony’s broader system of religious and gender discipline. The 1637 civil and ecclesiastical proceedings against Anne Hutchinson during the Antinomian Controversy were not witchcraft trials (Wall & Cantwell, 2004, p. 122); they concerned heterodoxy, authority, and the boundaries of permissible speech. They matter here because they show how women’s dissent could be construed as a threat to a “godly” polity and subjected to punitive legal-theological scrutiny. Witchcraft prosecutions became legally thinkable in a more direct sense in the 1640s and after, as the colony formalized statutes and courts became more willing to treat certain accusations as criminal rather than merely defamatory. The best-attested early execution is Margaret Jones (Charlestown, 1648), recorded in John Winthrop’s journal, while the later execution of Ann Hibbins (Boston, 1656) indicates that suspicion could attach not only to social marginality but also to property, conflict, and neighborhood governance. These cases underline a key point for any Salem-centered narrative: the 1692 crisis did not emerge *ex nihilo* but intensified repertoires already available—local grievance, reputation evidence, ministerial interpretation, and claims about bodily signs and spectral harm—that had been intermittently activated for decades.

Because some proceedings survive only partially, this article draws on authenticated records while remaining cautious about extrapolation. The earliest recorded witch trial in any English colony occurred in 1626, with the trial of Joan Wright in Kecoughtan, Virginia, near Jamestown. Virginia’s record (1626–1730) was comparatively less severe than New England’s and often channeled “witch” talk into litigation over slander and reputation rather than sustained criminal prosecution. Legal records report at least a dozen trials in the seventeenth century, including a 1641 slander case involving Jane Rookens (Hudson, 2019, p. 79). The colony’s most famous episode is the case of Grace White Sherwood (“the Witch of Pungo”), accused in 1706, subjected to a swimming test, and later acquitted (Goodare, 2016, p.109; Hinson & Ferris, 2010, p. 148). Over time, elite and official skepticism increasingly reframed witchcraft as deception rather than diabolical agency: an revealing shift that helps explain why later “witchcraft” controversies in Virginia tend to appear as defamation or swindle rather than capital crime (Davies, 2013, p. 46). In addition, such beliefs in witchcraft and demonology were later subverted by skepticism that increased in America, particularly among colonial officials and the educated elite (Kierner & Treadway, 2015, p. 31). The last known case of witchcraft in Virginia involved slander and took place in 1802 in Brooke County.

Other New England colonies show earlier and parallel trajectories. In Connecticut, prosecutions began decades before Salem, including the first random execution of Alse (Alice) Young (1647) to be hanged in New England without a detailed judicial record of her indictment (Stoker et al., 2022; Taylor, 2002). Although Connecticut's legal and ecclesiastical structures overlapped with Massachusetts Bay's Puritan culture, its prosecutorial history is not reducible to Salem's evidentiary crisis; it contains multiple local episodes with distinct social triggers and court dynamics. A late-seventeenth-century case that illuminates both continuity and controversy is the prosecution of Mercy Disborough (Fairfield County, 1692). The case is especially useful for a "beyond Salem" frame because it shows how women's departures from rigid gender norms were construed as threats to colonial social order. It also traces how such departures could be converted into suspicion that circulated through rumor, prior enmity, and household talk and how courts weighed bodily marks, neighbor testimony, and affliction narratives—materials that could be stabilized as 'evidence' within a moral-legal imagination even when inconsistencies were visible.

Connecticut's record also includes other executions and panics that help clarify how "proof" was assembled: Mary Johnson (1648) (whose confession was extracted under severe pressure), John and Joan Carrington (1651), Goody Bassett (1651), and Goody Knapp (1653). During the Hartford-area panic of the early 1660s, executions included Rebecca and Nathaniel Greensmith, Mary Sanford, and Mary Barnes (Godbeer, 2005, p. 150). At the same time, Connecticut also illustrates how later summary traditions can inflate or misstate outcomes: Lydia Gilbert, for example, was accused and found guilty in 1654 in connection with an accidental shooting, but the surviving record does not support presenting her as an executed victim (Godbeer, 1993, pp. 235-236; Hall, 1991, p. 88). These early cases established recognizable repertoires—reputation conflict, neighbor testimony, clerical explanation, and bodily "signs"—that Salem would later intensify under extraordinary fear and institutional instability. They also foreground the limits of the archive: some proceedings survive only in fragments, while others are known largely through later retellings, making precision about outcomes and numbers methodologically essential.

Patterns of vulnerability likewise require qualification. Some scholarship emphasizes that accused persons were often socially exposed—marked by age, poverty, outsider status, or reputational fragility—yet the record also includes defendants embedded in local status and property relations. Ann Hibbins is a telling example: despite her elite ties and household standing, she was convicted and executed, suggesting that sometimes suspicion could attach to contentious neighborhood relations and conflicts over authority as much as to marginality (Fox, 1968, p. 39). Other Massachusetts cases similarly show how gendered expectations and local grievance could converge: Mary Bliss Parson was tried, later imprisoned, and died before execution (Demos, 2008, p. 273; Hall, 1991, pp. 99-104) and the 1688 prosecution of Ann Glover, amplified by Cotton Mather's involvement, demonstrates how affliction narratives and clerical framing could consolidate a case around the alleged bewitching of children to death (Godbeer, 1993, p. 38). Cotton Mather's involvement elevated the case into a cause célèbre [Fox, 1968, p. 37]. The point is not that "status protected" or "status doomed," but that witchcraft accusation often worked by translating interpersonal conflict and community anxiety into recognizable proof-forms that could override ordinary presumptions of credibility.

An Atlantic frame further complicates any single regional template. Bermuda's trials (1651-1696) unfolded in a small colony marked by political instability, religious conflict, and factional struggle. The surviving record includes executions as well as acquittals, pardons, and reprieves—indicating both intensity and variability in outcomes despite the colony's limited population (Levack, 2013, p. 393). Bermuda is also useful for distinguishing between what communities remembered as "witchcraft" and what courts processed as legally actionable wrongdoing. The 1730 prosecution and execution of Sally Bassett, an enslaved woman tried for an alleged poisoning conspiracy, is often folded into "witchcraft" memory in Bermudian cultural history (Bernhard, 2016, pp. 191, 232), even when the legal category is better understood through the jurisprudence of slavery and capital punishment. Such cases underscore a methodological point central to this article: popular belief and legal form do not always move in sync, and the mismatch can be historically illuminating.

Other colonies reinforce the same structural lesson. In New Hampshire, early accusations appear, but

executions do not; a later successful civil suit by an accused woman against her accusers signals that local legal culture could constrain witchcraft prosecution (Gummere, 1908, p. 37). Maryland likewise saw a relatively small body of trials late in the seventeenth century without clear evidence of execution (Thwaites, 1896, p. 92). In the seventeenth-century Dutch colony of New Netherland (centered on New Amsterdam), accusations and “pretended” supernatural practices appear, but authorities often handled such claims more cautiously than Puritan courts (Lukezic & McCarthy, 2021, p. 12); where witchcraft statutes weakened or fell into disuse, suspicions about fortune-telling and “cunning” activity could persist and be rerouted into other legal categories (fraud, disorderly conduct, vagrancy). Across these settings, the recurrent issue is not belief in the abstract but the institutional capacity to convert suspicion into proof.

Pre- and post-Salem cases support two claims that Salem-centric narratives can obscure. First, witchcraft accusation was a recurring mechanism for organizing crisis and managing conflict across multiple colonial legal cultures. Second, the “success” of accusation depended less on generalized belief than on whether suspicion could be converted into locally credible proof-forms—reputation, neighbor narration, ministerial interpretation, and, in specific places and moments, affliction and spectral claims. These pre- and post-Salem episodes clarify the article’s main comparative claim. Witchcraft belief and accusation are widespread, but prosecutorial intensity varies with institutional thresholds: whether proof-forms are treated as admissible, whether examinations generate iterative “discoveries,” and whether gatekeepers route accusations into capital procedure or into noncapital channels such as defamation and community discipline. The most rationally decisive evidence often comes from restraint and rerouting—the “negative cases” that show how crises are absorbed rather than escalated.

FACTORS AND TRIGGERS

This section examines the conditions that made witchcraft prosecutions more likely, with attention to economic, political, social, and religious strain. In Puritan New England, “religious crisis” often took the form of a hermeneutic of affliction: hardship could be read as a sign of divine displeasure and as evidence of an organized satanic assault on the godly community. Such revelatory frames mattered because they converted ordinary misfortune—illness, failed harvests, accidents, and interpersonal conflict—into intelligible signs of collective danger. In moments of heightened insecurity, private antagonisms and ambiguous events became easier to narrate through familiar templates of blame. Reports of affliction, rumor propagation, and escalating testimony could then generate a feedback loop in which fear produced “evidence,” and “evidence” intensified fear. At the institutional level, shifts in judicial administration, contested authority, and widening social and economic dislocation further increased the likelihood that local grievances would be formalized as public threats and processed within a diabolic explanatory scheme.

GENDER

Gender is treated here as a credibility regime: it shapes whose bodies and speech become evidentiary and how domestic conflict is narrativized into actionable harm. In other words, gender does not only predict who is accused; it helps determine which proof-forms (bodily signs, affliction narratives, reputational testimony) will be treated as persuasive. Gender influenced both who was suspected and how ambiguity in health, behavior, and reputation became legible as witchcraft. In Europe, male practitioners increasingly claimed a monopoly over formal medical authority, while obstetrics often remained associated with female midwives. In frontier America, physicians confronted high sickness and mortality alongside weak regulation and a crowded field of lay practitioners—frequently represented in the record as women—including female healers, former slaves, sellers of patent medicines, and Native Americans whose belief systems included shamans involved in healing, divination, and the maintenance of community harmony (Ehrenreich & English, 2010, pp. 56, 63). The role of male medical practitioners is sometimes underemphasized in accounts of how witchcraft cases were decoded and “resolved.” Physicians could distance themselves from explicitly spiritual explanations for disease and death, in part because medical knowledge and claims to scientific authority were shifting. Yet precisely because illness outcomes were uncertain—and because ambiguous sickness could provoke suspicion—midwives and other lay healers were often more exposed than physicians when cures failed or deaths followed (Fox, 1968, p. 86). Men

accused of practicing witchcraft were also frequently positioned differently from women: prevailing cultural assumptions strongly linked witchcraft to women, making men less common targets, and accused men could occupy influential roles within their communities, complicating any simple profile of the accused as marginal or socially expendable.

Within Puritan patriarchal culture, inherited European attitudes toward women were intensified through moralized accounts of female nature and social danger. Women were routinely described in explicitly evaluative terms—promiscuous, duplicitous, prodigal, irate, vindictive, disobedient, or haughty—and authorities construed women’s conduct as either supporting or threatening the colonial order. Poor and older women, in particular, were vulnerable to scapegoating: denied resources and social protection, they could be imagined as entering a pact with Satan to remedy material deprivation (Karlsen, *Devil*, 1998, pp. 159-160). Elizabeth Reis emphasizes that Puritan doctrine could associate womanhood itself with moral danger, encouraging negative views of women’s inherent corruption and deepening gender disparity in accusation and confession. Even where Puritan theology cultivated a broad fear of damnation, women were often led to interpret their “nature,” rather than discrete actions, as evidence against them. In this regard, women were accused frequently, confessed at high rates, and sometimes implicated other women, including healers and midwives (Reis, 1998, pp. 2,4). The case of Margaret Jones, executed in Massachusetts Bay in 1648 (Godbeer, 1993, p. 235), illustrates how medical ambiguity could be read as maleficence: suspicion gathered around her cures and warnings, and subsequent illness or death was presumed as confirmation of intent rather than coincidence. Testimony against her, and her anger in response, were construed as signs of diabolic alliance, while later observers treated events such as storms after her execution as providential corroboration (Netzley, 2002, p. 151).

Gendered vulnerability was also intensified by wider disputes over the nature of women, the sanctity of marriage, and the propriety of women’s social roles (Hudson, 2019, p. 46). Debates inherited from Christian tradition and refracted through Puritan concerns with hierarchy and order. Sexual tensions, property disputes, legal infractions, and social class conflict further increased the likelihood that women’s independence, circumspection, or “mannish” dress could be read as unruliness (Karlsen, *Devil*, 1998, p. 161). Anxiety about women’s visibility in streets and shops of emerging commercial centers likewise fed patriarchal narratives that cast female noncompliance as a threat to communal discipline. These pressures entered courts that often operated with weak procedural protections by modern standards: broad admission of dubious evidence, heavy pressure to confess, limited avenues for defense, and delayed or indecisive correction when doubts about procedure emerged. In Salem, the admission of spectral evidence as proof intensified that instability and helped transform suspicion into conviction.

RIVALRIES, ENVY, AND INHERITANCE

Interpersonal conflict matters in this system because it supplies testimony. Rivalries, envy, and inheritance disputes generate the narrative materials—threats, quarrels, remembered slights—that depositions can stabilize as plausibility structures. When admissibility is loose, dense testimony supply can substitute for direct proof.

Family rivalries, moral disagreement, and neighborhood conflict could intensify witchcraft accusation, especially in small settlements where social life was highly interdependent. Kin networks overlapped with church membership, economic exchange, and local governance, and conflicts were difficult to contain because communities were compact and reputations traveled quickly. In such settings, rumor circulated efficiently, and misfortune could be narrated through familiar templates of blame. Economic stress—scarcity, debt, competition for land, or disputes over labor and reciprocity—could sharpen antagonisms and make scapegoating more plausible. At the same time, accusations were not confined to one “type” of community: suspicion appears in towns and port settings as well, and the specific triggers varied from case to case.

Claims about representation and fairness require similar caution. Defendants in many colonial jurisdictions had limited access to counsel in the modern sense, and procedures did not reliably provide the kinds of adversarial safeguards associated with later criminal trials. The larger point remains that witchcraft could

be beheld as a public danger—something like a contagion of disorder—encouraging authorities and neighbors to read ambiguous events as urgent evidence rather than as uncertainty requiring restraint. Regional comparison helps clarify the role of political culture. Rhode Island, for example, is often described as less prone to sustained witchcraft prosecution, and that relative restraint is frequently linked to a combination of religious heterogeneity, weaker coercive church discipline, and different local governance patterns (Hertzke, 2013, p. 317). Such contrasts do not imply an absence of belief; they suggest that belief did not always translate into the same prosecutorial momentum.

A recurring feature of many prosecutions is that accusations often began with neighbors. Envy, hostility, and longstanding grievance could shape who was suspected and how testimony was framed. In Connecticut, surviving documents suggest that complaints frequently entered the legal system through formal presentments or petitions, after which magistrates collected depositions and examined accused persons and witnesses. Some officials treated bodily “signs,” such as a purported “devil’s mark,” as meaningful corroboration, and aggressive questioning could increase inconsistent statements or coerced admissions (Hendricks, 2022, p. 48). Yet Connecticut’s record also includes both convictions and acquittals, and evidentiary thresholds varied across localities and over time. The frequently cited case of Alse (Alice) Young, executed in 1647, remains sparsely documented; that thin archival footprint is itself instructive, since it limits what can be claimed with confidence about motive, procedure, and proof even when it indicates that conflict and suspicion were present (Stoker et al., 2022). Economic and familial structures could also produce patterned vulnerability. Karlsen’s influential argument emphasizes inheritance and property transmission in New England, proposing that women who occupied structurally ambiguous positions in relation to property—especially widows or women perceived as standing between households and generations (Karlsen, *Economic*, 1998, p. 4)—could become disproportionately exposed when disputes over wealth, obligation, and authority intensified. These aspects clarify how accusation could be socially generated before it became legally actionable: interpersonal conflict created the narrative conditions under which ambiguous events could be redescribed as intentional harm and carried into court as credible suspicion.

Because many files survive only in fragments, claims about patterns and numbers must distinguish documented procedure from retrospective reconstruction. While some proceedings are well documented, others were lost, destroyed, or preserved only in partial form, limiting confident claims about total counts and about courts’ internal reasoning. Uneven preservation is therefore historically consequential: it determines what can be recovered and obliges historians to differentiate between surviving legal documents, communal narration, and later retrospective interpretation.

COURTS AND SPECTRAL EVIDENCE

This section shifts from social conditions to procedural mechanics. Spectral evidence is treated as a hinge proof-form: once institutions authorize unverifiable claims, the evidentiary threshold drops and the procedural cascade becomes possible. The aim here is to specify the accelerants (widened admissibility, testimony multiplication, coercive pressure) and the brakes (gatekeeping skepticism, executive intervention, evidentiary recalibration) that distinguish escalation from restraint.

Spectral evidence was an inherently indirect mode of proof. Rather than resting on observable acts or material traces, it relied on testimony that an accused person’s “specter” or apparition had afflicted someone—claims grounded in explication and unverifiable experience (Hutchinson, 1870, p. 42). For that reason, it resisted ordinary tests of reliability, and its subjectivity made it especially vulnerable to escalation in moments of panic. Many colonial proceedings also depended on confessions alleging harm, another unstable evidentiary form (Levack, 2006, pp. 14, 64). Both kinds of proof were prone to distortion: confessions could be produced under coercive questioning, fear, or intense communal pressure, while witness narratives were often influenced by antagonism, rumor, and reputational conflict.

Authorities sometimes supplemented testimony with “tests” that mimicked procedural rigor while resting

on dubious premises—among them the touch test (ordeal by touch), the water test (ducking), and episodes such as the “witch’s cake” (Wilson, 1997, p. 33; Ransone, 2019, p. 128). In this setting, two features associated with adversarial fairness were limited: defendants generally lacked counsel capable of sustained challenge, and evidentiary standards were not consistently applied (Gebo & Boyes-Watson, 2022, p. 18). The modern maxim “innocent until proven guilty” was not codified as a colonial rule in any straightforward way; preliminary examinations and depositions—often propelled by affliction narratives—could be treated as legally weighty even when their epistemic status was contestable². These conditions did not simply produce error; they reveal how institutions under strain can convert uncertainty into authorized “knowledge” by treating presumption as proof.

Before colonial legal institutions fully consolidated, English legal inheritance and church authority regulated the administration of justice unevenly. The Church of England remained an institutional reference point for canon-law matters, while Puritan jurisdictions—within a covenantal composition—intensified attention to discipline, temptation, and communal purity (Vaughan, 1972, p. 158). That moral-legal orientation could render possession and affliction legible as diabolic intrusion rather than ordinary disorder. Lay practice also retained a residual ordeal sensibility: bodies were examined for marks or “signs,” and reports described juries as having “diligently searched” the deceased. When suspicion persisted, inquiry could shift toward older ordeal traditions such as “bier right” (ordeal by touch), premised on the belief that a murderer’s touch would provoke bleeding from the corpse. A Plymouth case from 1678, for instance, included requests that Anne Batson and family members touch a deceased child, though no conclusive evidence emerged (Shurtleff & Pulsifer, 1856, p. 262). The recurrence of such practices into the eighteenth century shows how providential and embodied “proof” could coexist with developing legal procedure.

Colonial practice also invites comparison with European contexts. Legal systems in Europe and British America were related but not identical, and witchcraft prosecutions unfolded within different institutional ecologies. In parts of Europe, including Calvinist Geneva, a significant share of prosecutions began with claims of possession and affliction, and similar patterns appear in Scotland and New England late in the seventeenth century (Levack, 2006, p. 20). Yet from the early seventeenth century onward, doubts about spectral evidence grew in many European settings, dictated by shifting intellectual climates and skepticism about spiritual causation as a basis for capital conviction (Kors & Peters, 2001, p. 21). European prosecutions more often proceeded through courts with broader jurisdictions, rather than through ad hoc tribunals assembled to manage sudden caseloads. Purported magical tools and texts were not uniformly central to courtroom proof in Europe; by contrast, New England ministers and magistrates sometimes treated “books” or written materials as suggestive, even when such items remained illustrative rather than dispositive (Levack, 2006, p. 13). Colonial conditions—small communities, dense reputational networks, and acute insecurity—could further intensify testimonial drift, especially when fear and factionalism stabilized suspicion into certainty.

These contrasts were visible even within British North America. Salem is associated with the broadest admission of spectral evidence, whereas Connecticut and other colonies could be more cautious. Some colonial leaders raised explicit concerns about the credibility of spectral claims, including John Winthrop Jr., whose reservations about “invisible assaults” supported acquittals in several early Connecticut cases. Restraint also appears elsewhere: in New York, Governor Richard Nicolls intervened to discharge suspects in witchcraft-related matters (Wilson, 1892, p. 322). Differences in executive posture and evidentiary thresholds did not eliminate belief or accusation, but they controlled whether suspicions hardened into

² This concept gained prominence only around a century after the Salem Witch trials and was coined at the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales (Old Bailey) in 1790 by Sir William Garrow (Moore C. 1997, p. 37). It was officially established in the United States by the Coffin vs. United States case in 1895 (Gray 2017, p. 21). Although this maxim was never explicitly stated in the U.S. Constitution, it derived from the fifth, sixth, and fourteenth amendments, establishing it as one of the fundamental rights recognized by the modern-day Supreme Court.

conviction.

PURITANISM AND QUAKERISM IN THE COLONIES

Religious difference is analyzed less as doctrine than as institutional discipline. It outlines institutional mediation (clerical legitimation or caution), community surveillance, and the interpretive templates that render certain experiences evidentiary. These factors can widen credibility and lower thresholds for action in moments of perceived threat.

Belief in witchcraft was embedded in early modern Christian cosmologies and, in several colonial jurisdictions, was treated as a capital offense under statutes and legal reasoning that drew on biblical authority (Taylor, 1908). Not all clergy supported prosecutions, and ministers did not typically serve as magistrates or legislators. Even so, magistrates sometimes consulted ministers when uncertain how to study the evidence before them, and clergy could shape how a case was framed by identifying suspected witchcraft, offering spiritual guidance, and at times endorsing legal action against alleged offenders (Poole, 1868, pp. 31-32). Scriptural passages such as Exodus 22:18, Leviticus 20:27, and Deuteronomy 18:10 were frequently invoked as moral and legal justification for punitive measures, helping translate theological fear into public policy (Mather, 2018, p. 122). In England, this scriptural grounding was reinforced through statute. Successive Witchcraft Acts—beginning with the statute under Henry VIII (1542) and later the Witchcraft Act of 1604—expanded penalties and clarified the criminal scope of “consulting with” spirits, remaining in force until replaced in 1735 (Taylor, 2002, p. 23). Claims about the scale and gender distribution of European executions should be stated carefully: estimates vary, but many accounts emphasize that executions numbered in the tens of thousands across early modern Europe and that women “about 80 per cent” comprised a substantial majority of those charged and executed (Scarre, 2001, p. 29).

The role of elite clerical voices in the 1692 crisis is most often associated with Cotton Mather of the Second Church in Boston. Mather is widely described as supportive of prosecution in principle, even when he advised caution about certain evidentiary practices. He affirmed the reality of diabolic compact and treated witchcraft as a threat capable of producing disorder in both body and polity (Mather, 2018, p. 122). At the same time, ministerial influence was neither uniform nor decisive. In June 1692, for example, the Governor and Council sought counsel from Boston’s clergy, and the resulting advice urged “very critical and exquisite caution,” invoking authorities such as William Perkins and Richard Bernard to signal limits on the credibility of spectral evidence. Yet courts did not consistently adhere to such cautions (Poole, 1868, p. 31), illustrating the gap that could open between clerical guidance and judicial practice during a rapidly escalating crisis.

It is also important to distinguish witchcraft prosecution from other forms of Puritan religious policing. Decades before Salem, Massachusetts Bay harshly punished groups that Puritan authorities judged heretical, including Quakers, who were criminalized and, at moments, subjected to severe penalties. Quakerism emerged in the 1650s under George Fox and was influenced by commitments that challenged Puritan orthodoxies, including direct spiritual experience and a stronger place for women’s religious speech (Scholl & Morris, 2022, p. 1304). In Massachusetts Bay, the execution of four Quakers between 1659 and 1661—later remembered as the “Boston Martyrs”—signals the colony’s broader punitive posture toward dissent. This history matters here because it reveals institutional habits through which religious difference could be transformed into prosecutable threat, even when the legal category was not witchcraft.

Institutional change also formed part of the background to Salem. The Massachusetts charter of 1691 altered governance and political participation, shifting voting requirements away from church membership toward property-based qualifications and reconfiguring the older “New England Way” (Davis & Woodman, 1972, p. 51). The colony navigated this transition in the early 1690s, and the resulting uncertainty complicated legal administration at the moment accusations multiplied. The Salem prosecutions began to contract in late 1692 after Governor William Phips dissolved the Court of Oyer and Terminer; in 1693, further proceedings diminished and many detainees were released, with some later petitions seeking compensation (Faderman, 2023, p. 37). The crisis, in other words, unfolded not only as religious fear but within a shifting political-legal environment that helped determine when prosecution could expand and

when it could be restrained.

Colonial variations in religious settlement patterns further dictated prosecutorial intensity. Rhode Island, founded by Roger Williams and associated with religious liberty and church–state separation, became a refuge for heterodox groups and developed a civic culture less conducive to sustained witchcraft prosecution (Sulaiman, 2007, p. 101); its relative restraint has often been linked to plural religious life and political arrangements that limited the consolidation of coercive disciplinary authority. Similar patterns appear elsewhere. Pennsylvania, founded under William Penn’s Quaker influence, did not eliminate suspicion or conflict, but officials were more likely to treat accusations with skepticism than as occasions for capital prosecution (Koven, 2014, p. 9). Even so, Pennsylvania still recorded witchcraft-related proceedings, including the Philadelphia case against Margaret Mattson and Yeshro (Yeshua) Hendrickson, which ended not in execution but in binding the accused to good behavior (Hazard, 1828, p. 108).

WARS, EXTERNAL THREATS, AND UNSTABLE GOVERNMENTS

War and political instability matter in this argument because they produce emergency governance: conditions under which institutions may reward rapid closure, treat uncertainty as actionable, and become more permissive about proof-forms that would otherwise be filtered. In evidence-regime terms, war shifts the threshold at which suspicion triggers procedure.

European powers sought alliances with Indigenous nations as part of larger contests for territory and influence, disrupting trade networks and local security. In many settlements, periodic shortages, displacement, and the constant anticipation of attack produced an atmosphere in which misfortune could be viewed as evidence of hidden enemies. Under such pressure, communities could become more receptive to supernatural explanations for illness and loss. The attributes of accusation in witchcraft cases—denials, confessions, rumor, hearsay, and the pressures of domestic and neighborhood relationships—often intensified under conditions of fear, creating an environment in which suspicion could spread quickly and acquire the force of certainty (Hoffer, 1998, pp. 55, 58).

In New England, Anglo–Indigenous conflict formed an early and persistent backdrop. The Pequot War (1636–1638) marked an early large-scale conflict between English settlers and Indigenous communities (Kennedy et al., 2016, p. 40). Later struggles, including King Philip’s (Metacom’s) War (1675–1676), generated profound instability through violence, forced migration, and the collapse of fragile local arrangements (Martin & Williams, 2016, p. 17).³ By the late seventeenth century, imperial war increasingly linked colonial insecurity to European politics. The Nine Years’ War (1688–1697), known in North America as King William’s War (1689–1697), brought renewed raids and frontier violence to northern New England and fueled fears that settlements would be destroyed. In Massachusetts Bay, the convergence of frontier warfare, population displacement, and rumor created a heightened sense of vulnerability—conditions in which stories of diabolic conspiracy could circulate with particular force (Richards, 2014, p. 24). Scholars such as Mary Beth Norton have emphasized the relevance of northern frontier conflict and attacks tied to Wabanaki–English tensions for understanding the emotional and political climate in which Salem unfolded, especially the movement of refugees and the transmission of war news and atrocity reports through Essex County communities.

Later, part of the larger War of Spanish Succession in Europe, Queen Anne’s War (1702–1713) erupted as a conflict between French and English forces in North America. Following a triumphant invasion of the French colony of Acadia, Sir William Phips opted to launch a raid on Quebec City, enticing his volunteer troops with the promise of half the plunder along with their regular wages. This decision led to the issuance of paper currency in 1690, resulting in successive financial crises that exasperated tensions between the Crown and its later appointed governors and administrators in Province of Massachusetts Bay, including Joseph Dudley, Samuel Shute, William Dummer, and William Burnet (Labaree, 1979, pp. 136, 138–139).

³ In other accounts from 1675 to 1678, see Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert A. Yelle, and Mateo Taussig-Rubbo, eds., *After Secular Law* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Law Books, 2011).

Along these lines, Mary Beth Norton claims that the roots of the Salem witchcraft crisis can be placed on the tensions between colonists and the Wabanaki Indians (Norton, 2003, p. 94). In Particular, the external raids, known as the Battle of Falmouth (now Portland) in 1690, resulted in the death of two hundred settlers and the burning of their homes (Hull, 1885, p. 29). This surge of instability was provoked by the fragility of the colonial governments administered by colonial charters. These charters were legal documents that included directives and proclamations to establish a form of jurisdiction and authority for the British monarchy over the sparsely settled colonies in the New World. More importantly, they were granted to assert the monarchy's enduring authority and address matters such as emigration, trade, foreign policy, as well as to hear appeals and petitions from the American colonies.

War also strained colonial governance and finance. Military expeditions required funds, supplies, and coordination that exceeded the capacity of many colonial administrations. The 1690 expedition against French-controlled Quebec, associated with William Phips, is frequently cited as a moment when wartime mobilization intersected with fiscal improvisation, including the issuance of paper currency to meet costs. Such measures could deepen disputes over taxation, compensation, and authority and intensify tensions between local institutions and imperial administrators (Labaree, 1979, pp. 136, 138-139). These conflicts unfolded within a charter-based imperial order in which authority and jurisdiction were periodically reconfigured, producing uncertainty about governance at precisely the moments when social stress was highest.

In Massachusetts, the political and legal landscape at the onset of the Salem crisis was unusually unsettled. The overthrow of the Dominion of New England and the deposition of Governor Edmund Andros in 1689 created an interim period of uncertainty, and the subsequent reorganization of authority under a new charter regime contributed to administrative instability. At the same time, the apparatus of confinement expanded rapidly: jails in Salem, Ipswich, Boston, and Cambridge filled with accused people, making the crisis visible and self-reinforcing (Taylor, 1908, p. 250). Local conflicts also intensified within congregations and towns. Disputes between ministers and parishioners—often involving church governance, religious practice, and financial support—could harden factional lines and magnify interpersonal antagonisms portraying ministers as persistent while characterizing townsmen as unwilling, unfriendly, or frugal (Hoffer, 1998, p. 55). These overlapping pressures did not determine outcomes on their own, but they created a volatile environment in which accusations could flourish and in which legal authorities struggled to stabilize standards of proof and procedure.

ALCHEMY, MALADIES, AND DIVINATION

This section treats “alchemy,” illness, healing, and divination as boundary-work problems. Where causal explanation is scarce, communities generate interpretive narratives; in crisis moments, those narratives can be recoded as proof. The boundary between tolerated expertise and suspect power becomes evidentiary when gatekeepers define it through a diabolic frame.

Trial records and later commentary preserve extensive discussion of divination, healing, countermagic, and the ways these practices intersected with colonial prosecutions (Woodward, 2013, P. 211). Scholars have therefore examined how New England clergy, lawyers, physicians, magistrates, and writers described *maleficium* through vocabularies that mixed providential theology with emerging forms of natural-philosophical explanation (Fox, 1968). Because alchemy promised practical benefits in medicine, mining, agriculture, and industrial processing, some New Englanders regarded alchemical expertise with interest and, at times, welcomed practitioners into their communities. At the same time, alchemical activity could become a site of scrutiny when it appeared to blur into prohibited “magic” or when practitioners adopted religious views authorities treated as suspect. Debates surrounding the alchemical project associated with New London and John Winthrop Jr.'s wider intellectual networks illustrate how “experimental” inquiry could be admired as useful knowledge yet monitored for signs of heterodoxy or illicit practice, complicating any simple boundary between science and superstition (Woodward, 2013, P. 27).

This boundary instability mattered because colonial communities consistently sought explanations for suffering. Witches were often blamed for events that lacked clear causation: outbreaks of infectious disease, harsh winters, crop failures, and economic reversals (Wickman, 2018, p. 167). Such scapegoating did not require a coherent theory of disease or climate; it relied on a culturally available logic in which misfortune could be read as intentional harm. Under conditions of fear and scarcity, accusation offered a way to assign responsibility and translate diffuse anxiety into an identifiable enemy (Fels, 2018, p. 187). The record also shows how divination and “cunning” activity could slide from tolerated practice into prosecutable suspicion. Astrological and divinatory texts spread widely in the English Atlantic world, and colonists encountered them through almanacs, manuals, and borrowed books. In a Connecticut case associated with Katherine Harrison of Wethersfield, neighbors simplified reported fortune-telling and healing practices as evidence of *maleficium*, and hostile narration framed her remedies as harmful rather than curative (Westerkamp, 2021, p. 77). The proceedings demonstrate how allegations could accumulate through reputation conflict and economic jealousy, and how the same actions could be construed as “help” or “harm” depending on who narrated them (Lee et al., 2019). In the trial, her former patients accused her of *maleficium*, claiming she used herbal medicine to harm others. Even when juries hesitated or evidence remained inconclusive, communal pressure could persist; the case is frequently cited because John Winthrop Jr. questioned the evidentiary basis of the claims and contributed to the matter’s eventual dismissal.

The Salem crisis intensified these nuances. The turmoil became conspicuous when Elizabeth (“Betty”) Parris and Abigail Williams began displaying alarming behaviors deemed as signs of affliction (Netzley, 2002, p. 210; Hansen, 2007). Reports surfaced that the girls had experimented with fortune-telling and minor occult rituals, activities they concealed from adults (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023, p. 36). In the colonial imagination, nonconforming practices could be stigmatized as fraudulent, dangerous, or diabolic, and such stigma shaped how communities comprehended unfamiliar rites and sudden illness. Salem also generated later medical and psychological attempts to account for the reported symptoms without recourse to supernatural causation (Breslaw, 1996). One of the most debated retrospective hypotheses is ergotism: Linnda Caporael argues that, if court records are treated as reasonably faithful descriptions of observed behavior, the symptoms align with forms of ergot poisoning associated with contaminated grain (Caporael, 1976, pp. 21-26). Other retrospective readings propose alternatives such as conversion disorder, mass psychogenic illness, or other toxic exposures (Matossian, 1982). The point is not to settle the etiology of Salem’s afflictions—likely impossible to determine with confidence—but to show how limited medical knowledge and intense social stress could render extraordinary symptoms legible as a “supernatural distemper” (Carlson, 1999, p. 160), reinforcing the plausibility of accusation. Environmental explanations have likewise been proposed, including wet conditions and food-storage practices that could affect contamination and health, alongside the recurrence of epidemic disease and seasonal hardship that sparked fear across the colony. The reported “afflictions” resemble the physical and neurological behaviors associated with encephalitis lethargica (“sleeping sickness”) during the 1916–1930 pandemic. Such explanations function best as explicatory possibilities rather than proofs: they clarify how bodily distress and uncertainty could be translated into moral and legal narratives, and why divination, healing, and experimental knowledge could be read either as communal resource or as threatening evidence of witchcraft.

The era of witch hunts in Europe came to an end with the introduction of witchcraft Acts, including the one in the Kingdom of Great Britain in 1735. This act defined witchcraft and magic as religious deviation, allowing the country to target unconventional spiritual traditions by associating them with criminal fraud through the classification of people’s beliefs and practices as deceptive (Ewan et al., 2006, p. 170; Henderson, 2016, p. 238). However, in America, one more witch trial took place in 1878, as Lucretia Brown vs. Daniel Spofford case was conducted in Salem and in 1918 it was deemed as the last witch trial (Miller, 1995, p. 62).

5. Synopsis of the Main Research Outcomes

This article argues that colonial witchcraft prosecutions are best understood through profound inspection of evidence and credibility as communities turned misfortune into accusation, and courts either intensified or restrained suspicion by regulating which proof-forms counted, whose testimony carried weight, and how procedures amplified uncertainty into verdicts. Along these lines, the main outcomes of the article are:

- I. It shifts the frame from Salem as a default model to a comparative account across colonial British America, showing that prosecution intensity and outcomes vary with local legal procedure and evidentiary culture.
- II. It explains escalation and restraint through evidentiary regimes and procedural cascades, emphasizing how changes in admissible proof and judicial sequence can amplify or contain suspicion.
- III. It re-specifies gender as a credibility problem, arguing that expectations about women's speech, conduct, and social roles shaped both vulnerability to accusation and the authority of testimony.
- IV. It reframes "witch-hunt" as a recurring dynamic produced by procedural authority, rather than as an exceptional episode driven by irrational belief alone.

6. Conclusions

The memory of early American witch trials, though centuries past, remains one of the most unsettling legacies of colonial history. Salem is the best-known episode, but witchcraft prosecution was neither born in Salem nor confined to it. Across British North America, accusations emerged within specific local ecologies of belief, law, and conflict, and they became consequential when communities could translate diffuse fear into locally credible forms of proof—most visibly, in Salem, through the institutional admission of contentious practices such as spectral evidence. Witch-hunting thus functioned less as an irrational eruption than as a social and legal mechanism for organizing crisis: it rendered misfortune intelligible by assigning blame, distributed credibility unevenly, and gave institutional form to suspicion. A comparative frame also clarifies why New England produced the most intense episodes. Puritan disciplinary culture, recurrent frontier warfare and instability, and uncertainty within colonial governance and legal administration created conditions in which rumor could harden into indictment. At the same time, the record indicates that prosecutions were propelled by granular pressures: disputes between neighbors, competition over property and inheritance, factional conflict within congregations, and struggles over gendered authority in households and communities. Women's disproportionate vulnerability did not arise from a single cause; it was produced by overlapping expectations about moral danger, labor and care roles, and the policing of female speech and independence. Even practices that could function as communal resources—healing, divination, countermagic, and other forms of vernacular expertise—could be recoded as maleficium when social trust collapsed or when influential actors framed such activity as a threat to order.

This history also highlights the problem of evidence. Witchcraft prosecutions expose how legal systems falter when standards of proof are unstable and when institutions authorize claims that cannot be tested. The weight granted to spectral reports, reputation-driven depositions, and pressured confessions did not merely produce individual miscarriages of justice; it institutionalized a mode of adjudication in which fear substituted for verification. The consequences were profound: people lost property, freedom, and life, and communities absorbed patterns of suspicion that could outlast the trials themselves. The uneven archival record—often the only trace of those accused—further underscores how persecution can erase as much as it documents, leaving historians to reconstruct lives through hostile paperwork rather than through the accused's own voices.

The continued cultural resonance of "witch-hunt" is therefore not simply metaphorical. It names a recurring political and epistemic dynamic: crises invite narratives of hidden enemies, and those narratives become dangerous when they acquire procedural authority—when rumor is dignified as evidence, when

dissent is received as threat, and when law is used to ratify predetermined guilt. For that reason, the colonial cases examined here matter beyond antiquarian interest. They clarify how uncertainty can be converted into culpability; how vulnerable people become socially available for punishment; and how institutions, under pressure, can transform expositional certainty into coercion. The most durable lesson is institutional rather than moralizing: where proof is unstable and adjudication is governed by fear, the machinery of justice becomes capable of producing catastrophe while believing itself to be restoring order.

Table 1. Evidence-regime matrix

Selected colonial episodes illustrating how dominant proof-forms and institutional filters shaped trajectories of escalation or restraint. Escalation is associated with widened admissibility, testimony multiplication, and coercive pressure; restraint is associated with institutional skepticism, evidentiary recalibration, and executive intervention. The following is a purposive analytical table, not a census of colonial prosecutions.

Episode (date)	Jurisdiction	Dominant proof-forms	Institutional filters (key actors)	Trajectory	Endpoint / mechanism notes
Escalation (accelerant-dominant episodes)					
Salem crisis (1692)	Massachusetts Bay	Affliction narratives; spectral claims; depositions; confession and implication chains	Magistrates; ministers; Court of Oyer and Terminer; governor (executive)	Escalation or contraction	Cascade: widened admissibility (and) testimony multiplication (and) detention pressure; later contraction via evidentiary recalibration and executive dissolution of tribunal.
Else (Alice) Young execution (1647)	Connecticut	Community testimony; reputation evidence; providential interpretation	Local courts and magistracy	Escalation (early capital endpoint)	Capital endpoint in early period; illustrates how reputation evidence could become dispositive in a thinly documented record.
Mary Johnson (1648)	Connecticut	Pressured confession; moralized illness; community testimony	Local courts; clerical and communal pressure	Escalation (localized)	Confession functions as truth-production under coercive pressure; weak adversarial safeguards accelerate indictment and

					conviction.
Restraint and negative cases (brake-dominant episodes)					
Mercy Disborough (1692)	Connecticut	Depositions; reputation testimony; selective handling of affliction reports	Governor and magistrates (filtering posture)	Restraint	Brake: magisterial restraint narrows admissibility; escalation constrained relative to Salem.
New York (Nicolls intervention)	New York	Accusation reports (limited surviving detail)	Governor Richard Nicolls (executive)	Restraint	Brake: executive intervention discharges suspects; prevents conversion of suspicion into capital procedure.
Noncapital routing (pattern)	Chesapeake/Virginia	Slander and defamation complaints; community testimony	County courts; local elites	Restraint (procedural rerouting)	Brake: accusations absorbed as reputational disputes; endpoint is civil remedy rather than capital prosecution.
Accusations without executions (pattern)	New Hampshire	Rumor; depositions; intermittent warrants	Local magistracy; civil courts	Restraint / stall	Negative case: accusations present but conversion to capital procedure stalls; later civil suit by an accused woman against accusers signals local constraint.
Mixed intensity (recurrent prosecutions without Salem-style cascade)					
Bermuda prosecutions (1651-1696)	Bermuda	Community testimony; reputation evidence; interrogation reports	Colonial officials; local governance	Mixed	Repeated prosecutions show social proximity and governance strain can raise testimony supply without

					reproducing Salem's evidentiary regime.
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7. Limitations, Implications, and Further Directions of Research

The article's claims are bounded by scope and archive. It does not attempt a comprehensive census of prosecutions across all colonies and decades, and it cannot resolve every numerical dispute because many records are fragmentary, lost, or preserved through later retrospective narration. The argument is therefore strongest where it remains close to what the documents can support: sequences of accusation, types of proof treated as credible, and the institutional conditions under which uncertainty hardened into conviction. The article's intervention lies in changing the explanatory unit from 'panic' to procedure. The evidence-regime foundation specifies how proof-forms become admissible, how credibility is allocated, and how a procedural cascade can emerge from routine steps such as examination and deposition. Embedding a transparent sample matrix inside the conclusion and by using comparative negative cases (where accusations are rerouted or absorbed), the article aims to do more than summarize scholarship: it offers a portable model that can be tested and extended. Despite these limits, the contribution is conceptual as well as historical: the article clarifies how procedural authority can convert the unverifiable into actionable "evidence," and how gendered credibility and communal discipline determined whose bodies and speech became available for blame. In that sense, witchcraft prosecution becomes a historically grounded case-study in the hazards of epistemic instability under institutional pressure—how courts can mistake interpretive certainty for verification when crisis conditions reward rapid closure.

Further research could extend the framework in three directions. First, a larger corpus—including more colonies, more decades, and more non-capital proceedings—would test how widely the identified proof-forms and institutional mechanisms travel. Second, closer integration of Indigenous and Atlantic contexts could sharpen how frontier war, displacement, and cross-cultural encounters shaped accusation and governance. Third, a deeper microhistory of selected communities (church conflict, inheritance patterns, local economies, and household structures) could refine how gendered vulnerability operated differently across localities.

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