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The Devil's Disciples: The Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials

Peter Charles Hoffer

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Mention the term *witch hunt*, and Salem, Massachusetts, springs to mind?and with it the power of superstition, the danger of mob mentality, and our natural fear of gross injustice. For more than a year, between January 1692 and May 1693, the men and women of Salem village lived in heightened fear of witches and their master, the Devil. Hundreds were accused of practicing witchcraft. Many suspects languished in jail for months. Nineteen men and women were hanged; one was pressed to death. Neighbors turned against neighbors, children informed on their parents, and ministers denounced members of their congregations. How could a settled community turn so viciously against itself? Why were certain persons accused and condemned while others were not? And why did the incidents of Salem occur where and when they did?

Approaching the subject as a legal and social historian, Peter Charles Hoffer offers a fresh look at the Salem outbreak based on recent studies of panic rumors, teen hysteria, child abuse, and intrafamily relations. He brings to life a set of conversations?in taverns and courtrooms, at home and work?which took place among suspected witches, accusers, witnesses, and spectators. The accusations, denials, and confessions of this legal story eventually resurrect the tangled internal tensions that lay at the bottom of the Salem witch hunts.

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