

Tituba

Gale Student Resources in Context, 2017

- **Nationality:** American
- **Occupation:** Slave

A central but mysterious figure in the infamous Salem witch trials, Tituba was a slave owned by Puritan minister Samuel Parris (1653–1720). Parris was Salem Village's religious leader when witch hysteria broke out in Massachusetts in 1692. Tituba was among the first three women in the colony to be accused of witchcraft.

During her dramatic turn as a witness, Tituba confessed to the charges and accused two other community members of being witches. She was imprisoned, but Parris acted to secure her release at first. Tituba then recanted her confession, and it is believed that Parris eventually sold her to a new owner. This event marks Tituba's disappearance from the historical record.

Critical Thinking Questions

- Why are the historical records regarding Tituba's life so contradictory and inconsistent?
- Why might the historical record have evolved to describe Tituba as an African slave?
- What might have motivated Tituba to falsely accuse Sarah Osborne and Sarah Good of witchcraft?

Tituba's Background

Historical sources give contradictory accounts of Tituba's background. Court papers from the Salem witch trials describe her as an American Indian at least fifteen times. Other sources say Parris brought her with him to the American colonies from Barbados, where he presumably purchased her in a slave market. Over the course of the ensuing centuries, Tituba came to be described as half African, then fully African. At least one historian claims she was a member of the indigenous Arawak peoples of South America and that she was kidnapped from her childhood home in modern-day Venezuela and sold into slavery.

It is known that Parris brought Tituba and two other slaves with him when he returned to Massachusetts from Barbados in 1680. One of these other slaves was named John; the other's name is not known. The slave known as John was later assigned the surname Indian, presumably as a description of his racial background. Tituba later married John Indian and took the same last name.

Tituba's age when she first arrived in Massachusetts is unknown, but it is presumed that she was over the age of twelve but under the age of eighteen. Parris and his family relocated from Boston to Salem in 1689. It is thought that John Indian and Tituba also married around this time. According to some sources, John Indian and Tituba went on to have a daughter named Violet.

Beginnings of the Salem Witch Hunt

In early 1692, Parris's daughter Elizabeth "Betty" Parris (1682–1760) and her cousin Abigail Williams (1680–c. 1697) began to suffer unusual fits, during which the girls allegedly experienced violent convulsions and exhibited other types of uncontrollable behavior. Witchcraft was suspected. After learning this, Tituba, her husband, and a neighbor were said to have baked the girls a "witch cake," made from a mixture of rye and the girls' urine. They fed the cake to a dog, which was supposed to produce signs from which the highly religious community could determine the person or persons responsible for the girls' strange behavior.

Although the initial witch cake test failed to produce any suspects, Betty and Abigail soon accused Tituba and two other local women, Sarah Osborne (c. 1643–1692) and Sarah Good (1653–1692), of using black magic against them. The three women were arrested and promptly put on trial.

Tituba's Role during the Salem Witch Trials

Tituba testified in the Salem witch trials between March 1 and March 5, 1692. During her testimony, Tituba relayed a sensational story to the court, admitting that she, Osborne, and Good were all witches. However, multiple historical sources indicate that Parris beat Tituba the day after she was first accused of witchcraft by Betty and Abigail, forcing a confession out of her. In court, however, Tituba went on to voluntarily claim that Osborne and Good had met with the devil, and she provided elaborate accounts of their witchcraft rituals.

While many historians later claimed that Tituba's descriptions of these rituals were consistent with voodoo practices (and thus concluded that Tituba may have been a practitioner of voodoo herself), others say that all the details Tituba provided could be found in English superstitions and folk beliefs. Tituba also went into a fit of her own while on trial, a turn of events that convinced many of those present that the devil was indeed at work in Salem.

Tituba's strange behavior triggered an avalanche of witchcraft accusations, sending the Massachusetts Bay Colony into a state of hysteria. By the autumn of 1692, more than 200 women and men had been accused of being witches in league with the devil. The Salem witch trials resulted in the executions of twenty people found guilty of witchcraft, including Good. However, Tituba herself escaped this fate.

Aftermath of the Trials: Tituba's Release and Legacy

Court records from the Salem witch trials make little mention of Tituba after her testimony. However, it is known that she was imprisoned until Parris, her owner, agreed to pay the outstanding costs related to her incarceration. Yet, Tituba eventually withdrew her confession, leading Parris to refuse to pay for her release. At some point, an unknown individual paid the outstanding sum, and Tituba was released. This individual was thought to have purchased Tituba from Parris. Nothing is known about what happened to Tituba after her release from prison, though some accounts state that Tituba and John Indian's daughter, Violet, remained the property of the Parris family.

Tituba was the only one of the three women originally accused of witchcraft to escape death during the Salem witch trials. Good was executed, and Osborne died in prison.

Tituba has been depicted in literature, drama, and film on multiple occasions, most notably in *The Crucible*, a 1953 play by Arthur Miller (1915–2005). Tituba was portrayed by African

American actress Charlayne Woodard (1953–) in the 1996 movie adaptation of the play.

Timeline—Tituba

- c. 1668: Tituba is born in an unknown location.
- c. 1680: Samuel Parris purchases Tituba from a slave market in Barbados.
- 1680: Parris returns to Massachusetts, bringing Tituba, her future husband (John Indian), and an unnamed third slave with him.
- c. 1689: Tituba and John Indian are married.
- 1692: Two girls living in the Massachusetts Bay Colony accuse Tituba of bewitching them.
- 1692: Tituba is put on trial for witchcraft, confesses, and implicates two other women as fellow witches.
- c. 1693: An unknown individual secures Tituba's release from prison, and Tituba disappears from the historical record.

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