

Introduction

During the last three hundred years many have studied and speculated about the witchcraft episode which occurred in Salem Village in 1692. Some have concluded that the ministers of New England played key roles in this episode. While many men of God, such as Increase and Cotton Mather, clearly did play some part in the formal witch trials, one cleric stood out in the prominent role that he played in the origins of the crisis and during the trials. Samuel Parris, as minister of Salem Village, played one of the most crucial roles in the whole of the witchcraft episode. Although many aspects of these events have been extensively researched, surprisingly the role of Parris has been largely neglected. The purpose of this investigation is to provide a detailed examination of the life and role of Samuel Parris, and in particular to suggest that Parris calculatingly provoked the outbreak of witchcraft hysteria to secure his own position against the challenges of his opponents. The thinness of the evidence prevents absolute proof of this but it is the thesis of this dissertation that nevertheless sufficient evidence exists to indicate that such an interpretation is at least plausible.

Throughout the history of New England there were many accusations and prosecutions for the crime of witchcraft. The Salem witch trials, however, stand out from these by their sheer ferocity and by the unusual acceptance and usage of certain types of evidence, particularly spectral evidence. The Salem trials resulted in one of the largest number of victims, with nineteen persons going to the gallows and hundreds of others languishing in gaol. Confessing witches were treated differently in this episode compared with the New England norm. In this case, confessing to the crime of witchcraft earned time in gaol rather than the traditional death sentence. The Salem episode was one of the most extraordinary in the

history of New England witchcraft and seemed to defiantly fly in the face of all the traditions concerning the handling of witchcraft cases.

One unusual aspect of the Salem trials, though, lay in the very beginnings of the episode. In previous cases where an afflicted person made witchcraft accusations, it was they who were examined intensely for the truth of their testimony. In many cases it was the local minister who took charge of these afflicted accusers. The results of these cases were very different from what eventuated at Salem. The other New England cases resulted in one or two accusations only being made or in the exposing of the afflicted as a liar. Remarkably in the Salem case, the local minister appears to have displayed a credulity not seen among the puritan clergy. This minister, seemingly accepted, without question, the testimony of the afflicted as the truth. It is this aspect of the Salem episode - Samuel Parris' behaviour toward the afflicted, that will be a major focus of the thesis.

Although the material written and circulated about the Salem witch trials is abundant, few authors, as indicated earlier, had examined in any great detail the involvement of Samuel Parris. Most who have written about Parris and his contribution to the Salem witch trials represent two distinct schools of thought. The first school is critical of Parris and the role he played. The opinions of this group range from mild disapproval to outright condemnation for some of his actions. The other school represents those who agree that Parris did not beget or encourage the witchcraft proceedings in any way. For the main part, this group's opinion is that Parris played only a minor role and was almost, if not altogether blameless of encouraging or inciting the trials. At the very least, they consider him only a pawn of circumstance, doing the right thing by both his flock and his duty as a minister. What both these groups have in common, though, in spite of their

differing opinions on the character of Parris, is that they both agree that he played no part in engendering the trials.

The authors most critical of Samuel Parris come from the nineteenth century. J.W. Hanson in his *History of the Town of Danvers*, held a low opinion of Parris and claimed that his actions “in holding wide the sluice ways through which so much evil flowed upon the people, must render his character forever odious”¹. Parris’ active role in “that awful tragedy”, had “rendered himself so obnoxious to the people that in 1693 it was proposed to make void his salary”². George Bancroft considered that Parris’ actions during the witchcraft episode were the result of “personal malice” and “blind zeal”³. An even more critical view of Parris is that of Brooks Adams. In Adams’ considered opinion,

Parris behaved like a madman; not only did he preach inflammatory sermons, but he conducted the examinations and his questions were such that the evidence was in truth nothing but what he put in the mouths of the witnesses; yet he seems to have been guilty of a darker crime for there is reason to suppose he garbled the testimony it was his sacred duty to truly record⁴.

Each of these authors, in spite of their inflammatory opinions of him do not infer in any way that Parris was involved in giving rise to the witchcraft accusations.

¹J.W. Hanson, *History Of The Town of Danvers, From Its Early Settlement To The Year 1848*, Danvers, 1848, p.176.

²Hanson, *Town of Danvers*, p.229.

³G. Bancroft, *History Of The United States Of America, From The Discovery Of The Continent*, Boston, 1879, Vol.II, pp.256-7.

⁴B. Adams, *The Emacipation Of Massachusetts, The Dream And The Reality*, Boston 1962, p.394-5.

A more detailed chronicle came from Charles Wentworth Upham⁵. Upham's account of Parris during his time at Salem is one of the most complete and telling about Parris' actions and character. From his account it can be clearly seen that he did not hold Parris in very high regard. Upham states that his abrasive manner and ruthless haggling over his salary contract were the causes of much conflict between himself and the villagers, which, in turn, led to a further deepening of the factionalism which was already rife in the Village⁶. While Upham's dim view of Parris and his actions, both prior to and during the trials is clearly evident, nowhere did he state outright that he believed Parris was responsible for the onset of the crisis. Rather, Upham laid most of the responsibility for the craze at the feet of the afflicted girls and their desire for excitement and 'mischief'⁷. He did allow, however, that Parris was not entirely blameless during the affair and that Parris' contributions may have affected the magnitude and outcome of the events with his "all but insane passion for getting up a scene"⁸. This was especially evident with regard to Parris' handling of the afflicted girls. On the whole, Upham viewed Parris as a rather Machiavellian figure whose prime aim was to assert his ascendancy over the villagers.

A more favourable view of Parris in this period came from Samuel Fowler⁹. Fowler did not go into any great detail, but instead offered up tantalising glimpses of his character and he gave only vague theories for

⁵C.W. Upham, *Salem Witchcraft - With An Account of Salem Village and a History of Opinion on Witchcraft and Kindred Subjects*, 2 Vols., Boston, 1867.

⁶Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, Vol I, p.298.

⁷Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, Vol II, p.385.

⁸Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, Vol I, p.312.

⁹S.P. Fowler, "An Account of the Life and Character of the Rev. Samuel Parris, of Salem Village, and of his Connection with the Witchcraft Delusion of 1692", in S.G. Drake, *The Witchcraft Delusion in New England Its Rise Progress and Termination*, Vol. III, New York, 1866.

Parris' motivations before, during and after the witch trials. Fowler's account gave only the briefest of details about Parris' early life, mentioning in summary his paternal details and his failure to graduate from Harvard College¹⁰. He did go into more extensive detail about his further career, beginning with his first contacts with the Salem villagers and his relationships with them. Fowler's belief was that Samuel Parris was innocent of any duplicity in the beginnings of the Salem witch trials, either because of the animosity between Parris and some of the villagers, or his desire to "promote the cause of religion" with his congregation¹¹. Fowler does concede, though, that the contract between Parris and the villagers was a cause for animosity which led to the most bitter and public dispute of the time¹². In making this concession of conflict between Parris and the villagers, he glossed over other sources of friction, such as Parris' introduction of a new covenant¹³. Fowler denied, however, that Parris had any reason to become involved in generating or prolonging the trials as a source of reprisal against his opponents.

In his account, Fowler failed to properly address issues such as the influence that Parris had upon the beginnings of the witchcraft episode. He also had a tendency to gloss over details about Parris that did not fit into his profile of him as innocent of responsibility for the witchcraft episode. The way in which Parris handled the afflicted girls, for example, a most significant part in any discussion of Parris' influence on the trials, is hardly addressed at all. Fowler does not cover the impact that Parris had on the earlier phases of the girl's afflictions and how Parris' management of the

¹⁰Fowler, *Samuel Parris*, p.198.

¹¹Fowler, *Samuel Parris*, pp.207-8.

¹²Fowler, *Samuel Parris*, p.201.

¹³Fowler, *Samuel Parris*, p.202.

case allowed the panic to spread. Moreover, Parris' part in the trials themselves was downplayed considerably by Fowler and he passed over aspects of Parris' involvement that did not suit his view of Parris' apparent innocence.

Boyer and Nissenbaum in their work, *Salem Possessed*, have written a more sophisticated analysis of Parris and his role in the Salem witch trials¹⁴. The primary thrust of their research is that factionalism within the Village was the underlying cause of the witchcraft episode. Within this framework they go into considerable detail about the involvement of Samuel Parris in the events leading up to and during the trials. The chapter that Boyer and Nissenbaum devote to Parris is very insightful into his character and motivations, and specifically his interactions with the villagers.

Boyer and Nissenbaum suggest in their account that because of his past failures in Barbados and Boston in the mercantile arena, Parris was an embittered man. They considered that Parris had "made such a shambles of the first half of his life"¹⁵ that these past failures led him into having a "set of concerns - obsessions" which grew to dominate his new ministerial career. One of these obsessions was an inordinate concern about the exhibition of proper deference towards him. More importantly Parris had an overwhelming fear of internal subversion as well as external threat to the church. Citing his numerous references to Judas Iscariot, Boyer and Nissenbaum felt that betrayal was a major issue with Parris. They believed that this concern with betrayal began with his father's paltry legacy¹⁶.

¹⁴P. Boyer & S. Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed, The Social Origins Of Witchcraft*, Cambridge Mass., 1974.

¹⁵Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.160.

¹⁶Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.153-178.

Unfortunately the hypothesis that Parris was originally betrayed by his father has no basis. In fact Parris was left quite well off by his father and his career as a merchant was not as tragic as they portray. While the points Boyer and Nissenbaum put forward about Parris' concern with betrayal and morbid fascination with the mercantile arena may be valid, careful scholarship suggests that these be treated cautiously.

Boyer and Nissenbaum point out exhaustively that there was indeed factionalism within Salem Village before Samuel Parris entered onto the scene. Upon Parris' arrival in the Village, the obsessions and resentment that he brought with him caused him to identify with the villagers' conflict. His past frustrations enabled him to be sympathetic with the cause of one of the factions, gaining him their support. By gaining these allies, Boyer and Nissenbaum claim that he became an embodiment of the traditional pastoral economy that was being undermined by advancing mercantile capitalism¹⁷.

The conclusions that Boyer and Nissenbaum reach are akin to those of Fowler, with these authors maintaining Parris' innocence of any culpability. While protesting Parris' innocence, Boyer and Nissenbaum do emphasise his crucial role in the witchcraft episode, in that his sermons, "took the nagging fears and conflicting impulses of his hearers and wove them into a pattern overwhelming in its scope, a universal drama in which Christ and Satan, Heaven and Hell, struggled for supremacy"¹⁸. Boyer and Nissenbaum conclude that "Parris did not deliberately provoke the witch trials". Although Parris contributed to the atmosphere that gave rise to the trials, he could not be held accountable for their beginnings. They further state that Parris' only

¹⁷Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.80-109, 178.

¹⁸Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.177.

fault was that he was but a man of his era, where belief in the power of Satan and witches was a part of popular culture and where the clergy were not adverse to stimulating apprehension in order to effect reformation¹⁹.

For all the valid points that Boyer and Nissenbaum put forward in their chapter on Parris, though, they fail to consider some very obvious questions, answers to which could be easily determined with information that they themselves present in their research into Parris' life and actions. They also failed to consider to the fullest extent the possibility that Parris may have used the already existing discord for his own purposes, manipulating it towards his own ends of maintaining his security and pre-eminence within the community. With their extensive examination of Parris' character, this issue would have been an obvious one. They themselves noted repeatedly that Parris had a craving for respect and status²⁰. When this much desired respect and status was threatened by some of the villager's irreverent attitudes²¹, Parris may well indeed have had the motivation to use his position to ensure his indispensability to the Village.

While not holding quite as low an opinion of Parris as Upham or his contemporaries did, Marion Starkey does not retain any great admiration for him. She sees him as a man of "credulity and pitiless zeal", and his behaviour in Salem Village as being like that of "a general taking over an army suspected of insubordination"²². She looks only very briefly, at Parris' career in Salem. Her conclusions are similar to those of Boyer and Nissenbaum, pointing out that Parris was an embittered man because of his

¹⁹Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.177-8.

²⁰Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.163-4.

²¹Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.163.

²²M. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, New York, 1969, p.27.

past failures, and being forced to take his current post in a less than ideal situation²³. She does reflect, however, that his zealousness derived from his need to demonstrate “that it was from no negligence on his part that such a disaster had come about”. Starkey also agrees somewhat with Upham that “there was something in his composition to which so dramatic a struggle with the powers of darkness made a direct appeal”²⁴. For all that Starkey put forward that Parris made a significant contribution to the trials with his excessively zealous tactics in dealing with the villagers and the witch trials, she does put more emphasis on the afflicted girls, upon whose shoulders the bulk of the responsibility for the trials should lie.

Out of the many authors who have studied the Salem episode in modern times, Larry Gragg is the only one that has undertaken an extensive examination of the life of Samuel Parris. Gragg has produced two works on this minister. In the first, *Samuel Parris: Portrait of a Puritan Clergyman*, Gragg uses Parris to look at the character of religious leadership in rural Massachusetts during the seventeenth century. Through an analysis of his pastoral duties and sermons he concluded that in many ways Parris was an “unexceptional puritan clergyman”. While competent, he was unremarkable²⁵.

In his second work *A Quest For Security*, he states that his primary purpose was not to make any judgements about Parris’ actions during the trials, but to explore Parris looking instead at explaining and understanding him. Gragg’s main goal in examining Parris was to use his story with two

²³Starkey, *Devil in Massachusetts*, p.26-7.

²⁴Starkey, *Devil in Massachusetts*, p.45.

²⁵L.D. Gragg, “Samuel Parris: Portrait of a Puritan Clergyman”, *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, Vol 119, No 4, October 1983, pp.210, 237.

purposes other than the main theme of the witch trials. The first reason presented by Gragg for his research was to present a portrait of the duties and obligations of a minister during the seventeenth century. The second was to explore Parris' drive for security, both material and spiritual. This drive for security enabled Gragg to use Parris as a model for his contemporaries, and their needs for assurances of spiritual salvation, status and material prosperity²⁶.

This need for security was to motivate all of Parris' actions during the witchcraft episode. Gragg noted that Parris could have isolated the afflicted girls or questioned the validity of their spectral evidence. He could also have questioned the idea that church members could be witches. The fact that he rejected all of these options in favour of an aggressive approach to a crisis which threatened his security, Gragg says, was "a crucial if not decisive factor in the escalation of accusations". While Larry Gragg has assigned responsibility to Parris for the intensity of the witchcraft crisis, he has failed to do the expected and reach any definitive conclusions concerning the assignment of direct responsibility to him for its outbreak and course. This thesis concludes that such an assignment of responsibility would not be unreasonable. While much of the evidence is open to interpretation, it is not beyond the bounds of plausibility that Parris was driven by this need for security to foster and manipulate what would otherwise have been a small isolated incident of witchcraft.

Despite having vastly differing opinions on the subject of Parris, each of these authors considered that he was not responsible for beginning the witchcraft episode. For all the valid points that have been put forward by

²⁶Gragg, *Quest for Security*, p.xviii.

each of these authors, they have failed to consider some rather important questions. First and foremost, was Samuel Parris the guiding force behind the entire witchcraft affair? Many of the above authors have not taken into account the desperate situation that Parris found himself in just prior to the outbreak of afflictions in his household. Upham described Parris as a Machiavellian schemer. If this were true is it therefore possible that such a manipulative man might orchestrate the trials in order to extricate himself from the difficulties he found himself in?

In order to respond to these questions properly it is necessary to undertake a detailed investigation of the Reverend Samuel Parris. To fully understand the man, first we must look back at some of the influences that formed the person who came to have a significant role in one of the darker events in history. With so many conflicting opinions as to Parris' character, it has become necessary to reassess the existing material with the aim of discovering as accurate and detailed an account of his early life as is possible. Important in this assessment of Parris' character is an overview of his early career, as a student at Harvard and then as a Barbados plantation owner. This is an important aspect of Parris' life as we can see the influences that affect him, and began shaping the character and attitudes that affected his future dealings with the Salem villagers. In particular it will show that Parris was a man eager for the prestige that the ministry could give.

From this starting point we look at Parris' early contacts with the Salem villagers. This perusal of Parris' earliest dealings with the villagers is essential as they set the tone for his future relationships with his congregation. Because Parris was about to become one of the most important figures in the small community, these early dealings with the villagers may foreshadow how Parris would develop in his new career as the villagers'

spiritual leader. This section will look at his dealings with the villagers from their first contacts to the protracted negotiations for his remuneration package. Since this package became a large bone of contention at a later stage, it will be examined here in some depth to show why Parris may have been motivated to act in the way he did at the commencement of the incident in 1692.

Having already discovered what manner of man we are dealing with in Parris, it then becomes necessary to see what conditions existed in Salem Village when Parris took up his position. The pervading atmosphere appears to have been one containing a reasonable amount of hostility, with a deep division between two powerful factions within the Village. Here we can also see how Parris became allied with one of these factions, thereby ensuring for himself a valuable support base. Although there will not be a great deal of attention devoted to this internal conflict within the Village, excellently examined by Boyer and Nissenbaum, it is essential that some kind of understanding is reached about what tensions Parris would have faced upon his relocation to Salem. In essence the combination of Parris' personality and the divisions already existing in the Village led to further divisiveness rather than modifying the latter into a modicum of harmony.

After examining his early contacts with the Salem villagers, it is logical to explore the relationships he formed with the villagers. Here we will discover that the relationships between Parris and some of his parishioners began to break down, becoming acrimonious on both sides. This breakdown in turn led to a further deepening in the rift existing between the various factions within the Village. Although he still retained the support of his equally entrenched allies, it can be seen from some of the actions taken against him that his position as the Village minister was becoming tenuous.

This provided the motivation for Parris to ferment a situation which would secure his position within the Village.

As Parris' position in the Village came under attack he used the public forum of the meetinghouse to both castigate his enemies and reassure his friends. Parris' opponents finally manoeuvred themselves into a position where they could directly challenge his security in the Village. As his opponents gained in power and influence Parris' sermons began taking on an increasingly ominous theme that would predict future events. Instead of focusing upon the temporal argument between himself and his antagonists, he chose to interpret this battle in a spiritual context. Through his sermons, Parris translated his enemies' actions into an attack upon God's messenger and God himself rather than against a man and his ambition.

In the midst of his difficulties an outbreak of mysterious afflictions occurred within his household. This outbreak, which fulfilled many of Parris' earlier predictions, is central as it determined the scale of the events which were to flow from it. It was the handling of the afflicted which enabled an eruption of witchcraft accusations to blow out into a full-scale hysteria. We will also be able to directly compare Parris' management of the early part of the episode to those of a similar nature dealt with by other New England ministers. After this comparison it becomes obvious that Parris' handling of the afflicted was anything but conventional. After seeing what manner of man Parris was, it will be easy to see that it was within his capability to manipulate the afflicted, turning the villagers' attention from himself, giving them a greater evil to fear and thereby ensuring his indispensability to them in this new crisis.

After seeing how Parris managed the episode before the judicial authorities became involved, the next step will be to examine Parris' activities during the period of examinations and trial. Through the vehicle of his sermons he kept the community's attention firmly focused on the unfolding events. Parris was able to further distract the villagers away from both their battle with him as well as from the older dispute between his allies, the Putnams and their opponents, the Porters. Parris also played the role of a witness, where he readily testified against the accused. Part of the purpose in this section will be to look at those he testified against and investigate the possible reasons Parris had for taking a part against them. It shows that his sermons influenced the situation and that his desire for security surfaced in his actions during this time.

Finally we shall see the outcome of Parris' machinations. While the craze was in full swing, his position appeared to be secure. His alleged ploy had worked. In its aftermath, however, some of the members of the Village community held Parris directly responsible for the outcome of the tragic events of the trials. While Parris managed to hold on to his position for a few more years after the episode, it is clear that he was fighting a losing battle. In spite of all his efforts, in the end he moved on to another town, living out his remaining years in obscurity. Parris was unable to overcome the opinion of a significant portion of the Village community who held him accountable for the scale and intensity of the whole episode.

The purpose here is not to examine the Salem witch trials in any great depth, although this unusual episode in New England history worthy of serious contemplation. There are many issues left untouched by this research, such as the fact that confessing witches were not sentenced to death - the more common practice of the time. The purpose of this thesis is

to examine one man's involvement in these trials and the events leading up to them. Samuel Parris played one of the most pivotal and crucial roles in the whole episode - a role that turned the initial afflictions of those in his home into one of the most tragic affairs in the history of the settlement of New England.

The intention here will be to demonstrate that the Reverend Samuel Parris was an arrogant and dangerously intelligent schemer obsessed with his perceived status in his community. Parris manipulated the afflicted girls into generating an event of such magnitude to, not only assure himself fame and the recognition of his peers, but above all insure his indispensability to the Salem villagers. It is even within the realm of possibility that Parris had a hand in even the beginnings of the afflictions themselves. Parris' ego and his perception of his place as spiritual leader of the small Puritan community were the major contributing factors that turned an 'ordinary' witchcraft episode into a major witchcraft epidemic the effects of which were felt far beyond the boundaries of the Village.

Chapter 1: *In the beginning...*

Samuel Parris remains a rather mysterious figure. His only claim to fame, was his starring role in the witchcraft episode that occurred under his supervision in the sleepy New England village of Salem in the year 1692. As the erstwhile minister of the beleaguered and unhappy Salem Village, he had, perhaps, the greatest influence on the entire witchcraft episode. Being such a key figure, an in depth look at this man's character, and those factors that built that character, will give us some insight as to the motivations behind some of his actions during one of history's darker hours. In this chapter we will see the beginnings of Parris' quest for personal prestige and security.

Samuel Parris was born in London to one Thomas Parris in 1653. Thomas Parris appeared to have been a successful merchant owning lands and properties in England, Ireland and Barbados. Sometime in the latter part of the 1660's, Thomas chose to retire to his estates in Barbados. The affliction of London by fire and plague may have influenced him in this move. As a devout non-conformist who attended St Alphage's Church, London Wall¹, he may have seen emigrating to the distant colony as a more attractive alternative to remaining in England after the reinstatement of monarchical rule in 1660 under Charles II. The milder climate and the more relaxed lifestyle of the islands also would have made migrating an attractive idea in his twilight years. There is also an indication that Thomas may have craved not only a change in pace but of status as well. Through 1663, Thomas referred to himself as only a merchant, but in his will he had given himself a new embellishment, and designated himself as "Thomas Parris of ye Island Barbados Esq." The move to Barbados might also have been

¹London Guild Hall, MS 5746/1.

prompted by the desire to achieve status and respectability, to be a bigger fish in a smaller pond, rather than being an ordinary fish in a very large pond, as he would have been in England².

This desire of Thomas, for increased status and respectability, may have been transmitted to his son. In sending Samuel to Harvard College, Thomas may have been trying to ensure that these quintessential qualities were Samuel's right from the outset. A Harvard education would have automatically given the young Samuel status and an entry into 'society'. As James Axtell noted, a Harvard education gained for the possessor "full admission and confirmed their birthright of social leadership³." Samuel's attendance at Harvard is also a reflection of the family's wealth. The cost of such an education was the princely sum of between £40 and £55, approximately the price for which a small house could be purchased⁴. Although Samuel did not, in the end graduate from Harvard, the contacts he would have made there would have ensured a 'proper' beginning to his adulthood. Samuel left the hallowed halls of Harvard in 1673, we have to assume, on hearing of his father's death, choosing to return to Barbados. Although Samuel, upon inheriting a nice portion of his father's estate, could probably have chosen to return to Harvard and complete his education, he instead elected to remain in Barbados entering into the mercantile arena.

This decision of Samuel's may have been influenced to some extent by the declining state of Harvard College. Student numbers at Harvard at this time were seriously decreasing with only six graduating between 1672 and

² L. Gragg, *A Quest For Security: The Life of Samuel Parris, 1653-1720*, New York, 1990, p.10

³ J. Axtell, *The School Upon a Hill: Education and Society in Colonial New England*, New York, 1976, pp.207, 211, 214.

⁴ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.11.

1674. Students were also beginning to rebel against the strictly regimented lifestyle they had to endure while at Harvard. The College rules about a student's appearance, no long hair or showy clothing were being challenged by the students. Some were also beginning to object to the outdated way some subjects were being taught. In 1671, for example a class defied their teacher by refusing to read an obsolete physics text⁵. Most importantly some students protested against the President of Harvard College, Leonard Hoar, going even so far as to petition the General Court to oust him from office. Others withdrew from the College. Cotton Mather who began his education at Harvard in 1674, however, laid the blame for the unrest firmly at the door of the students, "The young men in the College" were attempting, "to ruine his reputation, as far as they were able", and trying to "set themselves to travestie whatever he did and said, and aggravate every thing in his behaviour disagreeable to them, with a design to make him odious"⁶.

Almost no records exist documenting Samuel's life until his departure from Harvard College and return to Barbados upon his father's death in 1673. What little record of his early career after his return to Barbados that does survive, is in itself somewhat scanty. For all the gaps in the record, though, there is enough to make certain suppositions about the details of Parris' life and character. From decisions such as that not to return to Harvard, quite a bit can be deduced about his possible attitudes. With the decline in the quality of both the institution and the student body, being a Harvard graduate might not have been the social asset it once was. From this choice we can perhaps begin to see Parris as an intelligent young man who

⁵ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, pp.11-12.

⁶ D. Levin, *Cotton Mather: The Young Life of the Lord's Rememberencer, 1663-1703*, Cambridge Mass., 1978, pp.23, 29-30, 43.

was ‘savvy’ enough to know when the time was right to move on. This pattern becomes more evident in his later life choices.

There is disagreement on some aspects of Parris’ life. Boyer and Nissenbaum argue that Parris was not well favoured by his father. This is wrong. Samuel was far from left out in regards to his father’s estate. Boyer and Nissenbaum have made the assumption that Samuel was left only twenty acres of his father’s property in Barbados. Their assertion appears to derive from the fact that this parcel was still owned by Samuel upon his death⁷ and in turn, willed to his two sons⁸. To the contrary Samuel did rather well from his inheritance. The estate he received came to an approximate value of some £7000⁹. To his son, Thomas bequeathed, “all my estate in Barbados, including my store house at Reeds Bay”¹⁰. The estate included a twenty acre parcel of land in St Peter’s Parish which was under an eighty-two year lease, land in Bridgetown, as well as a plantation in St James’ Parish “containing one hundred and seventy acres or thereabouts together with all the christian servts slaves cattle sheep stock buildings mills copper stills utensils or other necessarys and appurtences standing, growing lying or being thereon with my store house at Reid Bay”¹¹.

⁷ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.154-5 and 155n2.

⁸ P. Boyer and S. Nissenbaum, *Salem Village-Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England*, Belmont, Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.195.

⁹ Gragg, *Quest for Security*, p.13.

¹⁰ G. A. Moriarity, “Genealogical Notes on The Rev. Samuel Parris of Salem Village”, *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, Vol.49, 1913, pp.354-5; Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.155.

¹¹ Barbados Department of Records, *Copied Volumes of Will Record Books in the Barbados Department of Archives*, Blackrock, Barbados, RB 6/8, p.519, exert from the will of Thomas Parris; Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.13.

Further speculation also abounds that Samuel was not held in high regard by his father, this opinion stemming from the way that Thomas Parris left mentioning Samuel to the very last in his will, as a seeming afterthought. This, of course, could be interpreted in an entirely different way. In the best tradition of ‘last but not least’, Thomas could have saved mentioning Samuel to the last because he was a much loved and doted upon younger son. In fact Thomas was not the only one who favoured Samuel. His uncle John Parris, upon his death in 1660, favoured the seven year old Samuel with the lofty sum of £100¹². Such a sum for a child of this age, would have been a small fortune.

Upon gaining his inheritance, Samuel came into his own as one of the landed gentry of Barbados at the tender age of only twenty. At the time of his father’s death (1673) the plantation was being leased out and “in ye occupation of Capt. Edward Elding.” The young Samuel, chose not to immerse himself in the sedentary and monotonous existence of a plantation owner, and instead decided to operate out of Bridgetown as a merchant and agent for other planters, facilitating the disposal of their produce such as sugar, cotton and tobacco, and extending them lines of credit. Being in a position to be able to extend credit to others is an indication of the extent of Parris’ wealth. As well, this lack of desire to settle into the life of a planter could be an early indication of a certain restlessness of spirit, and a need for variety and a certain excitement in his daily life. After all the life he chose would indicate that Parris enjoyed taking risks.

¹² Barbados Department of Records, *Copied Volumes of Will Record Books*, RB 6/14, p.453; Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.9.

Unfortunately for the young Samuel Parris, the Barbados economy began to wane. This decline was due, in part, to the fall in quality and the profitability of sugar. There was an increasing competition between Barbados planters and those of Jamaica and the Leeward Islands. Approximately forty per cent of the total sugar imported into England was from the latter islands by 1680, a figure which had jumped from only 20 per cent a decade earlier. There was also an increased competition with the rest of the West Indies for the West European market. This growth in the availability of sugar from sources other than Barbados made for a lowering of the price Barbados planters could expect to receive for their product. Along with this decrease in the price of sugar, there was also a steady decline in the soil fertility of the Island, reducing the yield per acre. These factors, together with the destructive forces of nature in the form of hurricanes, began to make Barbados an uncertain climate in which a young man could make his mark¹³.

Instead of chancing the vagaries of the Barbados economy, Parris decided to move on. He could have returned to London to join his brother, but he instead chose Boston. The decision to go to Boston was probably rational and balanced. There may have been many more opportunities for Samuel in Boston than in London. Samuel would have been familiar with Boston from his earlier sojourn at Harvard, and he was already a member of the First Church of Boston¹⁴. He also had a family connection there, his aunt, Susan Oxenbridge, the widow of his uncle John Parris, was now the

¹³ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, pp.13-15.

¹⁴ M. Roach, "That Child Betty Parris", *Essex Institute Historical Collection*, Vol 124, January 1988, p.3. Samuel became a member of the First Church in 1672.

wife of the Reverend John Oxenbridge who was a pastor of the First Church between 1670 and 1674¹⁵.

Here again it appears that Parris was an intelligent man who had the wisdom to make, on the evidence before him, the right decision. In leaving Barbados for Boston, he showed that his instincts were all in place and he probably avoided ruin by transferring his assets before the collapse of the Barbados economy. The influence of his uncle, John Parris, may be important here. He also had had the ability to make the right decisions and avoid disaster in his reasonably successful career as a merchant¹⁶.

Upon leaving Barbados, Samuel liquidated the bulk of his holdings there. In the census of 1680, the former tenant Captain Elding was listed as the owner of the 176 acre plantation. The price Parris received for this is unknown. He did, however, sell the twenty-one acre parcel in St Andrew's Parish for sum of £80¹⁷. With this price for such a small parcel of land we can plausibly imagine that the payment he might have obtained for the larger plantation with all its slaves and equipment was a considerable one. With this nice little nest egg in his pocket, the now twenty-seven year old Parris was able to make his way to Boston in late 1680/1.

The bond he signed upon his arrival in Boston, identifying himself as a merchant and guaranteeing that his family would not become "chargeable to the town" in September of 1681, is an indication that Parris was self-sufficient¹⁸. In March of 1682, Parris paid the sum of £270 to purchase

¹⁵ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, pp.30, 32.

¹⁶ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, pp.15-16.

¹⁷ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, pp.15-16.

¹⁸ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.30; Boston Record Commission, *A Report of The Record Commissioners of The City of Boston*, Boston, 1886, Vol.10, pp.63, 70.

a shop measuring 2275 square feet from the merchant Richard Harris¹⁹. We also know that Parris at one time purchased a dwelling in Boston, it being listed in the inventory of his own will²⁰. Although the exact date of this purchase is not known, it would seem logical for him to have made the acquisition of a home during his residence there. Being able to afford such purchases of real estate in Boston would have put Parris in the category of moderately wealthy. Boyer and Nissenbaum considered that Parris' departure from Barbados was an indication of his failure as a merchant and because of limited resources there, left to avoid the shame of his past defeat²¹. This view is no longer sustainable.

Along with the purchase of his shop, Parris also borrowed £420 from Richard Harris, presumably to finance the beginnings of his enterprise²². No evidence has been found to date that gives us any details of the day to day transactions of Parris' business, but some assumptions about the nature of his activities can be made. It is quite likely that the business he conducted was similar to what he did in Barbados. The property he purchased and from where he traded, included a wharf, giving him access to the harbour. Given his past experiences and owning a wharf-side place of business, it can be assumed that he dabbled in overseas trade. Further evidence that he engaged in such trade is found in the court records. In 1684 a ship owner brought a suit against Parris, and although the details of the suit are not recorded due to the action being dropped, we can see that Parris had dealings with ship owners in his business²³.

¹⁹ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.30.

²⁰ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England*, Belmont CA, 1972, p.197.

²¹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.155.

²² Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.31

²³ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.31.

Although Parris did not have the resources to embark on a career of the magnitude of his father's or even some of the more prosperous Boston merchants, he did seem to be starting out on the right foot to become, at least, modestly successful. Having already achieved membership of the First Church of Boston, Parris appears to have been well on the way to securing himself a solid place in the community. He further went on to gain freeman status in February 1683. This new status gained him entry into the political life of Boston. He soon began serving in minor capacities in the political arena and by 1684 he was serving as a foreman of the Jury of Attaints and Appeals²⁴.

At the beginning of 1683, at the age of thirty, Samuel Parris verged on the border of a successful career. At this point Parris was a family man, a freeman of the colony with Church membership and a successful merchant. To all outward appearances things were going very well for him. Unfortunately everything was about to take a turn for the worse and the next year seemed to be spent in court. His creditor, Richard Harris, took action against him in the April session of the Suffolk County Court, for his failure to repay the £420 he had borrowed. With the result of the case in Harris' favour, Parris attempted to counter-sue Richard Harris for withholding the bulk of the money he was supposedly loaned, some £336. Unfortunately his case was not successful and Parris spent the next few months trying to repay the loan. Harris was apparently impatient about the time which Parris was taking, or perhaps he thought Parris was no longer a very good proposition, so in both the July and October sessions of the County Court, he again sought to have it prompt Parris into paying him the full amount. In the end the jury

²⁴ J. Noble (ed), *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1693*, Boston, 1901, Vol I, p.257.

decided that an amount of £50 16s was still outstanding. Not only did Parris have problems with Harris pressuring him for the repayment of the loan, but in January of 1684 the ship owner Benjamin Gillam brought a suit against him in the County Court, and although this action was eventually withdrawn, all this did not bode well for Parris' future as a successful merchant²⁵. Like most merchants, Parris probably owned plenty of assets in the form of real estate and inventory, but had little in the way of ready cash available to pay his debts.

Parris now came to a crossroads in his life. His future as a merchant did not look quite as rosy as it did before. He also saw that merchants, while being very wealthy and influential members of the community, were not generally held in very high regard. One such merchant who had achieved great wealth and political prominence was Robert Keayne. Even though Keayne was very successful, even gaining an appointment to a judgeship of the Suffolk County Court, he was still subject to public scorn. During the course of his career he had been complained about many times and in 1639 he was singled out and charged by the General Court for taking excessive profits, he "was notoriously above others observed and complained of"²⁶. He was taking between 50 and 100 per cent profit on such common goods as nails, buttons and thread²⁷. Because Keayne had previously "been formerly dealt with and admonished, both by private friends and also by some of the magistrates and elders" and had not mended his ways, the courts chose to fine him £200. The First Church, where Keayne was a member, also chose to reprimand him "in the Name of the Church for selling his wares at

²⁵ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.32.

²⁶ J.K. Hosmer (ed), *Winthrop's Journal, History of New England, 1630-1649*, 2 Vols., New York, 1908, Vol I. p.316.

²⁷ Hosmer, *Winthrop's Journal*, Vol I, pp.315-317.

Excessive Rates, to the Dishonour of God's name, the Offence of the General Cort, and the Publique scandall of the cuntry"²⁸.

This complaint that merchants "sold their wares at excessive rates" was quite a common one and one of the biggest reasons that they were held in such low regard. In fact the fine that Keayne was given was not the maximum sentence that they could lay upon him but because he was "not alone in this fault" the court chose to be lenient. Winthrop commented that "all men through the country ... were guilty of like excess in prices"²⁹. Although that had taken place decades earlier the situation did not decrease with the passage of time. Indeed, Increase Mather, arguably one of the greatest of the New England ministers, complained that "There are some Traders, who sell their goods at Excessive Rates"³⁰. All these complaints seem to stem from the fact that merchants appeared "to be parasites, producing nothing but merely profiting from the labour of others"³¹.

Here lies the heart of the matter. In the ideological world of Puritan society merchants were not held in high esteem. The making of profit from the sweat of others went against one of the essential Puritan beliefs, that the good of the community should outweigh the accumulation of personal profit. Winthrop put it that "the care of the public must oversway all private respects"³². John Higginson, a Salem minister confirmed that the colony was "originally a plantation of Religion, not a plantation of Trade" and further

²⁸ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.28.

²⁹ Hosmer, *Winthrop's Journal*, Vol.1, p.316.

³⁰ W. Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, New York, 1893, p.431; Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.28.

³¹ G.B. Warden, *Boston, 1689-1776*, Boston, 1870, pp.49-50; Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.35, fn.18.

³² D. Hawke, *The Colonial Experience*, New York, 1966, p.155

declared that “merchants and such as are increasing Cent per Cent” “remember this, Let others that have come over since at several times understand this, that worldly gain was not the end and designe of the people of New England, but Religion”³³. It was this essential belief that led ministers during the 1660s and 1670s, throughout the colony to level at merchants the charge of being responsible for a general decline in public morality³⁴. For a man desperate to be one of the ‘in-group’, being a merchant seemed to condemn him to a life on the margins.

So here we find Parris after a year spent in court at a point in his life where he had to once again reassess his future. He had found that his chosen career did not generate the sort of respect that he seemed to crave. For in spite of their wealth and influence, merchants were generally considered untrustworthy by the community at large and the public opinion of them was quite low, when compared to the more exalted status which a man of the cloth possessed, and the respect he could command from the community. Parris would have seen on a daily basis the respect granted to ministers. The best known example of a minister with great influence was Increase Mather. Increase’s influence was such that he was sent to England in order to negotiate the matter of the colony’s future with King Charles II and returned with the new charter and the new governor Sir William Phips. His son’s story also shows how a minister could gain great renown as well as respect. Cotton Mather was the minister who had charge of the Goodwin children in his local witchcraft outbreak and was instrumental in bringing Goodwife Glover to trial and curing the children of their afflictions. The subsequent paper published about the events was widely read and thought at the time to

³³ S. Bruchey (ed), *The Colonial Merchant, Sources and Readings*, New York, 1966, p.112.

³⁴ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.28.

greatly increase the knowledge about the activities of witches in New England³⁵.

As we can see, Parris probably had quite a privileged life as a child, growing up in London as the son of a reasonably wealthy merchant. Upon his father's move to Barbados, life would have become almost idyllic for the adolescent Parris. As the son of one of the landed gentry he would have grown accustomed to having a certain status in his life. His attendance at Harvard is a reflection of that status. The arrogance that Parris displayed in his dealings with the Salem villagers most probably derives from this early phase of his life. He would have grown up having command over servants and slaves, ensuring he was used to exerting power over others. He also most likely would have been accustomed to viewing people who worked the land or peasants as the Salem villagers were for the most part, as being of a lower social standing than himself.

So when his career as a merchant began to encounter a few obstacles, Parris became baulked at this thwarting of his plans to make good in the mercantile profession. A career as a merchant may have seemed less attractive to him when he began to experience losses, especially if he considered his Uncle John's slide into indebtedness. John Parris' inevitable decline was only arrested by the intervention of his brother Thomas. In the end poor John had gone from being a daring merchant of some wealth to being merely an agent for his brother³⁶. Being put into this situation of subservience would not have been acceptable to Samuel. An unwillingness to be merely an employee was to characterise Parris' mercantile career.

³⁵ C. Mather, *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions*, Boston, 1697.

³⁶ Gragg, *Quest For Security*, pp.5-6.

Before reaching this point in his life, things appeared to have been easy for Parris and he apparently had come across no other such obstacles to his ambitions. It was this frustration of his aspirations that was what embittered him, and eventually forced him into rethinking his plans for the future. Hale described Parris as being a merchant of only mediocre talents. It seems that Parris could not tolerate such mediocrity. Most men would have been content with the lot in life granted to them by God, but Parris, seemingly cut from a different cloth, was not so content and risked changing careers in mid-stream rather than be condemned to being one of the herd. The ministry would have held vast appeal to Parris because, even though great wealth was not their lot, great respect and status was and they were deferred to by all. Ministers were recognised as being the leaders of the community by society and were at the very top of the social hierarchy.

Parris has been described by John Hale, a Boston merchant as, “not meeting with any great encouragement or advantage”³⁷. Boyer and Nissenbaum have also commented upon Parris’ apparent lack of success, speculating that he had “made a shambles of the first half of his life”³⁸ and it was his complete failure as a merchant that left him embittered and looking towards the ministry as a chance of redemption and gaining respectability and financial security. It might be said Hale’s defence that he probably wasn’t condemning Parris as a complete failure, just as someone whose achievements were only mediocre. In spite of these opinions, Parris was not utterly a failure and seemed to enjoy, if not the blazing impact he might have hoped, at least moderate success. Unfortunately moderate success was not what Parris most desired and by choosing the ministry as a career, he was

³⁷ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.155; G.L. Burr (ed.), *Narratives of The Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, New York, 1914, p.341.

³⁸ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.160.

attempting to rescue his life from soul destroying mediocrity. This quest for distinction would impact on his later dealings with the citizens of Salem Village.

Chapter Two: *Something wicked this way comes!*

Parris was on the verge of deciding that a career as a merchant was not for him. He had not made a complete “shambles of the first half of his life” as has been previously suggested by Boyer and Nissenbaum¹, but he was not exceedingly successful when compared to other Boston merchants and certainly not in terms of his expectations. Parris could have lived out his life in Boston as an unremarkable, and unimportant merchant, making a comfortable living, yet not quite achieving greatness. This future was not acceptable to Parris so he made the decision to investigate a different career path. This chapter, therefore, examines Parris’ early contacts with the villagers of Salem as he sought to establish a new career for himself which would fulfil his desires for prestige and success.

There probably were not too many choices available to Parris when it came to considering his future opportunities. Although Parris had received one of the finest educations available at the time, he was somewhat limited in the options open to him without the support of a wealthy family or other powerful benefactor. With such limited prospects facing him, Parris decided to fall back onto the only avenue his education had prepared him for, the ministry. Although there was only the barest of possibilities for the attainment of great wealth on this path, there was opportunity to garner great respect and high standing in the eyes of his peers. Along with this came a certain amount of security if he could establish himself in a community. This would be an attractive and ideal arrangement for Parris as now he had a young family to support.

¹P. Boyer and S. Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, p.160.

Finding a secure post as a minister, however, was easier said than done. The period that Parris chose to enter the ministry was an inauspicious one for such an enterprise. A London bookseller on a trip to New England, John Dunton found, after a conversation with John Cotton the Harvard College librarian, that Harvard had produced “122 Ministers; of which Ten are dead, seventy-one remain in the Country, and Forty-one are removed to England”². Only sixty-three men were able to secure for themselves ministerial posts between the years 1680 and 1689 and the average length that they held these positions for was twenty-two years. With Harvard producing such an excess of ministerial candidates, it is no wonder that many left New England or went to remote communities to find themselves a position. Parris was yet further disadvantaged by not having completed his qualification before leaving Harvard³.

With the deck seemingly stacked against him, it is quite amazing that Parris actually secured a temporary post in Stow during the Spring and Summer of 1685. Stow was only a recently incorporated township with few residents and without a meeting house. Although this position was far from ideal, he gained valuable experience, and he did get paid. The residents voted in June to make a rate in order “to pay what ye town are indebted to Mr Parris for his pains amongst us”. By August it was decided that Parris should be paid the sum of fifteen shillings for every Sunday that he preached at Stow⁴. What is interesting is that the minister that eventually replaced Parris in Stow, James Minot, was only paid 12 shillings and 6 pence for his efforts each

²John Dutton, *Letters Written From New England, AD 1686*, W.H. Whitmore (ed), Boston, 1867, p.641.

³Gragg, *Quest For Security*, p.33.

⁴D. H. Hurd, *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*, 3 Vols., Philadelphia, 1890, Vol I, p.641.

Sunday, and he had actually graduated from Harvard in 1675⁵. It seems that although not qualified, Parris was well enough thought of to be paid more than their permanent minister. The question is why, if Stow was looking for a permanent minister, didn't Parris take up the position? There are two possible answers to this question. One is that Parris was beginning to experience some of the difficulties in Stow that he was to have later in Salem Village. At present no evidence has been discovered that supports this. The second possible answer, and the one most likely, is that the pay and the prestige was not sufficient for Parris to find Stow an attractive proposition. In Salem Village his proposed salary was over one and a half times greater than the few residents of Stow were able to afford.

From here the record becomes sketchy as to Parris' movements until he was approached by the Salem villagers. From all accounts it does appear that even after he did his time as the minister of Stow, Parris continued his business in Boston. The tax rolls of 1687 list Parris' taxable wealth as being in the category that paid between two and three shillings. This is an indication that in spite of his legal difficulties of 1683 to early 1684, he still went on to enjoy moderate prosperity, putting him in the same class as reasonably prosperous artisans and shop keepers⁶. Although Parris was relatively prosperous, he still had not achieved anywhere near the prosperity of either his father or uncle. Edward Shippen, who owned the property adjacent to Parris', paid ten times the tax that Parris did, and five other men in his ward paid over five times more than did Parris⁷. With his background of privilege and prosperity, this disparity in success between himself and his

⁵J. L. Sibley, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University*, 6 Vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1881, Vol II, p.463.

⁶James A. Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, Vol. 22, January 1965, p.78.

⁷Gragg, *A Quest For Security*, p.34. see fn.53.

neighbours would have galled Parris no end, showing him quite plainly that for all his efforts, he was still only a minor player in the mercantile arena and would not amount to anything more if he stayed on this path.

It appears that although Parris did not take up the opportunity of the position in Stow, choosing to retain his business interests, he did retain an active interest in the religious life of his community. His interest is indicated by his attendance at the Council of Boston's three churches which was convened in April of 1686. The purpose of this council was to deliberate on the charge levelled against the minister of Malden, Thomas Cheever, by his congregation of adultery and obscene speech. Although Parris was not a part of the council's deliberations the records do note his attendance, "Mr Sam Parris" was "present throughout, though not of the Council"⁸. Parris' attendance at this council would have given him the opportunity to mingle with some of New England's most respected citizens, Cotton Mather was a member of the council along with his celebrated father, Increase Mather, who was acting the part of moderator. Samuel Sewall in an entry in his diary notes that Parris also spoke at informal gatherings, mentioning that on 11 August 1686, "Mr Parris spake at Mrs Noyes's"⁹. It is rather unfortunate that Sewall does not provide any further details of this occasion, such as the content of his speech, the location of the meeting or the exact identity of Mrs Noyes. It is most probable, though, that the Mrs Noyes he refers to belonged to the Noyes' of Sudbury, where Parris eventually settled after leaving Salem and remarried.

⁸Gragg, *A Quest For Security*, p.34. fn.50.

⁹M.H. Thomas (ed), *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, 2 Vols New York, 1973, Vol I, p.119.

The period 1684 to 1688 seems to have been a period of decision making for Parris and by the end of 1688 his decision appears to have been made: the new tax assessment made in August of 1688 in Boston does not seem to have included Parris and he does not appear on the tax rolls after this time¹⁰. With his continued interest in the ministry, it is hardly surprising that when a deputation from Salem Village approached him about leading their congregation, he chose to consider their offer. The reason why the Salem villagers approached Parris over the many other available and qualified candidates is unknown, but perhaps his name was introduced to the villagers by Captain John Putnam. Parris had come into contact with Putnam while he was fulfilling his duties as a foreman of the Jury of Attaints and Appeals. Putnam may have been suitably impressed with Parris because he returned to him a favourable decision in the case he was appealing¹¹.

Some degree of reluctance can be seen on the part of Parris about his acceptance of the offer from the Salem villagers by the way he kept putting off his final commitment to the position. Parris was first approached by the villagers on the 15th of November, 1688, but he kept the negotiations for his remuneration package going right up until he finally made the relocation to the Village (November 1689)¹². His reluctance in taking up the position offered by the Village is rather surprising in the light of the scarcity of such posts in New England, but considering the problems experienced by the previous ministers in Salem Village, he may have wanted to apply some very serious consideration to their offer before accepting it. This seeming lack of enthusiasm for the ministerial post can also be seen in another light. Parris'

¹⁰Gragg, *A Quest For Security*, p.35.

¹¹Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.155.

¹²C.W. Upham, *Salem Witchcraft With an Account of Salem Village and a History of Opinion on Witchcraft and Kindred Subjects*, 2 Vols., Boston, 1867, Vol. I, pp.287,292.

tactics of delaying his final acceptance may also have just been his way of manipulating the negotiations over his benefits in order to ‘up the ante’, so to speak.

In the end, the negotiations were long, drawn out, and complicated beyond what the villagers would have ever expected. From the sermons that survive from his time in the Village it comes through quite strongly that Parris was a man with an inflated notion of his importance and a burning need for recognition as a leader, socially superior to most of his flock. Though there is no evidence of this side of his character in any earlier sources, he doesn’t appear to have had any compunction about exposing the Salem villagers, immediately, to the more abrasive side of his personality. He made the negotiations for his salary and benefits as tedious as possible, pushing the villagers for every advantage that he could. The idea that the villagers sought him out would have been a tremendously soothing to the ego of a man like Parris, who because of his recent legal difficulties, would have been left feeling a little battered. It would have nurtured in Parris a feeling of being empowered after his pride had been dented by Richard Harris hounding him for his outstanding debt. The fact that he enjoyed this new feeling can be seen by the fact that he made the villagers send representatives, or suppliant to him on three occasions¹³.

On the last occasion that representatives from the Village were sent to Parris a firm offer for his salary was made. They offered Parris annually, 60 pounds, one third being in cash and the remainder in provisions at specified rates. Wheat for example was specified at 4 shillings per bushel, Indian corn

¹³Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, Vol. I, pp.287-8.

at 2 shillings per bushel and pork at 2 pence per pound¹⁴. Of course this was not enough for Samuel Parris. He felt that he needed a much more precise agreement, so using his ‘business acumen’ he began to negotiate in earnest with the Village representatives. Perhaps he sensed that there was a certain urgency and eagerness about the final deputation that was sent to him, so Parris proposed a counter-offer to the villagers. Parris’ answer to the representative was a detailed eight point proposal listing quite precisely his requirements for taking up the position as minister. Since this list of requirements became a point of contention at a later time, and since they were unusually exacting for a minister’s contract, as well as giving some insight into the character of Parris himself, they are worth examining further. The eight points of Parris’ counter-offer are as follows:

First, when money shall be more plenteous, the money part to be paid to me shall accordingly be increased.

Second, though corn or like provisions should arise to a higher price than you have set, yet, for my own family use, I shall have what is needful at the price now stated, and so if it fall lower.

Third, the whole sixty pounds to be only from our inhabitants that are dwelling in our bound, proportionable to what lands they have within the same.

Fourth, no provision to be bought in without first asking whether needed, and myself to make a choice of what, unless the person is unable to pay in any sort but one.

Fifth, firewood to be given in yearly, freely.

Sixth, two men to be chosen yearly to see to that due payments be made.

Seventh, contributions each sabbath in papers; and only as such are in papers, and dwelling within our bounds, to be accounted a part of the sixty pounds.

Eighth, as God shall please to bless the place so as to be able to rise higher than the sixty pounds, that then a proportionable

¹⁴S.P. Fowler, “An Account of the Life and Character of the Rev. Ramuel Parris, of Salem Village, and of his Connection with the Witchcraft Delusion of 1692”, in Samuel G. Drake, *The Witchcraft Delusion in New England*, 1866, Vol. III, p.199, Appendix VI.

increase be made. If God shall please, for our sins, to diminish the substance of said place, I will endeavour accordingly to bear such losses, by proportionable abatements of such as shall reasonably desire it¹⁵.

This list of demands also contains a hint that Parris saw himself as favoured by God and that his mere presence in Salem Village would bring upon the town more of God's blessings and prosperity. The wording of point eight in particular, conveys this attitude quite clearly. The phrases, "as God shall please to bless", and "if God shall please ... to diminish", gives the impression that as Parris was now coming to the Village it is unlikely that the community would experience any reverses in fortune.

It can be seen, by the nature of the above document, that although Samuel Parris was giving up the commercial life, he used his experience in the field to develop an effective 'contract'. An interesting point of note is Parris' concern over providing for any increase of the cash proportion of his salary, even going so far as to protect it by fixing the price of provisions. He also provided for an increase in his remuneration should the town prosper. The first and second points of this counter-offer indicate Parris' need of a stable source of income, something that he had not previously had. Item number eight creates the impression that the acquisition of money, and security of income dominated his thinking. He stated that if the Village's wealth increases he requires that his salary should increase but if the Village suffered reverses he would only "endeavour" to take a decrease in pay. This item says a great deal about what Parris' real desires were from the villagers. If the Village declined in wealth he would only consider taking a reduced payment from individuals if they requested it. This request of Parris' tells us that he saw himself as the leader of the Village, with the villagers having to

¹⁵Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, Vol. I, pp.289-90.

come to him with all their problems for him to solve. Herein is contained the notion that Parris was attempting to set himself up as the Village overlord. He wanted the “peasants” coming to beg him for respite from their “taxes”.

Item four also reveals further attitudes towards the villagers. By requiring that the villagers gain his approval for those provisions which they supplied to him, he was effectively demanding control. Parris wanted direct control over how the villagers chose to pay him. In addition to this he wanted the villagers to bring the provisions to him so that he might have his pick of them. By having the villagers first come to him to offer their wares while Parris made his selection again gives the impression of his sense of importance.

This is also revealed in his attitude to firewood, insisting that each individual bring to him their portion of his firewood. The firewood appears in this instance to take on the symbol of being an offertory to Parris as master of the Village, for Parris himself would not have needed to cut his own firewood anyway, for as a slave owner he easily could have had his male slave, John Indian, perform the task. Even though the villagers gave Parris the extra allowance of six pounds with which to purchase his firewood, he still gave the impression that he expected the firewood delivered to him by the individual villagers. A plea to the villagers, “I told them I had scarce enough wood to burn till tomorrow, and prayed that some care might be taken,”¹⁶ reinforces Parris’ earlier expectation of individual portions of wood being delivered to him. Perhaps his years as a less than successful merchant, not given the respect and deference that he thought he deserved, cankered his

¹⁶ *Church Records*, 18 November 1691, p.277.

soul and gave him the desire to secure his future status as above the ordinary villager.

Nevertheless, up until this point Parris appears to have been very careful about displaying any of the abrasiveness that later emerges in his character. His fellow Bostonians or his parishioners at Stow do not appear to have found anything personally objectionable about him or at least no surviving records assert that they did. From all appearances, Samuel Parris was an educated man of good breeding with an impeccable background. The darker side of his personality did not become evident until his settlement in Salem Village. The question is, what did he do that so offended the Salem villagers that they sought to oust him from his position? Although the Salem villagers had previously had some problems in retaining their ministers, the lengths to which at least some of them went to in order to secure Parris' services does indicate that they genuinely wanted Parris to remain in the Village longer than his predecessors had.

Parris may have had no qualms about displaying the arrogance in his character, or trying to 'lord it' over the villagers once he felt his position as minister was unshakeably secure. His actions can be interpreted as a manifestation of an overwhelming desire to be treated in a deferential manner - itself a reflection of his view of himself as a clearly superior person. The villagers' treatment of Parris seemed to go beyond their ongoing internal political division and their prior difficulties with the other three ministers. Whatever the cause of the initial breakdown in the relationship he formed with the Salem villagers, the more abrasive side of his nature came most strongly to the fore when he found his position within the Village threatened. In much the same way as the legal difficulties thwarted his mercantile career, some villagers were now attempting to thwart him in his new profession.

Given his previous history, Parris was not a man to stand quietly by while his ambitions were thwarted by the villagers of Salem.

Chapter Three: *A house divided against itself*

Samuel Parris had a varied and interesting career. Having begun his life as the 'beloved' younger son of a well-to-do merchant and plantation owner he slipped from these rosy beginnings into mediocrity, achieving neither the successes of his father or uncle John, nor of his own expectations. Unable to face the prospect of so ordinary an existence, Samuel made the decision to abandon his career as a merchant in favour of the prestige and security of a ministerial post. Having made this choice in favour of the ministry, when approached by representatives from Salem Village, he eventually elected to take them up on their offer of a permanent post.

Although a permanent post as the minister of Salem Village would, on the surface, appear an ideal opportunity for Parris, unfortunately upon closer inspection, there existed some difficulties inherent in the situation within Salem Village which would challenge the atmosphere Parris was trying to create. Almost from the Village's initial settlement as Salem Farms, the inhabitants were embroiled in political factionalism that could at times become very bitter and intense. Because of the innate division within Salem Village, and for our interests here, its specific difficulties of having and keeping its own minister, it is essential to provide an overview of the underlying factionalism that existed in the Village before his arrival. Through such an overview, we will be able to assess what effect the addition of Parris had on the politically divided community of Salem Village.

In order to attain an understanding of the prevailing circumstances in Salem Village, it is unnecessary to go beyond the assessment of Boyer and Nissenbaum in their excellent work, *Salem Possessed*. This work analyses the underlying themes of Salem Village politics just prior to the outbreak of

the witchcraft episode. It will not be possible, nor necessary, to go into as much detail as Boyer and Nissenbaum have done. The intention here is rather to provide readers some sense of the existing tensions within Salem Village, an understanding of what each faction within the Village represented and why these issues were of such significance to the villagers. This overview will aid in the understanding of how Samuel Parris was able to manipulate these existing tensions and by allying himself with one of the factions was able to use his influence as the Village's minister to ensure his own future security and place in history.

Salem Village's economic role was to supply foodstuffs to the thriving commercial centre of Salem Town which because of a lack of arable land in the town's immediate vicinity could not produce sufficient quantities itself. The little settlement that became Salem Village, and later Danvers, was never meant to become an autonomous entity, but to remain under the direct control of the Town. Town control over the Village and its interests and institutions was the essential issue at the core of the ongoing dispute between the villagers and the townspeople. Salem Town, having already lost control of other satellite communities of Wenham, Manchester, Marblehead and Beverly, was determined not to lose the remaining agricultural region that remained under its influence. Although the conflict at times could degenerate into some intense, albeit petty squabbling, the central issue was a much more serious one, at least for the residents of Salem Village. The essence of this central issue was that the villagers wanted to wrest control of their institutions, secular as well as religious, away from the Town. They wanted autonomy if not independence.

Over time the interests of the townspeople diverged from those of the farmers, as they were known initially. This divergence of interests meant that

the villagers felt that they were being dictated to by an outside party whose goals and objectives did not always coincide with theirs. While the Town grew to become a 'Mecca' for mercantile activity, the Village area remained more provincial than its neighbour. It is in this area, most particularly, that the interests of the Town and the Village really began to diverge. The villagers retained the puritan attitudes towards merchants, which saw them as corrupting the moral standards of the 'New Jerusalem'. Those who settled in the Village area began to see in the growing commercialism of the Town, changes which undermined the original puritan ideals. The pro-autonomy faction of villagers, therefore felt they were in a morally superior position, and victims of the Town's profane ambitions¹.

Even though the Village was an entirely separate entity, the Town had control over their most important institutions. The Town controlled (up until 1752 when the Village finally gained its independence) all important matters including taxation. The villagers were required to pay all of their taxes to the Town. At least until 1672 these taxes even included church taxes and those special taxes levied for things like the construction a new meeting house in the Town. Salem Town also controlled the most important of the Village's civil institutions. The Village's constables were chosen by the Town, from amongst the residents of the Town, as were those people who supposedly represented them in the General Court. The prices of the farmed goods that the Village produced was even controlled by the Town. Town selectmen would set the prices for which the Village's produce could be sold to the Town. Being the closest and best port facility, the farmers of the Village had no real choice but to use the Town as their primary market. The Town even controlled such things as the determination where new roads would go, and

¹ P. Boyer and S. Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, Cambridge Mass., 1974, p.105.

as well as the allotment of undistributed lands in the Village. The villagers did not even get a say on exactly who made up the population of their community.

In such a small and tightly knit community where it was important for the inhabitants to stick together, this would have enormously added to the tensions within the Village. It would have especially put off-side those villagers who had determined that such problems could only be alleviated by a degree of autonomy. Anyone granted an allotment by the Town could easily be perceived as being of the 'pro-Town' faction, even if they were not. These constant irritations helped divide the Village. Many villagers were quite frustrated with the whole situation. They were in almost all respects a completely separate entity, both in geography and purpose, from Salem Town but they had no direct control of their own affairs. Outsiders, people who did not necessarily have the villager's interests at heart, controlled almost all of the Village's institutions.

One issue, in particular, became a bone of contention and the focus in this dispute for the villagers. This was the lack of a Church of their own and the privileges of being able to become full church members that went with it. If they wanted to become church members, 'visible saints', and receive communion, they had to make the journey into Salem Town to do so there. Having a covenanted church with an ordained minister would also give the Village some sense of legitimacy as a separate entity from Salem Town. A church would give the villagers some autonomy, even if it was only over their spiritual affairs. Prior to 1672, if the villagers wanted to attend religious services, then each week they expected to travel, in some cases distances of up to ten miles, to the Town to do so. Because they were "at great distance

from the meeting house”², the Salem villagers began in 1666 to present a series of petitions to the Town Church and its elders to be allowed to construct a meeting house of their own³.

The first petition presented by the villagers in 1666, to acquire an independent Church, was completely ignored by the Town minister and the church elders. Three years later, in 1669, prompted by the Town levying a special tax for the building of a new meeting house in the Town, the villagers again attempted to present another petition to build their own meeting house. In this petition, signed by twenty-eight farmers, the villagers refused outright to pay this special tax “unless you likewise of the Town share with us when we shall build one for ourselves”. However, when John and Thomas Putnam presented this petition to George Corwin, a leading merchant and the moderator of the Town Church, they were at first ignored, and when they persisted with their cause told that they were out of order⁴. Finally in March of 1672, after being put under pressure from the General Court, the Town gave the villagers some relief in the matter and they were given permission to build their own meeting house and hire their own minister. As part of this agreement the Town released the villagers from having to pay the church taxes, even though for all other purposes the Village would still be regarded as part of the Town and the villagers would still be required to pay all other taxes to the Town⁵. Despite having been given this exemption from paying Church taxes, the Town still persisted in levying taxes on the villagers to pay for the upkeep of the Town’s meeting house. Two and a half acres of Nathaniel Putnam’s land was seized in 1674 for non-payment of the

² Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.41.

³ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.40-41.

⁴ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.41.

⁵ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.41.

Town-imposed levy for the meeting house. This was two years after the Village had built its own meeting house⁶. The Town was reluctant to cede any of its control over the Village but in the end the Village gained a partial victory in the ongoing battle for control and eventually to gain an independent church.

Having been given leave to build their own place of worship and hire their own minister, one would have thought this matter would, if not come to an end, at least have gone some way towards relieving some of the tensions within the Village. Unfortunately this was not to be the case and the church became the new focus of the ongoing dispute. Because some of the villagers were still both politically and religiously aligned with the Town, they put obstacles in the path of those in favour of autonomy. The divisiveness inherent in the situation forced every minister that came to the Village to leave it. Instead of the average term for a minister being twenty-two years as it was in the rest of the New England region⁷, in Salem Village it was only a few years. Including the lamentable Samuel Parris, the Village had in total four ministers in a period of only twenty-five years, with the average term of service for a minister being only five and a quarter years⁸.

Having outlined the major source of contention between the people of the Village and the Town, next we shall have a closer look at the division within the Village itself. The inhabitants of the Village were divided into two factions. On one side we have the Putnam family and their allies who wanted complete autonomy from Salem Town for their community. Members of this

⁶ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.43.

⁷ L. Gragg, *A Quest For Security: The Life of Samuel Parris, 1653-1720*, New York, 1990, p.33.

⁸ Bayley 1672-1679; Burroughs 1680-1683; Lawson 1684-1688; Parris 1689-1696.

faction were staunch supporters of Salem Village's acquisition of a church and minister of their own. They were also responsible for bringing Samuel Parris to the Village, and later on became his support base when the opposing faction began to work against him in an attempt to oust him as the Village's minister. In contrast, the other faction, which considered it in the Village's best interest to remain part of the Town, was led by the Porter family and their supporters. This pro-Salem Town faction was the group most opposed and obstructive in the both the hiring and paying of a minister for the Village. According to Boyer and Nissenbaum, geography played an important role in the political division, the Porter and pro-Town faction, for the most part resided in the part of the Village closest to the Town. The Putnams and their supporters, on the other hand, lived the most distant.

If the central issue of contention of the Village having a independent and covenanted Church with its own minister was a source of friction between the Village and the Town, then this friction was magnified within the Village itself ten-fold. The three ministers before Samuel Parris, James Bayley, George Burroughs and Deodat Lawson, all came and left Salem Village in very quick succession. As representatives of this contentious institution, these men often found themselves under fire from opponents of village autonomy. Because they became the obvious figurehead in this debate, they found that their tenures in the Village were much like being a blind man walking through a mine field, nervous and full of unavoidable stress. As a result, each of the ministers found leaving the Village a much more rewarding proposition than staying and attempting to bring about any resolution in the ongoing conflict.

The first minister, James Bayley, came to the Village in October 1672. At first things appeared to go quite well for the Reverend Bayley and in June

of 1673 he was invited to “remain in his post” and gifted with some 40 acres of prime land by some of the villagers to encourage him to settle there. Unfortunately, this goodwill was not to linger for long and later in 1673 some of the villagers appeared to have become dissatisfied with Bayley’s ministry. This dissatisfaction is shown by some fourteen villager’s failure to pay their taxes for the minister’s upkeep. This refusal to meet their obligations with regards to the minister’s salary had become a common theme by the time that Samuel Parris arrived in Salem Village. The first signs of protest came in the form of simply not paying the minister and hoping that economics forced him to leave. In 1680, after a much protracted dispute, and after only seven years in the Village, Bayley had had enough and made the decision to leave, eventually changing careers altogether, and becoming a doctor in Roxbury⁹.

The next minister that was called to Salem Village was George Burroughs. Burroughs seems to have been well informed about the prevailing climate of dissent in the Village and as part of the agreement for his coming to the Village he set down the condition, “that in case any difference should arise in time to come, that we engage on both sides to submit to counsel for a peaceable issue”¹⁰. After a honeymoon period of only three years in the Village, he too began experiencing difficulties in getting paid. Burroughs took a different approach to this situation than Bayley. He simply stopped holding services for his congregation by March of 1683 and took up the offer of returning to Casco Bay upon the re-establishment and re-creation of his old ministerial post there. After his departure from Salem Village, the residents engaged in a protracted and acrimonious legal dispute over Burrough’s defection. It appears, that not having given the villagers the

⁹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.53.

¹⁰ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.54.

opportunity to harry him as they did to Bayley, the villagers still wanted their pound of flesh. Although it is not necessary to go into all the details of this legal dispute between Burroughs and the villagers, suffice it to say that in the end it became very bitter indeed and it could be said that this dispute ultimately led to Burroughs demise at the hands of his erstwhile congregation.

The minister that came after Burroughs was Deodat Lawson. He came to Salem Village in 1684. In the case of Lawson, the villagers opposing the idea of the Village having an independent Church did not follow what by now was their usual procedure. In this instance the minister became the focus of the same dispute but with a slightly different angle to it. With the arrival of Lawson, the pro-autonomy faction saw their opportunity to push ahead for a fully covenanted church and ordination for Lawson. Here both the Porter faction, and Salem Town threw their gauntlets in to the ring and protested so strenuously against Lawson's ordination that the attempt to gain both an ordained minister and a completely independent church was temporarily abandoned¹¹. The discord was such that as soon as his contract was up in 1688, he departed that unhappy place.

By the time Parris was contemplating a change of career, the residents of the Village had gained quite a reputation for their disputatious nature. In fact this contention in the Village was to even come out in the witch trials themselves. William Barker of Andover, in his confession, said that the 'conspiracy' of witches gathered in the Village "to destroy that place by reason of the peoples being divided & their differing with their ministers."¹² In fact the Salem villagers were considered by outsiders as labouring under "a

¹¹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.58.

¹² *SWP*, Vol I, p.66.

restless frame of spirit” and one of the Village’s ministers told of the uncomfortable divisions and contentions¹³. Hanson characterised the people as distinguished for their “intolerance, austerity and gloom”¹⁴. Jeremiah Watts, a resident of the Village, in a letter described the community as one where, “brother is against brother and neighbours [are] against neighbours, all quarrelling and smiting one another”¹⁵. Even the witch trials did not quell their disputatious nature and were described years later as possessing “a spirit full of contentions”¹⁶.

If Parris was seeking a quiet community to put down roots and establish himself in security, he definitely chose the wrong place to make this attempt. However given the fact that ministerial positions were very hard to come by, Parris possibly had little choice but to accept the villagers’ offer. After long consideration of both his other career options and whether or not he wanted to risk his family on such a chancy relocation, Parris elected to take them up on their offer. Of course, given Parris’ arrogance, he might possibly have thought he could succeed where his predecessors had failed and bring peace to the troubled community. In one matter at least Parris was more successful, he was able to become the ordained minister of the Village’s church. What Parris failed to recognise was the determination of the pro-Town faction to keep the status quo in regards to the Village’s status. The way that the Salem villagers routinely dealt with their ministers, as we have seen, had left a lot to be desired. The routine by the time Parris entered the scene was well established - one group hired a minister, while the other faction opposed him and made the minister’s living in the Village

¹³Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.44.

¹⁴Hanson, *History of the Town of Danvers, From its Early Settlement to the Year 1848*, Danvers, 1848, p17.

¹⁵ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.45.

¹⁶Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, p.74.

burdensome, which in the end forced him to quit the Village. However the faction that opposed Parris failed to take into account Parris' tenaciousness and cunning intelligence. By forcing Parris to defend his position as their minister, they forced him into a position which then compelled him to bring about circumstances to insure his indispensability to the villagers as their leader. An alleged witchcraft incident provided an opportunity to make him indispensable leading them in the battle against Satan and his minions.