FOUR decades ago Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, a pair of fresh-faced assistant professors toiling away in the same department, worked up a seminar they called “New Approaches to the Study of History.” Following a model of hands-on learning favored by Nissenbaum’s mentors at the University of Wisconsin and borrowing something of the sleeves-rolled-up, hands-dirty ethos of an archaeological dig, they set out to “give undergraduate students the opportunity to explore a single event in depth through the careful and extended use of primary sources.” The method—full immersion in the fast-flowing stream of history—was the point; the particular body of water into which these beginning students would be asked to jump was somewhat beside it.

Had Boyer and Nissenbaum set up shop in Detroit, or Los Angeles, or Miami, or Philadelphia, you would be reading a very different Forum. But as it happened, they worked at the University of Massachusetts, in a state that was once a British colony whose English settlers—those pious, probing, persnickety Puritans—had been maniacally devoted record keepers; their memory had been so venerated by nineteenth-century descendants that a treasure trove of documents from the late seventeenth century had survived time’s ravages, remaining close at hand. Tugged by the archive, Boyer and Nissenbaum decided to focus their class around the infamous 1692 Salem witch trials.

Salem’s documentary corpus—much of it published, with more to be painstakingly discovered by the diligent young professors—was perfect for a student’s deep, quick inquiry. The materials were plentiful yet bounded; counting the pages of legal documents, sermon notes, petitions, and church records doesn’t take you much past the high three figures. The texts were opaque enough to challenge yet forthcoming enough to tantalize. The story wasn’t lying there in plain sight, prettied...
up and predigested, *CliffsNotes* style. ("The five leading causes of the Salem Witch Trials are . . . ") But if you worked them over hard and thoughtfully, the bits and pieces of evidence might give up their secrets. And what secrets! Salem circa 1692 offered love and death, magic and murder, vengeance, regret, and forgiveness, not always in equal measure. Great mysteries of the human condition paraded across a tiny stage: a town of fewer than two thousand souls, a small, proud, largely vanished society whose traces could still be glimpsed and even felt, if dimly. Here, in short, was precisely the sort of laboratory that other new social historians (John Demos, Philip J. Greven, Kenneth Lockridge, and Michael Zuckerman foremost among them) had mined to brilliant effect, using small worlds to plumb big questions.

Boyer and Nissenbaum quickly realized that these fragments from Salem’s past contained the making of a great course and more. The professors began, “after considerable deliberation and some reluctance,” to sketch an article. Though neither was a colonial historian by training, the pair contemplated submitting an essay about their experiment and its results to the flagship journal in that field, none other than the *William and Mary Quarterly*. But the outline they “scribbled on a lunch bag one afternoon in September 1970” grew too big. The classroom collaboration would become instead a monograph of extraordinary complexity, grace, and longevity. (Now in its twenty-sixth printing from Harvard University Press, it has sold more than 180,000 copies over its life and is still going strong.) In their modest and generous response to the sometimes heated criticism their efforts receive in this Forum, Boyer and Nissenbaum recall that when they “finally completed *Salem Possessed* in late 1972 . . . we knew we had written a good book.” Perhaps even a definitive one, “the last word on Salem witchcraft.”  

*Salem Possessed* was far more than a good book, but it hardly closed the book on Salem. Quite the opposite: Boyer and Nissenbaum’s provocative interpretation of the *longue durée* behind the explosive conflict as well as their two documentary editions that put the raw materials of their research into hundreds of libraries around the country opened the floodgates to new waves of inquiry. Since 1974 a river of books and  

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3 When it first appeared in 1972, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum’s *Salem-Village Witchcraft* made some of the manuscript materials used in their teaching and writing available to students and scholars outside eastern Massachusetts for the first time. See Boyer and Nissenbaum, eds., *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England* (Belmont, Calif., 1972). Three years
articles exploring the historical meanings of New England witchcraft in
general and the Salem trials in particular has flowed from the pens of
Boyer and Nissenbaum's scholarly peers, the desktop computers of their
graduate students, and the ultralight laptops of their graduate students’
graduate students. A phalanx of doctoral candidates may be text messag-
ing the latest salvos in the debate as you read these words.

In their quest to crack Salem's code, these studies, including the
articles in the present Forum, have used a variety of interpretive tools,
some of which require electricity (computer mapping systems, digital
photography, spreadsheets, and even the wonders of eBay) and some of
which generate it (feminist analysis, psychoanalytically informed inter-
pretation, an Atlantic framework, and so on). The resulting explanations
have differed often on points of emphasis and sometimes on points of
fact. But whatever their disagreements, these works share an important,
indeed inescapable, context: they were shaped by the life- and thought-
worlds of their authors. As Boyer and Nissenbaum remark, “all historical
writing reflects the circumstances of its production and is the work of
men and women who are citizens and social beings as well as historians.”

Salem Possessed, as its authors recollect in moving detail, danced to the
music of the late 1960s, “a tumultuous era in the nation's history, with
society torn by clamorous disagreements over what many saw as a disas-
trous and ill-considered war waged by an arrogant and blundering
administration.”

A great deal in the small world of early American history has changed
since 1974. The most important studies of New England witchcraft pub-
lished during the intervening decades (I can gesture toward only a few of
them here) are reason to hope that some things have changed for the
better. Appearing eight years after Salem Possessed, John Putnam Demo's
Entertaining Satan used multiple lenses—biography, psychology, sociolo-
y, and history—to create a picture of New England witchcraft that
focused both on the inner lives of individuals and the broadest outlines
of a culture, a portrait both more crowded and more intimate than Paul
Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's town study. Carol F. Karlsen's path-
braking The Devil in the Shape of a Woman followed five years later,
forcefully demonstrating the need to think about gender when we think
about witchcraft. Why, in the colonies as in Britain and Europe, had the overwhelming majority of those accused of witchcraft, and an even greater proportion of those convicted of the crime, been women of a certain age? Karlsen’s answer, rooted in her close study of New England court, church, tax, and land records, reaffirmed the long-standing tradition of misogyny on both sides of the Atlantic and drew new attention to the economic and familial power wielded by many suspected New England witches.5

Demos and Karlsen took New England rather than Salem as their unit of study. To understand the society and culture of those colonies, they often looked across the vast and furious ocean to discern the intellectual inheritance of white New Englanders. But it was Mary Beth Norton’s In the Devil’s Snare that took the Atlantic turn in full, setting the events that unfolded in Salem in the context of empire and invasion, colonialism and Indian wars. As a result Norton’s Salem was less a Puritan village than a place of refuge just south and west of a barbarous and bloody frontier of the first British Empire, a place whose haylofts and lean-tos housed witnesses of (almost) unspeakable trauma “at the Eastward.” These survivors of imperial warfare, whose gossip and distress set the villages of Essex County together by the ears, consigned nearly a score of their neighbors to swing by the neck. For Boyer and Nissenbaum, the symbolic heart of the Salem witch trials was the Ipswich Road, the cow path that divided capitalism from its discontents. Norton instead located Salem’s epicenter at Maine’s Casco Bay and, at least by implication, in far-off London, as well as deep within Indian country. Sarah Rivett’s comment in this Forum, drawn from new work situating the Salem trials amid the intellectual foment of Enlightenment empiricism, suggests the continuing vitality of such transatlantic links.6


Demos, Karlsen, and especially Norton have given readers a bigger New England and a bigger Salem than the one Salem Possessed depicted thirty-four years ago. The victims of witchcraft and their accusers are now known not just as budding merchants and hardscrabble farmers but as fully rounded people with rich, complicated inner lives, as gendered beings, and as creatures of a vast and violent Atlantic empire.

As Boyer and Nissenbaum suggest in their concluding remarks to this Forum, all these new directions are just fine with them. Their Salem was not a place to be understood through “easy polarities” but rather one marked by the ambiguity, fluidity, and multiplicity that were (and are) defining features of the human condition. Asked to weigh competing interpretations—religion versus economics, for example—the pair of no-longer-young yet still wise professors aver, “it is not an either-or choice.” History is an interpretive discipline, as much art as science. As Karlsen points out in her comment, the last half century of scholarship on New England witchcraft has been so fruitful in part because Salem has offered historians a big tent, a field of play as deep as the surviving records and as wide as the imagination.

Where does the cutting edge lie now? This Forum makes clear that scholars have come a long way from using adding machines and outlining courses on lunch bags. The tools Margo Burns and Bernard Rosenthal, Richard Latner, and Benjamin C. Ray deploy in their arguments are powerful, precise, and sometimes pointed. Yet readers may be forgiven for wondering whether the broad humanistic questions that drew generations of scholars and writers to the subject of New England witchcraft have given way to narrow technical ones.

In Burns and Rosenthal’s piece, that fine-grained meticulousness serves as its own reward. The article heralds the publication of Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt, a superb new edition of the legal records of Massachusetts witchcraft prosecutions in 1692–93. This documentary resource, more than a decade in the making, supersedes Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum’s 1977 Salem Witchcraft Papers, which was based largely on the Works Progress Administration’s transcripts dating from the 1930s, which in turn relied on a nineteenth-century compilation that repeated errors Cotton Mather, among others, had introduced more than two centuries earlier. As Burns and Rosenthal explain in considerable detail, they and their crack team of historians, editors, and linguists

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7 Boyer and Nissenbaum, WMQ 65: 512, 521.
have gone back to the original manuscripts with renewed zeal, fresh eyes, and great care.

Numerous refinements result. The editors found new documents, purged old mistakes, and solved lingering puzzles. Using digital photography to bolster their old-fashioned paleographic detective work, they identified the handwriting of the two dozen men responsible for recording most of the documents. Knowing each clerk's hand allowed them to sequence the legal proceedings more fully than was previously possible. Indeed chronology is the main organizing principle of *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, which asks scholars to understand the Essex County witch hunts as they unfolded in time—as the people involved experienced them—rather than on a case-by-case basis, as older documentary editions presented them. Three historians make for poor predictors of the future, yet it seems safe to venture that the new *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* will quickly become the authoritative source for research on Salem and a great many other topics besides.

Though they constitute the bulk of the Salem corpus, the legal records of the 1692–93 witchcraft prosecutions barely figure in Richard Latner's article. His key sources are not trial records but tax lists, chief among the fragmentary records of economic life in seventeenth-century New England. Latner's emphatically revisionist account seeks to cast doubt on what he sees as one of the central conclusions of *Salem Possessed*: that Salem's witch hunters, rather than their prey, were economically marginalized as traditional land-based wealth yielded to a rising commercial society.

As part of their broader effort to understand the relative social standing of those who supported or opposed Salem Village minister Samuel Parris, Boyer and Nissenbaum analyzed the 1695 village tax assessment, levied the same year large numbers of village residents signed petitions for or against Parris. At that moment, Latner concedes, things stood much as *Salem Possessed* claims. But his close examination of seven tax lists spanning nearly twenty years, from 1681 to 1700, reveals a more complex economic picture. In the 1680s, Latner demonstrates, many pro-Parris taxpayers had greater assessed wealth than the minister's enemies, a position they lost in the early 1690s and largely recouped later in that decade.

The tax records matter a great deal more to Latner's argument than they did to that of Boyer and Nissenbaum, whose conception of status embraced biographical, familial, and social factors as well as economic ones. Moreover, as anyone who has worked with such records knows

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9 On the promise and pitfalls of a chronological organizing scheme, see Karlsen's and Norton's contributions to this Forum.
(indeed, as Latner himself admits), the data contained in these assessments are small, soft, and fragile. People move onto and off the rolls, up and down within them, or both: not enough whos and precious few whys survive in the record. Even when the subject is money and money alone, tax assessments hold up a blurry mirror to reality, one whose distortions remain largely unknowable. "There are limitations to what Salem Village's tax lists can say about the actual wealth of its inhabitants," Latner notes, "let alone how they derived their wealth . . . Moreover the tax rolls cannot address a person's involvement in or psychological relationship to capitalism or a market economy." 10

Latner brings a great deal of care to his analysis of these records, identifying "persisters" who stayed on the rolls from year to year, sorting the taxpayers into percentiles, and so on. 11 Boyer and Nissenbaum's rough correlation of names on the 1695 pro- and anti-Parris petitions with names on the 1695 tax list seems quaint and crude by comparison. But are the data robust enough to withstand the power of the lens Latner uses to read them? Discovering that only 19 percent of pro-Parris persisters—the faction Boyer and Nissenbaum said was fighting a rear-guard action against modernity—fell by at least 10 percent in the tax rankings during the 1680s sounds quite definitive. But who constituted that 19 percent? Latner's quantitative apparatus ennobles the fuzzy traces left behind by the public lives of four men. On the whole the effect is rather like hunting a mouse with a howitzer. You might hit your target, but it's a challenge to read the remains.

Like Latner's essay, Ray's article pulls at a single strand of the dense fabric of evidence that Boyer and Nissenbaum wove: a map plotting the residences of accusers, suspected witches, and their defenders. To this "simple yet compelling" illustration Ray somewhat improbably attributes much of the enduring success of Salem Possessed. 12 The map, he explains, rendered the book's argument in graphic form, clearly marking with a black line the social gulf dividing accused witches, said to have lived closer to the growing entrepôt of Salem Town, from their accusers, who resided disproportionately in the interior reaches of Salem Village. In trenchant prose Ray declares the map to be an interpretive fiction.

Ray's method—the transparency, completeness, and objectivity of which he contrasts to Boyer and Nissenbaum's "highly interpretive" and
mysteriously selective mapping techniques—sounds impressively high
tech. He describes the painstaking process of “digitizing and georefer-
cencing” the 1866 Upham map on which the *Salem Possessed* version was
based, his use of a “geographic positioning system device” to plot fea-
tures of the 1692 landscape and built environment in real space, and the
subsequent correlating of the named households labeled on Upham’s
map with Boyer and Nissenbaum’s “anonymous As, Ws, and Ds.”

Yet, in the end, it is not Ray’s digital arsenal that distinguishes his
maps from those presented in *Salem Possessed* but rather the evidence
gleaned from his research and his sifting and weighing of that evidence.
For reasons Boyer and Nissenbaum explained—and with which some
scholars, Mary Beth Norton and Rosenthal among them, hotly dis-
agree—they omitted from their calculations two subsets of accusers:
eight afflicted girls and five individuals who acted as both accusers and
defenders in the course of the Salem outbreak. For reasons Ray
explains—and with which other scholars, including Carol F. Karlsen and
John Demos in the present Forum, hotly disagree—he labels those thir-
ten as accusers on his maps. It is their presence, more than any other
single modification, that blurs the neat geographic divisions Boyer and
Nissenbaum placed before their readers. The choice is an interpretive
one, perhaps even a highly interpretive one, in Ray’s wording, but inter-
preting, after all, is what historians do.

The Salem whose legal manuscripts Margo Burns and Bernard Rosenthal
scrutinize letter by letter, whose tax records Richard Latner sifts and
sorts diachronically, and whose social geography Benjamin C. Ray plots
with the aid of geographic information systems software threatens to
shrink before our eyes, becoming an altogether smaller place than the
one *Salem Possessed* revealed to readers the better part of a half century
ago. Yet the minutiae probed in these articles—often “minor change[s],”
as Burns and Rosenthal put it—will doubtless become the building
blocks of big new questions yet to be asked about this little village.

What conclusions should readers draw, for example, from the fact
that Salem’s clerks and magistrates seemed unsure of the name of Sarah
Good’s four-year-old daughter? “As in many cases,” Burns and Rosenthal
explain, “the authorities simply did not know the people brought before
them, just as in many cases people making complaints did not know the

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13 Ray, *WMQ* 65: 452 (“highly interpretive”), 454 n. 7 (“digitizing”), 455
(“anonymous”).

14 Margo Burns and Bernard Rosenthal, “Examination of the Records of the
first names of those against whom they were complaining." Our long-held verities about the face-to-face communities of early New England clearly need close scrutiny.

Latner's tax assessment time series marks another frontier for future research: the study of the Salem trials as cause, rather than effect, of local strife. Focused as they were on the hidden history of Salem before the witch trials, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum had little to say about the shattered world the trials left behind. Latner's investigation hints that the mid- to late 1690s saw rapid reversals of fortune among the Salem Village elite. The aftershocks of the trials, in religious, legal, political, and cultural as well as economic terms, deserve more sustained study than they have yet received.16

All the main articles and several of the comments in the Forum also suggest that the next big book about Salem will have to attend to struggles within as well as between the social groups whose outlines Boyer and Nissenbaum discovered and whose borders they drew more starkly than people would have in 1692. Whether imagined geographically, economically, or otherwise, it is clear that a neat division between accusers and defenders no longer suffices. As Ray persuasively argues, "some of the Salem Villagers appear to have genuinely believed certain accused were guilty and others were not." They spoke to specific charges leveled against specific, imperfect human beings, less often (if ever) to the justice of "the trials in general."17 The situation of the afflicted accusers was yet murkier. For whatever one makes of their motivations—and the Forum authors disagree strongly—it seems clear, as Carol F. Karlsen insists, that each of these tormented girls and young women was divided against herself.

I teach a course on the Salem witch trials, an imitation of and homage to the one Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum devised back in 1969, that bears roughly the same relationship to their original as Disney's Celebration, Florida, does to an authentic seaside town. It seems only

15 Ibid., 416.
16 Gretchen A. Adams and Carol F. Karlsen are studying different facets of the history of witchcraft after Salem. See Adams, The Specter of Salem in American Culture (Chicago, forthcoming); Karlsen, "After Salem: The Transformation of the Witch in American Culture" (work in progress).
right that Boyer and Nissenbaum figure prominently in the assigned reading. Graduate students would merely sharpen their teeth on the tender, well-aged meat of *Salem Possessed*, for that is mostly what their mentors teach them to do. But mine is an undergraduate seminar, full of the delight of discovery. Year after year the students in the class confirm the book’s status as a living, breathing classic.

Indeed Boyer and Nissenbaum’s account of what happened in Salem Village more than three centuries ago presents something of a teaching challenge. Where in the roster does one put a book of such overwhelming explanatory power? I’ve programmed it first, asking it to serve as the straw man that latter-day work will tear down. I’ve set it head to head against Mary Beth Norton’s *In the Devil’s Snare* so students can see two distinct generations of scholarship going at it for twelve bloody rounds. I’ve placed it last, after a semester’s hard labor in the archive. But it doesn’t matter. My students look to Salem to get answers about how the world comes apart. And no matter where *Salem Possessed* appears on the syllabus, Boyer and Nissenbaum’s explanation of why Salem happened when, where, and how it did emerges as the answer, the one students tell their parents at Thanksgiving.

Rereading my battered copy yet again, I see what they see. Nearly every page has come loose from the binding, so it’s easy enough to pull out the map Benjamin C. Ray eviscerates and the tables with which Richard Lattner takes issue. And still *Salem Possessed* stands, held together by the energy of the authors’ collaboration, the inventiveness of their research, the depth of their insights, and the forcefulness of their prose. Doubtless Boyer and Nissenbaum would not write the same book today. Yet it remains, rightfully, an object not only of admiration and debate but also of envy.