

## A "GREAT ISSUES" FORMAT IN THE AMERICAN HISTORY SURVEY: ANALYSIS OF A PILOT PROJECT

William Simons

and

Armand LaPotin

State University of New York at Oneonta

### Initial Problems

The basic American history survey at the State University of New York, College at Oneonta, is similar to that of other public undergraduate institutions with liberal arts and pre-professional programs. Approximately five sections of our "Problems in U.S. History I" (1607-1877) are offered in the fall semester and an equal number of the second half (1877-the present) are scheduled in the spring semester for mostly freshmen and sophomores who generally have little or no history background. They register for the course to meet our basic curriculum requirements, those of pre-professional education programs, and/or out of a personal interest in the history of their own country. Each of the six instructors who teach the course have full individual autonomy in the selection of topics, reading materials, and visual aids.

As instructors who teach the course on a regular basis, we have become increasingly dissatisfied with its format. Although we believe that our sections effectively provide a comprehensive survey of American development, their broad chronological scope eschews in-depth examination of topics. Like most survey courses at present, they opt for breadth at the expense of depth. Equally challenging to us as instructors is the diversity of our students' intellectual and cultural backgrounds as well as their apathy and often limited knowledge of America's development as a nation. Clearly then, some method of instruction had to be found that would meet our concerns.

### Objectives

We decided that a case studies approach with a "Great Issues" format might best address some of these general problems. In addition, it would give our students the opportunity to utilize primary source materials; to demonstrate the diversity of historiography; to participate in the methodology of the historian by assembling, evaluating, and synthesizing data; and to convey the relevance of issues that touch upon a number of broad themes. In an immediate sense, the integration of selected case studies into the basic survey will better prepare the students for upper-division history courses. More significantly, it will do so by giving them the

---

The authors wish to acknowledge with appreciation the support of the State University of New York Research Foundation in funding this pilot program in the 1989-90 period.

opportunity for in-depth analysis, stimulating their interest in a topic that is relevant to them and *encouraging their active participation in the learning process.*

### Project Design

The instructors chose a specific "case" to run as a pilot project in the first half of the survey course. They utilized the fall semester simply because their schedules could be coordinated to meet the requirements of the project's application. The selection of the Salem Witch Trial (1692) as a case study was based on several considerations. Both instructors have an intellectual interest in the topic and, though their approaches to it are entirely different,<sup>1</sup> each consider the event as part of their areas of expertise. A second consideration was how we perceived its immediate relevance to our academic audience. Young adolescent girls precipitated the conflict that ultimately led to the witch mania, and at least one interpretation draws upon the generational differences between women in explaining the cause. Some of our students could readily sympathize with the internal anguish of these girls and understand the differences they shared with older women of their mother's or grandmother's generation. Another interpretation drew upon the alleged presence of hallucinogenic agents in explaining the girls' unique behavior. Here, too, the drug scene in their own generation elevated for our students the importance of events in Salem three-hundred years earlier.

An additional set of criteria in the selection of a specific case challenges the instructor's ability to discern broad universal themes. In this context the Salem witch trial was a good example, demonstrating the dynamics of hysteria, mob psychology, and the persecution of minorities in what was becoming an increasingly pluralistic society.

The selection of cases is limited only by the imagination of the instructors and in their ability to find relevant primary and secondary materials in the structure of its presentation. Consequently, to meet the needs of their students instructors can formulate their cases around a central theme or set of themes such as the role of the military in a democratic society; the development of American values or concepts such as popular sovereignty or the separation of church and state (demonstrating their universal applicability in American history); or the role of gender, generational, or cultural groups in an ethnic or racial context.

### Methodology & Presentation

Both the selection and class introduction of primary and secondary material are critical in the learning process. We planned four class sessions for the

---

<sup>1</sup> This turned out to be an unforeseen advantage when it came to our debate which, we believe, played an integral part in the success of the project (see below).

presentation of our pilot case. Before the first class dealing with witchcraft, students were assigned a 21-page narrative describing the events in Salem in 1692 that provided them with chronological and factual information but without interpretation. At our first class meeting, each student was given material that tersely summarized four different interpretations of the witchcraft controversy: 1) witchcraft was actually practiced; 2) the accusations were the result of the hallucinogenic visions caused by contaminated grains; 3) servant girls acted out resentments against the control exercised by older, more affluent women; and 4) pre-existing economic and social conflict within the Salem community prompted the pattern of witchcraft accusations. The interpretations, edited by the instructors to insure brevity and clarity, were selected on the basis of their diversity<sup>2</sup>

During the first class session, each student was also given a data packet consisting of primary materials arranged in sub-topical group categories relevant to events in Salem including excerpts from diaries, letters, and the trial, as well as a map of Salem Village and Town showing the residences of the accusers and the accused.<sup>3</sup> The class was immediately divided into groups of four or five students. The instructors circulated among the groups, assisting students in evaluating and analyzing the primary source materials serving as catalysts. The primary source materials, generated probing questions and comments. When the first class ended, clearly closure had not taken place. Students were told to continue considering the issue raised by the differing interpretations and the primary source materials. Students came to understand that additional data was needed to assist them in determining the validity of historical interpretations of the Salem witch episode.

---

<sup>2</sup> Students examined the following interpretations: John Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth Century New England," 75 *American Historical Review* (1970), 1311-1326; Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA, 1974); Linda R. Caporeal, "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?" 192 *Science* (1976), 21-26; and Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Other Possessions* (Boston, 1689).

<sup>3</sup> Primary sources utilized by students included: Petition of Salem Village to the General Court (December 1691); Petition of Salem Town to the General Court (1691); Pro-Parris Petition (May 20, 1695); Anti-Parris Petition (1695); Testimony of Samuel Parris, Nathaniel Ingersoll, and Thomas Putnam; Towne, Nurse, and Cloyse Genealogies; Examination of Rebecca Nurse; Physical Examination of Rebecca Nurse, Bridget Bishop, Sarah Good, and others; Testimony of Ann Putnam, Junior; and Testimony of Ann Putnam, Senior, and Ann Putnam, Junior. We found many of our primary sources in W. Elliot Woodward, *Records of Salem Witchcraft Copied from the Original Documents*, 2 vols. (Roxbury, MA, Privately printed 1864; Reissued, New York: Da Capo Press, 1969).

During the second class students viewed a film depicting the witch trials. The film, chosen for its historic authenticity and dramatic appeal, was originally shown on Public Television. With a playing time of 170 minutes, "Three Sovereigns for Sarah" would have consumed more class time than appropriate had not the instructors created their own edited, 43-minute version of the film. The edited version focuses on the arrest, trial, confinement, and execution of a single person, Rebecca Nurse, thus giving a human face to events in Salem. Although in its original form, "Three Sovereigns for Sarah" clearly advances a socio-economic explanation of the witchcraft controversy, the instructors purposely constructed the edited version in a manner that offered evidence that could support multiple interpretations. Consequently the edited version of the film not only deepened the interest of the students but it also enlarged their data base and advanced, rather than concluded, their inquiry.

The instructors were both present in each others' classes for the third session, utilizing the period to debate different and conflicting interpretations. Employing the case study approach common to social history, one instructor argued that the Salem witchcraft episode, given its scope, was a unique event in the chronicles of colonial America. Pre-existing familial, geographic, and commercial disputes, he contended, created socio-economic resentments that determined the pattern of witchcraft accusations in Salem. The other instructor, argued that his colleague's approach was too provincial. Salem needs to be viewed within a larger context that considers the rise and decline of Puritanism; previous outbreaks of witchcraft both in American and in Europe; and the nature of the New England mind. Subsequently, each instructor critiqued the other's approach. The final segment of the class was devoted to student questions and comments. Some students agreed with the approach offered by the first instructor, some with the approach offered by the second instructor, and others with neither approach. More importantly, students raised significant questions about the relationship between social and intellectual history, micro- and macro-perspectives, and theory and data.

The fourth and final class sessions were held with only the instructor in each class present. It was at this time that students had the opportunity to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the various interpretations they were exposed to through the lectures, readings, and the film, applying the primary source materials to their analyses of events and to broader issues that they deemed relevant to those events.

Each instructor deliberately used a different testing assignment as a follow-up to the presentation of the case study. One assigned his students a five-page essay to write at home on the causes and significance of the Salem witch trial; the other required them to select one interpretation and defend it in a blue book exam. Both formulated and applied a common anonymous questionnaire presented immediately after the fourth session, to assist them in further evaluating the project.

The instructors believed correctly that both timing and the introduction of materials in a sequential fashion would be critical to the project's success. The brief introductory narrative gave the students a factual understanding of the event and the opportunity to see a causal relationship in the packet of primary source materials they would shortly receive. Both the dramatic depiction of the event as well as the instructors' oral debate provided a focus for the interpretative essays students read prior to their assignment. The questions and ideas that were raised with the instructors informally within their individual groups helped them focus on the primary source documents. This inquiry facilitated understanding their analysis of materials that followed in the three subsequent sessions.

Our case studies approach has the virtue of repeat applicability and refinement by any instructor or group of instructors. To be sure, timing and coordination are critical here for we believe that the appearance of both instructors debating their interpretation in front of their students was a crucial dimension in the learning process. But the application of the case studies approach does not require any changes in student scheduling. And although it may be impossible to find adequate films to highlight some case studies, slides and audio tapes, if available, could serve as substitutions. Role playing, dramatized speeches, letters, sermons, and diaries, as well as music, can be equally effective.

#### Application—Result

The instructors spent part of the previous summer selecting primary and secondary source materials and arranging their sequential order along with the movie and the debate. It became apparent immediately prior to our first session that both the original number of interpretations (5) and primary source documents (18) could not be effectively presented within our planned time frame. After careful consideration, we deleted one interpretation and three documents. Our original concern proved to be correct, for our students would have had a difficult time placing the additional interpretations within the context of the document packet and our oral presentation. Although more potentially beneficial in understanding events, document analysis can also be more time consuming in comprehending the past than lecture presentations.

A second problem was timing. Since our format was such that the project would be duplicated, we had the opportunity in the brief time period between sections to profit from our mistakes. We found that while it was beneficial to encourage a "give and take" atmosphere when the students raised probing questions within their groups in the first session, we had to limit our debate in the third session in order to allow for their questions.

As previously noted, two kinds of evaluations were used to determine how our students responded to the project. The first was the assignment that each of us required in our sections. In both the blue book exam and take home essay, the

student responses seemed more thorough and judicious than those previously found in similar assignments. They generally analyzed most interpretations and provided evidence by citing the documents themselves as to why they favored one interpretation over another. They had a clear understanding of the causal relationship. Although these observations were not evident in all 88 students, they were sufficiently present in enough responses to make them significant.

Our second evaluative source was an open-ended, anonymous questionnaire where students had ample opportunity to express their own views in a free response section (see Appendix B). Correlations ran from 3.3 for the class discussion to 4.4 for the film (using a 5-point scale). Generally speaking, on the free response section, students liked the variety of teaching tools offered to them. Of particular concern to some were the opportunities for interaction between the teacher and the class. In the second part of the free response section, students generally found the challenge in formulating their interpretation as a positive and meaningful experience. Time constraints in discussing the issues were often cited as a negative factor. It would be interesting to organize a section of our basic course around the case studies approach and compare student responses with those of our "normal" sections.

In summary, we found that our case studies approach in the "Great Issues" format had several advantages. In making the material relevant, it instilled an interest in our students and encouraged them to learn. For the instructor, it holds the advantage of flexibility, in that cases can be tailored to the interests of both the academic audience and the major themes that the instructor wishes to present. Moreover, its repeat applicability allows any instructor or group of instructors to adopt the format. And the sequential way in which different kinds of material is presented gives students an active role in the learning process. The enthusiasm shown by our students when they asked questions, discussed the significance of a document, or defended a specific interpretation is sufficient reason for us to repeat it.

**Appendix A—PRESENTATION FORMAT**

**Session #1**

1. Students given 21-page narrative describing events in Salem which they were to read prior to the first session.
2. Students given brief summation of interpretations of the witchcraft controversy.
3. Students given data packet of primary source materials.
4. Students divided into small groups for discussion with both instructors circulating among them and assisting them with their questions and comments on the relationship of the primary source documents to the introductory narrative and the historical interpretations, no conclusions were called for.

**Session #2**

"Three Sovereigns for Sarah" (film) viewed.

**Session #3**

1. Instructors debate their historical interpretations.
2. Sufficient time allotted for an open discussion period.

**Session #4**

Open discussion continued with students formulating their own interpretations based upon their examination of the data packet, historical interpretations, and their experience with the film.

**Appendix B—STUDENT EVALUATION OF UNIT ON SALEM WITCHCRAFT**

Your candid evaluation of the Salem witchcraft unit will help us in teaching this topic in the future. Please do not sign your name.

**Numerical Ratings.** Please circle the response that best reflects your evaluation of the following. "1" is the least favorable response; "5" is the most favorable response.

- |    |                                |   |   |   |   |   |
|----|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. | the articles by historians     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| B. | the documentary materials      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| C. | the film                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| D. | the debate between instructors | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| E. | the class discussion           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**Free Response Question 1.** Is this way of studying a topic more or less effective than other approaches? Please use the bottom and/or reverse side to comment on this question.

**Free Response Question 2.** What are the chief strengths and weaknesses of the unit on Salem witchcraft? Please use the bottom and/or reverse side to comment on this question.