

Massachusetts Clears 5 From Salem Witch Trials

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More than three centuries after they were accused, tried and hanged as unrepentant witches on Gallows Hill in Salem, Mass., five women have been officially exonerated by the state.

The act, approved by the Legislature, was signed on Halloween by the acting governor, cheering the descendants of Bridget Bishop, Susannah Martin, Alice Parker, Wilmot Redd and Margaret Scott. The five were among 20 men and women put to death during the witchcraft hysteria of 1692.

"We've had an awful lot of descendants that have been out there working for it," said Shari Kelley Worrell of Barrington, Ill., an eighth great-granddaughter of Susannah Martin. The Puritan leader Cotton Mather called her one of the most "impudent, scurrilous, wicked creatures in the world."

Ms. Worrell said: "I want to make sure that people know she was not a witch. History will now record her as being what she really was."

Ms. Worrell said she felt pity for her distant ancestor, who could have lived had she admitted to being a witch.

"How would I feel dying as a Christian martyr, having people think I worshiped the devil?" she asked.

The state has tried to make amends before. In 1711, more than two decades after the trials, all the accused were exonerated and their relatives offered retribution. But, whether out of fear or shame, not all the families came forward to accept the apology.

A 1957 state resolution cleared the name of one more victim, Ann Pudeator, and "certain other persons" who were unlisted.

State Representative Paul E. Tirone, who helped shuttle this year's act through the Legislature, said the "other persons" should be cleared by name.

"These people were victims of hysteria, and they paid deeply with their lives," said Mr. Tirone, whose wife, Sharon, is a descendant of Sarah Wildes, who was exonerated in 1711.

The history lesson, he said, is one that modern Americans should keep in mind in the wake of Sept. 11 if they are tempted to eye their neighbors with suspicion.

"Sometimes when things like this happen we need to take a breath, and look at it," Mr. Tirone said. "We just can't paint blame with a wide brush."