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WITCH MEMORIES REMAIN: A LANDSCAPE HISTORY OF SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

Abstract:

This paper aims to explore how Salem, Massachusetts has remembered the 1692 Witchcraft Trials. This is a very large and comprehensive topic so focus has been narrowed to observe how the landscape of Salem has been transformed in memoriam. In the period post-1692 Witch Trials there was active forgetting in Salem. A stigma surrounded the trials and their occurrence was sidelined in favour of industrializing the city. Beginning just prior to the 1960s were small, concerted efforts to bring the trials to the attention of the public. The landscape of the city began to alter – a process that has continued till this day. In the 1990s and 2000s, full-scale memorialization of the Witch Trials has left its mark on the landscape. Memorials, museums and stores are now found at the heart of the city all recapturing a once forgotten memory.

This paper will specifically focus on the Witch Trials Memorial unveiled in 1992. The memorial has replaced an abandoned park in the middle of Salem, adjusting the tone of the space and its purpose. From this one memorial the culmination of Salem’s memorialization process can be observed and its impact on the landscape understood.

Keywords:

Salem, Witchcraft, Landscape, Memorials, Memorialization

JEL Classification: N90, N92

The Salem Witch Trials occurred from approximately January, 1692 until May, 1693 (Brown, 2006, pp. 92-96).¹ The first witchcraft accusation was sparked by a medical diagnosis made by Dr William Griggs in 1692 (Brown, 2006, p. 7). Afflicted girls from the Parris and Putnam families in Salem accused three female residents of witchcraft (Mappen, 1996, p. 4). John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin arrested the accused and interrogated them on March 1, 1692 in the Salem Village Meeting House located in modern-day Danvers (Roach, 2004, p. 25). By May 27, 1692 the formal court, Oyer and Terminer, was established with Hathorne and Corwin joining other judges, for example Samuel Sewall, to prosecute the more than two hundred women and men accused of witchcraft (Roach, 2004, p. 96).

The turning point in the trials came with the examination of Tituba in March, 1692. According to her court testimony (1692, p. 1) Tituba spoke of a coven of witches who were to blame for the children's illnesses. Her testimony confirmed the community's fear of witchcraft and encouraged the authorities to embark on a witch-hunt. Sarah Osborne was the first casualty of the trials, dying in jail on May 10, 1692 (Roach, 2014).

The reasons behind accusations varied. Motivations also included jealousy, fear and even revenge. In a community where access to land and resources was limited, jealousy was a major motivating factor (Hill, 2002, p. 3). Overall, the trials would formally claim twenty victims, nineteen by hanging and one death by crushing. As well as the executed there were also over two hundred women and men imprisoned, at least two of whom died in jail from starvation or disease.

The Oyer and Terminer courts were closed on October 29, 1692 in Salem Town, however, the Superior Court was quickly established (25 November, 1692) to address the remaining matters of witchcraft (Brown, 2006, p. 96). For the purposes of this summary, the concluding point of the trials will be regarded as May, 1693 as there were no individuals arrested on charges of witchcraft after this date and those remaining in prison were pardoned.

¹ This covers the period from the first accusation made by Abigail Williams until the formal pardon which ended the arrests and executions.

In order to effectively analyze the transformation of Salem's landscape to remember the trials, Avril Maddrell's cultural landscape methodology has been employed. In two of her landscape articles, "A Place for Grief and Belief: the Witness Cairn, Isle of Whithorn, Galloway, Scotland" and "Crossing Surfaces in Search of the Holy: Landscape and Liminality in Contemporary Christian Pilgrimage" Maddrell offers a three-point methodology for analyzing and evaluating any historical landscape (Maddrell, 2009)(Maddrell, 2013). These three-points are: landscapes are objective places but have subjective meanings, individuals purposefully interact with landscapes physically and mentally, and heterotopic landscapes are layered with meaning and memories.

Applying those points to a case study of the Official Witch Trials Memorial in Salem can yield insightful results. In 1992, the space surrounding the Old Burying Point Cemetery and Peabody Essex Museum in Salem's city centre was purposefully invested with meaning. The residents of Salem and the Salem Tercentenary Committee achieved this through the construction of an official Salem Witch Trials Memorial - the first formal memorial dedicated to the twenty executed victims in Salem. The objective space for the proposed memorial held no significance to the actual events of the 1692 Witchcraft Trials. It was a plot of public land donated by the Salem City Council (The Salem Award, 2014, p. 1).

The decision was made by the Salem Witch Trials Tercentenary Committee (1991, p. 2) to construct an official memorial that would "commemorate a period in American history when people fell victim to a society which lacked the basic guarantees of human rights and due process that are inherent in our nation today." Thereby, adding subjective meaning into an objective landscape. In addition, the memorial was to be an educational stimulus, readily accessible to anyone who could visit and experience the memorial.

The Tercentenary Committee launched a memorial design competition sparking a range of suggested interactions with the space. In total, two hundred and forty-two national and international entrants submitted designs (Crosbie, 1993, p. 70). On November 14, 1991, Arthur Miller, author of *The Crucible* (1953), announced the winning design by James Cutler and Maggie Smith, an architect and artist

respectively, from Bainbridge Island, Washington. Smith's ancestors were from Plymouth, Massachusetts, an area close to Salem, whereas Cutler's family had experience of McCarthyism in the 1950s, a political anti-communist pogrom which was regarded as a witch-hunt. Both were aware of the local significance of the trials and their perpetrated injustice. This awareness and experience is reflected in the memorial's multiple layers of symbolism. As they state, their design "did not want to interfere with other people's interpretations [of the trials]" (Dowd, 2012, p. 9). The memorial was purposefully constructed as a heterotopic space that is open to multiple interpretations.

The memorial can be entered from Liberty Street and from the Old Burying Point Cemetery. At first glance it appears to be a normal, suburban park with grass, a stonewall and six locust trees. On entering the landscape, however, layers of meaning are unveiled. As the site is a heterotopic space, each aspect of the Memorial can be imbued with different meanings. To architecture author, Michael Crosbie (1993, p. 70), the overall shape of the memorial resembles that of a gravestone. Crosbie argues its role as a gravestone for the twenty executed victims is further enhanced by the fact that behind and to the left of the memorial is the Old Burying Point Cemetery. To others, depending on the individuals' perspective, this cemetery may represent those who stood in silence during the trials or, alternatively, contextualize the memorial as a final resting place for the executed.

In order to enter the landscape one must walk over a slab of granite. Inscribed on this granite are the final words of those who were executed. They include, "I am no witch. I am innocent. I know nothing of it" (spoken by Bridget Bishop) and "Ye are all against me" (spoken by Martha Corey) (full transcription see Figure 3). The same New England granite has also been used to create a wall around the memorial, marking the boundary between the cemetery and the memorial. In this instance, the loose granite blocks can be seen as symbolic of Giles Corey's death by crushing. Inside the memorial are six locusts trees, believed to have been the type of tree from which the nineteen victims were hanged (Crosbie, 1993, p. 70). Surrounding the grassed area and locust trees are stone benches commemorating the twenty-executed victims. The benches could be seen as representative of courthouse seating for those who were convicted during the 1692 Witchcraft Trials (Wasserman, 2003, p. 8). Another

perspective on the benches, provided by Judith Wasserman in 2003 (p. 8), is that they represent pew seating in a Church.

Engraved on each stone bench appear the name, method of execution and date of execution of one of the victims. Around the stone benches is planted periwinkle, a plant used in ancient Rome as garlands for the condemned (Crosbie, 1993, p. 70). Here, the plants can be seen as identifying the victims. In Early Modern England, Periwinkle was used as a healing plant, to “stoppeth the inordinate course of the monethly sicknesss” (Gerard, 1633, p. 895). The early modern meaning of the plant transferred to this twentieth-century memorial landscape symbolizes healing the wounds of the past and the pain inflicted on the victims. It is, therefore, a highly symbolic plant to include in the memorial as it offers layers of multiple meanings.

The memorial has transformed public land into a heterotopic space. Each individual aspect of the memorial mentioned above adds a new layer of meaning to this part of the Salem’s landscape that now directly commemorates the seventeenth-century Witchcraft Trials. It also provides a landscape that can be interacted with by locals, visitors and pilgrims.

Before delving too far into the physical interactions with the landscape, there are a range of different responses and reactions found at the memorial’s unveiling worth considering. Some of the responses to the memorial were negative, accusing the memorial and its inscriptions of disseminating false information about the 1692 Witchcraft Trials. For this reason many individuals had not wanted the events commemorated and wished for the tercentenary to be ignored (Foote, 1997, p. 3). In November, 1992, a protest poster was found inside the memorial stating “the truth is Witchcraft is neither sin, nor lie, nor wickedness. May the Dead Rest in Peace” (Wasserman, 1998, p. 51).

A major criticism leveled at the memorial at its unveiling was that it only remembered the formally executed. Those who died in prison, or who were falsely imprisoned, or even the families of those who were involved, are not remembered nor memorialized. The competing interests invested in this landscape, both before and at the memorials unveiling, therefore, did prompt some negative reactions. Some meanings were

included in this commemorating landscape, however, others, such as memorializing those who were imprisoned, were not physically represented. This debate, which occurred both during the construction and at the time of the memorial's unveiling, represents the ingrained heterotopic nature of the space and the complex relationship that the acts of remembering the 1692 Witchcraft Trials continue to hold over Salem.

Revisiting Maddrell's method it is now worth exploring where evidence of physical interactions lay within the memorial itself. It has been estimated that by 2012, six million people had visited the official Salem Witch Trials Memorial over the twenty year period since its opening in 1992 (Bray, 2012, p. 7). As there are no visitor books at the official memorial site, evidence must be drawn from elsewhere to document physical interactions. What is present at this site are a range of objects individuals leave behind, which shed light on the different interactions with this space.

Each object is layered with different memories and reveals what Peter Howard (2011, p. 189) describes as an individual's level of "insideness"; that is, demonstrating how each individual relates to a landscape based on their past memories and experiences. Some descendants of those executed in 1692 have left letters to their ancestors. For example a letter to Martha Carrier by her tenth generation daughter, left on the bench dedicated to Carrier in the Memorial (Ang&Lori, 2014). This letter was handwritten, was approximately one A4 page in length and had been packed into a clear plastic sleeve for protection. These factors indicate that the letter is personal and intended to be a lasting tribute. It is important to note that the letter is structured in the same way that a letter to a living recipient would be structured: beginning with "Dear Martha" and finishing with "Love...Maggi" (Ang&Lori, 2014). Here the descendant is in a direct dialogue with the past. Writing personal letters to the deceased has become an act of therapy, a catharsis, where connecting to an individual after death can represent a search for guidance or act as closure. The act of writing and displaying the letter reveals the writer's desire for a connection and also to engrave their personal experience onto the space of the memorial.

Another way in which direct descendants have interacted with the memorial is by leaving bunches of rosemary. Articles in *The Salem News* by William J. Dowd and Alan Burke mention two descendants of the Witchcraft Trials leaving rosemary on the

benches. In 2012 (Burke, p. 3), the memorial was closed for renovations and during the rededication ceremony, descendants of the Witchcraft Trial victims were asked to lay bunches of rosemary on the benches. The leaving of rosemary is strongly connected with memory and memorialization. There is no evidence available to determine whether those with no personal connection to trial victims have interacted with the memorial in this way.

Although it is difficult to ascertain who left many of the objects behind, international or national tourists or those with direct connections, their significance is worth evaluating. The following are just two examples of additional objects. There are numerous types of flowers that can be left on graves in general, however, the main varieties of flowers left at the memorial are red and white roses. This act reflects the role of this space in the landscape of Salem as a place of remembrance. Red roses are traditionally believed to represent love and passion. They also represent respect and courage. This association was solidified in the Victorian Era in books such as the *Language of Flowers*, which states that red roses “are symbols of love” (Language of Flowers, 1834, p. 27). On the other hand, white roses are symbolic of purity and innocence. There is also evidence of a daisy left on the bench, which is another symbol of innocence. The layers within the landscape of the memorial are unveiled when observing the types of flowers left at the site and their intended significance.

On the bench in the Memorial dedicated to Susannah Martin, a red candle held in a glass container was left in 2014. It appears as though the candle had burnt for a period of time as half the wax has disappeared. Candles are part of a larger commemorative ritual that occurs at memorials, which also includes, for example, the laying of flowers and the writing of letters. A reason why candles are important and feature in every major religion as a symbol of commemoration is the perpetual light they provide for the deceased (Lysaght, 2009, p. 983). The lighting of a candle is synonymous with evoking a certain memory of a person, place or event, and the continuous light of the candle implies a continuous memory.

Photographs showing roses, rosemary, candles, letters and coins can be found in various places on the internet, revealing how an interaction with the Salem Witch Trials Memorial (1992) is not simply a private act; it can enter into the public realm.

Social media sites allow for picture uploads to occur instantaneously, capturing and sharing the memory with a larger audience. The meaning attached to the memorial by a specific individual can be expressed to a large international audience, allowing these viewers to see a range of connections to the memorial and why, perhaps, others have interacted with the landscape in a particular way.

There is also evidence to suggest that the memorial in Salem has become more than just a memorial to the trials, and has embraced its heterotopic features. Each year on September 11, flowers and wreaths are laid to remember those who fell victim to the terrorist attacks in 2001. The laying of wreaths in the landscape of the memorial, on September 11, is yet another form of remembrance. It is not, however, remembrance of the 1692 Witchcraft Trials, but of another tragic event, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. This memorial has, therefore, become a more universal place of mourning; an area within the town that can be utilized for multiple purposes, but one centred upon perceptions of innocence and victimization.

In conclusion, the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692 is a tale that continues to be told through the landscape of both Salem and its surrounding towns. By applying Maddrell's landscape theory the Official Witch Trials Memorial in Salem can be unpacked and properly evaluated. This interpretation of the landscape of Salem is only one small facet of this tale, one that can only grow through more experiences, interactions and reflections.

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