

SALEM: PLACE, MYTH, AND MEMORY

Dane Anthony Morrison and Nancy Lusignan Schultz, editors
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Reviewed by Hannah Gunderman
*Department of Geography, University of Tennessee-Knoxville
Knoxville, TN*

Folklore surrounding Salem, Massachusetts is popularly centered around images of witches burning at the stake amidst the hustle and bustle of pious, conservatively-dressed Puritans in a quaint New England setting. In a sense, the place identity associated with Salem overwhelmingly remains static due to its history with witch hunts and the murders of accused “witches”. However, “Salem: Place, Myth, and Memory,” edited by Morrison and Schultz, provides tales of Salem’s changing senses of place that span beyond its witch history, from its beginnings as the Native American village of Naumkeag to its present day role as a nexus for literary heritage tourism. Put simply, Salem is a geographical location that has undergone layers of space/place transformations. While several books focus on Salem’s history with witch hunts, Morrison and Schultz’s edited work is differentiated by its presentation of alternative narratives of Salem’s rich heritage, from its unique architecture which combines traditional New England and American styles with Chinese motifs, to its setting as an enthusiastic educational mecca in the eighteenth century that, for its time, boasted progressive schooling in both a public and private setting.

The authors’ purpose is to provide an intellectual travel guide for Salem that deviates from typical representations of the town, typically steeped in witchcraft and murder, towards other space/place transformations that have taken place within Salem’s contested landscapes. The book begins with two prefaces: one for the general reader, and one for instructors and students. The book is then divided into thirteen chapters which each focus on a certain historical representation of Salem, from its inaugural days as Naumkeag as a place of exploitation, invasion, and colonialism, where it soon became known as Salem, to its days as a modern-day Mecca of dark tourism and witchcraft nostalgia, much to the dismay of local residents. The chapters, some written more colloquially than others, follow a logical representation of Salem’s changing senses of place, beginning with the initial colonization of the town by Puritans and concluding with a chapter outlining the town’s attempts to create tourism from the Turner House, inspiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The House of the Seven Gables.” Current narratives of Salem effectively render its sense of place as frozen, centered around Puritan-led witch hunts in the seventeenth century. However, although each chapter is written by a different author, effective editing by Morrison and Schultz weave the chapters together cohesively to convince the reader that Salem offers a historical and cultural memory that expands beyond the witch trails and defines the town as a place of dynamic contestation of identity, economics, and education, and cultural heritage.

Chapter One, "Salem as Frontier Outpost," sets the stage for the contested narratives of Salem by highlighting that Salem has undergone a changing sense of place since its very colonization in the seventeenth century by the Massachusetts Bay Colony, transforming a resource-rich Naumkeag into Puritan Salem. This colonization transformed the landscape not only in a manner that alienated its original residents from their homes and places of daily operation, but also imposed Christianity on local Native Americans who were living a supposed "heathen" lifestyle without God. As a town, the cultural and social landscapes of Salem never quite decoupled from the influences of religion, as explored in Chapter Two, "Salem as Religious Proving Ground." Salem's landscape has undergone several religious-spiritual transformations, from imposed Christianity, to witch hunts and killings of those accused of practicing Pagan ritual, to fear of spiritual repercussions from said killings and increased discussion of the supernatural and its existence within the town. Among such religious turmoil, however, Salem proved to be a major player in maritime economies and trade, rivaling other port cities such as Boston and Charleston, as depicted in Chapter Three, "Salem as Enterprise Zone, 1783-1786." In the late eighteenth century, Salem boasted thriving foreign trade with merchants in Arabia, India, and China, economic prowess that influenced a cultural and social boom in the town and enriched the town's architecture and fashion with influences from the Far East (explored more deeply in Chapter Eight, "Salem as Architectural Mecca"). Along with this thriving economy came a well-established society of formal academic learning and vocational knowledge, as documented in Chapter Four, "Salem as Athenaeum." Salem, along with other maritime societies such as New York and Boston, was in an ideal geographical location for the creation and dissemination of knowledge particularly when it came to marine information, such as coastline topography and navigation. Salem not only served as an intellectual breeding ground for new knowledge in New England, but the town's maritime interconnectivity connected the mysticism and nostalgia of Salem with India, China, and Sumatra, as many Salemites traveled to these locations via trade routes, further described in Chapter Five, "Salem as Citizen of the World." Salem flourished into a successful seaport with international trade agreements, and over time, this success led to a stratification in its class structure led by wealthy captains and merchants. This wealth served to shape the educational landscape of Salem, in which public and private schools vied for lucrative success. Chapter Six, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," pays homage to the long history of innovative education within Salem, which was influenced and shaped by issues of money, segregation, and a marked class structure within the town.

While previous chapters primarily focus on the documented history of Salem, Chapter Seven, "Salem as Hawthorne's Creation," explores a literary narrative of Salem that was created by the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, creative works which gave Salem a certain sense of place among his readers and was shaped by both fictional and actual characteristics of the town. In a sense, much of Salem's charm for the modest visitor comes from a woven narrative that situates the town in rustic, Puritan New England, deeply troubled with its history of witch hunts and burnings at the stake. However, this narrative excludes many portions of the town's rustic landscape charm, such as its Far East-influenced architecture, as described in Chapter Eight, "Salem as Architectural Mecca." The visual landscape of Salem reveals classic American and New England styles of architecture, but Salem's success as a port city and thriving trade routes to the

Far East led to several Chinese architectural influences within the town. Indeed, Salem's contact with other geographical areas spanned far beyond New England; in fact, Salem has undergone industrialization and deindustrialization that attracted workers from French Canada, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. This is presented in Chapter Nine, "Salem as a Global City, 1850-2004," where the reader learns of Salem's history as a locale of immigration, labor struggles, and deindustrialization, a history that is often shadowed by witch trials and dark tourism. These dark tourists often visit Salem under the pretenses that the town is shrouded in witches and death. Chapter Ten, "Salem as Crime Scene," arguably the most conversationally written of all the chapters, presents a narrative of Salem's history of murders, robberies, and violent crime, a narrative which constructs webs of myth and memory that contribute to the city's often eerie sense of place.

While much of the book attempts to present alternative narratives of Salem's history outside of the witch trials, the book does not exclude the town's history and colloquial associations with witchcraft, despite obvious notes of historical fabrication, as noted in Chapter Eleven, "Salem as Witch City." Rather than focusing on the history of the witch trials, the chapter text is concentrated on how the town's tourist landscape is shaped by the capitalist commodification of the trials, which is translated into a cultural landscape of the supernatural, the haunted, and the ghoulish. Local residents display mixed feelings regarding the amount of dark tourism that the town attracts, but another feature of Salem attracts an even larger amount of tourists: The Turner House, a house made famous by Hawthorne's "The House of the Seven Gables." This popular tourist site is described in Chapter Twelve, "Salem's House of the Seven Gables as Historic Site." The house stands in Salem as a symbol of the town's Puritan colonialization, literary heritage, and status as an iconic New England city with global connections.

The book ends with Chapter Thirteen, a "coda" of several pieces of poetic prose relating to Salem's changing narratives, a surprising, yet effective ending to an otherwise traditionally academic book. The book's unique layout and subject matter would render it highly suitable in multi-disciplinary settings, as its representations of Salem's contested history and memory touch upon historical, environmental, political, economic, and cultural topics of discussion. Morrison and Schultz, along with the chapter authors, present a convincing argument as to why the modern-day Salem struggles to escape from its witch hunting past, and, due to increased dark tourism to Salem by those intrigued by this violent history, may be reluctant to relinquish such a narrative as said tourists bring money into the town's economy. In a broader sense, the book serves to create further discourse around how sense of place and place identities are created and maintained. The identity of Salem is often frozen around the witch trials, neglecting its rich history in education, commerce, and literary creation, often at the expense of the town's residents who interact with witch trial tourists. Perhaps this book will inspire more individuals to visit the town for its rich architectural styles, the Turner House, or to consume its seafaring history.

Admittedly, readers seeking a book concentrated on Salem's witch trial history may be disappointed when only a small portion of this book is dedicated to that particular historical narrative. However, this book may prove a useful tool in eroding dominant narratives that concentrate discourse surrounding Salem on witch trials. Rather, using Salem as a case-study presents an opportunity to study not only dark tourism and witch trial history, but also globalization, negotiated histories, colonization of Native American lands by Puritans, global economies and maritime enterprise, and early discourse surrounding private and public educational systems.