

Salem, Massachusetts: History, Halloween & Hauntings!

by Sue Kulick, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Probably the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about Salem, Massachusetts is witches. Scary witches in pointy black caps that get around on brooms while petting black cats! Well, you might be surprised to learn that Salem in a lot more than that. In fact, it is a great spot to get away for a long weekend.

The City of Salem was founded in 1629 in the sea-battered Cape Ann area. Roger Conant and a small group of settlers wanted a permanent home, and the fertile area on the mouth of the Naumkeag River was chosen. The name was an interpretation of "Shalom," which means peace in Hebrew.

The little village thrived and grew, increasing in population and prosperity. However, this prosperity was not without its own problems, and soon religious beliefs, rivalry among towns, and a group of young ladies in need of attention spawned the famous witch trials of 1692.

When the dust settled from that, Salem went back to being a growing harbor town. With its prime location, it became the sixth largest American city of the 18th century. In the early 1800s, novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, and by the mid 19th century, Salem was thriving as a manufacturing center. In 1914, a devastating fire swept through the town, destroying 400 buildings and leaving thousands homeless.

Salem floundered for a number of years, but in the mid 1970s a revitalization of the town began, and is still ongoing. Today's Salem is a working harbor, a tourist destination and a funky place to live and work.

So what does Salem have to offer? Let's begin with the history. The 1692 witch trials were a huge part of America's history, reflecting the times and the tribulations that the early settlers lived in. It wasn't magic, but it was mayhem. You can visit sites like the [Salem Witch Museum](#), which gives you the background of the witch trials with a little fun thrown in. For a real taste of 17th century witch hunts, don't miss [Cry Innocent!](#), a theater production put on by the theater students of Gordon College. It's 1692, and Bridget Bishop, a local tavern owner, has been accused of witchcraft. YOU are the jury! Don't miss this unique theater opportunity. [The Witch Dungeon Museum](#) will give you a recreated tour of the dungeons and of Gallows Hill. One thing you will take away from this tour is the deplorable conditions these imprisoned accused witches

had to endure. This is a re-creation, but it is very true to life. The real dungeons were discovered in the 1960s when the telephone company was excavating for its new building. They were buried beneath the ground, and despite an attempt to save this huge piece of history, construction went on and the dungeons were destroyed.

If it's Salem history you are interested in, there is plenty that doesn't include alleged witches. Spend some time at [Pioneer Village](#), also enacted by the students of Gordon College. You will be transported back to 17th New England, complete with period costumed actors and all the comforts of village life. Don't miss the [Peabody Essex Museum](#), a highlight of our trip. Full of the art and history of New England, it also has local artwork and an ever changing array of exhibits. When we visited, some of the original witch trial documents were on display, and you never know what treasures you might find.

Another not-to-be-missed attraction is [The House of Seven Gables](#). The house was built in 1668 and inspired Nathaniel Hawthorne to write his famous novel. You can tour the house and the grounds, as well as visit the home where Hawthorne was born. The house is a museum, and holds plenty of artifacts and literary works.

Of course, Salem is also known for its maritime history and attractions. The National Park Service operates the [Salem Maritime National Historic Site](#), with a museum, tours and the Derby Lighthouse. [The Schooner Fame](#) operates out of Pickering Wharf Marina, and tours the harbor three times a day in season. There is also [The Salem Ferry](#), operating between Salem and Boston. It's a nice, scenic, 45 minute cruise across one of America's prettiest harbors. For a relaxing afternoon, climb onboard any of the [Essex River Cruises](#) for a few hours of natural beauty.

OK, so it's really the witch in the pointy hat that you are interested in, right? In that case, you must be here for [Salem's Haunted Happenings](#). Every October, Salem takes Halloween to a new level. In addition to all the regular events, there are psychic fairs, Halloween parties, ghost tours, and night time revelry. Tickets sell out in advance, so it's best to plan early. The atmosphere is fun and frivolous, a good time to let yourself have the kind of Halloween fun that you haven't had since you were a kid. Haunted Happenings is family-friendly during the day and early evening, and adult-friendly at night. It's a great getaway for all ages!

One of the best resources on Salem is [The Official Visitors Guide](#). Packed with information, prices, schedules, accommodations, and dining options, you can plan your whole vacation here.

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Salem is a quaint New England town steeped in history and haunting. As the locals say "Stop by for a spell." You'll be glad you did!

About The Author: Sue Kulick is a resident of the Pocono Mountains and an avid Disney fan. She and her husband, Steve, live in a log home with their Golden Retrievers, Cody and Belle and their cat Tigger.

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