



# How Salem faced up to its dark past to become one of the most inclusive towns in America

Salem is known for its 17th-century witch trials, with more than 200 persecuted and 20 sent to their deaths. But today **Robin McKelvie** discovers a liberal and diverse city, with truths to tell about today's America



DAVE ENGS FLOWERS

Purple  
Scorpion  
BODY PIERCING & JEWELRY

DERBY  
JOE

INA PIG'S  
EYE  
RESTAURANT



moved here from **Texas** and **everyone has been very welcoming** – that’s just our city for you,” beams Zay Waters, as he checks me into The Hotel **Salem**. “We’re an inclusive **and progressive place** that accepts people for who and what they are.”

It’s quite a transformation from 1692, when the infamous **Salem** witch trials sent 20 innocent people to their deaths and saw 200 more accused, the youngest just four years old.

Salem has been on both a visceral and a cerebral journey since 1692, informed by the vile consequences of letting prejudice, envy and hate mutate into the persecution and execution of its citizens.

“We’ve been giving a voice to the innocents since 1972,” explains Jill Christiansen of the excellent Salem Witch Museum. “For Salem knows both the consequences of evil and of other people doing nothing to stop it. These are lessons that resonate today.”

You could spend days touring witch-themed attractions in Salem, slick venues where talented actors win awards for their brilliant recreations. I don’t. I see and feel enough with the Salem Witch Museum and the Witch House.

The latter is an eerie, dark-hued wooden mansion that chills me back to the American horror films of my childhood. The only building that actually played a role in the trials that you can still visit today is even more chilling inside. The floorboards creak with the spectre of Jonathan Corwin, a judge appointed after his predecessor resigned in protest at the first hanging. Corwin had no such qualms.



A grave marker for Mary Parker in North America's second-oldest cemetery (Getty)

In many ways, Salem has been paying penance for the horrors of 1692 ever since, trying to bury its baleful past. Salem gave the world the joy of Monopoly and Clue (Cluedo in the UK) and America the Peabody Essex Museum, its oldest continually operating museum.

It also gave sailors to fight in the War of Independence – and then its warships (along with more than a few appropriated from the British) became trading vessels opening up new routes to China, Japan and Madagascar as America’s busiest port and one of the country’s 10 biggest cities in the 19th century. The national guard was founded in Salem.

The city’s rich history lingers on at the Salem Maritime National Historic Site, the first of its kind, established back in 1938. This waterfront quarter was never ravaged by the British navy, with its largest wharf, Derby Wharf, still proudly stretching out into the lifeblood harbour. Information boards tell the stories of the days when silks caressed the waterfront and exotic spices filled the air. And US novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne’s time working at the Custom House inspired him to write his seminal gothic novel, *The House of the Seven Gables*, on visits to his cousin’s house, which still stands as a museum nearby.



*Salem knows both the consequences of evil and of other people doing nothing to stop it. These are lessons that resonate today*

*Jill Christiansen*

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The Salem Blackcraft Witch House (*Robin McKelvie*)

Salem has also found its place in the world today – with a sense of deep irony, unsettling for some – as the self-styled “Witch City”. **Witches** are everywhere. And out in the open. You would think that being most renowned globally for murdering “**witches**” is not a public relations win, but **dark tourism** descended on Salem as early as the arrival of the railroad in 1838, with ghoulish visitors knocking on doors demanding eyewitness accounts.

The public fascination with the occult has, if anything, increased down the centuries, and Salem has cannily embraced its “Witch City” moniker. There is a Witch City Mall, Witchcraft Heights School, and a flying witch even adorns police badges. I can have my fortune told, buy a crystal to cure any ailment and explore myriad alternative lifestyles. Blackcraft is a teenage goth’s paradise. I explore it with a Halloween-themed – of course – pumpkin-spiced latte from their cafe. At Kakawa Chocolate House, I try their delicious new Salem Spice Elixir. Salem does witch tourism big time. And it does it well.



Raising a glass at the Sea Level Oyster Bar  
(Robin McKelvie)

Thankfully, today's witches are not persecuted, more celebrated. At the Halloween Museum, I learn that around 2,000 locals today identify as witches out of a population of around 45,000. This population swells with more than a million visitors during the tourist invasion that swirls around Halloween, a global phenomenon with roots as Samhain in pagan-era Scotland and Ireland, but associated with Salem via its infamous trials.

Witches today in Salem are closer to the charming souls of the TV series *Bewitched*, rather than the green-faced goblin of the old *Wizard of Oz* film – Salem didn't thank MGM for searing the green skin into the public consciousness. Fittingly, a statue of *Bewitched*'s good-natured Samantha stands proudly on Salem's main thoroughfare, Essex Street.



The Salem Witch Museum *(Robin McKelvie)*

After a few days in Salem, the darkness of 1692 is starting to drift off in a gentle breeze under sunny skies. And there's great food to be found in this foodie hub. I discover why Turner's was named the best seafood restaurant in New England in 2025, with the best lobster roll I've ever savoured. Sea Level Oyster Bar serves up a rich bounty of boat-fresh seafood overlooking Derby Wharf, and even The Hotel Salem sports a rooftop bar restaurant offering delicious lobster tacos to go with the views.

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Then I take a walk. No ordinary stroll. It's a guided Salem deep dive with Witch City Walking Tours; there is a dizzying array. Our guide, Hancock, shares his eclectic Irish, Scottish and Native American heritage, before swirling me back through the centuries to the baleful days of 1692, the shiny shops and foodie haunts vanishing under the bleakness of a Puritan capotain hat as the sky clouds over.

The tour shudders to an end at the Salem Witch Trials Memorial, a brutally simple garden with stones for each of the 20 executed. Another innocent quintet died in custody. But Hancock is proud of Salem today: “You can truly be yourself here, not like in some parts of America today,” he says. “Everyone is welcome, witches and all.”

His eyes narrow, though, and his smile disappears as he whispers a cautionary note: “There is always a danger of witch trials in many forms, and we all must make sure we don't sit around and do nothing when they threaten to start. Above all, 1692 has taught us that.”

## Getting there

[JetBlue](#) fly to [Boston](#) from [London](#). Flight time is around 7 hours and 45 minutes. There are boat transfers from Logan Airport into the city, where you can catch the ferry to Salem.



Hancock shows off badges worn by Salem's police force (Robin McKelvie)