
Salem, Massachusetts

D&C 111: Introduction

Salem, the Hellenized name of Shalem (שָׁלֵם), the royal city of Melchizedek, was founded in 1626 in the Americas. The cultural identity of the city reflects its infamous Salem witch trials of 1692. The history of witchcraft allegations in Salem began with Abigail Williams, Betty Parris, and their friends, who played with a Venus glass (mirror) and an egg. It ended with accusations that led to nineteen people being hung for practicing witchcraft. Salem also gained prominence as the town of the Dorothy Talbye trial. Dorothy Talbye was a mentally ill woman hanged for murdering her daughter. At the time, the state of Massachusetts made no distinction between insanity and criminal behavior.

Rather than live down their history of witchcraft, insanity, and hangings, the city of Salem boasts of their sullied past. Police cars have witch logos on their doors, an elementary is named Witchcraft Heights, and a prominent knoll is called Gallows Hill. What is not as well-known is that Salem is home to the original Puritan church in America, the House of Seven Gables, and the Salem Maritime National Historic Site. It is also the birthplace of the National Guard.

Since its earliest days, Salem has been a busy coastal city. During the American Revolutionary War, the town was a center of privateering. Seafaring men would take their vessels to the open seas in hopes of finding and destroying British ships. Men from Salem were successful in capturing or destroying about 600 British vessels.

By 1790 Salem had become the sixth largest city in the United States. The growth had much to do with its seaport. Seamen in Salem carried on a busy China tea trade. They exported codfish to Europe and the West Indies. Ships from Salem sailed to Africa, Russia, Japan, and Australia. Shipping declined in the nineteenth century when Salem was eclipsed by ports in Boston and New York City.

Salem was incorporated as a city on March 23, 1836, a few days before the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. It was at this point that Salem became a subject discussed by Church leaders in conjunction with solving indebtedness created by the completion of the Kirtland Temple and sending financial aid to exiled Saints of Jackson County. Hoping to solve the escalating financial problem, Joseph Smith and others listened and then embraced the boasts of convert Jonathan Burgess, who claimed “knowledge of a large amount of money secreted in the cellar of a certain house in Salem, Massachusetts, which had belonged to a [deceased] widow.”¹ The excitement generated by these claims and the hope of finding hidden money led Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Oliver Cowdery to journey to Salem, Massachusetts.

Joseph Smith and the other brethren stayed in Salem for a month, “teaching the people from house to house, and preaching publicly, as opportunity presented; visiting occasionally, sections of the surrounding country, which are rich in the history of the Pilgrim Fathers of New England, in Indian warfare, religious superstition, bigotry, persecution, and learned ignorance.”²

Although much preaching was done in Salem, the main reason for the month-long stay in the seaport town was monetary. In a letter written by Joseph Smith to his wife Emma, he told of finding the house where the purported treasure was hidden in a cellar:

With regard to the great object of our mission, you will be anxious to know. We have found the house since Brother Burgess left us, very luckily and providentially, as we had one spell been most discouraged. The house is occupied, and it will require much care and patience to rent or buy it. We think we shall be able to effect it; if not now, within the course of a few months.”³

Hidden money was never found by Joseph Smith or the other brethren in Salem.

¹ Doctrine and Covenants 111, Revelation, 6 August 1836. Joseph Smith Papers.

² History, 1838–1856, volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838], 749. Joseph Smith Papers.

³ Joseph Smith letter to Emma Smith, 19 August 1836. Joseph Smith Papers.