



Massachusetts

Woman condemned in Salem witch trials on verge of pardon 328 years later

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More than three centuries after a [Massachusetts](#) woman was convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to death, she's finally on the verge of being exonerated - thanks to a curious eighth-grade civics class.

State senator Diana DiZoglio, a Democrat from Methuen, has introduced legislation to clear the name of Elizabeth Johnson Jr, who was condemned in 1693 at the height of the Salem witch trials but never executed.

DiZoglio says she was inspired by sleuthing done by a group of 13- and 14-year-olds at North Andover middle school. Civics teacher Carrie LaPierre's students painstakingly researched Johnson and the steps that would need to be taken to make sure she was formally pardoned.

“It is important that we work to correct history,” DiZoglio said. “We will never be able to change what happened to these victims, but at the very least, we can set the record straight.”

If lawmakers approve the measure, Johnson will be the last accused witch to be cleared, according to Witches of Massachusetts Bay, a group devoted to the history and lore of the 17th-century witch-hunts.

Twenty people from Salem and neighboring towns were killed and hundreds of others accused during a frenzy of Puritan injustice that began in 1692, stoked by superstition, fear of disease and strangers, scapegoating and petty jealousies.

Nineteen were hanged, and one man was crushed to death by rocks.

In the 328 years that have ensued, dozens of “suspects” officially were cleared, including Johnson’s own mother, the daughter of a minister whose conviction eventually was reversed. But for some reason, Johnson’s name wasn’t included in various legislative attempts to set the record straight.

Johnson was 22 when she was caught up in the hysteria of the witch trials and sentenced to hang. It never happened.

The then governor, William Phips, threw out her punishment as the magnitude of the gross miscarriages of justice in Salem sank in.

But because she wasn’t among those whose convictions were formally set aside, hers still technically stands.

“Why Elizabeth was not exonerated is unclear but no action was ever taken on her behalf by the [state] general assembly or the courts,” DiZoglio said.

“Possibly because she was neither a wife nor a mother, she was not considered worthy of having her name cleared. And because she never had children, there is no group of descendants acting on her behalf.”

Her bill would tweak 1957 legislation, amended in 2001, to include Johnson among others who were pardoned after being wrongly accused and convicted of witchcraft.

In 2017, officials unveiled a semi-circular stone wall memorial inscribed with the names of people hanged at a site in Salem known as Proctor’s Ledge. It was funded in part by donations from descendants of those accused of being witches.