

Anthropology Student Fund Final Report
Salem, MA research — October 18th to October 23rd
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A final report is required as soon as funds are expended, but no later than the second week of December 2019. This can consist of a couple paragraphs describing your experience and what you learned. With your permission, your report will be posted on the Department of Anthropology webpage.

The meaning of the Salem Witch Trials and the meaning of the word ‘witch’ are hotly contested in contemporary Salem, Massachusetts. Between the various museums, stores, and public monuments and presentations that relate to the Trials, a group of actors with diverse and often divergent aims deploy and redeploy the sign of the witch within a variety of contexts. These various witch-signs are regularly commodified and repackaged for sale to tourists. The witch is so ubiquitous that its absence in certain contexts — such as in historical displays within the visitor’s center, within the walls of the Peabody-Essex Museum, and in the arenas of residents’ day-to-day lives — has come to hold its own significance within Salem.

During my research, I spent much of my time walking around the streets of Salem, exploring the breadth of the mid-sized town over the four-day trip. I visited many of the major museums in town (witch-related and not), as well as ‘witch shops’ (stores stocked largely with items related to modern-day Wiccan practices), restaurants, and government buildings. While I spent much of my time on Essex Street, which contained many of the largest tourist attractions and the bulk of the tourist crowds, I also ventured out into parts of Salem less visited by tourists, including residential neighborhoods and local businesses outside the center of town.

While some used the Trials as a didactic example, whereby the tried ‘witches’ become innocent people sentenced to death by the paranoia of a non-scientific, unjust legal system and culture, others reified the witches’ legitimacy in order to give Salem a ‘genuine’ paranormal past or to draw upon a bloodline of ‘genuine’ witches that legitimize the claims of modern-day Wiccans and diviners. I plan to create a thorough write-up and analysis of my experiences in Salem to be submitted to *Radicle*, Reed’s student-run anthropology journal.