

Cotton Mather Reading Comprehension

Name _____

Cotton Mather was a Puritan minister who was well-known for his indirect role in the Salem Witch Trials. He was born on February 12, 1663, to a family of New England Puritan ministers. He attended Harvard University at the young age of 12, but when he received his Master of Arts degree at age 18, he realized he wanted to follow in his family's footsteps and join the clergy. He preached his first sermon in 1680, and was ordained as a minister in 1685. From then on, Mather served in Boston's North Church for 40 years.

Mather was known for his progressive views on medicine, which was a heavily contested subject at the time. Mather supported vaccinations for smallpox - a topic which was very controversial - and vaccinated his son, who almost died from the procedure. At the time, vaccinations were very uncommon and feared by many, so Mather's decision to vocally support it was striking for his time period. Mather also published over 400 works throughout his lifetime, on subjects ranging from smallpox inoculation to witchcraft. His work titled "Curiosa Americana" demonstrated his abilities as a scientist, and helped him get elected to the Royal Society of London.

While Mather's medical views were ahead of his time, his actions regarding witchcraft were less progressive. In 1684, Mather published a book titled "Remarkable Provinces," a book recounting his experience with possessed children in Boston's Goodwin family. In the book, Mather outlined symptoms of clinical hysteria and related the children's possession to witchcraft. He published another book titled "Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Possession" in 1689 that increased public interest in witchcraft and later led to witch trials during the colonial era. Mather's books played a role in instigating the first accusations of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts - accusations that later led to the Salem Witch Trials, the accusations of over 200 people, and the deaths of 19. Mather also wrote to the courts trying witches in Salem and petitioned to allow spectral evidence - evidence from spirits within the possessed witches attesting to their use of witchcraft. The trials themselves were based on false evidence - no one in Salem was actually a witch - but the fear stirred up by writers like Mather made the citizens afraid, and more likely to turn against their friends and neighbors. The Salem Witch Trials constituted the deadliest witch hunt in colonial America, and Mather's writings played a role in making them happen.

Cotton Mather died on February 13, 1728, leaving behind one of his three wives and two of his fifteen children. His mark on history, while significant, is certainly a controversial one.

1. Which statement about Cotton Mather is true?

- He was the first member of his family to become a minister.
- He never published a book in his lifetime.
- He had more than ten children.
- He lived to be over 70.

2. Which pairing of Mather's book with its subject is incorrect?

- "Curiosa Americana" – relating to scientific and medicinal topics
- "Remarkable Provinces" – the story of the Goodwin family's possession
- "Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Possession" – information on witchcraft
- All pairings are correct.

3. Which statement about Mather's involvement in the Salem Witch Trials is true?

- a. Mather convicted and ordered the execution of witches in Salem.
- b. Mather did not directly convict accused witches, but increased public fear of witchcraft.
- c. Mather was a vocal opponent of the witch trials, and protested them.
- d. Mather wrote books during the witch trials chronicling the stories of accused witches to increase public sympathy.

4. Put the following events of Cotton Mather's life in order.

- I. Mather attends Harvard University.
- II. Mather writes "Curiosa Americana."
- III. Mather increases public information and fear regarding witchcraft.
- IV. Mather dies in 1728.

- a. I, III, II, IV
- b. I, II, III, IV
- c. II, I, III, IV
- d. IV, III, II, I

5. Which statement best describes the Salem Witch Trials?

- a. A movement based in fear and hysteria which led to the deaths of innocent people.
- b. A well-founded hunt for evil, resulting in a more productive and healthy society.
- c. An attack on the wealthy facilitated by poor residents of Salem.
- d. A discovery of supernatural powers in Massachusetts, followed by a persecution of real witches.

6. Why is Cotton Mather a controversial historical figure?

- a. He was a respected figure during the witch trials, but set the country back in the medicinal field.
- b. He had forward-thinking ideas about medicine, but indirectly persecuted witches in Salem.
- c. He performed illegal vaccination procedures and convicted witches.
- d. He tried to set free the convicted witches in Salem, causing rebellion and anarchy.

7. What is spectral evidence?

- a. A type of vaccine used by Mather on his son
- b. A class taken by Mather at Harvard University
- c. A subject that Mather focused on for most of his 400 books
- d. Testimony from spirits used in the trials to prosecute witches

