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A Quest for Security: The Life of Samuel Parris, 1653-1720 (Contributions in American History)

Larry D. Gragg

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A Quest for Security is the first book-length biography of Samuel Parris, the man who led the 1692 struggle against the scourge of witchcraft. While an examination of Samuel Parris's actions reveals his crucial part in the witchcraft crisis, this biography also serves as a reminder of the concern of early Americans to sustain economic independence for their families. Fully documented with endnotes and featuring a complete bibliography of primary and secondary works, this volume fills a noticeable gap in the literature on Salem witchcraft.

The first chapter looks at Samuel Parris's early years. Born in London in 1653, Parris moved with his family to Barbados in the 1660s where both his uncle and father had prospered as sugar planters. Next, the book examines his stay in Boston where he met with modest success as a merchant and started a family. The book then recounts the eight years Parris spent in Salem Village as that divided community's pastor. Beginning with his call to the clergy, the book examines his life as a Puritan pastor, and then covers the conflict in his congregation. In the first year of his ministry, a faction had developed that sought to oust Parris by refusing to pay him. Next the book covers Parris's actions in the spring of 1692 which changed a seemingly ordinary case of a handful of accusations into a full-scale witchhunt. Convinced that an organized witch cult threatened his congregation, Parris sought to root out all conspirators. His leadership in the effort led to an ever increasing escalation of accusations. When the episode finally ended, family members of some of the twenty executed witches conducted a campaign that ultimately resulted in Parris's removal from the pulpit. The final chapter looks at Parris's last years, in which he moved from one small Massachusetts community to another. Parris died in obscurity in 1720. But he achieved his most important goal--that of providing material security for his children.

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