Three hundred and sixteen years ago, one of the most infamous paroxysms of American political life was playing itself out. At the beginning of 1692, in the town of Salem, Massachusetts, it was too cold and too snowy to do much else but sit inside and play at incantations and foretelling of the future. That’s what two young girls in the household of the Reverend Samuel Parris did to amuse themselves. And when the two girls began “acting strangely,” they were examined by a doctor, and by ministers and magistrates. The experts concluded that the girls were bewitched. And, apparently because they had little else to do either, the good people of Salem, Massachusetts – and I do not say “good people” to be sarcastic, mind – became concerned ...

Hearings into the matter began on March 1st. And less than three months later, 100 people were in prison awaiting trial. The Governor of the colony, one Sir William Phips, appointed a seven member panel to try the accused, who were not allowed counsel. Although initially uncomfortable with “spectral evidence,” voices and visions that only the witnesses could perceive, the Christian ministers of the community reassured the authorities that such testimony could be accepted with “exquisite caution.”

By September 22nd – just two weeks ago – no special prosecutors or bodyguard privileges in those days – the judges had tried and convicted 27 people. 19 were hanged. Giles Corey was pressed to death by stones in an effort to get him to confess. His last words were: “more weight!” Another 50 or so people had confessed to witchcraft, 100 were in prison waiting to be tried, and another 200 stood potentially accused.

With the jails overflowing and no end to the frenzy in sight, the very Christian, very devout Cotton Mather delivered a sermon in which he argued against the mass convictions. This emboldened some of the other clergy to begin questioning the reliability of “spectral evidence.” And with the public support he needed – the Governor was a politician, after all – William Phips issued an edict on October 12th, 1692 which put an end to the trials and executions. By the time they resumed, people’s attitudes about “spectral evidence” had changed, and even those convicted were pardoned by the governor, putting an end to the whole matter.

It’s that edict of October 12th, 1692 that’s the basis for Freethought
Day. It happens to fall on a Sunday this year which also just happens to be the day before Columbus Day. Freethought Week would run from October 12th to the 18th, and, of course, the whole month of October would be Freethought Month. In the past several years, mayors and governors of several cities and states have been petitioned to proclaim, and have actually proclaimed Freethought Days, Weeks, and Months.

Now here’s the point about a Freethought Day linked to the Phips Edict that makes it so right. It’s already out there. We’re not talking about reinventing the wheel. It’s neither a rebuke nor a glorification of any one person or religious viewpoint in a strict sense. After all, all the players in that ugly chapter of American history were mired in religious superstition, offenders, victims, and onlookers. That’s the beauty of the thing, really. Here you had a bunch of rabid fundamentalists (by our standards; by the standards of the day they were fairly enlightened; Cotton Mather was one of those who supported vaccination, for example, while many others denounced it for thwarting “God’s Will”) who had gotten in totally over their heads. By their own logic of “witches” whom the biblical God himself had to be put to death, and by the logic of “spectral evidence,” which also could not be questioned on theological grounds, everything was proceeding wonderfully. But the conscience of Freethought told them that these were terrible things that they were doing and it looked as if the worst was yet to come. And so they did the only thing they could do. With the encouragement of the local clergy questioning “spectral evidence” – the implicit alternative being that evidence had to be objective and not subjective – Governor Phips just stopped the whole process dead in its tracks.

Now this is the important part: why did he do it? Was Governor Phips a Freethinker? No. Was it that people suddenly realized that there are no witches, no demons, no evil spells and the like? No. No, the Phips Edict came about with the complicity of all the devout fundamentalist believers that constituted the community of Salem and the Colony of Massachusetts because they had to.

Winston Churchill once remarked that “What the wise do in the beginning, fools do in the end.” Churchill also said that “You can always count on Americans to do the right thing – after they’ve tried everything else!”

For, you see, eventually, at some point, and to some degree, people simply have to act rationally. You have to open doors before walking through doorways. You have to turn the key in your ignition before you drive home today. No amount of faith and prayer can allow anyone to do otherwise. And despite all the rhetorical flourishes of the superstitious believers, that’s the way it’s always been and always will be. Indeed, this truth is becoming more and more important every day.

It’s also the essence of the role of the law: to hold people to a standard of dealing with one another that’s based on reason. That’s the basis of every shall and shalt not that there is, not some divine command of “do it or else.”

That’s the beauty of honoring the Phips Edict: it’s a forceful example of the dangers of superstition and the necessity of rational thought to a world that’s fit for human beings to live in. After all, if we celebrate the life or career or discovery of some “great man” – or woman – that man or woman is necessarily, despite their virtues and accomplishments, still ignorant, still immature, and still unfinished. It would not be true to our understanding of what it is to be human to pretend otherwise. Freethought Day this October 12th – or Freethought Week or Month, if you prefer – is a celebration of progress. It’s a commemoration of choosing the better over the worse, even when it seems to go against the popular prejudices and beliefs. Most importantly, it’s a celebration of what we want our fellow humans who happen to be believers to do: to set aside their superstitions in their dealing with others in favor of reason. And that is something they can do. It is something that the better sort of believers already do.

Finally, I think that, like any real holiday that has a chance of capturing an enduring significance, Freethought Day can stand for and remind us about what is important in our own personal lives. Freethought Day should remind us to root out the petty witch-hunts of our everyday lives – by no more complicated an expedient than being reasonable. We should beware the judgments that we make of others based on the merest snippets of experience with them. We ought to be critical of the conclusions that we often reach too quickly about others formed out of nothing more than our prejudices and preconceptions. And perhaps we need to commute the harsh sentences we pass on ourselves and others when “the wrong thing” is said or done, which probably wasn’t so much “wrong” as simply not what we expected or wanted anyway.

Freethought Day, October 12th, is a good day to celebrate a Day of Reason. We can benefit from it, others can benefit from it, and the world can become a better place because we decide to think for ourselves.

HALLOWEEN PARTY!

Martina Kolmeder and Clinton Smith will be graciously hosting their annual Halloween Party, this year on Friday, October 31st. Costumes are encouraged and children are welcome, however costumes have been somewhat mature in the past, so you may want to take that into consideration. Since the party will be held on Halloween, bring candy to pass out to the neighborhood children and a healthy potluck dish to share.

If you’d like to come, plan to arrive at 6:00 PM, and get the rest of the details by emailing Martina and Clinton at: technetronic@airmail.net
The North Texas Church of Freethought couldn’t accomplish all that it does without the important volunteer work provided by its leadership, who serve their fellow freethinkers out of their own love of freethinking values and desire to help fulfill our shared mission.

Cash Foley, his wife Susan Eshelman, and their daughter Samantha joined the NTCOF family in 1999; publically-expressed religious belief was the norm in their Plano neighborhood, and Cash and Susan wanted to find a community of freethinking people so that Samantha wouldn’t grow up feeling isolated by their beliefs. The outstanding and occasionally ‘inspirational’ services have become a source of valuable stimulation in their lives. Over time, their family has built relationships that now serve as our roots with the community. While they weren’t explicitly seeking spiritual kinship for themselves, that’s what they have found. These relationships remain the most precious part of their experience in the Church. Cash hopes to see more opportunities for members to interact one on one with each other. As we grow, he thinks that “Special Interest Groups” will be pivotal in adding value in our experience of this community. These activities not only give us outlets for our interests, but they cultivate the relationships that make our community a Church.

As Outreach Director, Cash provides oversight and helps to initiate efforts for the improvement of the community outside our immediate church family, such as today’s post-service blood drive.

In addition to the key individuals such as Cash who have volunteered to take on the responsibility needed to keep the NTCOF running and reaching out to freethinkers such as yourself who are looking for intellectual respite and a social support system, it’s clear from the Feedback Session we’ve conducted in the past that we’ll need a more concerted effort from the NTCOF family members to support the directors in their tasks. Two specific committees were identified as CRITICAL needs to move us forward- if you have any time to donate to this worthy cause, we and your fellow freethinkers would be extremely grateful if you would contact Executive Director Zachary Moore at today’s service or by email:

exec-director@churchoffreethought.org

FINANCIAL COMMITTEE

NTCOF is looking for several volunteers (especially those with financial or legal expertise) to help our Finance Committee Chair, Cody Evans, with tasks such as:

- Organizing garage sales and other fund raising activities
- Ensuring the safe, secure investment of NTCOF funds
- Assembling instructions to set up recurring electronic payments
- Creating legal documents to help individuals establish endowments, bequests, etc
- Presenting the above and soliciting contributions from supporters
- Overseeing and planning for Building Fund contributions

TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

HTML, MySQL, RSS, MeetUp, MP3, Facebook, YouTube

If you’re familiar with these terms, the NTCOF desperately needs your generosity and assistance with these tasks:

- Maintaining information and content on our website
- Providing technical support in website and forum upgrades and user issues
- Updating our upcoming events on MeetUp.com and Facebook
- Recording, editing, and uploading monthly service recordings and updating our podcast feed

MYTHMAS PARTY - DECEMBER

Please see BRAD WATSON if you’d like to help plan our annual ‘Mythmas’ party in December
COMING IN NOVEMBER

Lori Lipman Brown: Ms. Brown is a lawyer, an educator, and a former Nevada State Senator. Since 2005 she has been the director of the Secular Coalition for America, the first Congressional lobbying organization explicitly representing nontheistic Americans. Brown’s awards include the Freethought Backbone Award of the Secular Student Alliance, Civil Libertarian of the Year from the Southern Nevada chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, Legislator of the Year from the Nevada chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, and the Friend of the Center award from the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Southern Nevada.

Ms. Brown will be visiting North Texas throughout the end of October, and will be speaking at our November 2nd service on the subject of “Now Hiring: Pastor-in-Chief?”

George Hrab: An unabashedly atheist and freethinking musician who has performed for President Clinton at the White House, entertained at the Super Bowl, played gigs at The Kennedy Center, and even shared the stage with Elton John at Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center. His hugely popular “Geologic Podcast” combines his love of scientific skepticism, musical talents, and comedic instincts.

www.geologicpodcast.com

Mr. Hrab will be visiting the North Texas area on Friday, November 21st. Reserve that evening if you’d like to meet him, and venue updates will be posted as available.

OCTOBER EVENTS

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and friendly discussion at Jason’s Deli in Irving, located just south of I-635 on MacArthur, at 7770 N. MacArthur Blvd., phone (972) 432-0555. Easy driving directions: To reach Jason’s from the Holiday Inn: turn RIGHT out of the parking lot onto Esters Blvd., RIGHT onto Freeport Parkway, RIGHT to enter I-635 EAST. Exit I-635 at MacArthur Blvd., then RIGHT onto MacArthur, and RIGHT again just ahead into the Jason’s parking lot.

Games Night: The NTCOF Games group meets nearly every Friday night at the smoke-free IHOP at 2310 Stemmons Trail in Dallas. The IHOP is adjacent to the Radisson Hotel along North-west Highway, about a ½ mile east of Loop 12. For the latest details, join the NTCOF Games e-list by sending any e-mail message to:
ntcof_games-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Secular Singles: The Freethinking NTCOF Singles meets at the Vineyard restaurant in the Hilton DFW Lakes Executive Conference Center in Grapevine (1800 Highway 26 East). To get up to speed on the NTCOF Secular Singles e-list, just send any email message to:
ntcof_singles-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Food Critics: Enjoy visiting different restaurants in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, as well as meeting socially with your fellow freethinkers? The NTCOF Food Critics dinner might be right for you! To catch up on the details, contact Social Director Brad Watson by email at:
social@churchoffreethought.org

Obnoxious Ball: Remember last month’s “Smell the Roses?” Brad’s new game makes its (infamous?) debut on Sunday, October 12th (Freethought Day!) at 5:00 PM. Check our website calendar for more information and directions.

Halloween Party: See Page 2, and for more information, send an email to Martina Kolmeder and Clinton Smith at:
technetronic@airmail.net

FINANCIAL REPORT

Folks, you hear this over and over, but it’s true: Freethought is NOT Free! Our continued growth is only possible through your generous donations and contributions to the church- our success depends on the commitment of ALL our members. We’ve shared a more detailed financial summary earlier in the year, but here’s a snapshot of our financial activity from the past month:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Income</td>
<td>$1,609.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Expenses</td>
<td>$1,080.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>+$529.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>