

Friday, November 14, 2008

Local expert will reveal history of Tophet Swamps

by Ellen Miller

There are several Tophet Swamps, says historian Daniel Boudillion, and with very few exceptions, all are unique to Massachusetts. Carlisle, of course, has its own Tophet Swamp and on Thursday, November 20, from 7 to 9 p.m. in the Hollis Room at Gleason Library, Boudillion will speak on "Tophet Swamps: Devils and Indians in Colonial Massachusetts." The free presentation is sponsored by the Carlisle Historical Society and follows a brief annual meeting that begins at 7 p.m.

According to Boudillion, the word "tophet" means "an extremely unpleasant or painful condition or place; i.e., hell." Among other revelations, Boudillion will disclose why these swamps were named "tophet."

He will also explore the relationship between swamps and Indians, and between Indians and devils in the Colonial mind. Boudillion maintains a collection of over 100 devil-related place names in Massachusetts and will discuss some of them. In addition, he will examine the possibility of an Indian underground railroad of sorts that may have utilized a network of Tophet Swamps in the King Philip's War era.

*Boudillion, who lives in Littleton, maintains an avid interest in historical research as well as the unusual and forgotten tales of Massachusetts. His articles and photography have been published in a number of magazines and he was a contributor to the recently published book, *Weird Massachusetts*.*

Carlisle's Tophet Swamp

*In the Mosquito of February 27, 2004, Rachel Page Elliott wrote an article about Carlisle's Tophet Swamp. Elliott loved exploring the town's trails on horseback when she and her husband settled on River Road in the mid-1940s. "I was soon reminded," she wrote, "by longtime residents of the importance in not letting my horse diverge from the narrow trail when riding through Tophet Swamp. There had been occasions when horses had become mired and had to be rescued by the help of townspeople." Cows and people also became stuck in the swamp. Elliott quoted from Donald Lapham's book, *Carlisle: Composite Community*: "The story goes that a daughter, Joanna [of the Adams clan], in the late 1700s sank in Tophet Swamp up to her armpits while picking blueberries, but after much screaming she was rescued."*

Sidney Bull's History of Carlisle (available at Gleason Library) includes a topographical description of Carlisle's Tophet Swamp. With its formidable hazards presented to man and beast, it lives up to its hellish name. Δ

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