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## History

### The murky mystery of Tophet Swamp

By Pam Hays  
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#### LITTLETON -

The Littleton Historical Society's event last week drew a crowd of close to a hundred people to hear a presentation by Littleton resident Daniel Boudillion.

His main topic of research concerned the numerous New England locales incorporating the word "Tophet" into their name, in particular eight Massachusetts swamps so named by the Puritans. Illustrating his remarks with slides, Boudillion began by noting that the word "Tophet" was peculiar to the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which was chartered in 1629.

The Puritan Bible of choice was the Geneva Bible, a translation that used the word Tophet to depict a "place of burning," a graphic depiction of hell, he noted.

Because the Pilgrims were "practical people in a hostile land, beset by wolves, Indians, starvation, diseases and harsh winters," they were not given to fanciful, exaggerated, or metaphorical names when it came to matters of survival, he said.

Many swamps were named after dangerous animals likely to be encountered there, such as Bear Swamps, Wolf Swamps, and Catamount (mountain lion) Swamps, and he theorized that Tophet was used similarly as a warning about the dangers that could be expected in those particular swamps.

Indians, he said, used the islands in the middle of swamps as places of settlement and refuge. He noted that Mary Rowlandson, who had been captured by Indians, was held captive for three months, and wrote about living on islands in swamps during her captivity. Increase Mather, a Puritan minister of the time, observed, "every swamp to them is a castle," he said, underscoring the link between swamps and the native inhabitants.

But why were these swamps considered so hellish?

Examining the Puritans' religious beliefs, Boudillion said that they favored the Old Testament over the New, and "their God was the God of the Old Testament." For the Puritans, Hell was very real and vivid, and was depicted as a fiery place filled with the screams of the damned, he said.

Swamps were not only dwelling places for Indians, but were also places of Shaman ritual, and during these rituals there would be shouting and yelling as well as beating of drums accompanied by singing and dancing, he said. The fire from the swamps could be due not only to bonfires but also to swamp gas, which produces luminous, floating lights, he added. For Minister Cotton Mather, son of Increase, all this activity taking place in fiery swamps convinced him that these rituals were "diabolical" and a form of devil worship, he said.

The eight Massachusetts locales with the name Tophet (including Littleton's Tophet Swamp and Chasm) are found in Adams, Westminster, Fitchburg, Shirley, Littleton, Carlisle, Lexington, Lynn/Lynnfield, and they all line up at regular 10 to 20 mile intervals, corresponding almost exactly to the Mohawk Trail or Route 2A, he said, leading him to theorize that they were regular camping stations on the Trail.

"They seem to be headed directly towards Salem; Nanepashemet was the most powerful Sachem of Massachusetts up to



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1620, and he had his seat of governance in Salem, so this suggests that these swamp sites may have also been used as camping or wayfarer sites toward this destination," Boudillion speculated. From Carlisle to Lexington another route heads south, and he theorized that perhaps this marked a secondary route leading into Boston.

Boudillion's slides of the current sites of these swamps reveal that they have changed considerably through the centuries, with the water table either rising or falling, or with development erasing them completely. But a few still have rocks arranged in a way that he suspects is related to the solstice, such as the Tophet Chasm in Littleton.

There is still a lot of research he has yet to pursue, and some day he might publish a work, "Tophet Theories A to Z," he said.

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