

## TALES OF THE WOODS

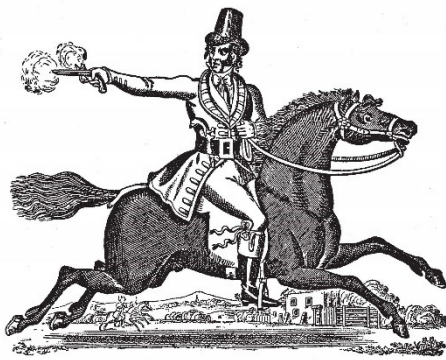
By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

Did a highwayman once ride through Winchester territory? Maybe—maybe not.

Throughout New England there are caves called Devil's Den. "An Old Backwoodsman" vividly described a local one in *The Middlesex Journal* in December 1856.<sup>2</sup> "The Devil's Den, alias Robber's Cave, is situated in Winchester, near the Stoneham line, and about a quarter of a mile west by north from Bear Hill. It is located on the edge of a dismal swamp, whose gloomy recesses are intersected by a slimy stream, the unearthly gurgling of whose waters is flung back from the depths of the cave in frightful echoes that sound to the heated imagination like the howling of demons pursuing their infernal origins. On the south lies a dark forest of pine and birch, through whose tall tops the wind shrieks a wild requiem for the victims of the bloodthirsty cut throats who once inhabited this retreat."

Further he wrote, "Tradition informs us that this cave was once inhabited by two notorious robbers, Thunderbolt and Lightfoot, who gained an extreme reputation for breaking the laws of the land and evading the penalties attached thereto.

"Some avaricious persons have hinted that treasure may be concealed in some crevice in the rock. It may be so. But the only treasure yet brought to light is a small, rusty, three-cornered piece of iron, apparently the remnant of some agricultural or mining implement, such as a spade."



MICHAEL MARTIN, alias CAPTAIN LIGHTFOOT

"Tradition" may have been wrong about Thunderbolt,<sup>3</sup> but could Lightfoot have ridden this way? Born Michael Martin (1795-1821), Capt. Lightfoot, was introduced to the life of highway robbery by Capt. Thunderbolt in their native Ireland. After a notorious and unappreciated career of burglaries, hold-ups and frauds there, he fled to America. Here he took up his old trade, until he robbed Medford resident Major Bray while on the road from Salem to Medford. Attempting an escape, Lightfoot made it to Medford, where he came under suspicion and took off toward Cambridge. He got to Springfield before being apprehended. He was hanged in Cambridge in 1821.<sup>4</sup>

While eluding capture on the Bray escapade or some other nefarious adventure, Lightfoot might have passed through Winchester territory, but it is unlikely he left anything secreted in the Fells. In the Backwoodsman's time, some young men cleared away the rocks and rubbish which had

collected before the entrance of the Devil's Den and surely searched. Today the site of the cave is unknown.

## **HANNAH SHINER**

From time to time, people have lived in the Fells. According to Medford historian Charles Brooks, remnants of the indigenous tribe lived at Turkey Swamp in the Middlesex Fells prior to the 19th century. The last of these, recalled by both Medford and Winchester historians was a woman known as Hannah Shiner.

According to Brooks, who published his Medford history in 1855, she was "kind-hearted, a faithful friend, a sharp enemy, a judge of herbs, a weaver of baskets, and a lover of rum."

"Hannah Shiner," Winchester historian George Cooke wrote in 1885, "lived alone, part of the time, in a hut by a spring upon the eastern margin of Turkey Swamp, where she made baskets and 'Indian trinkets' for sale, when not employed among the families in mending chair-bottoms, or other services, in quasi-compensation for the broken food she could obtain."

According to Brooks (but not Cooke), she lived with Old Toney, "a noble souled mulatto man, who lived on the Woburn Road, in West Medford, opposite where the town schoolhouse once stood," until one Thanksgiving Day when his house burned down.<sup>5</sup>

According to Cooke, "At another time she is remembered to have lived in an old house, long since disappeared, at the corner of Church and Bacon Streets, and is described by some who remember her, as she appeared to their childhood, as short and small in stature, with a thin face, traveling about with a little dog, which, when she called at a house, she was accustomed to hide under her skirts, in a manner very amusing to the children." On one cold winter day in 1820, while crossing the old Main Street bridge in a high wind, "her slight form was blown from it into the water and she was drowned."<sup>6</sup>

It is understandable that both writers considered Shiner as part of their own local history. A marginalized woman, she probably recognized neither community as hers, preferring the unspoiled woods.

## **LIVING IN A BARRELL**

In 1902, a tale was published anonymously in *The Winchester Star*<sup>7</sup> about an unidentified man who lived in the Fells and likely died there. He had retreated to the woods apparently hoping for a cure from consumption, an all too prevalent and fatal affliction in Winchester during its first century.

In the early 1890s, "about the time that the South Reservoir was being constructed, a man afflicted with tuberculosis settled on a sunny slope on the present shore of the pond with the intention of taking the open air treatment for the disease."

For many months he lived on the west shore at the south dam, about a dozen feet above the reservoir. “He built a small lean-to by placing a few boards against a pole suspended between two trees. Beneath this he had his fire place.” Normally, he would sleep in a hammock suspended between two trees.



*The South Reservoir*

What the reporter, who signed himself as “T,” found of special interest was that “for a shelter he had a large hogshead or molasses barrel buried to its top in the earth and fitted at the top with a trap door, which was in turn covered with one of iron.” This he used on rainy nights.

“The old hogshead is still in place, just as it was left long ago,” T wrote. “The iron cover may be taken off and the trap door filled with small holes for ventilation lifted, exposing the interior. If the walls are tapped with a cane they give a dull, soft sound, showing that it is fast becoming punk and that old Father Time has not passed it by, although he has been very lenient with it. The other signs of habitation are few. A few old holes dug in the hillside, here and there, some iron cooking utensils and a three legged stool....

“How the occupant ever slept with much comfort is a puzzle, for while the barrel is so deep that one can almost stand upright, it is not so wide that one may stretch out straight.” The writer recommended a visit and gave directions, but it is unlikely any remnant of that barrel remains over a century later.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2023 by the author Ellen Knight is a revision of an earlier article by the author published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 25, 2021. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> Reprinted in *The Winchester Record*, Vol. II, No. 1 (Jan. 1886), pp. 185-186.

<sup>3</sup> Lightfoot and Thunderbolt parted ways before Lightfoot came to New England. Though there is another tradition that Thunderbolt ended his days in Vermont, he and Lightfoot did not reunite.

<sup>4</sup> *The Life of Michael Martin, Who Was Executed for Highway Robbery, December 20, 1821, As Given by Himself*. Boston: Russell & Gardner, 1821.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Brooks, *History of the Town of Medford*, 1855, pp. 80-81.

<sup>6</sup> George Cooke, “Our Aborigines,” *The Winchester Record*, I:4 (Jan. 1885), p. 274.

<sup>7</sup> *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 8, 1902.