

## A Halloween tale: The legend of Moll Dyer

Posted by [TBN\\_Charles](#) On 10/01/2016

**Leonardtown, MD** - Poor Moll Dyer.

She died horribly in the early years of Maryland's history, freezing to death in a brutal winter storm.

She was no more a witch than those unfortunate souls crushed to death by rocks in the New Salem Witch Hunt insanity of the early 17th century in Massachusetts.

But fear is a terrible thing.

A tragic victim of superstition, ignorance and vigilante justice, the tale of Moll Dyer is one of Southern Maryland's most enduring legends.

Just south of Leonardtown, a stream meanders under Route 5, with hills to its west and modern homes scattered around it.

This was the colonial home of Moll Dyer, whose story first came to light in the late 19th century in *The St. Mary's Beacon*.

The author, Joseph F. Morgan, noted that the story was already 100-years-old.

He figured the woman's home must've been about a mile south of the old county alms house, a 19th century relief system providing food and shelter for the county's homeless. The proprietors of this alms house were actually my great-grandmother and great-grandfather. This building stood, for geographical reference, in the woods behind the current St. Mary's County Technical Center and Leonardtown High School.

Moll Dyer, described in Morgan's article as "an old hag," lived in a ramshackle home. She was shunned by the locals, who feared her tall stride and baneful gaze.

"Her history no one knew," Morgan wrote, "but there were stories told of her in another day and another country where her lot was different and where all that was refined and beautiful waited on her hand and foot. Some great sorrow which crushed hope and love out of her young life, came upon her."

The destitute woman roamed the land during summer months, gathering plants from the woodland and begging a pittance from fearful neighbors who dared not deny her requests.

The crux of the legend followed a bitter storm of plummeting temperatures, a winter blizzard of such fury that cattle and sheep froze in the fields.

To the townspeople, stricken and desperate, the "witch in the woods" was at the heart of their ills and they determined they'd had enough.

After much deliberation, they lit torches, surrounded her shack and set fire to her humble dwelling.

The terrified woman fled to the surrounding woodland and the townspeople returned to their homes, satisfied they had ridden themselves of the person responsible for their troubles.

Nothing more was heard from her for several days until a young boy searching for lost cattle in the snow came across her frozen body kneeling on a rock, one arm stretched to the heavens as if cursing her tormentors.

Families living in the area reported that fields planted in the years after her passing remained uncharacteristically barren.

Rumors of her ghost wandering through the land where her death occurred began surfacing in later years. Always, the legends insisted, her spirit would be seen on the coldest night of winter.

In the early 1970s, Philip Love, a St. Mary's County resident and writer for *The Washington Star*, became interested in the legend and tracked down old timers in the area who knew where the rock Moll Dyer died upon still sat in the woods.

The imprint of her hand and knees were said to be embedded in the stone. Love had the rock relocated to the old colonial jail in front of the court house in Leonardtown.

For many years the home of the St. Mary's County Historical Society, the jail became the rock's final resting place. The stone remains one of the county's most curious historical relics.

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