

In 1639, a UFO was observed over Boston, Massachusetts



On March 1, 1639, three men drift on a river near Boston, facing a light that changes shape, darts like an arrow, then vanishes — leaving them inexplicably carried back a mile upstream, against the tide, with no memory of having rowed.

Boston, Massachusetts — Nearly four centuries before the acronyms UAP and UFO entered everyday speech, a text of thoroughly Puritan sobriety already recorded an encounter that posterity would, not without irony, come to regard as the first reported unidentified flying object on North American soil. The author was neither a drunken sailor nor a sensation-seeking pamphleteer: it was John Winthrop himself, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, founder of Boston, and author of the celebrated "city upon a hill" sermon. His journal, a cornerstone of American colonial historiography, devotes an entry to an episode that stands in sharp contrast to his usual notations on harvests, conflicts with Algonquian tribes, or the theological disputes then roiling the young colony.

An ordinary night on the Muddy River

The affair begins modestly. James Everell, described by Winthrop as "a sober, discreet man," boards a lighter — a flat-bottomed barge used for transporting goods — with two companions, to make their way down the Muddy River, a tributary of the Charles River that in 1639 wound through the marshes of what is now Back Bay, before that neighborhood was filled in during the nineteenth century. The area, today absorbed into the urban fabric of Boston and Brookline near present-day Fenway Park, was at the time little more than a stretch of mudflats and brackish water bordered by pastures where livestock grazed during the summer months.

It is in this setting that, according to the account Winthrop recorded, an unusually intense light appeared.

The governor's account

The journal entry, dated March 1, 1639, deserves to be examined in full, so sharply does its precision contrast with Winthrop's usually terse style. When the light stood still, it flamed up and measured, by the witnesses' estimate, about three yards square — roughly nine feet, or just under three meters. When it moved, it contracted and took on the shape of a swine, racing then with the speed of an arrow toward Charlestown on the opposite bank, repeating this pattern for two to three hours.

But it is the rest of the account that has, more than anything else, fed the legend. The three men, who had drifted nearly

a mile downstream on the current while watching the phenomenon, found that once the light vanished, their boat had been carried back to its starting point — against the tide — with none of them recalling having rowed. Winthrop adds, finally, that "divers other credible persons" reportedly saw the same light afterward, in the same place.

A man whose word carried weight

The identity of the principal witness is no small detail in a Puritan society where the credibility of any account rested entirely on the reputation of the person reporting it. Winthrop takes care to note that Everell enjoyed "good reputation, activity and estate" in Boston — a way, in the language of the time, of certifying that he was neither a drunkard nor a teller of tall tales. For a governor concerned with the moral order of his colony, recording such an episode without disputing it amounted to lending it considerable credit.

Nick Pope, a former investigator for the British Ministry of Defence on unidentified aerial phenomena, has recently pointed out that the rigor of the testimony fits a pattern observed in many contemporary reports: the most frequently cited witnesses today — pilots, police officers, military personnel, radar operators — are likewise chosen for their presumed seriousness and sobriety.

The will-o'-the-wisp hypothesis, and its limits

The explanation most commonly advanced by later commentators points to ignis fatuus, the "will-o'-the-wisp" phenomenon resulting from the spontaneous combustion of gases released by decomposing organic matter in marshy ground — and the Muddy River, whose very name evokes mud, offered fertile terrain for such an effect. James Savage, who republished Winthrop's journal in 1825, already advanced this explanation in a footnote, suggesting that the prevailing fear and the imagination of the age, quick to see the hand of the devil in any unexplained event, had likely amplified what was at bottom a natural occurrence.

The hypothesis, however, runs into several details of the account. A will-o'-the-wisp is a phenomenon that rises from the ground and generally stays close to the marsh surface; it does not cross, in a matter of seconds, the more than two-mile distance separating the Muddy River from Charlestown, nor does it dart "as swift as an arrow" across the night sky. The meteor hypothesis, for its part, runs up against the duration of the observation — two to three hours — far longer than the few seconds a fireball remains visible. As for the aurora borealis, its presence at Boston's latitude remains possible but rare, and explains neither the erratic movement nor the shape attributed to the light.

The detail of the swine, or the memory of daily life

There remains the more troubling question of the animal shape described by the witnesses. Some researchers see in it a purely psychological clue: the Muddy River and its surroundings then served as summer pasture for swine destined for slaughter, the hamlet itself later taking the name Brookline. It is not implausible that the three men, having encountered or heard pigs earlier that day, unconsciously projected this familiar image onto a luminous mass of indefinite shape — a hypothesis that takes nothing away from the sincerity of the testimony, but that raises questions about how the human mind shapes the inexplicable out of the familiar.

A colony under theological strain

The episode occurs in a context worth bearing in mind for anyone seeking to understand the colony's state of mind in 1639. Only months earlier, in 1638, Winthrop had presided over the banishment of Anne Hutchinson, the central figure of the Antinomian Controversy that had deeply divided the Puritan community over questions of divine grace and religious authority. In a society that had just lived through this major theological crisis, and that interpreted the slightest natural event as a possible sign of divine will — or of diabolical interference — the appearance of an elusive light above the water could only fuel the widest range of speculation.

Winthrop himself offers no interpretation of the episode in his journal, unlike other entries where he does not hesitate

to invoke the workings of "the evil one." This interpretive silence, from a man otherwise quick to comment on signs of Providence, has often been noted by researchers who have studied the text.

"When it stood still, it flamed up, and was about three yards square; when it ran, it was contracted into the figure of a swine: it ran as swift as an arrow towards Charlton, and so up and down about two or three hours."

— John Winthrop, personal journal, March 1, 1639

Archival document

Excerpt from John Winthrop's journal, "The History of New England from 1630 to 1649," entry of March 1, 1639:

"In this year one James Everell, a sober, discreet man, and two others, saw a great light in the night at Muddy River. When it stood still, it flamed up, and was about three yards square; when it ran, it was contracted into the figure of a swine: it ran as swift as an arrow towards Charlton [Charlestown], and so up and down about two or three hours. They were come down in their lighter about a mile, and, when it was over, they found themselves carried quite back against the tide to the place they came from. Divers other credible persons saw the same light, after, about the same place."

A precedent that did not stand alone

Winthrop's journal does not end there. Five years later, on January 18, 1644, the governor recorded a further troubling episode: three men returning to Boston by boat reportedly saw two lights rise from the water near the town's north point, take on a human form, approach the town, then disappear near the south point. A week later, another account describes a mysterious voice rising from the harbor waters, which Winthrop linked to a ship explosion and to the memory of a missing sailor suspected during his lifetime of practicing necromancy. These repeated occurrences, all recorded by the same careful hand, suggest that the 1639 episode was no isolated anecdote in the governor's mind, but part of a series of observations he considered serious enough to archive.

The memory of the place, today

The episode has not faded into obscurity. In 2019, artists Ann Hirsch and Jeremy Angier installed an artwork titled "Winthrop's UFO" along the Muddy River, in the landscaped park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in Brookline — a luminous structure evoking the swine-like silhouette described nearly four centuries earlier. The site, today wedged between sports infrastructure and the landscaped grounds of the Emerald Necklace, thus preserves a tangible trace of a mystery born in the darkness of the colonial marshes.

What remains of the mystery

Nearly four centuries after the fact, the Muddy River episode remains in that gray zone where the historian runs up against the limits of the discipline. The source text suffers from no ambiguity of transmission: it comes from a firsthand document, written by one of the most influential and best-documented figures of colonial America, and corroborated, by his own account, by several independent witnesses. None of the natural explanations advanced — will-o'-the-wisp, meteor, aurora borealis — accounts for every element reported: the duration of the sighting, the erratic trajectory, and above all that lost hour the three men could never explain. What remains, as is so often the case with these old archives, is the impossibility of choosing between a misperception, a tale amplified through repeated retellings, and the slender but never quite dismissible possibility that something genuinely unexplained occurred that night above the marshes of Boston.

