Searching for Vampire Graves

Given the ubiquitousness of vampires, those undead beings who are driven by bloodlust (and who thrive in movies like 2008's popular *Twilight*), it should not be surprising that historically there have been instances of reputed vampirism in the United States, notably in New England. And today there is a veritable vampire industry in New Orleans. I have investigated these cultural trends on site, tracking the legendary creatures to their very graves.

New England

New England has always been an admixture of both austere skepticism and passionate superstition. Vampire legends lurk in the latter. According to one vampirologist, "The presence in New England of a strongly rooted vampire mythology is something of an enigma to folklorists. There is quite simply no other area in all of North America with such wealth of vampire lore" (Rondina 2008, 165).

One of the best known examples is the case of nineteen-year-old Mercy Lena Brown in Exeter, Rhode Island, in 1892—a case that supposedly influenced Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula* (1897). As Katherine Ramsland (2002, 18) concisely tells the story:

> George Brown lost his wife and then his eldest daughter. One of his sons, Edwin, returned and once again became ill, so George exhumed the bodies of his wife and daughters. The wife and first daughter had decomposed, but Mercy's body—buried for three months—was fresh and turned sideways in the coffin, and blood dripped from her mouth. They cut out her heart, burned it, and dissolved the ashes in a medicine for Edwin to drink. However, he also died, and Mercy Brown became known as Exeter's vampire.

Accounts of the exhumation in the *Providence Journal* of March 19 and 21, 1892, acknowledge that the Browns died of consumption (tuberculosis). They do not mention the corpse of Lena (as she was actually known) being turned on its side or blood dripping from the mouth. The exhumation was conducted by a young Harold Metcalf, MD, from the city of Wickford. "Dr. Metcalf reports the body in a state of natural decomposition, with nothing exceptional existing," stated the *Journal*. "When the doctor removed the heart and the liver from the body a quantity of blood dripped therefrom, but this he said was just what might be expected from a similar examination of almost any person after the same length of time from disease." The article added, "The heart and liver were cremated by the attendants" ("Exhumed" 1892).

A follow-up article ("Vampire" 1892) noted that the heart's blood was "clotted and decomposed . . . just what might be expected at that stage of decomposition." The correspondent acknowledged the custom of an afflicted person consuming the ashes to effect a cure, stating, "In this case the doctor does not know if this latter remedy was resorted to or not, and he only knows from hearsay how ill the son Edwin is, never having been called to attend him."

And so ends "Unarguably the best known incident of historical vampirism in America," indeed the story of "The Last Vampire" (Rondina 2008, 83, 99). However, there are many other reported cases typically involving consumption. The victim's lethargy, pale appearance, coughing of blood, and contagiousness all suggested to the superstitious the result of a "vampire's parasitic kiss" (Citro 1994, 71).

The Demon Vampire

In 2008 I went in search of vampire cases in Vermont. Apparently the earliest reported vampire incident took place in Manchester in 1793. Four years earlier, Captain Isaac Burton—a deacon in the congregational church—wed Rachel Harris. Judge John S. Pettibone (1786–1872) picks up the story:

> She was, to use the words of one who was well acquainted with her, "a fine, healthy, beautiful girl." Not long after they were married she went into a decline and after a year or so she died of consumption. Capt. Burton after a year or more married Hulda Powel, daughter of Esquire Powel by his first wife. Hulda was a very healthy, good-looking girl, not as handsome as his

Joe Nickell, PhD, is the author of numerous books, including Entities *and* Adventures in Paranormal Investigation. *His Web site is at www.joenickell.com.*

first wife. She became ill soon after they were married and when she was in the last stages of consumption, a strange infatuation took possession of the minds of the connections and friends of the family. They were induced to believe that if the vitals of the first wife could be consumed by being burned in a charcoal fire it would effect a cure of the sick second wife. Such was the strange delusion that they disinterred the first wife who had been buried about three years. They took out the liver, heart, and lungs, what remained of them, and burned them to ashes on the blacksmith's forge of Jacob Mead. Timothy Mead officiated at the altar in the sacrifice to the Demon Vampire who it was believed was still sucking the blood of the then living wife of Captain Burton. It was the month of February and good sleighing. Such was the excitement that from five hundred to one thousand people were present. This account was furnished me by an eye witness of the transaction.

Not only is Judge Pettibone's informant unnamed, but his manuscript (which still exists in the Manchester Historical Society [Harwood 2008]) is of uncertain date, although penned sometime between 1857 and 1872 (*Proceedings* 1930, 147). I located a Burton family history (Holman 1926) that makes no mention of the vampire tale but does confirm the sequence of marriages and deaths. (Captain Burton married Rachel Harris on March 8, 1789, and she died on February 1, 1790. He married Hulda Powell on January 4, 1791, and she succumbed on September 6, 1793.)

Therefore, the Pettibone account could be true. The salient point, however, is that belief in "the Demon Vampire" was indeed nothing more than a "strange delusion." Pettibone places the bizarre sacrifice about three years after Rachel's burial, which means the event occurred in early 1793, and Huldah died later that year. Clearly, anti-vampire magic was no cure for consumption.

I attempted to locate Rachel's grave. Isaac Burton and his fourth wife Dency Raymond (1774–1864) are buried together in the old section of Dellwood Cemetery in Manchester (Holman 1926, 25–28). The graves were relocated there from the old burial ground on the village green, today's courthouse site, where many old, unmarked graves are thought yet to remain (Harwood 2008). Among them may be the lost grave of the beautiful but unfortunate Rachel Harris.

Photo by Joe Nickell

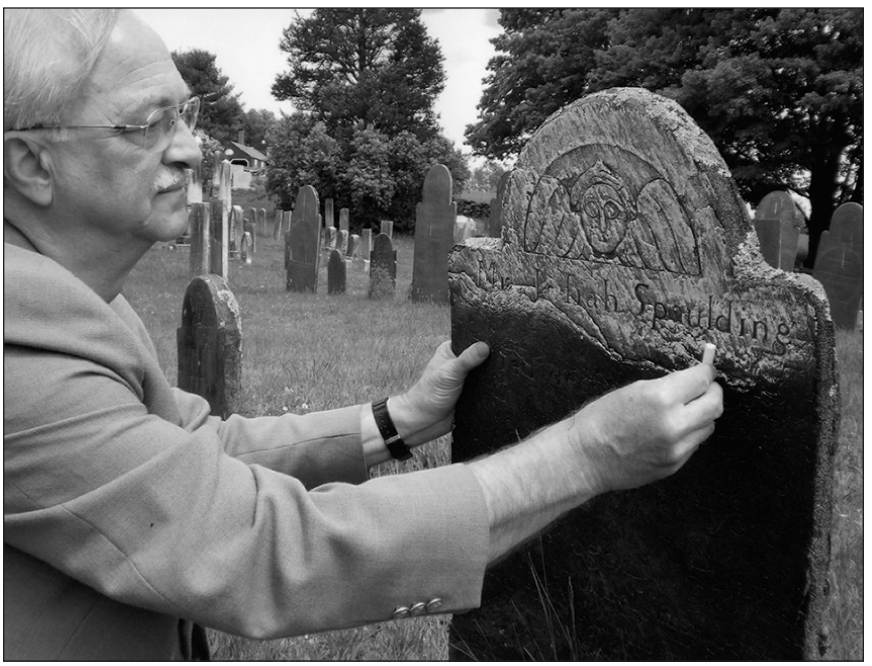
Figure 1. The Spaulding graves of vampire legend in Vermont's Dummerston Center Cemetery.

On Woodstock Green

Another story comes from Woodstock, where sources claim a vampire's heart was burned on the public green around 1829. The earliest account appeared in *The Journal of American Folklore* (Curtin 1889, 58–59). The story was later retold in the *Boston Transcript*, followed by an expanded version "Vampirism in Woodstock" in the October 9, 1890, *Vermont Standard* (quoted in Stephens 1970, 71–74). This gave the man's family name as Corwin. (Composite, garbled

versions have since appeared [e.g., "Vampire Incidents" 2008].) According to the original source (Curtin 1889, 58):

> The man had died of consumption six months before and his body buried in the ground. A brother of the deceased fell ill soon after, and in a short time it appeared that he too had consumption; when this became known the family determined at once to disinter the body of the dead man and examine his heart. Then they reinterred the body, took the heart to the middle of Woodstock Green, where they kindled a fire under an iron pot, in which they placed the heart, and burned it to ashes.



Author's photo by Diana G. Harris

Figure 2. The author uses chalk to enhance the tombstone of Josiah Spaulding, which is topped with the familiar image of the Angel of Death.

Unfortunately, not only was the story sixty years old at the time it appeared, but the writer failed to give any source other than an "old lady" in Woodstock who "said she saw the disinterment and the burning with her own eyes." The editor of *The Vermont Standard* added much supplementary material, claiming that the pot of ashes was buried under a seven-ton granite slab and that persons digging at the site a decade later encountered a sulfurous smell and smoke. This reference to the fires of Hell reveal the editor's writing as tongue-in-cheek, even sarcastic, and discredits his other details: the man's name as Corwin and burial in the Cushing Cemetery. Small wonder that no one of that name is buried in that graveyard—as shown by cemetery records (Stillwell and Proctor 1977) and confirmed by a search among the old tombstones by my wife and me (see also Crosier 1986; Wendlong 1990).

Misunderstanding the editor's satire, popular writers have tended either to give too much credence to the story or to debunk or dismiss it altogehter. Possibly the original account did contain a nucleus of truth, an early account of consumption and superstitious belief associated with it.

The Killing Vine

Yet another old case, again involving consumption and associated superstition, has been reinterpreted by moderns as a "vampire incident" ("Vampire" 2008; Rondina 2008, 104). The story, in David L. Mansfield's *The History of the Town of Dummerston* (1884)—itself an account written some ninety years after the events and based on oral tradition—has become somewhat garbled by writers copying writers. Therefore, I tracked down a copy of the original text for study. It relates that Lieutenant Leonard Spaulding died of consumption in 1788, aged fifty-nine, father of eleven children. Mansfield states (1884, 27):

> Although the children of Lt. Spaulding, especially the sons, became large, muscular persons, all but one or two died under 40 years of age of consumption, and their sickness was brief.
>
> It is related by those who remember the circumstance; after six or seven of the family had died of consumption, another daughter was taken, it was supposed, with the same disease. It was thought she would die, and much was said in regard to so many of the family's dying of consumption when they all seemed to have the appearance of good health and long life. Among the superstitions of those days, we find it was said that a vine or root of some kind grew from coffin to coffin, of those of one family, who died of consumption, and were buried side by side; and when the growing vine had reached the coffin of the last one buried, another one of the family would die; the only way to destroy the influence or effect, was to break the vine; take up the body of the last one buried and burn the vitals, which would be an effectual remedy: Accordingly, the body of the last one buried was dug up and the vitals taken out and burned, and the daughter, it is affirmed, got well and lived many years. The act, doubtless, raised her mind from a state of despondency to hopefullness [sic].

Now, Spaulding and his wife Margaret (who died in 1827) were buried in separate cemeteries and in unmarked graves. However, I located all but two of the children's graves, including a row of six in the Dummerston Center Cemetery (figures 1 and 2).

Unfortunately for the quaint legend related by oral tradition, the graves (whether linked by hidden underground vines or not) are not placed consecutively in the order of the family members' deaths. Neither did the last of the six, Josiah, die very close in time to the previous sibling's demise, since more than five-and-a-half years passed since the death of John. Of course, the family may well have been plagued by consumption, and it is possible Josiah's body was disinterred and the vitals burned. In any event, he was indeed followed in death by one of Leonard Spaulding's daughters, as the legend states, since after he died only Olive remained alive. Apparently, she lived on

for years, moving with a second husband to Brattleboro (Mansfield 1884, 26)—perhaps this being the secret of her having avoided the contagion!

In New Orleans

In sharp contrast to vampire legends of New England are those of New Orleans. While Louisiana indeed has a folk tradition of werewolves (the Loup-Garous of the Cajuns), the vampire culture there is not folklore but fakelore.

When I investigated various topics in the New Orleans area in 2000 (Nickell 2004, 140–161, 165–175), I found frequent references to vampires. The various nighttime tours focusing on cemeteries, voodoo, and ghosts invariably touted vampires as well, and guides (like mine) regaled tourists with spine-tingling tales of the "undead."

Anne Rice (born Howard Allen O'Brien in 1941) inspired legions of fans with her series of erotic horror novels, beginning with *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). Until she repudiated the genre, returned to her Catholic faith, and moved from New Orleans in 2005, many Rice devotees made pilgrimages to the Big Easy. Some walking tours included Rice's home or the location of the filming of *Interview*. There was even a tour book, *Haunted City: An Unauthorized Guide to the Magical, Magnificent New Orleans of Anne Rice* (Dickinson 1997).

According to Victor C. Klein, who has compiled two books of New Orleans ghost legends, "Throughout my extensive researches I have never encountered any tangible trace of Vampirism in Louisiana or New Orleans." He adds, "The genesis for such beliefs is directly attributable to the commercial imagination of Ms. Rice and the cebretonic endomorphs who, in their mad dash to establish a subjective species of identity and immortality, elevate her works to gospel status" (1999, 106). He also speaks of "the hyperbolic balderdash which spews forth from the black garbed tour guides who are more interested in money and sensationalism than accurate historical research" (1999, 64).

I recall one of the more responsible guides laughingly telling me how a customer once inquired about a particular grave featured in a Rice story and would not be convinced that the site was purely fictional. But I think the evidence shows that that grave is just as authentically vampiric as any real graves in New Orleans, New England, Europe, or elsewhere. □

I recall one of the more responsible guides laughingly telling me how a customer once inquired about a particular grave featured in [an Anne] Rice story and would not be convinced that the site was purely fictional.

Acknowledgments

My wife, Diana G. Harris, helpfully accompanied me on my trip to Vermont. Timothy Binga, director of CFI Libraries, provided much research assistance, and I am grateful to Paul Loynes for typesetting and indeed the entire SKEPTICAL INQUIRER staff for help at all levels.

I am especially grateful to the following gracious Vermont people and institutions for their crucial assistance: in Woodstock, the staff of the Norman Williams Public Library, including reference-desk attendant John Donaldson, and the staff of the Woodstock Inn and Resort (for free coffee and tea!); in Dummerston, Town Clerk Pam McFadden and historian Paul Normandeau; and in Manchester, the staff of the Mark Skinner Library, Assistant Town Clerk Bear Scovil, Dellwood Cemetery caretaker Kurt Baccei, and, especially, curator of the Manchester Historical Society, Dr. Judy Harwood.

References

Bunson, Matthew. 2000. *The Vampire Encyclopedia*. New York: Gramercy Books.

Citro, Joseph A. 1994. *Green Mountain Ghosts, Ghouls and Unsolved Mysteries*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Crosier, Barney. 1986. Vermont's vampire heart. *Rutland Herald*, October 26.

Curtin, Jeremiah. 1889. European folk-lore in the United States. *Journal of American Folklore*. 2:4 (March), 56–59.

Dickinson, Joy. 1997. *Haunted City: An Unauthorized Guide to the Magical, Magnificent New Orleans of Anne Rice*. Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press.

"Exhumed the Bodies . . . ." 1892. *Provincetown Journal*, March 19 (reprinted in Rondina 2008, 86–87).

Hard, Walter R., Jr., and Janet C. Greene, eds. 1970. *Mischief in the Mountains*. Montpelier, Vermont: Vermont Life Magazine.

Harwood, Judy. 2008. Personal communication, May 21, July 9.

Holman, Winifred Lovering. 1926. *Descendants of Josiah Burton of Manchester, Vt.* Concord, N.H.: The Rumford Press.

Klein, Victor C. 1999. *New Orleans Ghosts II*. Metairie, La.: Lycanthrope Press.

Mansfield, David L. 1884. *The History of the Town of Dummerston*. Ludlow, Vt.: Published by Miss A.M. Hemenway.

Nickell, Joe. 2004. *The Mystery Chronicles: More Real-Life X-Files*. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky.

Pettibone, Judge John S. N.d. The early history of Manchester. In *Proceedings 1930*, 147–166.

Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society. 1930. New series, vol. 1, no. 4.

Ramsland, Katherine. 2002. *The Science of Vampires*. New York: Berkley Boulevard Books.

Rice, Anne. 1976. *Interview with the Vampire*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Rondina, Christopher. 2008. *Vampires of New England*. N.p.: On the Cape Publications.

Stevens, Rockwell. 1970. "The Vampire's Heart," in Hard and Greene 1970, 71–80.

Stoker, Bram. 1897. *Dracula*. Reprinted, New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003.

Stillwell, Dorothy, and Dorothy L. Proctor. 1977. Cushing cemetery file; typescript at Norman Williams Public Library, Woodstock, Vermont.

Vampire incidents in New England. 2008. Available online at www.foodforthedead.com/map.swf; accessed May 9.

"The Vampire Theory." 1892. *Providence Journal*, March 21; reprinted in Rondina 2008, 89–96.

"Vampirism in Woodstock." 1890. *Vermont Standard*, October 9; reprinted in Stephens 1970, 71–74.

Wendling, Kathy. 1990. Woodstock's vampire: The heart of the legend. *Vermont Standard*, October 25.