

I Wish I'd Been There

THE SPIRIT ROOM OF JONATHAN KOONS BY SHARON HATFIELD

Visitors making the steep ascent to the ridgetop farm of Jonathan Koons in Athens County, Ohio, in the early 1850s were about to witness a wonder that rivaled P. T. Barnum's attractions in faraway New York City.

Koons, a humble farmer turned spiritualist medium, had built a rude log cabin for public séances. It was here that spirits of dead loved ones were said to speak to the living, not only to reassure them of "the continued life" beyond the grave but to serenade them with celestial music.

Over a three-year period, hundreds and possibly thousands of travelers from the Midwest, eastern United States and Canada visited the Koons farm in remote southeastern Ohio.

Most evenings they filled the spirit room in groups of about 20—a mix of devoted spiritualists and truth-seekers, grieving widowers and tourists on a lark, with a sprinkling of skeptics and debunkers. Some were millennialists, reformers who wanted to perfect society to hasten the return of Jesus Christ to Earth. Others rejected organized religion altogether.

EQUALITY OF ALL SOULS

What united these Victorians was their support for the abolition of slavery and women's rights. Spiritualists at the time believed in the equality of all souls, even though some souls were more highly evolved than others. This belief led some social reformers to become spiritualists supporting the rights of women and people of color.

In the spiritualist movement, women could play an authoritative role, either through their work as mediums or by becoming public speakers (very rare at that time). Some were called "trance speakers" and others were more conventional orators. Some spiritualists also believed that the Divine had a female element as well as a male one.

Waiting to greet the unannounced visitors was Koons, a Pennsylvania transplant in his 40s. With heavy dark eyebrows, long brown hair and a full beard, Koons wore the mantle of a holy man. He was an iconoclast, eager to distance himself from mainstream Christian thought, especially rejecting the Calvinistic notion that only a select few would evade hell.

"The Messiah taught the doctrine of peace, love, goodwill, and forgiveness to all mankind in general; which of itself was sufficient without the brimstone," Koons wrote. Joining

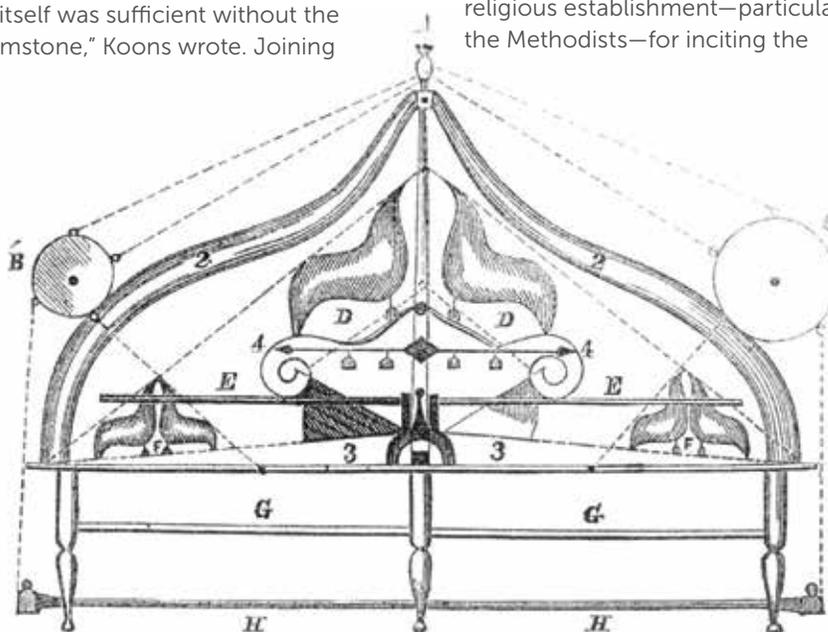
Koons at the séances were his wife, Abigail Bishop Koons—said to be an herbalist and a clairvoyant—and his eldest son Nahum, reputed to be the most powerful medium in the family.

HELD FREE SÉANCES

The Koonses conducted séances in the darkened spirit room several nights a week without charging admission. Jonathan began by playing his fiddle until other instruments mysteriously joined in and voices sang. Visitors reportedly felt the chill of strange breezes, saw ghostly lights and received messages scribbled by spirit hands on paper. A trumpet was said to float about the room, regaling the audience with sermons, songs and jokes from the Koons family's spirit guide, King.

A spiritualist and physician, Dr. J. Everett, was so enthralled that he collected the sayings from the spirit room in a slender volume called *A Book for Skeptics*, which was published in Columbus in 1853.

But not everyone was enamored of Koons. Visitors strolling the grounds near his home might have noticed the remains of Koons' barn, which had been destroyed by an arson attack just before Christmas in 1852, consuming his tools and a year's harvest. Koons blamed the local religious establishment—particularly the Methodists—for inciting the



Jonathan Koons built his "spiritual machine" out of wood and metal to help the spirits better concentrate their energy during séances. The drawing was published in 1854.

Ohio University Press

arson by condemning him for alleged “devil worship.”

“Replicas of his famed spirit room were built in Ohio.”

By 1855 the mostly favorable coverage that Koons had enjoyed in the spiritualist press gave way to more negative articles. Some critics charged that the séances were a clever hoax engineered by Koons and his large family. However, Koons’ supporters, such as the painter Selah Van Sickle of Delaware County, vouched for the authenticity of the Koons family’s demonstrations.

By the late fall of 1855, Koons had closed the vaunted spirit room, but his days as a medium were not over. He and his son Nahum, sometimes with his wife and daughter, took to the road, touring Cincinnati, Delaware and Morrow counties, Cleveland and even New York City.

FADED AFTER 1858

Koons mostly faded from public view after he moved to Illinois in 1858, but he remained a spiritualist until his death in 1893. Today Koons is considered by historians of religion to be the innovator of the trumpet used for voice communication in séances. Replicas of his famed spirit room were built in Ohio, Indiana, New York City and beyond.

If I had been present at a Koons séance back then, would journalistic objectivity have guided my observations and reporting? Or would I have been enthralled by the magic that so many visitors to the Koons Spirit Room joyfully attested to?

I wish I could have been there to find out.

Sharon Hatfield is the author of *Enchanted Ground: The Spirit Room of Jonathan Koons*, published by Swallow Press in 2018. She is a recipient of the Ohio Arts Council’s Individual Excellence Award in nonfiction.

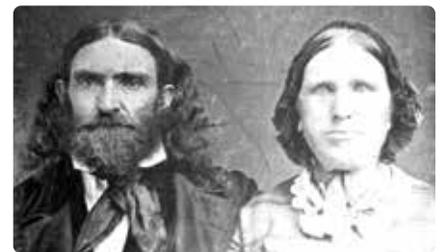


LEARN MORE

Find Dr. J. Everett’s *A Book for Skeptics*, published in Columbus in 1853, at ohiohistory.org/seance.

The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult, published in 2017, was “designed both for those new to the field and for experts. The book is organized into sections covering the relationship between Victorian spiritualism and science, the occult and politics, and the culture of mystical practices.”

Robert Cox, the head of the University of Massachusetts Amherst’s Special Collections and University Archives, gives an hour-long talk on 19th century spiritualism produced by the Amherst History Museum. Hear his talk at ohiohistory.org/spiritualism.



Top: Artist’s conception of the Koonses’ Spirit Room in 1852. Jonathan and Abigail Koons and their guests (5) sat in a semi-circle around a mediums’ table (4). Drawing by Sandy Plunkett.

Bottom: Spiritualists Jonathan and Abigail Koons, circa 1852–1855.

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