

History Corner



Koons' Sprit Room ¹

by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, MFA, DSNU

William R. Hayden, husband of Maria B. Hayden, spoke at Hampden Hall in Springfield, Massachusetts, on Spiritualism and related the facts he witnessed at "Coon's [sic] spirit room in Ohio." ²

Koons' Spirit Room in Athens, Ohio, became a destination for Spiritualists in the 1850s, despite being located in a remote and "rough and hilly area not far from the Virginia (now West Virginia) line. To reach it, one had to travel by stagecoach from Columbus over rutted and often washed out roads. Then, to reach the Koons' cabin, visitors still had to walk another two miles along a wooded trail." ³

Jonathan and Abigail Koons, self-educated farmers, had read about the Fox sisters. The Koons attended séances in Ohio and discovered they both had the gift of mediumship along with their oldest son Nahum. The spirits ordered them to build a "spirit room," with exact specifications: a cabin twelve by fourteen feet with a seven-foot high ceiling, three shuttered windows, and a single door. The room needed to contain benches to hold twenty people. In addition, the spirits wanted two drums, two fiddles, a guitar, an accordion, a trumpet, a tin horn, a tea bell, a triangle, and a tambourine. From there, the spirits then directed the Koons to place two tables, a rack for the instruments, and a wire from which the Koons would suspend small bells.

The Koons family held public séances at no charge, and the spirits gave musical concerts, sometimes ear-shattering, as well as lengthy communications. The music could be heard for a mile in any direction. Even though the séances were held in darkness, those who attended agreed it would be impossible for the three Koons' members to elicit such a noise, nor would they be able to make the instruments dance about the room and above the heads of the spectators. ⁴

[1] This article is excerpted from Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, *In Search of Maria B. Hayden: The American Medium Who Brought Spiritualism to the UK* (Salt Lake City: Scattered Leaves Press, 2020), 196-97.

[2] *Springfield [Mass.] Republican*, 23 Dec. 1854, p. 2, GenealogyBank.com.

[3] "The Haunted Museum: The Koons Family Spirit Room: What Happened to Make Athens, Ohio So Haunted?," <https://www.americanhauntingsink.com/koons>.

[4] "The Haunted Museum."

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Below is a letter to the editor written by Jonathan Koons to the *Spiritual Telegraph* on 8 November 1853. Like many pioneers, the Koons family endured ridicule and tests from skeptics because of these early physical phenomena.⁵

For my own sake, for the sake of the cause in which we have in common interest, and for the information of the multitudes who are writing for information, and visiting my house to witness the wonderful demonstrations occurring here almost daily, I desire a small space in the *Telegraph*....

I wish to say that but little if any exaggeration of the Spirit Manifestations at my house has been made. The Spirits write, talk, sing, render themselves visible, shake hands, play on instruments, while those instruments are carried to every part of the room, place objects in the hands of spectators, and many other acts unnecessary to detail. All these things are done without the contact of the medium in any case or in any degree. These things occur weekly, and sometimes daily; but the times are wholly controlled by Spirits. Persons who come must not hold me responsible for any failure if they should happen to come on a vacant night. But they are of so frequent occurrence that any person sufficiently interested will find it no great tax to tarry until they are satisfied.

From the beginning of the manifestations in my house, the most base and untruthful charges against my family and friends have been made by persons to whom I have thrown open my house, and all the fixtures ordered by the Spirits, for the fullest inspection. To silence these slanderers the Spirits have directed and allowed frequent changes in the circles; they have allowed persons not members of my family to sit by me, and by my son, which the demonstrations were being made, so as to prove that we are not guilty of

[5] "The Spirits in Athens County," *Spiritual Telegraph*, 24 Dec. 1853, p. 3, GenealogyBank.com.

fraud. To all those who still suspect fraud I can only say, Go to those who have seen and heard. If you cannot believe them, you can not believe your own senses. No more changes will be made; and all persons who come to detect me in the practice of the most stupendous imposition ever attempted, if it be an imposition, are politely requested to stay away.

I have no interest in practicing such a fraud; I have never made a charge for witnessing the experiments, but have repeatedly refused compensation when offered; my time and the time of my family has been freely spent, as well as money and provender, for the benefit my fellow-beings, and too frequently to gratify an idle curiosity; while the extraordinary communications written by Spirits have been freely given, without compensation, to responsible men for publication. Now what more can I do to satisfy the unreasonable demands of unreasonable men?

The Spirits made the demonstrations at their own time and in their own way. If they prefer darkness, I can not help it; if they choose light, I do not object to it. All I wish known is, that I do not do these things; that they are not done by any human agency; that I have made nothing by them, and never expect to be compensated in any other way than the untold satisfaction of demonstrating beyond cavil that man lives after death, of which I had many doubts myself until they were removed by these demonstrations. To my own mind they have been a source of instruction and infinite satisfaction. So they will ever prove to those who sincerely seek the truth. Those who seek any thing else had as well stay away. Those who see to prove fraud seek a falsehood, and will most likely end in the belief of a lie; for they have predetermined our guilt, and will not be convinced by reasonable testimony....

My house has been searched again and again, from top to bottom.... True, I have refused to submit the experiments to the kinds of tests proposed by men who are totally ignorant of the principles involved, and totally incompetent to devise tests. Let any man show that he is competent to the work, and I shall not refuse the severest scrutiny; but I can not submit to rules which I know to be in direct violation of sound philosophy, and which would therefore defeat the very object they seek....

Yours for the truth,

J. Koons



From the desk of

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Sharon DeBartolo Carmack is a 30-year veteran Certified Genealogist with a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Nonfiction Writing, a Certificate from the SNUi in Speaking and Demonstrating, and an Advanced Academic Diploma from the SNU. She is the author of twenty-four books, including her newest one, *In Search of Maria B. Hayden: The American Medium Who Brought Spiritualism to the U.K.* Sharon lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, with one husband and one cat, has one grown daughter, one son-in-law, and two granddaughters. She is math challenged, so this keeps her life simple.