



# A Skeleton's Tale: The Origins of Modern Spiritualism

More than half a century after modern spiritualism began with purported communications from the ghost of a murdered peddler, the reality of the messages was allegedly confirmed. A skeleton was reportedly uncovered in the cellar of the original farmhouse where the séances had taken place along with the peddler's tin trunk. Now, a century after that, the claims are again being touted by spiritualists who have enshrined the excavated foundation (figure 1)—sort of a spiritualists' equivalent of the Mormons' Hill Cumorah (where Joseph Smith claimed he received a book written on gold plates from the angel Moroni [Nickell 2004]). Assisted by research librarian Timothy Binga, director of Center for Inquiry Libraries, I sought to uncover the true facts in the case.

## Background

Modern spiritualism began in Hydesville, New York, in 1848. At the home of a blacksmith named John Fox, strange rapping noises began to occur in the bedroom of Fox's young daughters. Joe Nickell is CSI's Senior Research Fellow. His numerous books include *Real-Life X-Files* and *Adventures in Paranormal Investigation*. His Web site is at [www.joenickell.com](http://www.joenickell.com).



Figure 1. CFI Librarian Tim Binga stands at the enshrined site of the birthplace of Spiritualism. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

Margaret ("Maggie") and Katharine ("Katie"). The girls claimed the noises were communications from the departed spirit of a murdered peddler. After a time, on the night of March 31 (All Fool's Eve!), the girls' mother witnessed a remarkable demonstration that she later described in a signed report.

Loudly, Katie addressed "Mr. Split-foot," saying "do as I do," and clapping her hands. At once, there came the same number of mysterious raps. Next Maggie exclaimed, "Now do just as I do; count

one, two, three, four," clapping her hands accordingly. Four raps came in response (Mulholland 1938, 30–33).

Next, the peddler's spirit began to answer questions by rapping, once for no, twice for yes. He claimed he had been murdered and his body buried in the cellar, but digging there produced only a few bones attributed to animals (Weisberg 2004, 57).

Before long, people discovered that the girls could conjure up not only the ghostly peddler but other obliging spirits as well. The demonstrations received such attention that the girl's older sister, Leah Fish, originated a "spiritualistic" society. "Spiritualism" began to take on the trappings of religion, with hymns being sung at the opening and close of a session (which they called a "séance"). Following a successful visit to New York, Leah took the girls on tour to towns and cities across the nation. Everywhere people were anxious to communicate with the souls of their departed loved ones.

However, scientists and other rational-minded investigators came forth to challenge Maggie and Katie's claims. Early on, University of Buffalo faculty members studied the girls' raps. The examiners excluded "spiritual causation" and asserted, curiously enough, that the raps

were “produced by the action of the will, through voluntary action on the joints.” In a much later investigation, the “spirits” gave out erroneous information, and investigators caused the rapping sounds to cease abruptly by controlling Margaret’s feet (Mulholland 1938, 34–38).

Then, four decades after spiritualism began, sisters Margaret Fox Kane and

on the floor, or we would drop the apple on the floor, making a strange noise every time it would rebound. Mother listened to this for a time. She could not understand it and did not suspect us of being capable of a trick because we were so young.

At last she could stand it no longer and she called the neighbors in and told them about it. It was this that set us to discover the means of making

mourners attended her funeral.

Today, spiritualists characterize Margaret’s exposé as bogus, attributing it to her need for money or the desire for revenge against her rivals or both. However, not only were her admissions fully corroborated by her sister, but she demonstrated to the audience that she could produce the mysterious raps just as she said (Christopher 1970, 181).

## The Discovery

The Fox sisters had seemingly fooled the world, but, after the turn of the century, new evidence for their supposed genuineness was allegedly discovered. As reported by the Boston Journal of November 23, 1904:

The skeleton of the man who first caused the rappings heard by the Fox Sisters in 1848 has been found between the walls of the house occupied by the sisters, and clears them from the only shadow of doubt held concerning their sincerity in the discovery of spirit communication.

The Fox sisters declared that they learned to communicate with the spirit of a man, and that he told them he had been murdered and buried in the cellar. Evacuation failed to locate the body and thus give proof positive of their story.

The Journal continued:

The discovery was made by school children playing in the cellar of the building in Hydesville known as “The Spook House,” where the Fox sisters first heard the wonderful rappings. A reputable citizen of Clyde, who owns the house, made an investigation, and found an almost entire human skeleton between the crumbling walls, undoubtedly that of the wandering peddler who it was claimed was murdered in the east room and buried in the basement.

Examination revealed that a false and unobserved inner wall had been built. Between this false inner wall and the original outer wall and near the center of the basement, the skeleton was found. It is interesting to know that the false wall is composed of stones like those used fifty years ago to build stone fences. This recalls a statement made over fifty years ago by Miss Lucretia Pulver, that Mr. Bell [the earlier house owner and presumed murderer] worked each night under cover of darkness, carrying stones from the fence into the cellar. The finding of the bones corroborates the sworn

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Katherine Fox Jencken confessed it had all been a trick. On Sunday, October 21, 1888, the sisters appeared at the Academy of Music in New York City. With Katherine sitting in a box and repeatedly nodding in agreement while a number of spiritualists expressed their disapproval with groans and hisses, Margaret revealed all from the music hall stage. She explained how she had produced the rapping noises by slipping her foot from her shoe and snapping her toes. Placing her stockinged foot on a thin plank, she demonstrated the effect for the audience. As *The Evening Post* reported the following day, “Mrs. Kane now locates the origin of Modern Spiritualism in her great toe” (qtd. in Christopher 1970, 181). Margaret went on to state:

I think that it is about time that the truth of this miserable subject “Spiritualism” should be brought out. It is now widespread all over the world, and unless it is put down it will do great evil. I was the first in the field and I have the right to expose it.

My sister Katie and myself were very young children when this horrible deception began. I was eight and just a year and a half older than she. We were very mischievous children and we wanted to terrify our dear mother, who was a very good woman and very easily frightened. At night when we were in bed, we used to tie an apple to a string and move it up and down, causing the apple to bump

the raps.

Margaret explained:

My sister Katie was the first one to discover that by swishing her fingers she could produce a certain noise with the knuckles and joints, and that the same effect could be made with the toes. Finding we could make raps with our feet—first with one foot and then with both—we practiced until we could do this easily when the room was dark. (qtd. in Mulholland 1938, 41–42)

Margaret also stated that Leah knew the spirit rappings were fake, and that when she traveled with the girls (on their first nationwide tour) it was she who signaled the answers to various questions. (She probably chatted with sitters before the séance to obtain information; when that did not produce the requisite facts, the “spirits” no doubt spoke in vague generalizations that are the mainstay of spiritualistic charlatans.)

Margaret repeated her exposé in other cities close to New York. However, explains John Mulholland (1938, 43), “It was expected that this would give her sufficient income to live but she shortly discovered that while many people will pay to be humbugged few will pay to be educated.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Margaret returned to mediumship when she needed money again. After her death on March 8, 1895, thousands of spiritualist

statement made by Margaret Fox [the girls' mother], April 11, 1848.... (qtd. in Muldoon 1942, 20–24)

Additional stories appeared in other newspapers ("Bones" 1904; "Fox" 1904; "Headless" 1904; "Topics" 1904).

This reputed discovery was trumpeted by spiritualists over the following decades, along with a "tin peddler's pack"—actually a tin trunk (figure 2)—that was allegedly discovered at the same site (Keller 1922, 60). The trunk was later kept in the cottage that had been moved to Lily Dale spiritualist village in 1916 and used as a museum. The cottage remained there until it was destroyed by fire in the 1950s. While the trunk was saved, skeptics have long questioned its authenticity (Weisberg 2004, 266–267).

### Investigation

To review the alleged discoveries at the Fox cottage's cellar, I twice visited the site, taking photographs and making a diagrammatic sketch of the stone structure; interviewed knowledgeable persons; examined Fox-related artifacts, including the reputed peddler's trunk at the Lily Dale spiritualist museum; with Tim Binga, conducted research at the Public Library at Newark, N.Y. (where I joked that my work was so important I had "brought my own librarian"); and studied a valuable collection of old papers, clippings, and photographs that were generously sent over to the library for our use by the Newark-Arcadia Historical Society. We also sought out rare books and journals and did much other work, all of it demanding but ultimately paying dividends.

Unfortunately, as it happens, there is reason for skepticism of nearly every aspect of the case. To begin with, the earliest published testimonies never gave the peddler's name, only the initials "C.B.," with the B specifically applying to the surname (Lewis 1848, 10). Only later was the name said to be "Charles B. Rosna" or some variant; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1926, I: 64, 76) insisted it was actually "Charles B. Rosma." Another source gives "Charles Rosa" (Guiley 2000, 141).

In fact, no one has been able to find a single record or other proof of the existence of a peddler named Charles B. Rosna/Rosma/Rosa. One source (Pressing N.d., 63) was forced to conclude, lamely, that the name "might have been misspelled," but no peddler with any similar name has ever been identified. We too looked—in vain.

wall in question is actually just one of four inner walls that likely represent an original, boxlike foundation (figure 3). That foundation was apparently later enlarged into a rectangular shape by the addition of new walls around the old ones (creating unequal spaces between the walls at either end and thickening the front and rear walls at the same

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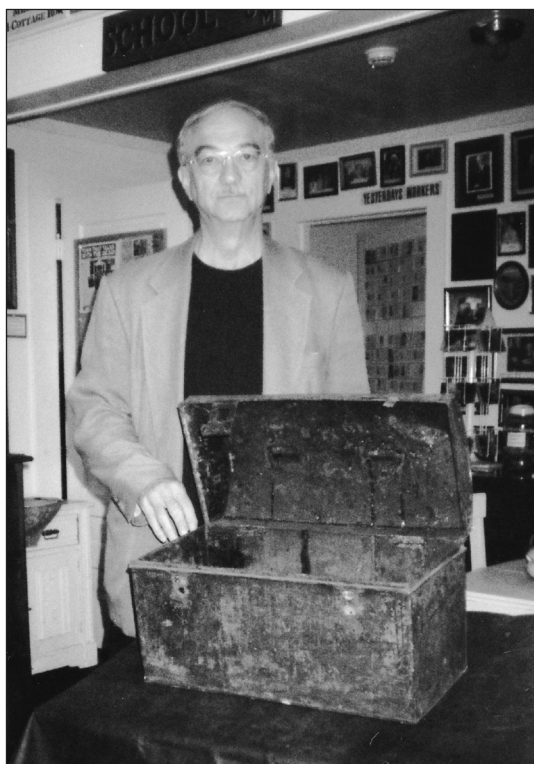


Figure 2. Joe Nickell examines the alleged "peddler's trunk" at Lily Dale Museum. (Photo by Diana Harris)

At the old cottage site we studied the restored foundation and its double wall, the "false" interior one having ostensibly been placed secretly to hide the peddler's corpse (Muldoon 1942, 20–21; Keeler 1922). However, it is apparent that the

time). Perhaps the extra foundation resulted from the house having been expanded from a cabin into a cottage. We later discovered that the "two separate stone foundations" were confirmed in 1904 ("Headless" 1904).

As to the bones themselves, their authenticity was questioned at the time of their alleged discovery. The New York Times ("Topics" 1904) reported that the bones had created a stir "amusingly disproportioned to any necessary significance of the discovery." That was because there was no proof either that the bones belonged to the "legendary peddler" or that the Fox sisters had done anything more than capitalize on a then-current rumor that a peddler was murdered at the site. The Times said of spiritualists' claims about the bones, "As usual, they are taking all possible pains to render a real investigation of the affair impossible, and are assuming as true a lot of things much in need of other proof than their own assertions."

The Acadian Weekly ("Fox" 1904) opined that while the bones might have been hidden in the wall for half a century, they might equally have been "dis-



interred from some cemetery and placed there for effect.” The paper referred to the original 1848 story of spirit communication at the cottage as “the old hoax.”

Eventually, the true source of the bones was reported in an editorial in the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* in 1909. A physi-

faking spirit writing and other phenomena (Nickell 2007). I examined the trunk at the Lily Dale museum, whose curator Ron Nagy (2006) conceded there was no real provenance for it nor any proof of its discovery in 1904. And the trunk’s condition appears far too good for its supposed half-century burial (figure 2).

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cian had been asked by another publication (the *Occult Review*) to investigate the alleged discovery:

He reports to us that he found a number of bones there, but that there were only a few ribs with odds and ends of bones and among them a superabundance of some and a deficiency of others. Among them also were some chicken bones. There was nothing about the premises to indicate that they had been buried there, but might have been put there by boys in sport. He also reports that within a few days past he has learned that a certain person near the place had put the bones there as a practical joke and is now too much ashamed of it to confess it. Whether there is any better foundation for these incidents than for the original story it is not possible to decide, but it is certain that the probabilities that there is anything more than a casual coincidence or than a trick played on the credulity of the defenders of the Fox sisters are very much shaded. (Editorial 1909)

But then what about the peddler’s trunk, allegedly found at the same site and time as the bones? As a matter of fact, the trunk was never reported in any of the contemporary sources we uncovered. The earliest mention of it I have found is an account penned years later by one P.L.O.A. Keeler (1922), a Lily Dale medium who had a reputation for

to hide the legendary peddler’s remains but that it was merely part of an earlier, smaller foundation. The best evidence indicates that the 1904 “discovery” of the peddler’s bones was a hoax; ditto the later appearance of the tin trunk. Therefore, the Fox sisters’ confessions stand, corroborated by independent evidence that the spirit rappings they produced were accomplished by trickery.

### Acknowledgments

In addition to Tim Binga, I was assisted by many others, including my wife Diana Harris and Paul E. Loynes who did the typesetting. I also wish to thank the helpful staff of the Newark Public Library and the Newark-Arcadia Historical Society (notably John Zornow and Chris Davis), Ron Nagy at Lily Dale and Judge Harold Stiles.

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Figure 3. A reputedly false inner wall (left) of Fox cottage is actually only part of a smaller, four-walled, inner foundation. (Photo by Joe Nickell)

### Conclusions

The modern unearthing of the Fox cottage’s foundations did nothing to support the claim that in 1848 schoolgirls had communicated with the spirit of a murdered peddler. Instead, the excavation made it possible for everyone to see that no “false wall” had been built