

The Jersey Devil: A Political Animal

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Abstract

The Jersey Devil ranks as the most popular legend in the folklore of the Garden State.¹ In the dark forbidding Pine Barrens, a witch known as Mother Leeds gave birth to a 'child' with horse-like head, bat-like wings, clawed hands and hooved feet. It flew off into the woods to take up a career haunting and harassing travelers. The only element of the legend with historical connection is the reference to the Leeds family (indeed, it was originally known as the Leeds' Devil). The story has become layered down with myths and variations obscuring the original events that gave rise to it. A reappraisal of the story is in order. Far from being a tale of a monstrous birth gone horribly awry, the story comes not from a blaspheming mother, but colonial era political intrigues, Quaker religious in-fighting, astrology, rumor mongering, almanac publishing, a cross-dressing Royal Governor, and a future Founding Father.

Jersey Devil aficionados regularly head into the Pine Barrens on 'expeditions' to find the creature they think prowls those dark precincts. They argue over the minutiae of physical evidence, such as tracks in the snow, and compile lists of sightings by famous personages in order to prove the creature a flesh and blood animal.² Unfortunately for these seekers, the Jersey Devil has no physical evidence and only scattered, inconsistent, reports, and its reported

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² Fred R. MacFadden. "Claws, Hoof, and Foot: The Devil's Tracks in Devon and New Jersey," *Free State Folklore* (Spring 1976):5-14.

morphology resists labeling as a genuine cryptid.³ Debunkers and skeptics head into the field as well to prove the legend originates in misidentifications of owls or hawks or in the tricks of light and easily confusing conditions of the forest. Neither of these groups has looked at the political and cultural roots of the myth in the epistemological framework of colonial New Jersey from which it sprang. Approaching the genesis of the Jersey Devil through an examination of the political conflicts, intellectual quarrels, and printed record of the time rather than searching for it as an actual animal that leaves physical traces, allows for a more nuanced analysis.

The secondary literature on the Jersey Devil legend creates more obstacles than it removes. The vast majority of publications and websites simply rehash other secondary works, as part of the paranormal echo chamber, with little attempt to check the sources employed. Reports of children killed by the creature or an attempt by local clergy to ‘exorcise’ the Devil in the eighteenth century have no supporting documentation in the written record (also, Quakers, who are at the heart of the story, did not perform exorcisms). It is commonly thought that reports of the Jersey Devil go back to the colonial era. A reputed description of the Leeds Devil comes from the diary of New Jersey resident Vance Lerner for 1790.⁴ This reference, which has been repeated without question in several texts, is of dubious provenance and must be discounted.⁵

The earliest documented mention of the Leeds devil that can be found, however, in a media publication, is W. F. Mayer’s article for the *Atlantic Monthly* which appeared in May of 1859. Mayer travelled to southern New Jersey in order to write about the culture of the

³ A Cryptid is a creature not described by mainstream science, but which has a mythical history, with at least some, albeit controversial, physical evidence for its existence. Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster are prime examples.

⁴ James F. McCloy and Ray Miller Jr., *Phantom of the Pines: More Tales of the Jersey Devil* (Middle Atlantic Press, New Jersey: 1998).

⁵ Though it is often cited, particularly by McCloy and Miller in *Phantom of the Pines* (1998), the diary entry, or possibly the entire diary, is of spurious origins. A number of researchers have tried to track down the Lerner manuscript without success. Until further evidence comes along it must be treated as a hoax. See Don Nigrone, “The Vance Lerner Diary,” *Phactum* (July/August, 2010):10-12, and Stephen D. Winick, “Tales of the Jersey Devil,” American Folklore Center, Botkin Archives, 2005.

inhabitants of the Pine Barrens, a region he calls “aboriginal in [its] savagery.”⁶ His view of what he calls “Pine Rats” is condescending, seeing these people as barely human in their squalid living conditions. He refers to them as “the degraded descendants of Torries...completely besotted and brutish in their ignorance.” He also mentions in passing the legend of the ‘Leeds Devil’ as something the Pine Rats believed in. Like so many authors on the subject he gives no references for his text.⁷

Stories compiled by Henry Charlton Beck in *Jersey Genesis* (1945), and McCloy and Miller’s *The Jersey Devil* (1976), considered canon works, likewise have no citations. Beck simply copied out the Leeds Devil section of a John Elfreth Watkins’ article “Demon of the Pines,” from 1905.⁸ McCloy and Miller offer no footnotes, a bibliography of less than half a page, and a simple list of newspapers consulted, with no references to specific articles.⁹ In *South Jersey Towns* (1973) William McMahon claims folklorist Fred MacFadden found references to the Leeds Devil beginning in 1735, but neither author published a citation or reference supporting this claim.¹⁰ The situation had not improved by the appearance of Coleman and Hallenbeck’s *Monsters of New Jersey* (2010), of which half concerns the Jersey Devil. A respected author on cryptozoology, Coleman’s book, while an entertaining read, likewise includes no citations or footnotes to be followed, despite the high number of quotations and dates given in the text.¹¹ An episode of the television documentary series *MonsterQuest* on the Jersey Devil, aired in 2012, interviews Rutgers University folklorist Angus Kress Gillespie, but focuses

⁶ W. F. Mayer, “In the Pines,” *Atlantic Monthly* 3:19 (May, 1859):560-569.

⁷ *IBID.*, 566.

⁸ John Elfreth Watkins. “Demon of the Pines,” Washington, DC, *Evening Star* (September 2, 1905).

⁹ Henry Charlton Beck in *Jersey Genesis: the story of the Mullica River* (Rutgers University Press, 1945), James F. McCloy and Ray Miller Jr. *The Jersey Devil* (Middle Atlantic Press, 1976).

¹⁰ William McMahon. *South Jersey Towns: History and Legend* (Rutgers University Press, 1973):212, also see Angus Kress Gillespie, “The (Jersey) Devil is in the Details,” *New Jersey Outdoors* (Fall, 1993):40-43.

¹¹ Loren Coleman and Bruce Hallenbeck. *The Monsters of New Jersey* (Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA.: 2010).

on a fruitless ‘expedition’ into the woods to investigate recent sightings rather than any serious historical examination. Only passing reference is made to the fictionalized Leeds family.

Primary sources can also be misleading in this case when restricted to media reports on the creature itself. Surveys of extant newspapers of the Colonial and Early Republic period have turned up no references to any of the story’s characters in relationship to the production of a monster. The bulk of reports of the creature do not begin until the turn of the twentieth century. These sources ignore the real life family that came to be attached to the mythos. Other primary sources, however, do add useful material. The Leeds family produced almanacs and other ephemera. It is here that the origins of the Jersey Devil can be found. The traces of this myth are left in the pamphlets and tracts of the region rather than in monstrous foot prints. The story of the Jersey Devil is an example of how political history and the history of the book provide a vehicle to explore the creation of a myth.

While the Jersey Devil story has variations, a basic narrative can be articulated. In the first half of the eighteenth century (often given as 1735), in the woods of Burlington County, New Jersey known as the Pine Barrens, a witch called ‘Mother Leeds’ bore a child. Being her thirteenth and a difficult birth, Mother Leeds called out in despair or anger a variation on “Oh, make it a Devil!” as the child breeched. The ‘child’ had a horse-like head, hooves or claws for feet, and leathery bat-like wings. It let loose an appropriately unnerving scream then flew up and out of the chimney and off into the darkness, annoying travelers and generally being a disturbing local pest until modern times.

In 1905 an article in the *Trenton Times* appeared that helped bring wide attention to the story. Described here as a monkey-like creature, it does not immediately fly off after birth, but lives with the family for some years before doing its dramatic exit up the chimney. This Leeds

family is headed by a Captain Leeds and his wife and the event occurs in 1808. The wife, local gossip said, was an alleged sorceress who “associated her name with beings of the other world.”¹² The major flap came in 1909 with the discovery of a series of “curious hoof-prints made...by some strange animal not yet classified by scientist or nature-faker,” in the snow around Bordentown, Mount Holly, and Leeds Point. A number of Philadelphia area newspapers ran articles on the footprints and what might have made them. The *Trenton Evening Times* included a series of humorous cartoons to go with their article showing a reptilian, dragon-like figure with leathery wings, clawed hands, and hooved feet.¹³ During this period the creature carried several alternate names, including Leeds Devil, Leeds Satan, Flying-Hoof, Air-Hos, and Winged Dog. It is not until after 1909 that ‘Jersey Devil’ is used for the first time.

One possible explanation for the story is that it grew from a monstrous birth or in the more politically correct modern term the appearance of a child with birth defects, born to the Leeds family. Monstrous births (babies with two heads, multiple arms and legs, or no arms or legs) both fascinated and repulsed Europeans and became the source for a considerable and popular printed literature.¹⁴ Pamphlets and broadsides on monstrous births, often accompanied by lurid illustrations alternately accurate or outrageously fantastic, sold well particularly in England from whence many early settlers of New Jersey hailed. Along with depicting actual births of deformed animals and humans, monster pamphlets used such cases as excuses to attack political or religious groups. For example, one of the more popular monsters depicted during the early modern period, the Monk Calf, first appeared in a pamphlet by Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon. *The Papal Ass of Rome and the Monk Calf of Freyberg* (1523) included an illustration of the purported creature as a pig-like bipedal beast with layers of flesh hanging. It

¹² “The Devil was Bordentown Born,” *Trenton Times* (July 15, 1905):2.

¹³ “Fly Rival of ‘Leeds Devil’ has Jersey people Frightened,” *Trenton Evening Times* (January 20, 1909):1.

¹⁴ Lorraine J. Daston and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (Zone Books: 2001).

fitted the anti-Catholic diatribes and prurient rumor mongering meant to win converts to the Protestant cause by turning them away from the establishment. The skin of the Monk Calf mimicked the religious garb of a Catholic monk. Luther used the creature as a metaphor of the Church and the displeasure the Church caused God. "Monsters," Luther and Melanchthon said, "most times doe note and demonstrate unto us the ire and wrath of God."¹⁵ Monk's were accused by anti-Catholics of trying to achieve Godliness through special clothing instead of genuine spirituality. Monk's lives, Luther claimed, "consist of nothing but gobbling food, of drinking, and of sex."¹⁶ Thus, they were not true religionists, but ghastly imposters just like this malformed monstrosity. The Monk Calf was, Luther said, God's way of producing a sign to warn people of the perfidy of heretics. Attaching a monster to a religious denomination, an individual, or a family proved an effective way to bring social ridicule upon the target.¹⁷

The simplistic monstrous birth scenario for the origin of the Jersey Devil has no supporting evidence. A review of the extant publications and doctor's records from the period show no references to such births in the Burlington region. If a monstrous birth is at the heart of the story it went unrecorded. What remains is not Mother Leeds or Captain Leeds, but the colonial era family patriarch, Daniel Leeds.¹⁸

European settlement of the area now the state of New Jersey, or Nova-Caesaria as it was originally named, began in the 1620s as a slow trickle of only a few hardy souls. Sir George Carteret (1610-1680) received the land between the Hudson and Delaware Rivers as a grant from the Crown. As he hailed from the island of Jersey in the English Channel it became known as New Jersey. The region was divided, with the area bordering New York called East Jersey, and

¹⁵ Martin Luther and Phillip Melanchthon. *The Papal Ass of Rome and the Monk Calf of Freyberg* (London, 1579).

¹⁶ *IBID*, 357.

¹⁷ Julie Crawford. *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005):30-35.

¹⁸ *The Register of the New Jersey Society of the Colonial Dames of America* (Trenton, New Jersey: 1914):301.

the half bordering Pennsylvania called West Jersey. Settlers to West Jersey came initially from Holland and Sweden. Not until the 1660s did larger numbers arrive, predominantly from England and members of the recently created religious order the Society of Friends, more commonly called Quakers. Catholics and particularly Anglicans too found their way to the region. In West Jersey Quaker communities, farms and Meeting Houses appeared from the Atlantic Ocean to Philadelphia (Burlington had its first meeting house built in 1683). In 1702 East Jersey and West Jersey unified as a single colony.¹⁹

The first Royal governor of New Jersey, Edward Hyde, Lord Cornbury (1661-1723), simultaneously served as governor of New York through 1708. Cornbury is remembered as one of the most vilified and hated governors in colonial America. He also stands accused of being a cross-dresser. A portrait widely believed to be Cornbury hangs in the New York Historical Society and shows him dressed as his aunt Queen Anne. In her reappraisal of his gubernatorial career, Patricia Bonomi argues that there is little but slander and innuendo concerning Cornbury's cross-dressing, and some evidence that, far from being a rapacious spend-thrift, he actually performed his duties well. She points out that evidence of this behavior comes from a series of letters written by Quaker opponents of his who made the accusations of him wearing women's clothes between 1707 and 1709. As Cornbury was genuinely disliked, the accusations propagated. Bonomi also shows that the infamous portrait of him in drag has no direct connection to him, the association being apocryphal.²⁰ Regardless of whether Cornbury was a fiscal scoundrel—he eventually left America in disgrace and financial ruin—or a cross-dresser, his connection to the Jersey Devil story is tangential, but important because of his association with one of the story's main protagonists.

¹⁹ Maxine Lurie and Richard Veit eds. *New Jersey: A History of the Garden State* (Rutgers University Press, 2012).

²⁰ Patricia Bonomi. *The Lord Cornbury Scandal: The Politics of Reputation in British America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

When Lord Cornbury received his orders to take charge of New Jersey, the document included a list of his councilors, one of which was Daniel Leeds.²¹ Daniel Leeds (1651-1720) hailed from Stansted, Essex, England. He followed his father Thomas and his brothers to the New World towards the end of the 1670s and landed in Burlington.²² About twenty-five years old and a devout Quaker, Daniel Leeds claimed to have had several ecstatic visions as a young man. His first wife passed while still in England, so he married a second time in 1681. His new American wife, Ann Stacy, died in Burlington giving birth to a daughter named Ann, who did not survive long after.²³ He married a third time, to Dorothy Young, who also passed, though not before producing eight children by 1699. He married a final time to Jane (Revell) Abbot-Smout. Some variants on the story name the ‘mother’ of the Jersey Devil as ‘Jane,’ though it is unclear if Jane Leeds produced any children. There are no contemporary sources referring to any of his wives as ‘Mother Leeds.’ In 1682 Daniel Leeds became a member of the local assembly. He also rose to surveyor general. This position carried influence as land ownership disputes and boundary issues came up often in the wilds of the New World. As a symbol of his prosperity and religious conviction he contributed a subscription of £4 to build the first Burlington Quaker Meeting House just off High Street.²⁴ In the 1690s he surveyed and acquired land in the Great Egg Harbor on the Atlantic coast, eventually handing it down to his eldest son as a family seat which came to be known as Leeds Point: the area most associated with the Jersey Devil legend.²⁵

²¹ This document is recorded in Samuel Smith’s *The History of the Colony of Nova-Caesaria or New Jersey* (W.S. Sharp, Trenton, NJ: 1877): 151. Smith’s book was originally printed in 1765. Despite being alive during the period in question, Smith makes no mention of a Leeds or anything even remotely similar in his history.

²² Some confusion exists over just when the Leeds family arrived in the New World. They may have gone to New York first in the mid-1670s then headed into Jersey. The ship he and his family traveled also has yet to be identified. By 1678 Daniel Leeds had settled in a house just outside Burlington.

²³ William McMahon. *South Jersey Towns: History and Legend* (Rutgers University Press, 1973):210.

²⁴ George Morgan Hills. *History of the Church in Burlington, New Jersey* (Trenton, NJ: William Sharp, 1876):10.

²⁵ Francis Bazley Lee. *Genealogical and Memorial History of the State of New Jersey vol IV* (New York, Lewis Historical Publishing Co.:1910): 1609-1611, and Clara Louise Humeston. *Leeds: A New Jersey Family. Its Beginning and a Branchlet* (California Voice Print, 1900?).

Running through the story of the Jersey Devil is the story of the Quakers. When Daniel Leeds arrived in Burlington, Quakerism had been in existence barely longer than he had. Born of the upheavals of the English Civil Wars in 1647, a group of dissenters formed a new sect they called “The Society of Friends.” Because they claimed to shake with the inner light of the Lord, the name “Quakers” became popular. They believed an individual need not have a priest or clergyman or other official between them and God. The connection with the divine came through a relationship with Jesus. Their rejection of organized authority brought them into conflict with the forces of law and order. Persecutions from without and wrangling from within pushed the originally decentralized Quakers to form a more rigid and disciplined internal structure. Persecutions also drove them to seek relief in the New World, to which they travelled in numbers. In the 1650s the Puritans ejected the newly arrived Quakers out of Massachusetts, so they headed to Pennsylvania and the Jerseys (where they found an easier time).²⁶

Publically and officially, Quaker doctrine renounced witchcraft and the occult as foolishness. Privately, many Quakers enjoyed and were titillated by ghost stories and were fascinated by the supposed behavior of witches. They rejected it, but did not persecute it the way the Puritans of New England did. When witch trials broke out in Massachusetts in 1692, the Quakers were not involved; indeed the Quakers barely escaped accusations themselves. Quaker founder George Fox (1624-1691) railed against belief in the occult yet at the same time claimed he could spot a witch just by looking at her. “The Lord,” he wrote, “had given me a spirit of discerning” so that he regularly accosted women telling them to repent. A story from his life would reverberate in an occult tale years later in America. While they held him imprisoned in England in 1659 as a heretic, Fox’s jailers insisted on sitting in the fireplace of his room as they

²⁶ Thomas Hamm. *The Quakers in America* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

feared “I should escape up the chimney,”²⁷ a feat not unlike that performed by the Leeds Devil one fateful stormy night.

Along with farming and surveying, Daniel Leeds aspired to more intellectual and metaphysical activity. He began publishing an almanac in 1687. Titled *An Almanac*, he referred to himself as a “student in agriculture.” He had it printed by the Englishman William Bradford (1663-1752), who had recently arrived in the area, and who would gain fame as one of the first printers in America. Popular in New England by the mid-1600s, almanacs appeared in the Middle Atlantic region by 1682 (for example, Samuel Atkins in Pennsylvania, also printed by Bradford, and William Nuthead in Maryland). Leeds created the first in New Jersey.²⁸ He broke the New England mold by not having a connection to Harvard College: something that linked previous American almanac publishers.

Leeds went initially with a single page broadside, and later to the more traditional almanac model of multi-page pamphlet. He included tidal information based on Philadelphia, setting and rising of the sun and moon, and the movements of other heavenly bodies. Leeds also included inspirational words along the almanac’s mast-head. “No man is born unto himself alone,” the first one said, “who lives unto himself lives alone.” Leeds’ agricultural, seemingly innocuous, astrological data did not please all his readers. Not long after its appearance, several members of the Quaker Burlington Monthly Meeting complained that he used inappropriate language and astrological symbols for names of days and months that were a little too ‘pagan’ for some tastes. A technique common to almanacs, Leeds made connections between star signs and various human body parts—Aries for the head and face, for example. He eventually included astrological medical advice as well. “It is generally approved to be good to purge and bleed in

²⁷ Quoted in Amelia Mott Gummere, *Witchcraft and Quakerism: A Study in Social History* (Philadelphia: The Biddle Press, 1908):20.

²⁸ John E. Pomfret. *The Province of West New Jersey* (Octagon Books, New York: 1976):233.

the months of March and April,” he wrote. As to bleeding, that should be done “when the moon is in Cancer.”²⁹ An order was sent out to collect up all the copies of the Leeds almanac not in circulation and destroy them. Money was appropriated to pay Bradford for the loss of income and it was thought the incident closed. At the next Quaker Meeting, Leeds publically apologized for having given offence, but privately had no intention of cancelling his almanac. In fact, he only seems to have been warming up and would soon establish himself as one of the Quakers outspoken critics.

From modest beginnings, the publication of almanacs became a lucrative business throughout the Middle Atlantic colonies. The first printed material in North America came in the form of an almanac in 1639 (done in Massachusetts). Ironically, though heavily inspired by English almanacs, the American strain appeared just as English interest in them began to wane. Astrology, too, began to fade as a legitimate pursuit elsewhere as American almanac compilers took it up.³⁰ Reading almanacs supplied farmers with agricultural news, forecasts of weather and meteorological information, home spun wisdom, and even a joke or two. In the rural and agrarian culture of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, where few books were printed or even available, almanacs proved useful, entertaining, and popular. Though Leeds determined to keep publishing his almanac, it was not quite enough to satisfy his need to write.

The year after he first published the almanac, Leeds put together a book called *The Temple of Wisdom for the Little World* (1688). Also printed by William Bradford, *The Temple of Wisdom* is as unconventional a book as a colonial Quaker is likely to produce.³¹ It is a complex

²⁹ Leeds almanac for 1713.

³⁰ Bernard Capp. *English Almanacs: 1500-1800, Astrology and the Popular Press* (Cornell University Press, 1979):275-276.

³¹ It is the first book published in New Jersey and only the second south of Massachusetts. Charles R. Hildebrun, “The First Book Printed South of Massachusetts,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 6:4 (1882):461-462.

compilation of theology and the budding Scientific Revolution. Rather than a completely original text, Leeds paraphrased and outright copied large sections of other authors, including Francis Bacon, to cobble together a personal cosmology. He included sections on angels, natural magic, astrology, theology, philosophy, and the behavior of devils. Along with Bacon, the other source Leeds used extensively was the work of the German Pietist, mystic Jacob Boehme (1575-1624). From a humble background, Boehme taught himself to be a philosophical theologian and claimed to have had ecstatic visions of the mystical aspect of the universe. His work *Aurora* (1612) was immediately considered heretical and he had to go before the local religious authorities to explain. Boehme's writings focused upon the nature of sin and redemption. He argued that the fall of man needed to occur for him to gain entry to heaven. He saw a correspondence between zodiac signs and such human conditions as love and sweetness, or natural conditions such as dryness and sound. In his writings, Boehme argued that mainstream Lutheranism had lost its way, become dull and lifeless, and had abandoned the proper zeal, strict behavior, and direct Bible study and emotion Christianity demanded.³² Leeds saw Boehme as a kindred spirit: one who, like himself, had experienced ecstatic visions, been called before religious authorities for his work, and who rebelled against the local establishment. In 1621 he published *De Signatura Rerum*, in which he propounded upon the doctrine of signatures. This work on medical astrology also influenced Daniel Leeds.

Boehme chided his learned critics who dismissed him as an untrained pseudo-scholar. Leeds took Boehme's ranting and used it as the opening section of *The Temple of Wisdom*. A colonial example of outsider scholarship and the reaction to it, *The Temple of Wisdom*—unusually long and expensive for the time and place—is Leeds' rebuttal to the “Doctors and

³² John Yost Stoudt. *Jacob Boehme: His Life and Thought* (Wipf & Stock Pub., 2004), and Arthur Versluis. *Wisdom's Children: A Christian Esoteric Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

Schollers” that read his work and disapproved of it. Boehme and Leeds were both amateur theologians who took pride in their underdog status. Defending himself and his astrological work using Boehme’s words, Leeds says “everyone that will speak or teach of divine mysteries, that we have the spirit of God.”³³ Leeds may also have dabbled in geomancy. A technique of divination that seeks patterns and markings in the earth, geomancy turns up in the work of some eighteenth century surveyors in England and Europe. Seeing patterns in the earth would be common within their work. While no direct evidence has been found showing Leeds practiced geomancy, historian Arthur Versluis thinks it possible he did and that it influenced his philosophical writings.³⁴

Taken in the aggregate the published work of Daniel Leeds shows him to be simultaneously a Christian occultist and purveyor of the Scientific Revolution. (He was an early proponent in North America of the Copernican view of the solar system).³⁵ However, he was no dark magician, but a pious shepherd leading his flock to the light. There is no evidence that Leeds ever engaged in attempts to manipulate extra-terrestrial or magical processes. For Leeds and other almanac compilers, astrology was not a dubious, fringe activity, but a Christian technique for gaining deeper insight into the divine. As historian T.J. Tomlin expresses it, “Almanacs and their astrological formulations complemented and even promoted Christianity across eighteenth-century British America.”³⁶ The majority of readers of Leeds’ work in West Jersey would have been unfamiliar with the esoteric nature of his writings and so saw more occultist than Christian in him. The Quaker Philadelphia Meeting immediately suppressed the

³³ Daniel Leeds. *Temple of Wisdom for the Little World* (Philadelphia, 1688): introduction.

³⁴ Arthur Versluis. *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2001):21-24

³⁵ Leeds almanac for 1694.

³⁶ T.J. Tomlin, ““Astrology’s from Heaven not Hell” The Religious Significance of Early American Almanacs,” *Early American Studies* 8:2 (Spring 2010):287-321, quote on 289.

Temple of Wisdom.³⁷ The Quaker Burlington Meeting exerted growing power and control over Quaker life in the region during this period and were able to rally support to crush Leeds' book. They "demanded and obtained general conformity" of its members.³⁸ The suppression was so complete only one known copy of *The Temple of Wisdom* is extant.³⁹ Leeds felt betrayed. His intention with both the almanac and *Temple of Wisdom* centered on bringing philosophy, theology, and science to his New Jersey neighbors. Their rejection and destruction of both wounded him. Brokenhearted by the religion he had so fully embraced, he turned on the Quakers.

Daniel Leeds sought influence through local politics on the side of Royal authority and against the Quaker position. When New Jersey became a Royal colony, he aligned with the anti-Quaker governor Lord Cornbury. In his role as councilor, Leeds advised the new governor not to swear in several Quaker members appointed to the assembly by local election. The rest of the assembly complained to Cornbury about these "groundless accusations," but to no avail.⁴⁰ Cornbury alienated the West Jersey Assembly and its Quaker population through "arbitrary practices" by being inconsiderate, listening to false accusations against its members, and by not spending much time in the colony of which he was governor.⁴¹ The Quakers saw the Anglican Governor Cornbury as a local tyrant representing the larger empire who sought to keep them under control and who opposed their religion as heretical. When Daniel Leeds, as one of their own, sided with Cornbury and the establishment, they saw him as a turncoat. Adding insult to injury, Leeds showed loyalty to his sovereign with a ditty ending the 1713 edition of the

³⁷ Henry J. Cadbury, "Early Quakerism and Uncanonical Lore," *Harvard Theological Review* 40:3 (July 1947):177-205, and J. William Frost, "Quaker Books in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Quaker History* 80:1 (Spring 1991):1-23.

³⁸ Valerie G. Gladfelter, "Power Challenged: Rising Individualism in the Burlington, New Jersey, Friends Meeting, 1678-1720," in Michael Zuckerman ed., *Friends and Neighbors: Group Life in America's First Plural Society* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia: 1982):116-144.

³⁹ This copy is in the Pennsylvania Historical Society collection.

⁴⁰ Smith, 293.

⁴¹ Smith, 284.

almanac. “God save Queen Anne,” he wrote, “her foes destroy, and all that do her realms annoy.”

Leeds backed anti-Quaker proponents such as George Keith (1638-1716). An early member of the Society of Friends, George Keith knew founder George Fox, William Penn, and the original Jersey proprietor, Robert Barclay. Keith came to New Jersey in 1685, became a surveyor, and took his place as a leader of the Quaker community. He did the survey which separated East from West Jersey and founded the town of Freehold. He eventually soured on the Society of Friends and began preaching aggressively that the Quakers had strayed too far for proper Christianity. He accused the Quakers of being Deists, was disowned by the London Friends, and eventually converted to Anglicanism. Following the public rejection of both his almanac and his heart felt book, Daniel Leeds, too, left the Friends, renounced Quakerism, joined the Anglican Church, and proceeded to zealously attack his former fellow religionists as the real heretics.

Involved openly in the Keithian controversy, Daniel Leeds felt obliged to defend and explain his position. He addressed the issue of his work in *The Innocent Vindicated from the Falsehoods and Slanders of Certain Certificates* (1695), where he worked to show he stood on the side of right where the Quakers did not.⁴² The Burlington Meeting of the Friends had grown increasingly upset with what Leeds published. In the 1698 meeting they referred to him as “evil” for his publications and other unseemly behavior.⁴³ At odds with the Friends, Leeds produced an outright anti-Quaker book, *The Trumpet Sounded Out of the Wilderness of America* (1699), in which he deconstructed Quakerism. Leeds argued that Quaker theology denied the divinity of Jesus. In addition to the theology he accused Quakers of being anti-monarchists. He left the

⁴² Daniel Leeds. *The Innocent Vindicated from the Falsehoods and Slanders of Certain Certificates* (Philadelphia, 1695). This work was later published in England in 1699 so that the London Friends could feel Leeds’ wrath as well.

⁴³ Minutes of the Burlington Monthly Meeting, 7/1698.

Quakers because, he said, “they formerly exclaimed against the government of England.”⁴⁴ The book is a laundry list of grievances against Quaker ideology and practice. A defense of Quakerism appeared as *Satan’s Harbinger Encountered...Being Something by Way of Answer to Daniel Leeds* (1700).⁴⁵ With this pamphlet, Leeds stood publically accused of either working for or being a devil.

It was not unusual for political rivals to ridicule each other by calling them devils. Depictions in religious and political tracts of Satan—many which resemble the later popular image of the Jersey Devil—go back to the Middle Ages. The Early Modern era and the introduction of wood block printing saw the devil rendered in humorous ways as a tactic to deflate and lampoon evil. One such example appeared in London in 1641 and would have been known to English Quakers. That year a pamphlet feud broke out between John Taylor and Henry Walker. Taylor, known as the ‘Water-Poet’ because of his job as a ferryman, produced a tract satirizing preachers with no attachment to a church congregation. These men were known as ‘tub preachers.’ In retaliation, Walker published *Taylor’s Physicke has Purged the Divel*, which has a crudely drawn but startling illustration of Taylor in his ferryboat with a winged figure defecating on his face. The image of a creature with hooves for feet, claws for hands, leathery wings, and a pointy tail did not originate with the Jersey Devil legend, but drew upon a robust tradition.⁴⁶ Identifying a political rival as a monster—as with calling them devils—also proved a useful technique and contributed to the growing popularity of political satire.⁴⁷ An early example of this is *The Life and Character of a Strange He-Monster* (1726), in which a political rival is called

⁴⁴ Daniel Leeds. *The Trumpet Sounded Out of the Wilderness of America* (Philadelphia, 1699).

⁴⁵ Caleb Pusey. *Satan’s harbinger encountered, his false news of a trumpet detected, his crooked ways in the wildnesse laid open to the view of the imperial and judicious. Being something by way of answer to Daniel Leeds his book entitled News of a trumpet sounding in the wilderness* (Philadelphia, 1700).

⁴⁶ On the Taylor/Walker feud see, Kirsten Inglis, “Behaving Badly in the Press: John Taylor and Henry Walker, 1641-1643,” *Transverse* 10 (2010).

⁴⁷ Alison Olson, ““Monster of Monsters” and the Emergence of Political Satire in New England,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 29:1 (Winter 2001):1-22.

“the scabby offspring of a Scotch Moggy by a scratching pedlar...” Out of Boston came *The Monster of Monsters* (1754), which concerned a local alcohol tax. This tax, the author notes in overblown prose, stands as “the most hideous form and terrible aspect such as one as was never seen in America.”⁴⁸ Unscrupulous land grabs following the Revolution resulted in *The Deformity of a Hideous Monster Discovered in the Province of Maine* (1797).⁴⁹ Colonial New Jersey brimmed over with devils and monsters, and political rivals regularly made accusations of many types. Scandal and back stabbing in print occurred as much during the seventeenth and eighteenth century as it does today, and Daniel Leeds was in the thick of it.

The dislike Leeds held for his former religion seemed to know no bounds. In 1705 he published *The Great Mystery of Fox-craft Discovered*, in which he attacked George Fox directly as a fraud.⁵⁰ Leeds argued that Fox did not write his own books, but paid others to. As proof he offered up letters from Fox to a correspondent whose spelling and syntax fell well below the mark. Having a hand in writing Leeds’ pamphlet, the Anglican Reverend John Talbot of Burlington too preached anti-Quaker rhetoric.⁵¹ Talbot, Rector of St. Mary’s church in Burlington from 1703-1725, supplied the incriminating Fox letters to Leeds.⁵² The false letters accusing Lord Cornbury of cross-dressing may have been in retaliation to these fake Fox letters. Talbot enjoyed baiting the Quakers and tried to draw them into a public debate. They would have

⁴⁸ Thomas Thumb. *The Monster of Monsters* (Boston, 1754).

⁴⁹ Samuel Ely. *The Deformity of a Hideous Monster Discovered in the Province of Maine* (Boston 1797).

⁵⁰ Versluis. *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance*, 21.

⁵¹ *The Spirit of Missions*, volume 81 (New York, 1916):286. Also see, Caleb Pusey. *Some Remarks Upon a Late Pamphlet Signed part by John Talbot, and part by Daniel Leeds, Called the Great Mystery of Fox-Craft* (Philadelphia, 1705).

⁵² Leeds contributed money to building the new Anglican church of St. Mary’s and was its Warden for 1706 and bought half of a pew in the nearby St. Ann’s church. See Hills, *History of the Church in Burlington*, 226 and 716, and Cynthia McFarland. *Recovering John Talbot* (Privately Printed, 2011).

none of it and Talbot complained that “No they say,” concerning face-to-face public debates, “they will answer in print.”⁵³ This is what they did.

Daniel Leeds found himself in a pamphlet war with the Quakers. His opposite number came in the form of Caleb Pusey (1650-1727). A friend of William Penn, Caleb Pusey came to Pennsylvania in 1700. He opened a mill, entered local politics, became a member of the provincial Supreme Court, and member of the executive council, and immediately waded into the Keithian Schism and attacked one of its most vocal supporters, Daniel Leeds. Initially a friend of the heretic George Keith, Pusey repudiated him when the controversy began.⁵⁴ Pusey vigorously defended William Penn and Quakerism and responded directly to the writings of Daniel Leeds. It was Pusey who referred to Leeds in print as *Satan’s Harbinger*.

Leeds responded to Pusey with *A Challenge to Caleb Pusey and to Check his Lyes and Forgeries* (1700). Playing off the title of one of his earlier works, Leeds quickly followed with *News of a Strumpet Co-Habiting in the Wilderness* (1701). Here Leeds referred to the “spiritual and carnal whoredoms and adulteries of the Quakers.”⁵⁵ Leeds lashed out at many members of the Quaker elite besides George Fox. He charged them with adultery, fathering children out of wedlock, cheating tradesmen, and other insidious crimes. Pusey replied with *Daniel Leeds Justly Rebuked* (1702), to which Leeds craftily countered with *The Rebuker Rebuked* (1703). Leeds became a one man publishing machine, and center of a war of words over the efficacy of Quakerism putting out biting and sarcastic publications with regularity. Historian Patricia Bonomi refers to Leeds as “perhaps the best surviving example of early Middle Colony scandal

⁵³ Quoted in Hills, *History of the Church in Burlington*, 56.

⁵⁴ J. William Frost. “Unlikely Controversialists: Caleb Pusey and George Keith,” *Quaker History* 64:1 (Spring 1975):16-36.

⁵⁵ Daniel Leeds. *News of a Strumpet Co-Habiting in the Wilderness* (Philadelphia, 1701):1. This pamphlet is only known from one extant copy which contains the signature of Daniel Leeds.

mongering.”⁵⁶ When Lord Cornbury relinquished the governorship to return to England in 1708, Leeds left the council. The next year, however, he became Justice of the colony’s Supreme Court, presumably sitting next to his nemesis Caleb Pusey (also a justice).⁵⁷

Leeds had other accusers as well. In order to boost sales, almanac publishers entered into controversies or feuds, sometimes legitimate, but often made up—not unlike the manufactured controversies of modern media—with each other. In 1705 an almanac publisher named Jacob Taylor aired an attack upon Leeds in his *Ephemeris Sideralis*. He accused Leeds of fumbling his mathematical calculations and of plagiarism in that he “filched matter out of other men’s works to furnish his spurious almanacs.” To this Leeds replied that Taylor “crows like a cock on his own dung hill.” The feud went on for years with both men making charges and counter charges with vitriol flowing freely from their bitter pens.⁵⁸

Daniel Leeds continued to publish his almanac until 1714, when he retired from public life. He turned the business over to his son Titan, who early showed aptitude in math, science, and astronomy. Titan Leeds (1699-1738) had already been doing the calculations for the almanac and had a gift for anticipating lunar eclipses. His father beams with pride while introducing his son to the reading public and assures them he will do an even better job than he. He says not to worry about Titan’s age as “while he lives with me he shall not be wanting.”⁵⁹ After taking over the running of the almanac at the tender age of sixteen, Titan found the Leeds family still had enemies and that devils were now associated with them.⁶⁰ In the 1720 edition he mentioned he might not be able to continue publishing the almanac because an unnamed monstrous rival was

⁵⁶ Bonomi, 122.

⁵⁷ *The Register of the New Jersey Society of the Colonial Dames of America* (Trenton, New Jersey: 1914):301.

⁵⁸ Quotes in Marion Barber Stowell, “American Almanacs and Feuds,” *Early American Literature* 9:3 (Winter 1975):276-285.

⁵⁹ Leeds almanac for 1714.

⁶⁰ Unlike his father, Titan Leeds never published any material other than the almanac.

giving him grief. "If I write no more," he said, "you may think 'tis because of a smoak breathed out to stifle me by the Devil's Emissary." This person, this Devil of Leeds, was guilty of "lying, cheating, treachery, malice, and damb'd hipocrasie." Where his father had once been labeled Satan's harbinger, now Titan Leeds used a similar title upon another. Demonic influence concerned many in early America and so any author wishing to tarnish the image of a rival could do no better than to make them out to be a monster or a devil. In *The Armour of Christianity. A treatise, detecting first, the plots of the devil against our happiness* (1704), Cotton Mather argued there are many devils afoot and a goodly Christian must always be on their guard.⁶¹ Benjamin Keach in *War With the Devil* (1714) likewise warned his fellows of the whiles of the evil one. It is unclear just who Titan Leeds meant when he referred to his enemy as Devil's Emissary, but it would not be long before he fell afoul of yet another, and found himself in one of the most notorious almanac feuds of them all.

The up and coming Philadelphia printer, scientist, statesman, and soon to be Founding Father Benjamin Franklin entered the almanac game in 1732 with *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Writing as Richard Saunders, Franklin followed the standard formula of agricultural and astrological material, including the inspirational quotes (he took the name Richard Saunders from a popular London almanac).⁶² As competitors in a lucrative market, Franklin decided to go after his successful rival in print by creating an almanac feud. In the 1733 edition of *Poor Richard's Almanac* Franklin, writing as Saunders, used astrological techniques to predict Titan

⁶¹ Cotton Mather. *The Armour of Christianity. A treatise, detecting first, the plots of the devil against our happiness* (Boston, 1704).

⁶² For a brief discussion of this see Walter Isaacson. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (Simon and Schuster, New York: 2003):95-97.

Leeds' death on October 17 of that year. Franklin referred to Leeds in his typical jaunty manner as "my good friend and fellow student" of astrology.⁶³

Franklin approached all this in a humorous vein. Titan Leeds, however, did not. He retaliated in the *Leeds Almanac* by saying that Franklin "has manifest himself a fool and a liar" for his antics. Franklin replied with mock outrage, saying Leeds was "too well bred to use any man so indecently and so scurrilously" so this must not be the real Titan Leeds, but a manifestation from the spirit world.⁶⁴ He said he had "receiv'd much abuse from the ghost of Titan Leeds." When he referred to Leeds, Franklin always did so with the language of the astrologer. "The stars are seldom disappointed," he said when he predicted Leeds' death. The only reference Franklin makes to Daniel Leeds came when he said that Titan followed "the honor of astrology, the art professed both by him and his father."⁶⁵ Leeds could do little but fume. Franklin found the whole project irresistible and kept it going. Even after Titan Leeds finally died in 1738, Franklin faked a letter from him supposedly written from the great beyond. Franklin has Leeds say that he can see much further into the future because, having died, "I got free from the prison of the flesh."⁶⁶ Franklin then responded to his own creation that "Honest Titan, deceased, was raised [from the dead] and made to abuse his old friend [Franklin]."⁶⁷ Largely out of fun, Benjamin Franklin had publically cast his rival almanac publisher as a ghost, and all but a reanimated sorcerer brought back to haunt his enemies. In the end Franklin's ploy worked: *Poor Richard's Almanac* flourished and is remembered while the *Leeds Almanac*

⁶³ *Poor Richard's Almanac* transcribed in Albert Henry Smith, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin vol II* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1905):196.

⁶⁴ October 18, 1733. Reprinted in Smith, 196.

⁶⁵ *Poor Richard's Almanac* for 1735.

⁶⁶ Benjamin Franklin. *Pennsylvania Gazette* (February 4, 1734).

⁶⁷ *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1742).

disappeared to be forgotten. The traditionally believed period of the ‘birth’ of the Jersey Devil coincides roughly with the death of Titan Leeds as well as the Franklin/Leeds almanac war.

With a few fits and starts the Leeds almanac stopped being printed after Titan’s death and the family receded from the public eye. The basis of the Leeds family as unintentional progenitors of the Leeds Devil myth springs from how their reputations—both real and manufactured—were remembered. Starting as the Leeds Devil, the elements that came together to form the Jersey Devil mythos percolated and fermented over the next century in the culture of the Pine Barrens. The leisurely pace of this transmutative process meant that not until the late nineteenth and particularly the early twentieth century did the legend arrive, spurred on by the agitation over the supposed mystery hoof prints in the snow.

By the nineteenth century, quarrels, fights, and animosities that seemed so important in the eighteenth century no longer seemed so. The Quaker rivalries, the political fighting, the almanac wars, and Daniel and Titan formed a memory that like paint chips flaking away from a wall mural left a distorted version of the original image behind. The texts through which this conflict played out passed into obscurity as well. The ephemeral nature of these publications contributed to their disappearances. Aside from the almanacs, the Bradford family printed the Daniel Leeds tracts in small numbers and few survived. The active censorship and destruction of Leeds material contributed to this evaporation. Their memory had become so hazy that an 1848 newspaper article on the history of almanacs in New Jersey incorrectly stated the Franklin/Leeds feud occurred in 1773.⁶⁸ This dissipation of memory had so set in that by 1900 even the biographer of the Leeds family, genealogist Clara Louise Humeston, incorrectly called Daniel

⁶⁸ “Old Almanacs,” *Trenton State Gazette* 2:593 (December 13, 1848):3.

Leeds “the writer of the single volume called the *Book of Wisdom*.”⁶⁹ This was copied without question by a later Leeds family chronicler, Alfred M. Heston, in an article for the *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*.⁷⁰

The newspaper articles of 1905 reduced the entire Leeds family down to ‘Captain Leeds’ and his occult leaning wife ‘Mother Leeds,’ while moving the events to the early nineteenth century and blotting out the eighteenth century family altogether. The 1909 media attention focused on reports of mysterious horse-like tracks found in the snow around the Pine Barrens region and attributed them to the Leeds Devil, though accusations of a Philadelphia press agent inventing it all flew about as well.⁷¹ Charles A. Bradenburgh, the owner of the *Ninth and Arch Street Dime Museum* in Philadelphia, and his press agent Norman Jeffries, saw an opportunity to cash in on the wave of monster foot print sightings. Always eager for any outlandish scheme to bring paying rubes into the museum, and showing no scruples about honesty or accuracy, Jeffries began to plant stories about the Leeds Devil and its sinister behavior in local newspapers. These early January 1909 press releases were read by an eager public already interested in the reports of snowy foot prints. Bradenburgh and Jeffries then faked an actual Leeds Devil and put it on display, further heightening interest. The newspaper accounts—for the Jersey Devil is a product of the media rather than genuine folklore—began the birthing process. The *Trenton Evening News* exclaimed on its front page that the “Leeds Devil has Jersey People Frightened.”⁷² The scheme had the desired effect and attendance at the museum grew. The *New York Tribune* declared if anybody doubted the stories of tracks in the snow, they have now been confirmed.⁷³

⁶⁹ Humeston, Clara Louise. *Leeds: A New Jersey Family. Its Beginning and a Branchlet* (California Voice Print, 1900?): 3.

⁷⁰ Alfred H. Heston. “The Leeds Family,” *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 53 (1935):9-11.

⁷¹ “South Jersey Joke Ended,” *New York Times* (January 23, 1909).

⁷² “Fly Rival of ‘Leeds Devil’ has Jersey People Frightened,” *Trenton Evening News* (January 20, 1909):1.

⁷³ “The Things they see in Jersey,” *New York Tribune* (October 20, 1909).

A new moniker caught on quickly as well. As far off as Minnesota a headline exclaimed “Real ‘Jersey Devil’ Found.”⁷⁴

The story now had a life of its own so that by 1929 a ‘posse’ set out to capture the creature.⁷⁵ A 1930 article in the *New York Times* referred to Jersey Devil’s return.⁷⁶ Bruce MacFadden points out that odd or ‘Devil’s footprints’ have been reported in the British Isles for centuries and that such tracks have been vaguely associated with the Leeds Devil since the mid-nineteenth century. The shape, distance, and abruptness of these tracks led to speculation that the Jersey Devil could fly, and so the dragon-like horse with wings model became the norm.⁷⁷

The Leeds family, genuine publishing pioneers of New Jersey history, soured its relationship with the Quakers, leaving them open to animosity, resentment, and innuendo. Daniel Leeds’ almanac was seen as inappropriate while his *Temple of Wisdom* bordered on the heretical. His scandal-ridden and not always accurate writings, such as *The Trumpet Sounded* and *The Great Mystery of Fox-Craft*, attacked Quakerism and its founder. His wives had all died as had several children—for example Ann Stacey, who died in childbirth and was shortly thereafter followed by their daughter Ann. Both father and son had public battles with publishing rivals. Daniel found himself accused of being Satan’s harbinger, while Benjamin Franklin accused Daniel’s son Titan of being a ghost resurrected from the grave. The Leeds family- by virtue of their supposed heresy, their breaking with the Quaker community to join the opposition Anglicans, their out spoken anti-Quaker views, their almanac writing, and their siding with the

⁷⁴ “Real “Jersey Devil” Found,” *New Ulm Review*, New Ulm, MN (October 27, 1909):7.

⁷⁵ “Posse Sets Out as ‘Jersey Devil’ Reappears; Black and Shaggy This Time, It Kills Hogs,” *New York Times* (December 19, 1929).

⁷⁶ “‘Jersey Devil’ Returns as Applejack Mellows, And Dry Agents Investigate the Coincidence,” *New York Times* (August 6, 1930).

⁷⁷ MacFadden, 5-14.

Royal government at a time when thoughts of revolution had just begun to germinate- became political and religious monsters to their neighbors.

By the early twentieth century the Leeds Devil and its fragile memory, remodeled by sensational media reportage, became the Jersey Devil while Mother Leeds, as much a phantom as her offspring, materialized out of the snow covered forests surrounding Leeds Point. Stories of tracks of a strange horse-like creature with wings became coupled to the blurred memory of the Leeds family. The reality of genuine people's lives faded from view, replaced by the fantasy of a forest dragon. The Jersey Devil was never a genuine creature, but a political animal, a scapegoat, birthed from the pages of forgotten texts and a mangled family reputation.

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