

ENCHANTED GROUND

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Preface

When I moved to Athens, Ohio, in 1985, I had no idea that one day I would explore what a nineteenth-century commentator has called “the weird celebrity” of the place. As a new arrival from my native Virginia, I thought it was just a picturesque, progressive city where I would eventually earn a master’s degree in journalism from Ohio University. Only in 2010, as an author and longtime Athens County resident, did I turn to explore the deeper history of my adopted home. That was when I settled on researching the medium Jonathan Koons, a life that continues to intrigue me even after several years.

I had first learned of Koons through the local newspapers while in graduate school. Around Halloween time he would dutifully take his place in a recap of Athens County’s spooky stories—haunted cemeteries linked by a pentagram, the abandoned insane asylum overlooking the city of Athens, and of course his own dark séances where ghostly musicians played and instruments floated about the room. But in those pre-internet days I could scarcely imagine that Athens would eventually gain notice online as one of the “most haunted” places in the United States. Not until I began my recent study did I learn of Koons’s contribution to the mystique—some would say superstition—that has attached itself to the area. For he drew hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people to Athens County in the 1850s with the promise of reconnecting them with dead loved ones, thus putting the locale on the map of the spiritualist press. It was from the rocks and forests—the very landscape itself—that psychic forces were able to gather strength, or so the theory went. This idea has persisted for at least 165 years—and perhaps much longer, if one considers legends about Native Americans in this place.

Yet Jonathan Koons has no mention in the standard history books of Athens County, Ohio; he lives on mostly through oral tradition. Not

surprisingly, that tradition has reshuffled facts even as it has enlarged certain themes and diminished others, memorializing yet obscuring the person who lived here. What's more, the story of Koons's wife, Abigail Bishop Koons, is a wisp of smoke compared to that of her husband, not due to any lack on her part but the sheer fact that the nineteenth century was indeed a man's world in which women's lives were seldom detailed—or their names even mentioned—in published sources. From the scraps of information available, it is clear that Abigail and Jonathan were full partners as together they explored the counterculture of their time.

When I began looking into the Koons story, I thought I would be writing a book about psychic abilities—traits that the Koons family was said to possess. I thought I would use my journalistic skills and the latest research to find out exactly what was genuine and what was false about the Koons phenomena. But I soon realized that the story was as much, or more, about the power of ritual and belief than about an actual physical reality. Some visitors to the Koons séances reported transformative encounters, whether their perceptions were “real” or not. For that reason I do not presume to judge the validity of the religious experiences reported in this book. To avoid a ponderous writing style, I decided not to overuse qualifiers such as *purportedly* and *supposedly* in every account of what visitors to the Koons séances saw or heard. I invite readers to enter the sphere of the nineteenth-century spiritualists and look at the world the way they saw it—playful, mysterious, and ultimately kind.



IN his fine book *Wonder Shows*, Fred Nadis makes the provocative statement that “every historical study is a veiled autobiography.” Although that maxim may not be uniformly applicable, it resonates for me. I have always been attracted to mysteries large and small. As a child and enthusiastic member of the Nancy Drew book club, I was transported to a world where fictional mysteries unfolded like clockwork in old hotels, larkspur lanes, and hidden staircases. In the real world I wondered who had made the arrowheads that farmers routinely plowed up from the fields around our home. As I began to study science, more curiosities presented themselves: the dark side of the moon, the stars, the dinosaurs, Mendel's peas,

and Schrodinger's cat—and I wondered what future discoveries might reveal about the cosmos. I even dreamed of becoming a scientist myself.

But mysteries of the supernatural resided in a category all their own. I waited in rapt anticipation for my grandma to open the book of Grimm's fairy tales and begin to read. I shivered as other relatives told of a headless horseman patrolling a lonesome hollow in our neighborhood. Such flights of imagination led me to speculate on what magical creatures might dwell in the misty folds of Cumberland Mountain, whose high rocky rim dominated the landscape of my youth. And in church we learned of magical feats such as walking on water or through fire, how Gideon's fleece changed from dry to wet, and why the hand wrote on Belshazzar's wall. The difference was that these stories, unlike "Hansel and Gretel," were believed to be literally true.

Over fifty years later I am still as interested in mysteries as I was back then—both of a scientific and metaphysical kind. I have gained much comfort, and perhaps some insight, from reading the works of poets, philosophers, scientists, and assorted radical thinkers. As a young child I had feelings of *déjà vu* that I could not really articulate, but years later I instantly recognized them in Wordsworth's verse from 160 years before:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

That sense of glory predictably faded over time, but from reading the works of Carl Jung and his disciple Joseph Campbell as an adult, I have experienced a feeling of connectedness with water, rocks, trees, and animals—both human and not. Jung demonstrated how many cultures throughout the world share the same archetypes, although they have different expressions—perhaps an indication of a great mind or consciousness that unites not only

humans but other forms of life. Jonathan Koons and his fellow believers were attempting to tap into this vast reservoir—although other religions could claim other, equally valid, pathways. Koons was the product of a time and place, just as I am. And though this book was not intended as a “veiled autobiography,” I will be the first to acknowledge that by learning his story I have been able to trace some philosophical dilemmas of my own. I hope the reader will find illumination as well, and, if not, will simply be entertained by Jonathan Koons’s tale.



FEW visible structures remain from the world that Jonathan Koons and his extended family created when they settled on a high ridge in Dover Township in the 1830s. Both Koons’s 1852 Spirit Room and another built about 20 years later have succumbed to the ravages of time. One artifact that survives is a small hilltop cemetery where his daughter and brother lie buried. As the Koons family stood around the fresh graves of their kin in the mid-nineteenth century, they grappled with the perennial questions that the death of a loved one brings. What can we know in this life about the next, if there is one? It is a search, as one Victorian letter writer put it, for evidence of “the continued life.” But the path they took to seek that truth, that is what makes this story.

