

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Solomon Jewett: The Shepherd of Spirits

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The ancient Celts believed that All Hallows Eve, or Halloween, was a time when the veil separating the living and the dead was lifted. On that night, those attuned to the spirit world might speak to the dead and the spirits of the dead threatened to come back and wreak havoc on the living. The holiday has degenerated from these eerie beliefs through the age of outhouse tipping to our own firm focus on 'fun' size Milky Ways. But what if the dead are all around us right now, clamoring for our attention? Would we notice them?

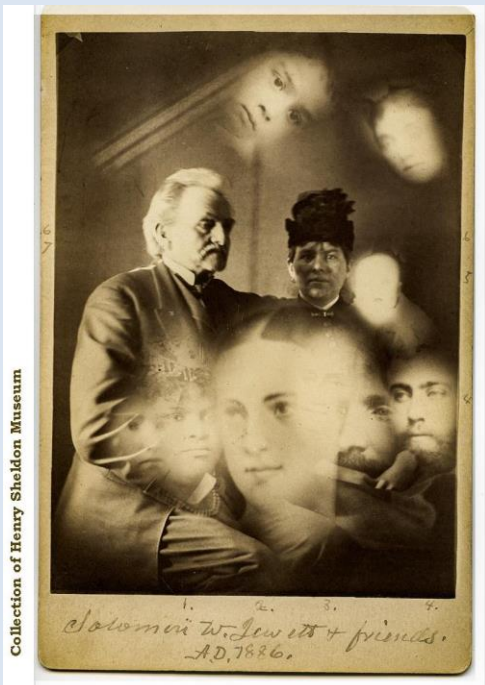
The spirit world seems to single out some of the living for special attention. In nineteenth century Weybridge, that special someone was a man named Solomon Jewett. He claimed to have been a seventh son, born covered in a veil, on May 22, 1808, when "all planets but Saturn were ascending," signs of special powers to come.

Solomon was also born with a silver spoon in his mouth. His father, Samuel Jewett, a wealthy farmer, built the large brick house on Weybridge Hill. Solomon rode the Merino sheep boom to even greater success. By the late 1830s, Solomon was one of the biggest sheep farmers in Vermont, and certainly one of the wealthiest. He organized the State Agricultural Society, started the fair in Middlebury, served in the Vermont Legislature and was touted for governor. The U.S. government sent him to London to represent American agriculture at the Great Exhibition of 1851, where he purchased animals from Prince Albert. As the Vermont sheep boom went bust, he headed West to California, starting another huge sheep farm in Oakland while two of his sons founded the city of Bakersfield. He began to call himself "The American Shepherd."

But the material world was too small for the ambitions

of Solomon Jewett. From an early age, he believed himself to have second sight and the ability to speak to the departed. The

supernatural was a usual part of the everyday culture of the time. By the mid-19th Century, Jewett's Vermont had becoming a hotbed of religious fervor, spawning everything from the free loving utopian, John Humphrey Noyes to the first Mormon,



This photograph from the 1880s shows Solomon Jewett almost lost among the many spirits who were trying to contact him with messages for their loved ones.

Joseph Smith. For women and those of a liberal, abolitionist bent, spiritualism was becoming the preferred religious outlet. In this bubbling cauldron of spiritualism, Solomon fell under the spell of the famous Eddy Brothers of Chittenden who held séances and claimed psychic powers. At their meetings, he became convinced that he possessed the ability to heal.



Solomon W. Jewett, 1893, detail.
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

Having lost his sheep, the Shepherd of America now began to style himself Dr. Solomon Jewett, D. M. (Doctor of Magnetism). He advertised himself as a “Mesmeric and Magnetic Physician. The Seventh Son and Natural Doctor. Born with special Gifts. Insanity, palsy, deafness, blindness, Pains Chronic Sicknesses and Disease depart before the power under his control and WILL and HAND.” His first success was at his brother Philo’s house in Weybridge, where he cured a man suffering from ‘Insanity and Epilepsy’ in two treatments. He claimed to have restored the health of many more in the area: Amasa Hunter who had been paralyzed by a Stroke of Lightning, a French girl cured of deafness, and Mr. Williams of Sudbury relieved of ear-ache in five seconds under Jewett’s hand.

Powers like his were too big for Weybridge, so he soon took to the roads. In California he claimed to have cured a man of his smoking habit right on the street, by passing his hand over him four times. He made a blind man see in Detroit. In Zanesville, the doctor laid his hands on a deaf and dumb girl, who began to speak, “much to the Joy of her mother.”

Solomon had the wisdom to cure people quickly and then get out of town.

His greatest feat came in 1869 in New York City, where Dr. Jewett was briefly imprisoned for reasons that are not completely clear but may be easily surmised. During his incarceration a fellow prisoner, John Cronham, appeared to have passed away in his cell. Jewett was allowed to go to his corpse, where he placed the dead man’s bare feet against his chest and grabbed his lifeless hands, creating a powerful magnetic circuit. The man was quickly and miraculously restored to life and the feat won Jewett his freedom.

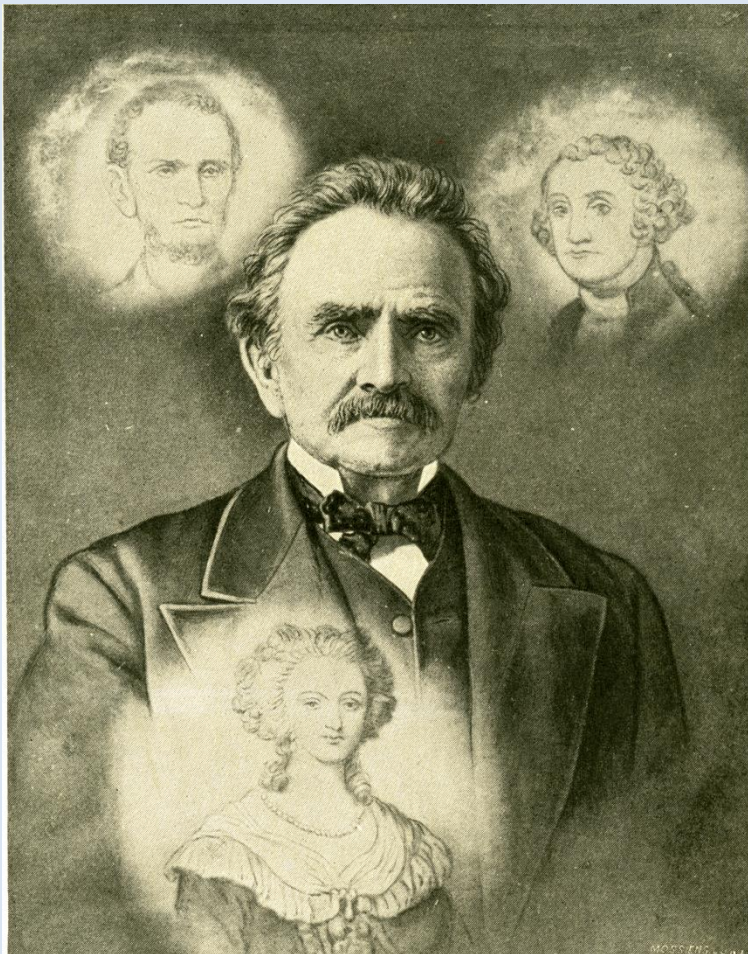
But by this time Jewett’s chief preoccupation was not with the living, but the dead. American Spiritualism was spawned in the ‘burned over district’ of nearby upstate New York, an outgrowth of the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening. The Civil War had sent over 600,000 men to their graves, leaving grieving parents, wives and children behind, yearning for one last word with the departed.

Solomon Jewett was happy to offer himself as a conduit for healing their grief through conversations between the living and the dead. Styling himself “Shepherd and

Physician,” he claimed that, in his presence, “Knockings Physical and Spirit voices are Manifested.”

A man like himself, who had once been one of the most important people in Vermont, could expect the assistance of a spirit of the highest caliber, George Washington.

So, you skeptic, you want proof? Solomon had proof. How about a photograph? At a séance in Brooklyn in 1885, as Jewett stared at a slip of paper, a message in ‘independent, automatic writing’ appeared, saying, “Solomon. I am here, George Washington.” The departed president expressed a desire to have his photograph taken with Dr. Jewett. An appointment was made with the famed ‘spirit photographer,’ William M. Keeler, “for a sitting on the 22d day of Feb.,” obviously a belated birthday treat for Washington. Three photographs were taken of Jewett with the president’s spirit. Keeler then threw in a bonus, a written note from Washington saying, “Solomon your father requests me to say to you that he is present, and would have presented his likeness also beside yours but was not sufficiently strong now, but would give it at some future sitting, George Washington.”



Solomon W. Jewett and apparitions, c. 1880. Engraving from a photograph. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

The new magic of photography proved to be a perfect medium for the mediums. Solomon Jewett had many more spirit photographs taken, some of which were so crowded with spirits that you could hardly discern the living among the dead. He sent copies of many of them to his dear friend back home, Henry Sheldon. Was this dupe of men now being duped himself by the photographers?

Jewett died in Santa Barbara in 1894, aged 86. His body was brought back to Weybridge Hill for burial with his people. Now, as the nights get longer, listen for a light tapping in your parlor. You may be about to get a visit from Solomon Jewett, Shepherd of Spirits, and his dear friend, George Washington.