



THE JERSEY DEVIL: THE REAL STORY

The story of the Jersey Devil has become layered with myths and variations, obscuring the original events that gave rise to it. This is not surprising considering the story comes from colonial-era political intrigue, Quaker religious infighting, and a future Founding Father.

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Most skeptics and students of the outré know the story of the Jersey Devil. Sometime in the early part of the eighteenth century in the New Jersey forest called the Pine Barrens, a woman known as Mother Leeds gave birth to her thirteenth child and cried out, “Oh, let this one be a devil!” The “child” arrived with horse-like head and bat-like wings. It yelped menacingly and flew up and out of the chimney, disappearing into the dark to spend the centuries accosting anyone unfortunate enough to encounter it. The commonly held story of the Jersey Devil bears no resemblance to any sort of reality, however. The story is one born not of a blaspheming mother, but of colonial-era political intrigues, Quaker religious in-fighting, almanac publishing, a cross-dressing royal governor, family reputations, and Benjamin Franklin.

There are legions of books and websites devoted to the Jersey Devil, but they rehash material or copy other websites without any attempt to verify sources or check original materials. If you looked to the historical record with the keyword of Jersey Devil, you would find little factual or reliable evidence. Reviews of newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides from colonial New Jersey show no references to a Leeds Devil (see below) or anything like it. Reports of children killed by the creature or an attempt by a local clergyman to “exorcise” the Leeds Devil in the eighteenth century have no supporting documentation (also the central protagonists, the Quakers, did not perform exorcisms). As a result, the story of the Jersey Devil’s origin has been shrouded in monster tales that obscure the far more interesting historical events. Here is a reassessment of the mythos.

Daniel Leeds

The European settlement of New Jersey, originally named Nova-Caesaria, began in the 1620s. Settlers came predominantly from England. They were mostly members of the religious order the Society of Friends, commonly called Quakers. They were delighted to discover large tracts of land all but empty of people nestled between Manhattan and Philadelphia. The first royal governor of New Jersey, Edward Hyde, Lord Cornbury (1661–1723), is remembered as one of the most vilified and hated governors of colonial America. He also stands accused of being a cross-dresser. A portrait believed to be Cornbury hangs in the New York Historical Society and shows him dressed as his aunt, Queen Anne. However, a recent reappraisal of his gubernatorial career shows there is little but slander and innuendo concerning Cornbury’s cross-dressing. Regardless of whether Cornbury was

a fiscal scoundrel or a cross-dresser, his connection to the Jersey Devil story is tangential but important.

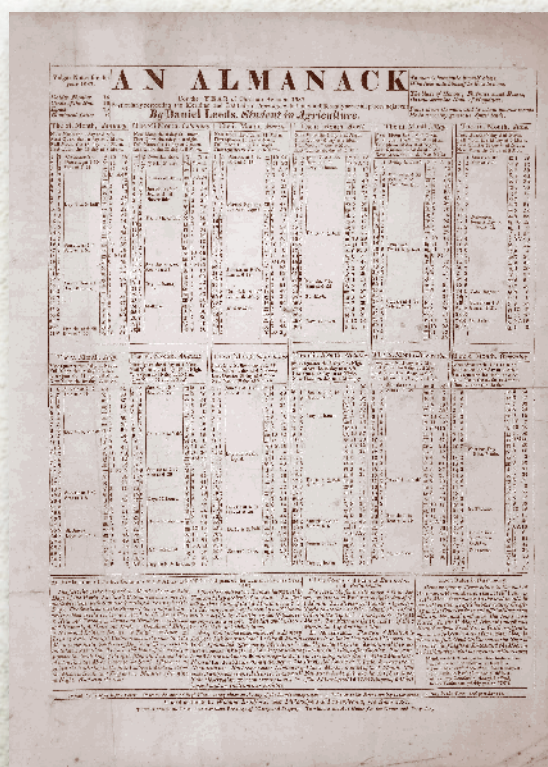
When Lord Cornbury received his orders to take charge of New Jersey in 1702, the document included a list of his councilors, one of whom was Daniel Leeds (1651–1720). Born in Leeds, England, Daniel Leeds arrived in Burlington in 1677. A devout Quaker, he claimed to have had ecstatic visions as a young man. His first wife died while in England, so he married a second time in 1681. This wife, Ann Stacy, gave birth to a daughter, though neither survived the birth. He then married Dorothy Young, who also died, though not before producing eight children by 1699. He married a final time to Jane Abbot-Smout. In 1682, Daniel Leeds joined the local assembly. He also held the title of surveyor general. In the 1690s he surveyed and acquired land in the Great Egg Harbor near the Atlantic coast. He handed this property down to his sons as a family seat, and it came to be known as Leeds Point: the location most associated with the Jersey Devil legend.

The Leeds Almanac

Daniel Leeds began publishing an almanac in 1687. It was printed by the Englishman William Bradford (1663–1752), one of colonial America’s first printers. Leeds’s astrological data did not please all his readers. Several members of the Quaker Meeting complained that Leeds had used inappropriate language and astrological symbols and names that were a little too “pagan.” The notion of predicting the movements of the heavens did not sit well with Quaker theology. He went to the next meeting and publically apologized. To his

surprise an order was sent out to collect up all the copies of the almanac not in circulation and destroy them. Daniel Leeds determined privately to break with the Friends and continue his almanac.

Brimming with the need to get his ideas out and a growing resentment of his fellow Quakers, Leeds put together a book called *The Temple of Wisdom* (1688). Leeds paraphrased and outright copied large sections of other authors to cobble together a personal cosmology. He included sections on angels, natural magic, astrology, and the behavior of devils. The source he drew upon most was the work of the German mystic Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) whose first book, *Aurora* (1612), was considered heretical. Boehme’s writings focused upon the nature of sin and redemption. Leeds saw Boehme as a kindred spirit: a self-taught man who, like himself, had experienced ecstatic visions, been called before religious authorities for his work, and rebelled against the establishment. Defending his astrological writings using Boehme’s words, Leeds said, “Everyone that will speak or teach of



Daniel Leeds first published his almanac in 1687. His astrological material so outraged his Quaker neighbors they tried to have it burned.

divine mysteries, that we have the spirit of God."

Taken in the aggregate the published work of Daniel Leeds shows him to be a Christian occultist. He was no dark magician though. He used astrology to gain deeper insight into the workings of God and the meaning of Christianity. The readers of his work would have been unfamiliar with the esoteric nature of his writings, so they saw more occultist than Christian in him. The Quaker Philadelphia Meeting immediately suppressed the Leeds book. Now at odds with the Friends, Leeds produced the first in a line of outright anti-Quaker tracts, *The Innocent Vindicated from the Falsehoods and Slanders of Certain Certificates* (1695). Leeds argued that Quaker theology denied the divinity of Christ, and he accused Quakers of being antimonarchists. He left the Quakers in part because, he said, "They formerly exclaimed against

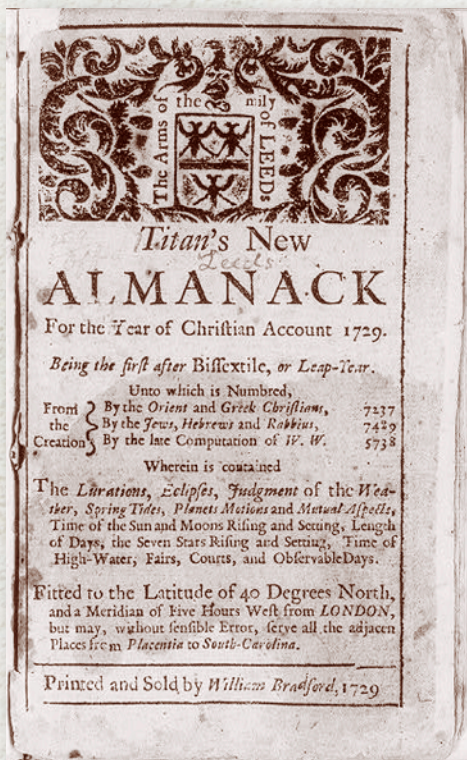
the government of England."

Leeds was heavily invested in local politics, leaning toward royal authority. In one instance Leeds advised Lord Cornbury to not swear in several members appointed to the assembly by local election. The rest of the assembly complained to Cornbury about these "groundless accusations" but to no avail. 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. When Daniel Leeds, as one of their own, sided with Cornbury the Quakers saw him as a turncoat. Leeds also backed other anti-Quakers such as George Keith (1638–1716), an early member of the Society of Friends who knew founder George Fox and William Penn and who soured on the Friends and began preaching that the Quakers had strayed too far for proper Christianity. Keith

Another defense of Quakerism appeared as *Satan's Harbinger Encountered ... Being Something by Way of Answer to Daniel Leeds* (1700). With this pamphlet Leeds stood publically accused of working for the devil.

Daniel Leeds continued to publish his almanac and quarrel with the Quakers until 1716 when he retired and turned the business over to his son Titan Leeds (1699–1738). In 1728, Titan redesigned the masthead to include the Leeds family crest, which contained three figures on a shield. Dragon-like with a fearsome face, clawed feet, and bat-like wings, the figures, known as wyverns, are suspiciously reminiscent of the later descriptions of the Jersey Devil. Titan Leeds then found himself in one of the most notorious almanac feuds of them all. The up and coming Philadelphia printer—and soon-to-be Founding Father—Benjamin Franklin entered the almanac game in 1732

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Having taken over from his father to publish the almanac, Titan Leeds added the family crest which contained a creature not unlike later descriptions of the Jersey Devil.

was disowned by the London Friends and eventually converted to Anglicanism, as did Daniel Leeds.

After a series of Leeds's anti-Quaker pamphlets such as *The Trumpet Sounded Out of the Wilderness of America* (1699), George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, responded to Leeds's accusations with *The Case Put and Decided* (1699) in which he argued that Quakerism stood unjustly accused of any theological wrongdoing. Leeds was also accused by the Burlington Meeting of being "evil."

with *Poor Richard's Almanac*. As competitors in a lucrative market, the upstart Franklin decided to go after his established rival to boost sales. In the 1733 edition of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, Franklin used astrological techniques to predict that Titan Leeds would die on October 17 of that year.

Franklin approached this "feud" in a humorous vein while Leeds took it seriously. He retaliated in the *Leeds Almanac* by saying that Franklin "has manifest himself a fool and a liar [sic]"

for his antics. Franklin replied with mock outrage and hurt, saying Leeds was “too well bred to use any man so indecently and so scurrilously,” therefore the person saying these things must not be Titan Leeds but a creature from the spirit world. He went on to say that he had “receiv’d much abuse from the ghost of Titan Leeds.” Even after Titan Leeds finally died in 1738, Franklin responded to his own creation that “Honest Titan, deceased, was raised [from the dead] and made

with the Quaker majority. The Leeds almanac was seen as inappropriate while his *Temple of Wisdom* bordered on the heretical, and he was publically accused of being Satan’s harbinger. His other writings such as *The Trumpet Sounded* attacked Quakerism and its founder George Fox directly. The Quakers saw no hurry to give their former fellow religionist an easy time in circles of gossip. His wives had all died, as had several children. His

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to abuse his old friend [Franklin].” Largely out of fun, Benjamin Franklin had publically cast his rival almanac publisher as a ghost, brought back from the great beyond to haunt his enemies. It is interesting to note that the traditionally believed period of the “birth” of the Jersey Devil (the mid-1730s) coincides with the death of Titan Leeds.

The Jersey Devil

The Pine Barrens, that area of New Jersey with its thick and seemingly impenetrable forests, dark and forbidding in the heat of summer, mysterious yet beautiful in the snows of winter, so unlike the industrial, urban blight most associated with the state, make a fine place for the birth of a monster. During the pre-Revolutionary period, the Leeds family, who called the Pine Barrens home, soured its relationship

son Titan stood accused by Benjamin Franklin of being a ghost and of having been resurrected from the grave. The family crest had winged dragons on it. In a time when thoughts of independence were being born, these issues made the Leeds family political and religious monsters. From all this over time the legend of the Leeds Devil was born. References to the Jersey Devil do not appear in newspapers or other printed material until the twentieth century. The first major flap came in 1909. It is from these sightings that the popular image of the creature—batlike wings, horse head, claws, and general air of a dragon—became standardized.

The elements that led to the creation of the Jersey Devil are by and large unknown even to monster aficionados. The Quaker rivalries, the almanac wars, Daniel Leeds and his son Titan, as well as their monstrous

TAYLORS
Physicke has purged the D I V E L L.
O R,
The Divell has got a squirr, and the simple, leame-vent, thudbare Taylor translates it into railing Poetry, and is now soundly cudgelled for it.
By *Voluntar Ambulatoria.*



Images of creatures similar to the Jersey Devil were already being published in political and satirical pamphlets in the 1640s. This one from England was startling and well known.

family crest drifted into the mists of time, leaving only the vague notion of a frightening denizen of the Pine Barrens. Even the Leeds Devil was all but forgotten, its fragile memory remodeled into the cartoonish “Jersey Devil” while Mother Leeds, as much a phantom as her supposed offspring, materialized out of the forests of Leeds Point. In the twenty-first century, as rubes search the woods off the Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway for a bat-winged beast, the ghosts of Daniel Leeds and his family may just be watching and smiling at the absurdity of it all. ■

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