

# Sheldon exhibit conjures spirits — and fun

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THIS "SPIRIT PHOTO" from 1886 shows Weybridge "mesmeric physician" Solomon W. Jewett surrounded by apparitions. This photo is part of a Sheldon Museum exhibit titled "Conjuring the Dead: Spirit Art in the Age of Radical Reform." Photo courtesy Sheldon Museum

MIDDLEBURY — Solomon Jewett (1808-94) of Weybridge kept a very impressive guest list.

Presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

Prince Albert of England.

The Virgin Mary.

Oh, and since they were all deceased, Jewett didn't even need to open his door; as spirits, they all drifted in through the walls and hovered above his head.

And he had the photos to prove it.

Jewett's "spirit photos" and other otherworldly keepsakes are now on display at Middlebury's Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History.

They're part of an exhibit titled, "Conjuring the Dead: Spirit Art in the Age of Radical Reform," on view through Jan. 11, 2020.

The exhibit, curated by the Sheldon Museum's Eva Garcelon-Hart, shouldn't be perceived as a showcase of one man's eccentricities. Rather, it serves as a prime example of spiritualism during the 19th century, a movement that led to progressive thought and that fueled efforts to end slavery and give women equal rights.



SHELDON MUSEUM ARCHIVIST Eva Garcelon-Hart stands next to a photo portrait of the late Solomon Jewett, whose spirit photos and ephemera form the bulk of the Sheldon's new exhibit titled, "Conjuring the Dead: Spirit Art in the Age of Radical Reform." Independent photo/John Flowers

Jewett, by many historical accounts, was hard working, ambitious and a shameless self-promoter. Born and raised in Weybridge, he became a successful sheep farmer and state legislator during the first half of the 19th century.

He traveled throughout Europe displaying fine examples of his Merino sheep, including at the 1851 Crystal Palace Exposition in London.

"He was good at it," Garcelon-Hart said of Jewett's ability to talk up his livestock and himself.

The latter half of the 19th century saw cows replace sheep as the preferred livestock in Vermont. So Jewett refined his business interests and at the same time cultivated what he saw as his special talents: Communicating with the dead and healing people as a "mesmeric physician."

Jewett's claims of special, otherworldly powers would get him in — and out — of trouble during his eventful life.

Garcelon-Hart noted Jewett was briefly imprisoned in New York City for reasons that are unclear; perhaps for a financial faux pas or a case of mysticism run amok. While in jail, a fellow prisoner named John Cronham appeared to have died in his cell, according to material in the Sheldon Museum archives.

Prison officials allowed Jewett access to Cronham's body. Jewett placed the "dead" man's bare feet against his chest and grabbed his lifeless hands, creating what was described as "a powerful magnetic circuit" that revived Cronham, according to an account in the Sheldon archives.

“From then on, he sees himself as a healer, and claims all sorts of powers,” Garcelon-Hart said.

Jewett was married three times, ultimately to Mary Lockwood Allen, a Chittenden native who became one of the first woman medical doctors in the country. It was through Allen, Garcelon-Hart believes, that Jewett became intrigued by spiritualism.

Allen’s hometown of Chittenden was known as the spiritual capital of the world during the 1860s and 1870s, Garcelon-Hart noted. The town earned that distinction, in part, because it was home to brothers William and Horatio Eddy. The Eddys were well-known mediums of their era, and claimed to have psychic powers and the ability to conjure spirits of the dead.

Spiritualists of the period believed that the living could communicate with the dead, and practitioners used séances and a relatively new invention — photography — to “prove” it.

“Spirit photography” was born in 1861 when William Mumler — a Boston jeweler and photographer — took a self-portrait that revealed an ethereal image of someone behind him.

Those familiar with double-exposures and overlapping negatives knew the “spirit” photos could be manufactured. But a lot of folks of that era believed cameras could capture both the living and dead. Jewett claimed to have been visited by famous historical and Biblical figures and “proved” those encounters through photos of himself encircled by disembodied apparitions. Those photos are part of the Sheldon exhibit. “He had a big personality, and my feeling is, he truly believed in (his claimed powers),” Garcelon-Hart said. “He was not out to deceive people.”

The world was at a different place during Jewett’s era, and the conditions were ripe for people to make leaps of faith. Electricity and magnetism were relatively new. People couldn’t see electricity, but they knew it’s there. They trusted science and the ability of the camera to reveal that which the human eye could not.

“Photography was seen as able to depict reality,” Garcelon-Hart said. “All of a sudden, you can depict ghosts in photographs. So people really think this is proof that ghosts exist.”

Spirit photographers could easily make two exposures on a single negative, manipulate the negative to create ghostly blurs, or overlap two negatives in the darkroom to produce an extra face within the resultant frame.

## **MYSTICISM VS. RATIONALISM**

But the audience for spirit portraits in the mid-1800s was vast — even when trickery and fraud were proven, Garcelon-Hart noted. These images might appear to the contemporary viewer as clumsily executed studio images, but at the time they were a tangible symbol of the overarching argument of mysticism versus science and rationalism.

Spiritualism also coincided with the greatest period of carnage in the nation's history: The Civil War, during which thousands of families lost soldiers. Folks were willing to spend good money with a medium who might be able to connect them to a fallen loved one.

Some of the towering figures of the 19th century found themselves on opposite sides of spiritualism, according to Garcelon-Hart. Sherlock Holmes author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a believer, while escape artist Harry Houdini was bent on exposing mediums. With western migration came exposure to new ideas and religions — like Mormonism, Millerism and Shakers. Spiritual leaders predicted the second coming of Christ, prompting followers to sell their possessions in anticipation of the Rapture that never came.

The Sheldon exhibit includes a transcript of testimony from a Bristol woman who, during March of 1843, claimed to have been visited by Jesus and a ghost, who asked her to warn others that the second coming was nigh.

Melissa Warner of Bristol testified in March of 1843:

“Jesus Christ then gave his instructions... saying, ‘You see, I am coming, have advanced almost to the earth and shall soon be there, warn the impenitent of their danger, instruct them to prepare for my coming.’”

Vermont, with its spirit of independence, became a hub for spiritualists.

Rutland in June of 1858 hosted the “Free Convention,” considered one of the most radical events of its time, according to Garcelon-Hart.

“People from all over the country came to discuss various issues, and among them was spiritualism, abolitionism, marriage reforms and all kinds of religious reforms,” Garcelon-Hart said. “Local newspapers were bashing it. It was considered a convention of lunatics.”

Jewett and his family would leave Vermont for Wisconsin and then California. He left all of his possessions related to spiritualism to the Sheldon Museum. They include a series of life-size pencil portraits depicting well-known historical and mythical figures, such as Jesus Christ and Mozart. The drawings were created by spirit artist Wella P. Anderson and his wife, Lizzie “Pet” Anderson, a medium. Those extremely rare original drawings are part of the “Conjuring” exhibit.

Garcelon-Hart believes the exhibit will have major appeal to county residents.

“It’s a real historical moment,” she said. “I don’t think one should relate to it on whether you believe (in spiritualism) or not. We just have to acknowledge it existed. There were beliefs that a large number of Vermonters had, and this collection is rich and interesting. I hope people will see it.”