

0. The Jersey Devil - Story Preface

1. The Jersey Devil

2. Hurricane Sandy

3. Volney Phifer of Hollywood and New Jersey by G. Monaghan



"It was neither beast nor man nor spirit, but a hellish brew of all three. It was beside a pond when I came upon it. I stopped and did not move. Nay, I could not move. It was dashing its tail to and fro in the pond and rubbing its horns against a tree trunk. It was as large as a moose with leather wings. It had cloven hooves as big around as an oak's trunk. After it was through with the tree, it yielded an awful scream as if it were a pained man, and then flew across the pond until I could see it no more."

So wrote Vance Lerner in 1790, the first known person to see the Jersey Devil. It is depicted as a winged, kangaroo-like demon with the head of a horse and the face of a dog who haunts the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. For three centuries, it has stalked the Garden State, disturbing the otherwise serenity of the Pinelands and leaving tourists trembling.

Sporadic sightings over the past 300 years inevitably trigger questions. From whence did the beast come? Is it real? Could it truly be trapped in a forest of such absolute beauty? The answer lies in fact and history. The legend starts in the 1700s, in a cottage straight off the Pine Barrens where a woman named Deborah Leeds really lived with her family of 12 children.

As the story goes, Deborah was exhausted from tending to the demands of her home and family, of cooking and cleaning for her large brood. Imagine her anguish and anger when she discovered she was pregnant again, with her 13th baby. In a fit, she declared that this child would be a devil, and in the 1700s, about 100 years after the Salem Witch Trials, Deborah's words would be deemed a curse. Many believe that this is what turned her would-be, innocent child into a voracious demon. It would become best known as the Jersey Devil or the Leeds devil, according to some versions of the story. In most accounts, the child was born a demon, but some say it progressively grew into one.

Other versions say that the family was cursed beforehand or that the baby became a demon during the difficult and painful birth. There are even more twists to the tale, claiming clergymen cursed her child because Deborah Leeds was a Quaker who refused to change faiths. The most popular story tells of a long painful birth. The house echoed with deafening screams, either Deborah's or the demon's. Blood spattered the floor and walls. When the creature was finally born, it flew out of the womb on leathery, bat-like wings with a bone-rattling screech and slit the woman's throat in one sweep of his talons before soaring out the window.

Other versions claim that although the child was a demon, Deborah raised it in secret until it was driven out as a child. This theory also says that the Devil came back to its home to check on its mother until she died. At that point, the creature turned demonic and started to terrorize the neighborhood. Similar versions say that as Deborah raised it, it progressively transformed into the devil.

In Deborah's time, belief in witchcraft still abounded, and many today believe that the legend of the Devil was a result of a disfigured child or maybe even a miscarriage. It was often thought in those times that an imperfect child was the result of sin on the part of the parents, a curse delivered to balance their wrongdoings. However, this theory certainly does not explain the more recent sightings of the monster; that is unless it could somehow survive for three centuries alone in the woods of New Jersey.

Since the time of Vance Lerner, many sightings have occurred steadily throughout the years, describing scenes of gremlin-like creatures and demonic monsters eating chickens and destroying property. At one point in the early 1900s, \$100,000 was offered for the kill or capture of the Devil, and in 2001, two teenage boys claimed to see the Devil staring at them through the trees while ice skating in his "Territory".

Despite the drastically different descriptions of the Devil over the years, the unexplainable occurrences and stories left today are a testament to the strength of the folktale. Considering the lack of medical knowledge in that time, it isn't hard to believe that disfigured babies were fairly common occurrences. So why did this one stand out? Perhaps it was just a family story that became something more, and what Lerner saw was a buck rubbing up against the tree. Or maybe the story is true. Maybe the Devil does stalk the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. Maybe he discovered the child lost to darkness three centuries ago.

Even in the 21st-century, the Jersey Devil's legacy lingers in the Garden State, this time as an icon of popular sports culture. The ice hockey franchise known as the Jersey Devils debuted in 1982, a testament to the power of folklore.

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JERSEY SEES A DEVIL.

Leeds' Monster Resurges Among the Pines.

ATTRIBUTES OF A BLACK WITCH.

A Strange Combination of Serpentine Body, Horse Head, Cloven Hoofs and Forked Tail Banned For Many Years.

Leeds' devil has resurged in New Jersey for the first time since it warned the pioneers of the approach of the civil war. Back in the middle colonial days, says the New York Herald, there lived in Burlington, on the Delaware. The pioneer Quaker settler of the country, a woman known as "Mother Leeds," account of sinister witchcraft, and elsewhere as it is taught thousands at that time. In 1733 Mother Leeds gave birth to a male child, whose father was later said to have been seen other than the price of darkness.

The child was normal at birth, but before the termination of the tempestuous night of its arrival horrified several old crones gathered about the bedside of Mother Leeds by assuming an elongated, serpent-like body, cloven hoofs, the head of a horse, the wings of a bat and the forked tail of a dragon. The coloring of the horrible creature turned to a dusky brown, and after ho-pumming its mother and her terrified companions it flew up the chimney, sitting loud, raucous cries.

Circling about from village to village during this eventful night, the fiend devoured several babies, assaulted women and made for the forest. For some years afterward, belated travelers, while crossing the pines, heard and saw it. The pine folk, whose experiences were even more terrible, attributed to it supernatural powers such as possessed by the black witches of English folklore. It turned the milk sour, lamed horses in their stalls, dried up the moss, made sour the Indian corn growing in the fields.

Accompanied, as it usually was, by the howling of dogs and the howling of owls, there could be

no more forewarning of disaster. When the pines line the seashore it flitted from one doudale, green-green down to another, watched upon those wild nights when merchant ships, diving their prow into the sand, burst anchor and disintegrated their freight of costly goods and human souls upon the relentless waves.

Upon such occasions Leeds' devil was seen in the companionship of a beautiful, golden haired woman in white, or yet of some fierce-eyed, catlike bearing, dismembered spirit of a pirate who two centuries ago had been wrecked upon the shore of Cape May county as, plying from the Spanish main, his galleon had gone to destruction. Again this same son of Satan shared his hours with a beautiful woman whom the Barrengat people say Captain Kidd decapitated and whose stiffened trunk that very pirate king left standing as a centinel of his buried treasure.

At other times Leeds' devil, like a bird of prey, hovered over a silent, star-be-spangled pond in some silent corner of the cedar swamps, blasting with its foul breath the lives of hundreds of fishes. Round floating next day upon the surface, tainted and unfit for food. Again the dreaded fiend half ran, half flew through the shadowy vistas of the pines, while before it to their coverts hurried panther and deer, rabbits, squirrels and wild song birds.

The habitat of Leeds' devil included the entire pine forest which extends, from Freshfield, to Monmouth county, through Burlington, Ocean and Atlantic to the upper part of Cape May county, preferring the lonely roads through the cedar swamps region, but frequently it made nocturnal onslaughts upon the Frontenac villages, playing havoc with the stock and farm crops as it went. One tradition has it that it was particularly active during the Revolutionary period, but one more distinct is that it was banished for a century and did not resurface until about 80 years ago.

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