

Beyond the Veil

Spiritualism in the 19th Century

“FAREWELL, DEAR ATHOL!”

At 6:30 p.m., on July 25, 1897, Athol Estes Porter died of tuberculosis in the home of her mother and stepfather. Her death was a crushing blow to her family, especially her husband, William Sydney Porter, the man who would later become famous under the pen name “O. Henry”.

At the time of Athol’s death, there were those who may have comforted the grieving family by telling them of their belief that Athol was not gone at all, and – better still – could even still communicate. These people were known as Spiritualists.



Photo: Portrait of Athol and Margaret Porter, O. Henry Museum – Roach Collection (2001.01.03)



Spiritualism began in the 1840s in a small town in New York, and quickly grew to become one of the greatest – and most divisive – religious movements of the 19th Century. Almost all historians point to modern Spiritualism beginning in 1848 in Hydesville, New York, where sisters Maggie and Kate Fox began communicating with a “spirit” in their home through rappings and knockings. The girls became a phenomenon; before long they were communicating with spirits around the nation in front of hundreds of rapt audience members. Soon, spiritual mediums could be found in almost every town. America’s new religion had taken root and showed no signs of stopping.

Photo: Kate and Maggie Fox, Wikimedia Commons

RELIGIOUS REBELLION

Religion in United States during the 1840s was primed for Spiritualism. The ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg, an 18th Century philosopher, had already begun to change people's concept of Heaven from a far-away, sterile place to a more perfect version of Earth where the spirits of loved ones lived on.

Many gravitated towards Spiritualism because, like traditional religions, it believed in the immortality of the soul. Unlike traditional religions, it did not call for blind faith; skeptics could see concrete "proof" of an afterlife by attending a séance. Spiritualism also rebelled against traditional religious authority and, instead, emphasized "radical individualism". This individualistic outlook meant that Spiritualism was the sole religion of its time that saw women as equals.

Photo: Emanuel Swedenborg portrait, Wikimedia Commons





"GET THEE BEHIND ME, (MRS.) SATAN!"—[See Page 145.]
 Wife (with heavy burden). "I'D RATHER TRAVEL THE HARDEST PATH OF MATRIMONY THAN FOLLOW YOUR FOOTSTEPS."

For a time, Spiritualism was the only way women were allowed to speak in public. Female mediums used this as a way to champion the ideas of women's suffrage, equal rights, and the abolition of slavery, claiming that these weren't their ideas, but rather messages from the "spirit realm." This did not, however, stop the criticism and condemnation of female spiritualists. Victoria Woodhull, a vocal spiritualist and the first woman to run for president, was dubbed "Mrs. Satan" for her belief in Spiritualism, suffrage, and the ideas of free love, all of which were seen as a threat to traditional morals.

Photo: "Get Thee Behind Me, (Mrs.) Satan" by Thomas Nast, published in Harper's Weekly, 1872

(Library of Congress); caption reads "Wife (with heavy burden), 'I'D RATHER TRAVEL THE HARDEST PATH OF MATRIMONY THAN FOLLOW YOUR FOOTSTEPS'"

“THIS REPUBLIC OF SUFFERING”



With the onslaught of the Civil War, and the growing lists of men who would never return home, more and more people turned to spiritualist mediums, hoping for some proof that their loved one's immortal soul was at peace. The number of spiritualists in the United States blossomed. By the end of the war, a reported 11 million people subscribed to Spiritualism and 35,000 were practicing mediums.



Before the war, the idea of a “good death” meant that all aspects of dying were undertaken in the home, surrounded by family. The Civil War robbed hundreds of thousands of families the chance to be by their loved one’s side at the time of their death. There was no chance to say a proper good-bye. Grieving mothers, fathers, sisters, and wives participated in séances and spirit communication, hoping to receive one last message from their dearly departed.

Photo: Unidentified woman wearing a mourning brooch and displaying a framed image of an unidentified soldier (c. 1861), Library of Congress

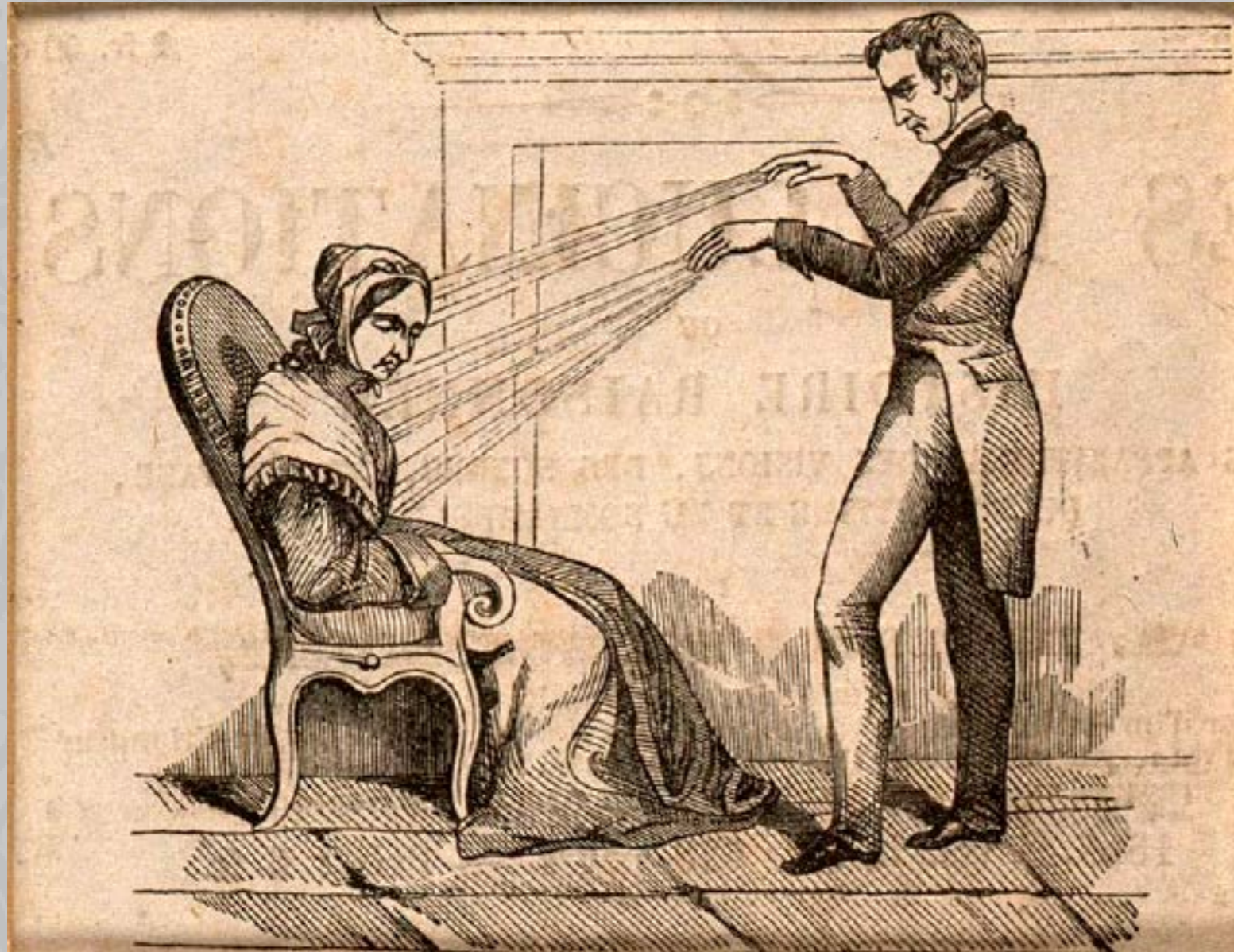
SCIENTIFIC SPIRITUALISM

In the mid-19th Century, American's religious beliefs were shaken by scientific discoveries. Newly unearthed fossils and analyses of the geological record indicated that the earth was far older than the Bible claimed it to be. People clamored for a religion that could maintain their faith while also aligning with science. Spiritualism fit this need perfectly. It was touted as the "scientific religion," asking participants to observe spiritualistic "demonstrations" produced under "test conditions" in the séance room.

Photo: Andrew Jackson Davis's engraving showing the spiritual telegraph connection between Heaven and a séance

(Davis, *The Present Age and Inner Life*, 1886)





Spiritualism was also believed to have healing powers. There were those in the movement known as “spiritualist doctors” who subscribed to the ideas of Anton Mesmer. Mesmer - a 18th Century physician - believed that the body was governed by a magnetic fluid and, when an imbalance occurred, it could cause all manner of ailments. Practitioners simply had to wave their hands over the bodies of their patients, “mesmerizing” them, and the physician’s own “animal magnetism” would realign the patient’s magnetic fluid and restore health.

Photo: “A practioner of Mesmerism using Animal Magnetism” (c. 1845), The Wellcome Collection

Spiritualism also drew parallels between it and technological advancements. The Fox Sisters' raps and knocks were similar to the Morse alphabet, which had been invented just a few years before, leading the promoters of Spiritualism to claim that mediums could establish a "spiritual telegraph" between the living and the dead. Later, William Mumler would claim that he could capture the ghostly images of dead loved ones in his spirit photography studios in Boston and New York.

Mumler's most famous spirit photograph is of Mary Todd Lincoln. America's grieving First Lady had become heavily involved in Spiritualism after the deaths of her son and her husband. She regularly attended séances, hoping to receive a message from them. In 1872, Mrs. Lincoln visited Mumler's studio in Boston. In the resulting photograph, the ghostly specter of Abraham Lincoln appears behind his wife, resting his hands on her shoulders. It was the last photograph ever taken of Mrs. Lincoln.



Photo: Mary Todd Lincoln with Abraham Lincoln's "spirit" by William H. Mumler, Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection,

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World War I ushered in a new wave of interest in spirit communication and Spiritualism. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – the creator of the world famous detective, Sherlock Holmes – was an avowed spiritualist. He traveled around the world lecturing on the comfort grieving family members could find in a séance parlor. In his talks, Doyle told of the next world as it had been described to him by “spirits” during séances. He assured his audiences that the “departed all agree that passing is usually both easy and painless, and followed by an enormous reaction of peace and ease.” To the thousands who had lost loved ones in France and Belgium, this was welcome news.

Photo: Poster for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Spiritualism Lecture at Carnegie Hall

(The Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin)

Although there were people who genuinely believed they could communicate with spirits, there were also many frauds looking to make money off of the grief-stricken. On October 21, 1888, Maggie Fox – who, along with her sister, had ushered in the age of Spiritualism – confessed that they had faked the rappings and knockings by cracking their knuckles and the joints in their feet. A 1901 secret catalog called *Gambols With The Ghosts* was available to mediums and offered ghost figures, fake ectoplasm, self-playing guitars, and self-writing slates.



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Photo: Ad for 'Gambols with the Ghosts' in a 1902 issue of "Suggestion"

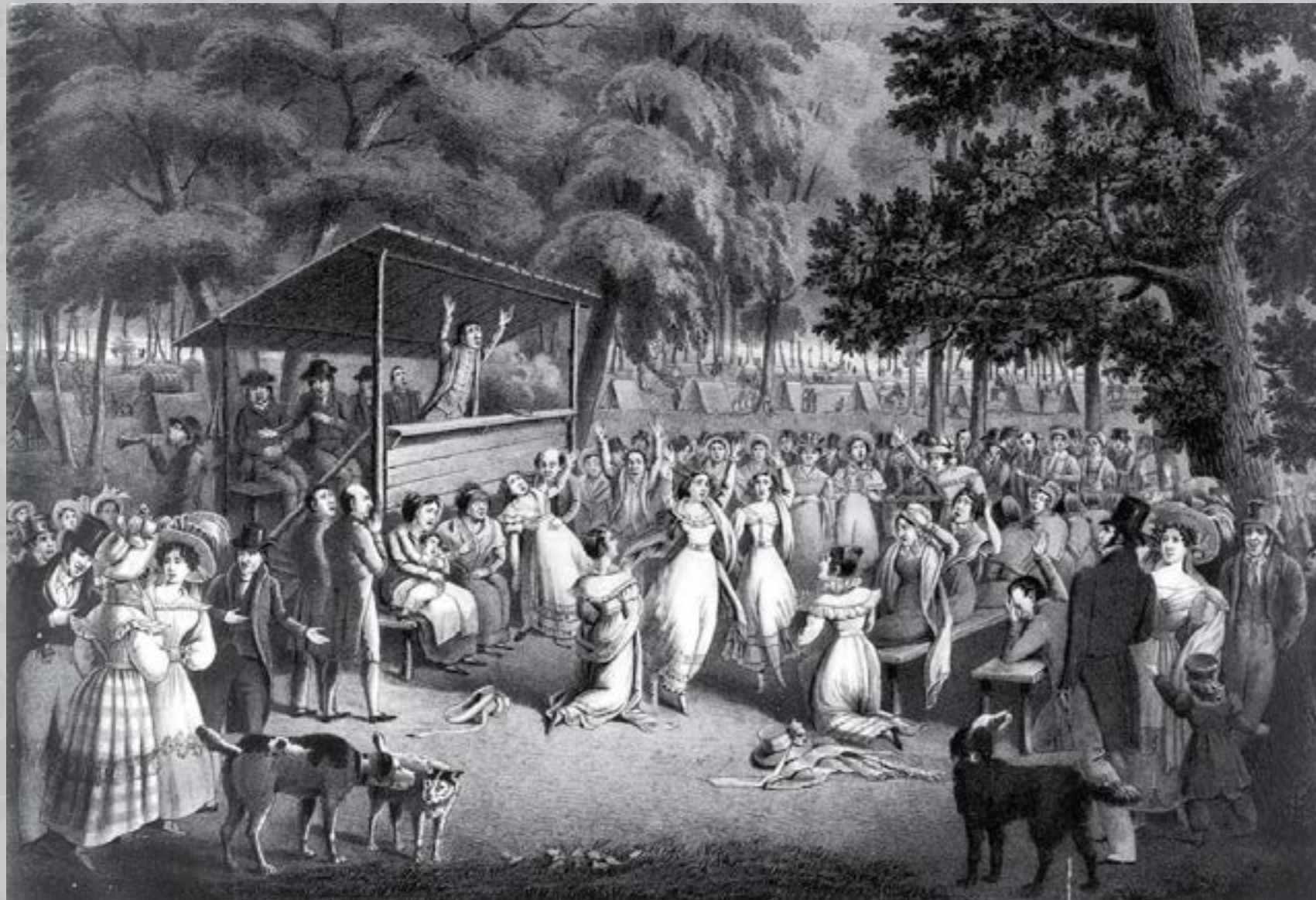
Spiritualism skeptics attempted to expose fake mediums. The world-famous magician, Harry Houdini, made it his life's work to expose the perpetrators of "this most monstrous fiction." Even though he always entered a séance with an open mind, Houdini declared, "after twenty-five years of ardent research and endeavor I declare that nothing has been revealed to convince me that intercommunication has been established between the Spirits of the departed and those still in the flesh."

Photo: 'Do spirits return? Houdini says no – and proves it 3 shows in one: magic, illusions, escapes, fraud mediums exposed'

(Library of Congress Magic poster collection, McManus-Young collection of pictorial material relating to magic)



SPIRITUALISM IN TEXAS



Spiritualism was not as wide-spread in the South as it was in the North, but there were still plenty who declared they were in communication with the spirits. Unlike in the North, where Spiritualism became its own religion, Southern spiritualists viewed spirit communication as one part of evangelical Christianity. Instead of communicating with the departed in a séance room, Southern Spiritualists received heavenly messages at revivals and meetings.

Photo: Lithograph of a ca. 1829 religious camp meeting by Alexander Rider, Library of Congress

In fiercely independent Texas, the individualistic nature of Spiritualism was very appealing. One of the first Texas Spiritualists was Moseley Baker, who had fought during the Texas Revolution, serving at the Battle of Gonzales. Later in life, Baker became a Methodist preacher in Houston and started the first Spiritualist newspaper in the South: the Texas True Evangelist. Baker died in 1848, but continued to influence Texas from the beyond. In the late 1800s, railroad builder Paul Bremond credited Moseley Baker's "spiritual guidance" for directing the successful construction of Bremond's Houston, East, and West Texas Railroad.

Photo: Paul Bremond (City of Bremond website)



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In Austin, around the time of Athol Porter's death, Spiritualism was readily available in a variety of forms. There were periodicals like *The Texas Spiritualist* and *the Harmonia*. In 1895, the Spiritual Society of Austin was formed and met on the first Thursday of every month. Advertisements could be found in the *Austin Daily Statesman* for spiritualists and mediums who would charge \$1 for a sitting. Traveling mediums would perform public readings and séances at the Board of Trade Hall or the Masonic Temple.

Photo: Index page of "The Harmonia", January 1886, Austin History Center



We may never know if O. Henry ever visited a medium with the hope of hearing from his beloved Athol again. But he might have believed in spirit communication. Soon after Athol's death and O. Henry's imprisonment, Margaret Porter told her grandmother, Martha Roach, that Athol came every night to help with her lessons. When Roach wrote to O. Henry about this, he responded, "Well, Margaret isn't the only one. Some day [sic] I will tell you of a similar experience."

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