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Erin Dix
Lawrence University

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The Death of Professor Jones: Ghosts and Memory in a Small University Archives

Erin Dix

LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY

The following is a true story of hauntings, literal and figurative, at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. It is the tale of Haunted Lawrence: a walking tour of the Lawrence University campus featuring historical stories of the ghostly and unexplained, designed and led by staff in the University Archives for the past ten years. Perennially popular with the campus community, the tour has grown to plague the university archivist. This essay is an attempt to exorcise her personal Haunted Lawrence demons.

“Do you have records of strange occurrences in X dorm? Ceiling tiles in my room are moving on their own.”

“Has anyone died in Y building? I heard disembodied crying in one of the bathrooms.”

“How can I learn more about Z former student? I made contact with him using a Ouija board.”

When I was a newly minted archivist (not a paranormal investigator, ghostbuster, or exorcist), I would never have anticipated fielding these kinds of questions – but each one of these is a real inquiry that has come my way at one time or another in the past few years. In fact, it often seems to me that many members of our campus community associate the University Archives *primarily* with ghosts and hauntings. Search the university’s website for related terms and you will find that the top results are all links to Archives pages. There is a simple explanation for this: Haunted Lawrence.

When I began as the university archivist at Lawrence University, a small liberal arts college and conservatory of music in Appleton, Wisconsin in 2010, I inherited Haunted

Lawrence. This popular annual walking tour had been conceived, designed, and implemented by my talented predecessor. She researched ghostly phenomena documented in our archival records; interviewed a number of faculty, staff members, and alumni who had experiences to share; and wove these stories together with historical information about campus buildings and grounds to create a compelling tour narrative. Collaborating with very generous staff members from our Facility Services and Campus Safety offices, she led nighttime walks of ghostly hot-spots for several years in a row. Having heard of the tour, I clearly remember praising Haunted Lawrence during my on-campus interview for the job: what an innovative outreach strategy!

The benefits of sponsoring Haunted Lawrence were clear, in terms of furthering the Archives mission. Outreach is an essential responsibility for any archives – what good is it to collect and preserve historical records if no one knows that your repository exists for researchers to use? I believe wholeheartedly in the value of promoting understanding of our college’s history through the Archives – among all constituencies, but especially among our students. College archivists have many ways of going about this work: integrating hands-on instruction with primary sources into courses across the disciplines; collaborating with student organizations to collect their records or research their history; designing exhibits and presentations; engaging with social media; and so on. Haunted Lawrence provided a truly unique way to share information about our college’s history. It was especially useful for reaching students who might not have sought out or encountered the Archives through other means. In my early days of leading the tour, I sometimes worried that we had pulled a mean trick on our attendees, sneaking historical context into the script like vegetables in dessert. (“Surprise! The delicious, spooky brownie you are eating is 30% zucchini. Let me tell you about the history of Main Hall, the only campus building on the National Register of Historic Places...”) But I was more often surprised to find that students seemed just as interested in the campus history as in the ghost stories, or, at least, they were polite about it.

Within a couple of years, Haunted Lawrence had started to wear on my nerves. My growing frustration was due at least in part to merely the tedium of repetition. In each academic year the student body is different, and each individual student has just four years or so in which to accrue experience and knowledge of the university. Institutional memory among the students is constantly in flux. For each year that we have offered Haunted Lawrence, interest has always been very high. Advanced registrations fill in just a few hours. Reporters from the student newspaper have covered the event with one or more articles every year for the past five years. (That even includes one year in which we did *not* offer it – the story was about *why* we had chosen to cruelly deprive students of the opportunity, and when our benevolence would permit its return.) For a time, I assumed that eventually students would tire of this subject matter, but with the yearly turnover, they have not. So, we have presented essentially the same script, year after year, and it receives essentially the same reactions, year after year. I have much of the narrative memorized.

As more time passed, the subject matter of Haunted Lawrence also began to trouble me. My level of comfort with Haunted Lawrence content fell across a spectrum. On the harmless end: our earliest report of a haunting on campus dates to 1899, when the student newspaper reported that women residents of the only dormitory on campus at the time heard “a deep groan” and footsteps on the stairs. “The ladies who heard it, arming themselves with hat pins and fruit knives, went out to conquer or die, but owing to their inability to locate

the ghost, could not do either.”¹ The author of the article uses a tongue-in-cheek tone (“we should advise all ghosts, especially such are vulnerable to hat pins, to stay away”), the image of “hat pins and fruit knives” is funny, and this all happened more than 100 years ago. And it’s based on actual records housed in the LU Archives! This is the anecdote I typically produce when someone like a local news reporter asks for a ghostly soundbite.

More problematic are the stories that stem from on-campus deaths of historical figures. For example, the tour narrative has always included the story of the 1898 death of a professor in his classroom in our oldest academic building. In recent years, we added to the retelling a dramatic recitation of the report that was published in our local newspaper: “He seated himself at his desk, took up his text book, and was about to call upon some member of the class for a translation, when suddenly he was seen to clutch at the arms of his chair, his head dropped upon his desk, and when the students stepped forward in alarm, they found that his spirit had already taken its departure.”² This excerpt reliably frightens the audience. But as a result, if Hiram Jones is remembered for anything today, it is most likely that people say his spirit wanders the corridors of Main Hall – not that he was a professor of Latin and Greek at Lawrence for more than 40 years. In the LU Archives, there is a large bound volume containing almost one hundred letters written to Jones by his former students to celebrate his fortieth year of teaching in 1894 – a testament to his lasting impact as a teacher. But, like Jones, those letter-writers are long gone. What remains of his memory is an untouched volume and annual retellings of a ghost story.

Similarly, in the LU Archives collections we have one death mask – a plaster cast made of the face of a former president, Samuel Plantz, following his death. Every iteration of Haunted Lawrence includes a theatrical unveiling of the death mask, to gasps and grimaces. Plantz died suddenly on November 13, 1924, still in the position of college president which he had held for 30 years. He remains the longest-serving president in our history. 1894 to 1924 was a period of tremendous growth for the university, due in no small part to Plantz’s leadership. The LU Archives houses 26 boxes of his papers, which clearly document the breadth and depth of his involvement in running the institution. Plantz was beloved by generations of students, who dubbed him “Doc Sammy.” On the day of his burial, the entire student body of more than 1000 processed to the cemetery. I say all of these things about Plantz when I produce the death mask, in a small effort to counteract the fact that I am also using his likeness for Halloween amusement.

Taken by themselves, Hiram Jones and Samuel Plantz were relatively minor thorns in my conscience. But in recent years, I encountered a new trend. Students started asking about particular sites on campus where, they had heard, something happened and a student died. But instead of invoking apocryphal or long-ago stories, they referred to real, tragic events that took place on our campus as few as seven or eight years ago. A few years, it turns out, is all it takes for a suicide or an accident to fall out of the student body’s collective memory and join the realm of campus lore. For someone with a longer history at the institution and a personal memory of these events, this is a jarring realization. Fielding questions about recent campus tragedies in the context of Haunted Lawrence has made me deeply uncomfortable – enough to reconsider the entire enterprise. Is there really a difference between trivializing an untimely death that happened in 1898 or 1924 and one that occurred in 2007? If so, where do you draw that line? How much time must pass before it becomes acceptable to start scaring people with stories of a real person’s ghost haunting your halls?

On the other hand, we are still talking about ghosts here. This is a topic that, depending on your beliefs, you may or may not take seriously. (Navigating those waters with a diverse group of Haunted Lawrence attendees makes for yet another fun challenge.) In this context, isn't it silly to wring hands over the notion of protecting a respectful memory of the lives and deaths of a few individuals at a little college in Wisconsin, most of whom are long gone? How much could any of this possibly matter?

I have no answers to these questions, other than a general sense that it probably is not logical to feel badly for Hiram or Samuel; no individual has any real control over whether and in what ways their memory will endure beyond death. Donating your papers to a repository might seem like a way to gain a measure of control – to ensure that at least somewhere, your story will be saved. For some donors of materials, preserving a legacy in this way is clearly the primary goal. For others, like family members who may be grieving, the promise that a piece of their loved one's memory – even just a scrapbook or a few letters – will be kept safe into the future can provide great comfort. But at the point of donation, the responsibility for stewarding these materials (and control over the stories they might tell) is out of the donor's hands and has transferred to the archivist.

My job is fundamentally about promoting understanding of our institution's history on our small campus. With the accumulated historical records from hundreds of transfers and donations in my care, I have more control than most over our institutional memory and the stories that we tell about Lawrence. This can and often does feel like a weighty responsibility. For me, the problem of Haunted Lawrence boils down to this: its popularity has meant that the same tales are told over and over again. I worry that what is generally known of Lawrence history on our campus, the stories that are the most firmly embedded, are too heavily weighted toward the ghostly and the unexplained. Too much fantasy and not enough reality; too much death and not enough life.

Ruminating on questions of death, memory, and archival responsibility, it is easy to forget that there are ways to tip this balance. Haunted Lawrence, though by far the most popular, is still only one piece of the Archives' campus outreach. I have focused efforts on teaching, helping students develop the skills they need to decipher and interpret primary sources. Students have uncovered and shared untold stories from our campus history, often in creative and compelling ways. The Archives has played a crucial role in campus conversations about aspects of our history that require a more nuanced understanding than "just the facts." Even social media allows us to share daily historical tidbits, and each one of these is part of a larger story.

So, while for some, Haunted Lawrence still presents the most memorable stories of our institution, we are working on other ways to broaden the picture. These efforts contribute to building a wider awareness of campus history: the good, the bad, and even the ghostly.

Endnotes

- 1 T. R. Moyle, "Spectator," *The Lawrentian*, February 1899.
- 2 "Death of Prof. Jones," *Appleton Weekly Post*, April 14, 1898.

Erin Dix is the university archivist at Lawrence University in Appleton, WI. She holds a Master's Degree in Library and Information Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a Bachelor's Degree from Lawrence University. Contact: erin.k.dix@lawrence.edu.