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**I**t contained nothing earth-shaking, yet the notes written by Dr. Charles Leale gave a visceral and sobering sense of Abraham Lincoln's bloody end. The first physician to reach the mortally-wounded president at Ford's Theater penned a detailed if clinical description of the hole in the back of his head. Long-believed to have been lost, news of the discovery of those notes excited the history community. Indeed, reading the article about it on the Huffington Post website—reached via a link someone had posted on Facebook—left a palpable sense of sadness. Lincoln's murder has become the quintessential pop-cultural touchstone image of a political assassination, challenged only by the more contemporary killing of John F. Kennedy. Leale's notes didn't reveal anything that wasn't already known, but they gave a peek beyond the martyr's myth into just how ghastly the event really was and in very human terms.

And then I scrolled down the page.

# Perils of Popularization

Some historians view 'ghost tours' as trivializing history. Yet they may be the least of issues faced at the intersection with pop-culture.

by Gordon Bond

Below the article was a trailer for the movie "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter." No doubt it made perfect sense to some internet algorithm to place an ad for a movie with "Lincoln" in the title coupled with a news article with "Lincoln" in the headline. Yet the juxtaposition of the two items seemed jarring to me and, perhaps due to the somber tone of the subject above it, somewhat disrespectful. It struck me as just one more example of a trending pop-culture trivialization of history.

But is it?

The image of axe-wielding Abe slaying blood-sucking vampires got me thinking about the controversial alliances between history and the paranormal as expressed in such forms of entertainment—and how some historians embrace it while others run from it as if it were . . . well . . . a blood-sucking vampire.

But it also got me thinking about the ways in which historians have sought to popularize their subject in general. As an area of endeavor that

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encompasses both an established scholarly discipline and a robust amateur community, some forms of popularizing have led to interesting and strong disagreements.

### Ghosts in the Closet

As I write this, we're getting on into September, when I'm sure history groups throughout the country are planning ghost tours in anticipation of October's Halloween spirit. The reasons are obvious enough—any old house of sufficient vintage will most likely have been the setting for some form of tragedy and personal discord—the very fodder for a good haunting story. Haunted houses in literature and movies are almost always old, drafty, creaky structures, just like most historic houses. Cemeteries are an obvious common ground between history and the so-called paranormal. And, unnatural and violent deaths in-mass are a defining feature of any battlefield. If one is so inclined to believe in ghosts, there should be a clear association between such places and the undead—or at least the dead-but-in-limbo.

Even if one doesn't believe poltergeists infest their historic sites, the bottom line for most history groups is simple—people, for better or worse, love ghost stories. Generations have tapped into our primal fear of monsters for fun and profit from the earliest tales told around the campfire to the latest movie featuring sparkling vampires. Those who defend historians glomming onto the present pop-culture trends of vampires and zombies—in addition to the old standby of ghosts—see it as a tool to entice people who might not otherwise be interested in history. Maybe they spend money buying tickets or make donations—chronically short of income, few groups can afford to turn away potential revenue streams. And, of course, there is the opportunity to expose people to “real” history, which is always an important core mission.

“In regards to the ghost tours,” GSL subscriber Neil Yablonsky sums up, “if it gets people interested in history, why not? It also brings in money to the historical site—donations, cost of the tours, trinkets, and such.” That tends to be the attitude most supporters of the idea take.

Bill Normyle is an example of someone who is comfortable straddling the two paradigms and sees the one as an effective tool to draw people to the other. In addition to an interest in “real” history, he also operates Jersey Shore Ghost Tours. “Well speaking as someone who enjoys history AND has conducted ghost tours,” he explains, “I don't feel the two have to be mutually exclusive. While some people come on ghost tours because they're really into the paranormal experience, I look at them as a chance to talk about some not-so-pleasant events that are not taught in schools, but are equally important history lessons! I conduct ghost tours every

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year in Red Bank and Keyport where we discuss unsolved murders, pirates, tragic deaths, and we even throw in figures like Molly Pitcher, but sometimes you need to do whatever you can get to get them ‘in the door!’ A ‘Ghost Tour’ sounds heck of a lot more interesting than a ‘Walking History Tour!’”

From our perspective as historians, a perfect world would be one where “Walking History Tour” elicits at least the same degree of interest as “Ghost Tour”—preferably more. But that’s not the real world and probably never has been. But it has, arguably, gotten worse in the last decade or two. We can lament the contributions to this perceived trend by underfunded history education or even decry the creeping anti-intellectualism of late. But tackling such broad cultural issues simply isn’t within the purview of the average historical society. They can only try their best to influence the communities in which they have some pull. Rather than changing the world, they must adapt to remain relevant within the larger social trends.

And, sometimes, that means an occasional ghost tour.

Bowing to such pop-culturalism can have its reward. Beth Woolley operates a cemetery monument company with her husband, Peter, in Neptune City. While manufacturing modern monuments, she is mindful of her industry’s heritage and sees paranormally-themed cemetery tours as a way of making people aware of the cultural, historic, and artistic resources graveyards really are—and, perhaps most importantly, as places worthy of preservation. “I think that Ghost Tours (I prefer calling them Cemetery Tours) encourage not only an understanding of local history, they also teach an appreciation of the (pardon the bad pun) dying art of memorial design,” she told me. “These tours provide funds for the badly needed restoration of historic cemeteries. I fear that with the trend towards scattering cremains, future generations will no longer have monuments to trace their history.”

Many view the whole ghosts and ghouls thing with tongue planted firmly in cheek—as just a bit of silly fun that defies the image of historians as stuffy bores immersed in a subject as dull, and dusty as dirt. What’s a little loss of dignity if it ultimately helps the cause?

As well-meaning as such efforts may be, however, some view it all as just as ultimately cheapening and trivializing. Where is the line between a fun fundraiser and demeaning degradation? When does portraying a dead historical figure as a ghost stray from creatively educational into bad-taste and disrespectful?

“I do not think ghost tours are about history or education or understanding,” Randall Gabrielan of the Monmouth County Historical Commission told me. “They are about entertainment and money. At

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worst the conductors of ghost tours are prostituting their sites. Many probably deserve a break because they are strained financially and the ghost tours may be their biggest money maker. However, when such significant places like Savannah and Charleston are so ghost-oriented, it has to be the entertainment and money. Frankly, ghost tours disgust me.”

In the interest of full disclosure, it is probably appropriate for me to admit here that my wife and I have been on more than a few ghost tours in various cities and towns we’ve vacationed at. And, neither of us believes in ghosts or the paranormal. History, being both a vocation and avocation for us, explains why what attracts us isn’t the ghosts. The better tours—at least the memorable ones—strongly feature local history. Standing in Philadelphia’s pleasant Washington Square Park, for example, we learned how not far beneath our feet in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had been buried the destitute, African-Americans, and yellow fever victims—not an uncommon practice for the time on what had been communal land. On another tour in Boston, we stopped before an unassuming commercial building we would have likely otherwise passed as unremarkable. It was the location of a “spirit photographer” who counted among his clients a grieving Mary Lincoln who paid good money for a portrait purported to show the late President hovering lovingly over her shoulder.

Obviously, a strictly history tour or even a decent guidebook could have equally enlightened us. But they probably wouldn’t have included the attending ghost stories that, it could be argued, are part of the folk lore that makes up the cultural histories of those communities.

“Real” historians have sometimes been, perhaps, too respectful. This was particularly true of early efforts at popularizing, when it was understood that retelling stories of a community’s origins was laying the foundations for a future sense of civic identity. Consider the reverence with which the so-called Founding Fathers have been regarded, to the point that their human failings have been glossed over or ignored. Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia only began integrated slave life into their popularized—idealized—view of the colonial world in the 1970s. Inaccuracy has been tolerated to avoid unpleasantness in a form of ancestor worship. It has only been relatively recent that it became not quite so unpatriotic to acknowledge the sins of our forefathers.

On the more local scale, communities seeking to attract tourist dollars might find some more salacious aspects of their past anathema to their desired family-friendly image. Murder scenes, brothels, opium dens, and other less-than-respectable aspects of the human condition are still part of our history. Rather than be embarrassed, ghost tours often gleefully embrace this underbelly that other historical groups might feel inclined

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to shy away from. Left out of the serious tourist guides, my wife and I have learned of that side of places thanks to ghost tours.

### **Taking it Seriously**

Personally, I don’t believe in ghosts or the paranormal. Some readers may, and my point here isn’t to argue for or against that, per se. But there is at the least an inherent rolling of the eyes that happens with serious historians when encountering someone who is equally serious that they feel a “presence” in the room. It’s hard to take them seriously, and some historical groups fear they will lose credibility within the history community if they allow the idea of ghosts to even be mentioned, even in the context of Halloween fun. If seen too eager to buy into the whole spirit world thing, they risk losing the support of their historian-base.

“For the fun of it, years ago around Halloween, I went on a ghost tour of the Metlar House Museum in Piscataway,” Yablonski related. The tour was led by an alleged psychic. “Let’s just say a historical tour of the house would have been much more interesting than going to the areas of the house that have ghost activity.”

Maybe the issue isn’t so much that ghost tours in general are inherently bad for popularizing history education as *how* they are done.

Author Linda Zimmermann is someone who made a successful shift from writing strictly “serious” history to fully-embracing a history/paranormal blend. She began with a series of popular self-published books that mined deep the rich and spooky folk lore of New York State’s Hudson Valley. Today she is a regional cottage industry as a “Ghost Investigator” who is sought out for talks, program hosting, and as a talking head for anything in the region having to do with ghosts, zombies, or even UFOs.

Her latest book, the 2011 “America’s Historic Haunts,” took her across the country and gave her an insight into just what this means. “While doing my research for ‘America’s Historic Haunts,’ I had the opportunity to speak with hundreds of historic sites in all 50 states,” she told me. “Severe budget cuts have forced sites to reduce hours or close altogether. Many of these places begged to be in the book so they could find some way to bring in more visitors. The economic reality is that ghosts sell tickets and pay the bills.”

Not that there wasn’t some self-respecting resistance. “There was also a handful of site directors who become angry at the mention of the ‘g word,’ and said they would rather close than ‘sully the integrity’ of their site,” Zimmermann continued. “While I sympathize with their viewpoint, I also have to point out that every culture throughout history has had its myths and legends. Done properly, a combination of ‘real history’ and a

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few spooky stories is entertaining and educational. As one site director told me after I wrote about the history and haunted legends of her house museum, 'Families with children are now showing up for tours who would never be caught dead in a place like this before!' Also, from my own experience and from what I have been told by sites across the country, ghost tours are the most popular and well-attended events of the year, and often have to be extended to additional nights to accommodate the waiting lists. In this economy, can any historic site afford to ignore this opportunity? I have absolutely no doubt that such tours can be educational. I specialize in 'haunted history' and take great pains to present the history of a location accurately, while weaving in a couple of entertaining ghost stories. After these lectures, I always get a lot of questions about the history of the site, so I know the audience was paying attention and actually learned something!"

It's a question of balance and how far one is willing to go. But what about other pop-culture collisions? That between history and art may be more problematic.

#### The Oliver Stone Effect

"Factually debatable movies such as 'JFK' are far more damaging, as people think they are watching the absolute truth," Linda Zimmermann contends. "Unless you are dealing with documented, verifiable facts, history is always an interpretation, yet movies, teachers, and text books often present their views as the incontestable truth. They say history is written by the winners, but it's also written by those with an ax to grind. Which leads me to the ax-wielding vampire slaying Lincoln: No one in their right mind would ever consider something like the Lincoln vampire movie to be anything but fantasy, so while useless historically speaking, it's also harmless."

I would wager that there is at least some of a certain generation who learned much of what they know about John F. Kennedy's assassination from director Oliver Stone's 1991 film, "JFK." It was a cinematic tour-de-force for the conspiratorially-minded, reflecting Stone's personal beliefs that the Warren Commission's report was—to use his words—a "fictional myth." As expected, it drew sharp and polarized critiques from film critics and history scholars alike. "As history, Oliver Stone's *JFK* is dubious," concluded the review-aggregating website Rotten Tomatoes, "but as filmmaking it's electric . . ."

It could be argued that in making people revisit the event, this movie, for all its lack of rigorous historical accuracy, served some greater purpose. Or it could just have been a \$205.4 million-dollar-earning piece of revisionism.

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Historic fiction is, of course, a legitimate literary and cinematic genre. Even such works that make an effort to tread more closely with reality inevitably evoke “artistic license” to permit them to alter time frames or introduce made-up elements to serve a storyline. But in most cases, these modifications are admitted to up front and the consumer ought to be aware what they’re getting themselves into.

As another form of popularizing history, such dramatic adaptations are usually a mixture of both good and bad. The 1989 movie “Glory,” to cite an example, was loosely based on the experiences of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry—the first African-American combat unit formally mustered during the Civil War. As a blend of historic fact and artistic rendering, “Glory” wasn’t—nor was it intended as—a documentary. Nevertheless, it did introduce a new facet of the Civil War to a mass market. The popular view of the African-American experience during the conflict had been largely one of victimhood—of poor slaves to be freed by noble white soldiers and Father Abraham, the Great Emancipator. While some asked why the story of the 54<sup>th</sup> was being told through the eyes of their white commander, there was still something empowering in the idea of black soldiers taking an active part in the fight.

But there is a question that is obvious to those of us who love our history unvarnished—why is it necessary to sex it up in the first place? Why should “real” history feel compelled to force itself into a pop-culture entertainment mold? Why does guiding a nation through a bloody civil war, freeing an enslaved race, and being slain by one of the period’s most popular actors even need the introduction of vampires?

#### **Popular = Dumb?**

Somewhere along the line “popularizing” became synonymous with “dumbing down.” Complex issues need to be boiled down to good guys and bad guys. To some extent, however, that’s always been the case.

“Pop culture does not magnify history, it shrinks it,” asserts Patrick J. Owens, Historian at Picatinny Arsenal. “Yes, many people know of Washington because of the cherry tree, but this does not mean they know Washington, nor even know anything about him. Such stories were ways of removing historical figures from historical context. By focusing on what a good little boy was George, they remove the need to judge him as politician, soldier, and nation builder.”

George and his cherry tree shenanigans was the invention of Mason Lock Weems, a book agent and author, better-known as “Parson Weems,” reflecting an earlier career as an Episcopalian minister. “A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington,” which included the apocryphal line “I cannot tell a lie, I did it with my

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little hatchet,” appeared in 1800—just twenty-four years after the Declaration of Independence.

Weems’ work remains our earliest examples of manipulating history for popular consumption—though in his case it was for more than just entertainment value. His hero-worship of George Washington was extreme, as if he were applying the religious zeal he learned as a minister to interpreting history. Washington became a saint and Weems was his apostle, writing the parables and creation myths for a new nation. Facts were secondary to spirit.

“As the initial post noted, the phenomenon is not new, but it is getting worse,” Owens, remarked, referencing a query I had posted to the H-Net New Jersey history listserv. “Shakespeare seldom missed a chance to get a fact wrong in his history plays, but he still portrayed recognizable human beings dealing with issues of power and morality and, apparently, had no qualms about these matters not interesting the ‘average guy’ of 1599. The premise of the initial post is the ‘average guy’ of 2012 is incapable of following history when presented with any seriousness. I have not and will not see the Lincoln as Van Helsing movie. It may be good movie making, but the core idea is repulsive. It assumes people are so dumbed down they have no interest in a man dealing with issues of slavery, civil war, and preservation of democratic government as the outgrowth of complex social, political, and economic forces but must reduce the cause of over half-a-million deaths to supernatural forces. If we need to reduce Abraham Lincoln to a vampire hunter to teach history, the game, truly, is not worth the effort.”

Hunterdon historian Frank Curcio, however, takes a longer view. “Whenever the topic comes up, my response is this: Who knows more about George Washington—those of us who first learned of him via a story of him and a cherry tree or those “spared” such myths? Does such pop-culture trivialization ultimately serve the greater cause of history education? Or is this part of a trend, between such movies, adding ghost tours, and the increased infusion of pseudoscience on The History Channel? As Joseph Campbell put it: ‘Our myths and our legends are our history.’ One need only read Gilgamesh, the Bible, Homer—for thousands of years of human existence our history has been carried and preserved and passed along to the next generation in our myths and legends. As for Pop Culture—it doesn’t trivialize—it magnifies. All history was at one time Pop Culture. Shakespeare, in his day, was Pop Culture—his plays appealed to the average guy, not the effete snobs of the day. After all, Romeo & Juliet, Macbeth, Hamlet, &c were about what? Sex & violence! If Abe Lincoln saves us from vampires, then it has to be Teddy Roosevelt who takes on the zombie apocalypse!”

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While Owens might disagree, he does concede that—not unlike ghost tours—when done well, popularization through pop-culture can work. “There is a temptation to refer to ‘comic book history,’” he adds, “but the cartoon histories of Larry Gonick proved the medium able to handle the complexities of history very well. As for film, in the not too distant past, historical movies could include ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ and ‘Lion in Winter.’ They took their share of liberties, but neither film maker nor audience panicked at the introduction of a serious topic. The fault is not in the medium but in its use and its users.”

### **The Pseudo-History Channel**

Cable-television customers with a penchant for history largely rejoiced when among the offerings was added something call “The History Channel.” Launched January 1, 1995, it has been hit-or-miss ever since—often miss. The preponderance of programs about World War II had critics calling it “The Hitler Channel.” But at least it was history. Then they were roundly chastised for airing the controversial series “The Men Who Killed Kennedy” in 2003—three episodes of a controversial British documentary that ended with law suits and a promise never to air it again.

It has since drifted into what *Forbes* contributor Brad Lockwood characterized last March as “programs devoted to monsters, aliens and conspiracies.” The highly successful “Pawn Stars” at least maintains an albeit sometimes tenuous link to history. The historic backgrounds of objects brought in for pawn or sale is briefly treated. If you’ve never seen it, think of “Antiques Road Show” with tattoos. “American Pickers” and other programming maintain that flirtation with serious history and are entertaining in their way.

Other shows may interesting, but definitely don’t belong on a channel with “History” in the title. “Ice Road Truckers,” for example, is a reality show that follows drivers in Alaska and northern Canada who make deliveries to remote outposts using roads plowed on the thick but seasonal ice. While it can be entertaining to see how they make a living driving under often dangerous and inhospitable conditions, it isn’t history.

But even these distinctly non-history shows have more merit than the steaming pile of pseudoscience that has become their stock fare—ancient aliens, monster hunters, and doomsday Nostradamus shows. And, while I’m in the midst of a good rant, I might as well also throw in the amount of commercials one has to sit through to watch even that.

I’m not the only one. Google the words “criticism of the history channel,” and page after page of links come up with lamentations over

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the loss opportunity to really bring history to the masses.

“I am totally bummed out by the pseudoscience, pseudo-history, pseudo-psychiatry, pseudo-whatever-you-have that clutters up the TV channels that used to have just good stuff,” laments Clif Ashcraft, a history fan as well as amateur astronomer who includes alleged science-oriented channels in his critique. “I am talking about the history channel, science channel, discovery channel, TLC and the like. I go ballistic when I see the ghost hunter programs as well as the hunting for animal-X programs full of blurry night vision shots and ‘oooooh did you see that!’ comments by really stupid investigators. I can only conclude that we the public (the collective unwashed average) are getting exactly what we want on TV and that it is me that is in left field, wanting, of all things real science and real history. Highlights of today’s viewing have some ignorant redneck showing even more ignorant tourists how to tickle catfish in the muddy waters of some, probably polluted river somewhere in Tennessee or Alabama. Once it might be interesting, but week after week where the only thing that changes is which dumb tourist the redneck is teaching how to tickle the catfish. Even the real science programming is dumbed down and takes a whole hour to cover 10 minutes worth of information.”

Of course, this is driven by ratings—they wouldn’t broadcast this stuff if enough people weren’t tuning in to attract advertisers. Not entirely unlike local history societies, the need for revenue forces imperfect choices—for the local history group, it’s a ghost tour; for The History Channel, it’s ancient aliens.

There is, however, a chicken and egg question here. Have these shows contributed to the lowering of standards when it comes to popularizing history? Or are they simply reflecting an already existing cultural decline?

#### **Shakespeare and a Bible**

I’ve grown up with stories about my great grandfather, James Habacker. How when his father died he had to drop out of the fifth grade and go to work to help support his widowed mother and two brothers in turn-of-the-century Brooklyn. How he worked as a young boy brushing horses that seemed like giants and escaped an explosion in a fireworks factory, running all the way home without once stopping. How he was almost claimed by that scourge of tenement life, “the consumption”—pulmonary tuberculosis that cost him part of his lung. How he overcame his Dickensian origins to become an upright and honorable man whose reputation meant the world to him.

And, how he could recite from memory passages from the two books

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they had—the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. He loved American history and told his granddaughter—my mother—with deep pride of how the Habacker line went back to the American Revolution. “My people helped make this country,” he proclaimed.

How was it that a fatherless grade-school drop-out from Brooklyn could not only list in order the main battles of the War for Independence, but discuss them in detail? He was no scholar, but he valued education and appreciated the sense of identity history gave him. Perhaps such family lore is also the wishful thinking that gives some kind of dignity to an otherwise difficult start. Certainly there were some innate interests—inherited, it seems, by me. I know he could have just as easily ended up dissipating away a meager existence in saloons and brothels as many from those neighborhoods would. Maybe it was the strength of his mother, whom he adored, that kept him on the straight and narrow.

But I think there was also another dynamic at work.

Aside from music halls and bars, where could his generation find their escape after a long day of physical labor, returning to cramped, smelly, stifling apartments? Books, newspapers, and even penny-press tabloids fed latent intellectual ambitions otherwise stunted by circumstance. Popular culture was much more driven by the written word back then. Young James Habacker may have been poor, but he had Shakespeare.

The irony, of course, is that today’s kids have access to information on a scale undreamt of in Habacker’s post-Civil War era youth. But they also have expectations of what “entertainment” is that is far different. Sitting quietly and reading a book has steep competition from the dynamic stimulus offered by mass media.

Have we reached a point where Lincoln needs vampires to keep up?

### Conclusions

Curt Harker of Salem, New Jersey, replied to my listserve query with a single line that may get at the heart of the thing: “Perhaps the thoughtful questions below should be framed first by answering the larger question of the value of educating the public about history.”

He has a point.

Popularizing history is a difficult proposition, leaving us torn between integrity and economics; between our culture as it is and as we would wish it to be.

