

Haunted house: Ghostly legends born of tales of woe

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By Nicole Carter

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PARIS — Old abandoned homes, through their grayish and disheveled declines, often earn fabled status as haunted by ghosts.

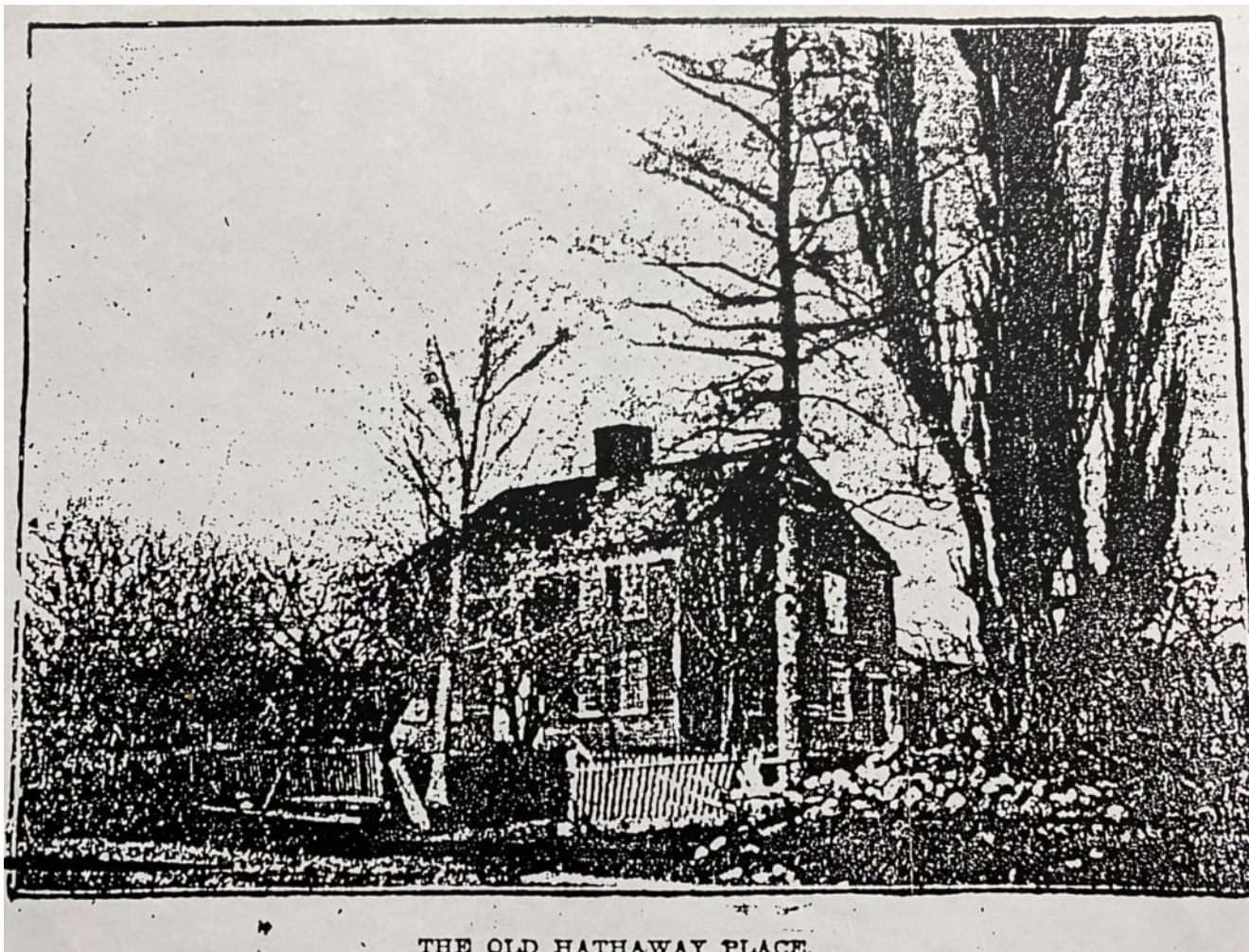
This is especially true when residents were known to have reputations of oddness, eccentricity or scandal. As memories of figures fade with their passing, the sites associated with them can take on new life, aided by neighborhood gossip that accelerates as the tales are repeated through generations.

This was the fate of Daniel Staples of Paris. Once regarded as a town leader and prosperous farmer, Staples experienced marital discord, disgrace and financial downfall.

In 1772, Staples moved from Turner and became one of Paris' first five settlers. On Sept. 20, 1777, he married Mary Webber.

On Nov. 17, 1784, he purchased two lots from Lemuel Jackson in Range 6 on Paris Hill. Covered by a heavy forest, Staples worked to make it one of the best farms in town that boasted the largest herd of dairy cows ever owned in Paris.

As a town father he served in several official capacities through the years: as selectman, church founder, road surveyor and fence viewer.



The once grand home of Paris founder Daniel Staples, a victim of a mental disorder. Staples' abandoned mansion would gain a reputation as a haunted house, reflecting the tragic life of its builder. *Courtesy Paris Cape Historical Society*

Staples built an impressive farmhouse that displayed the depth of his prosperity. Superior pine was ample and supplied the shingles, clapboards, right down to lathes. Staples' home was said to display the finest quality of workmanship to be found in the county.

From its spreading lawns, cultivated fields, orchards and lowing cows, the farm attracted the admiration of all who passed by.

But behind the façade of affluence, however, the Staples estate was in turmoil. After 36 years of marriage, Mary accused her husband of adultery with Betsey Door of Livermore and was granted a divorce.

Mary was awarded the farm assets in their separation settlement, but the two continued to share their home, even as Staples would eventually marry Door.

The newlyweds left Paris for Livermore. But like his first wife, Betsey eventually cast him out and he returned to Paris, penniless and descending from reality.

Given Staples' grand fall from grace, with his former home enduring similar decline years later, it may have been unavoidable that the Staples farm legend became intertwined with the supernatural.

"He became quite taken with perpetual motion," Oxford Cape Historical Society Curator Ben Conant said of Staples. He apparently was convinced that he would invent a way for power to make its own power indefinitely without loss or expense. His preoccupation with the possibility caused him to abandon his responsibilities; he never financially recovered from his costly divorce.

By 1830 Staples was recorded as being a town pauper. During annual town meeting that year townspeople "voted that the poor be put up as auction separately to the lowest bidder . . . Daniel Staples was struck off to Azel Kinsley for ninety-nine cents per week."

Mary Staples sold the farm to Milo Hathaway, who lived on and worked it for a time but decided to relocate to South Paris where his children would receive better education.

The old farm, once a stately symbol of rural grandeur, further wasted away until all that was left were legends and tales.

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In 1932, George Morton wrote that an elderly female acquaintance told him that when she was very young her grandfather brought her inside the abandoned house and to a room on the second floor, where he told her that a man had once hung himself, convincing her the house was haunted.

Despite the morbid tale, she and another young girl took to daring one another to sneak into the house. Neither could ever convince the other to enter that second-floor room, which she claimed retained an unnatural darkness from the rest of the house.

The tale caught on with other generations of Paris Hill youngsters, evolving into a ghost story where it was a woman who hung herself using a bed cord.

The real story of Staples' life was lost to haunting mythology.

Staples sadly spent his final years as a ward of the town of Paris. One of its original settlers and beset by an addled mind, he died homeless and was buried in an unmarked grave. Even his once grand house would not survive. It was eventually dismantled, with parts of value integrated into other buildings around Paris Hill.

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