

WHY I NEVER GET ANYTHING DONE ON TIME, PART 2: FOLLOWING DEVILISH LEEDS

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I have a time management problem. In theory, focus and discipline should overcome it. I admit to lack of both, but my problems often occur because of what I find while researching. Readers of Ancestry Daily News have learned about how I got diverted from my focus when I spotted a Rembrandt in a will (see WHY I NEVER GET ANYTHING DONE ON TIME). [For those who want to know the follow up, the recipient auctioned about 100 pieces of art a year before his death and apparently gave the remainder to the distant cousin. Unfortunately, the inventories are in private hands, so I'll never know more.]

Well, it has happened again. As you know, common surnames are difficult. I had researched most of the very early Smiths in southern New Jersey for a client. There were at least four John Smith progenitors and three Robert Smith progenitors (two of whom married three different Elizabeths, just to confuse me, I'm sure), none related to the other.

But I had one leftover (see I HATE LEFTOVERS). Deborah Smith, of the right age to be a sister to the client's ancestor, married Japhet Leeds. Maybe she would provide the clue to his origin. They appear in Quaker records and in wills. One step was to check Ancestry World Tree to see if anyone had suggested an origin for her. My Internet connection opens up to the Google search engine, and I thought "oh, I should check that first." I typed in "Japhet Leeds." There were a lot of hits. I could see that some mentioned Deborah Smith, so I added her name to the search filter, yielding a more manageable number. There were a couple of the usual family trees, some items from county histories—and some very, very odd things, including interviews with a woman who had written a fictional book about her ancestor, Deborah Smith.

I printed out page after page and started reading. This has got to be one of the most astounding stories I've encountered in my research (even more so than when I stumbled across the website saying that President Harding had been killed by a vampire—see SEARCHING FOR SUBSTANCE).

I was hooked. Clearly the client report would not, once again, go out on time. Instead, I went to the library and researched (on my own time, of course). The best way to convey my amazement is to tell a pieced-together version of the story, without comments on accuracy. Assume that every sentence below begins with the word "purportedly."

When New Jersey finally got a professional hockey team a few years back, it was named the New Jersey Devils. This name derives from the official state demon of New Jersey, the Jersey Devil, legislated in 1939. This creature, with the head of a dog and/or horse, covered with fur or scales, which are red or green, with a tail (or not), walks on its back legs, which have hooves or bird-feet, is

three feet tall or larger than a man, has large wings and a loud harsh cry, and is sometimes violent.

This is one of the oldest legends in America, haunting the pine barrens of south Jersey. Literally centuries of parents have used it as a reminder to children not to play outside after dark and a threat for bad behavior. It gets blamed for ruined crops, dead animals, and curdled milk. It was seen by Joseph, the brother of Napoleon Bonapart, in the early nineteenth century. The *Atlantic Monthly* published a version of the legend in 1859.

Sightings have occurred in the twentieth century, too, especially an outbreak in January and February 1909 that also affected Delaware and Pennsylvania. It attacked firemen (who fought it off with fire hoses) and street cars in Trenton (the city stationed armed guards on the street cars). An enterprising theater owner in Philadelphia painted a kangaroo green, added wings, and charged 10 cents admission. The 1909 outbreak has been explained as migrating sand hill cranes—although what they would have been doing migrating in the dead of winter is beyond me. The Jersey Devil (mysteriously portrayed as a female Bigfoot) was the subject of one of the earliest episodes of the popular TV show "The X-Files."

The relevance (if it can be called that) to my research is that before being named as the official state demon, it was known as the Leeds devil. The story goes that Mother Leeds, who had twelve children already, invoked the Devil during her thirteenth pregnancy. A normal baby was born in 1735, but instantly grew into the monster. It attacked (or not) and/or killed the people in the birthing room, then flew away. For five years it caused damage, at which time a minister or priest (in New Jersey!) exorcised it, apparently for a hundred years, new incidents arising in 1840.

The author of the novel, who claims to have done research, says the couple was Japhet Leeds and Deborah Smith, that Deborah was trained in wiccan (good witchcraft) and was sent from England in 1704 to marry Japhet, whom she had never met (not a Quakerly thing to do!), and that she was known as a healer. My research had already established that they did have twelve children.

Genealogists often find mythical persons in genealogies that try to push backwards from medieval times, but this is absolutely the first time that I've found something suggesting I should add a mythical creature to an eighteenth-century family group. And just in time for Halloween, too!

But the effect on my focus problem didn't stop there. I have been working simultaneously on too many different lines for this client. I was trying to finish a report on another line saying I'd exhausted the resources and that we needed to close it down. Instead, while diligently researching Japhet Leeds, I stumbled across an entry with a wildly

variant spelling of that other surname. Now I can't close it down.

Focus? I try. I really do. But it seems that, once again, the patron saint of genealogy was hovering overhead

wearing that devilish grin as she rewarded my diligence in research in a totally unexpected way.