

Research and Interviews

Many investigators will want to proceed directly to the spooky lodge in the woods. Those who don't might try some preliminary research or interviews in order to be better prepared. There is no timetable and John does not insist or imply that they must go directly to the lodge. He will not micromanage their activities. In fact, he will do little to monitor them unless something catastrophic occurs and comes to his attention. Since he will return to work within a few days of his initial meeting with the investigators, his wife will be the group's primary point of contact.

Some of these investigative points might come up later in the scenario. They are presented here since some groups may anticipate the need.

Jacob Withering

Jacob Withering's recent activities should be the subject of the investigators' scrutiny. Because he was such a private man, little detailed information on his final few months of life can be had from public sources such as newspapers. Interviews are the best option.

Though none of his relatives can provide clarity, his housekeeper is a logical source to seek out. John Withering can only say she left under unusual circumstances and cites rumors of ghost activity as her excuse. The best he can do is to provide her name, Margaret Davis. Neither John nor Marybeth ever learned that she was placed in a sanitarium within days of her departure from Withering Lodge. More on Margaret and how to find her is on page xx.

Locating the executor is as easy as checking with John Withering or consulting the Montpelier telephone directory. Madison Birchard is a forty year old attorney working in private practice in partnership with Edward Hoysradt. Birchard & Hoysradt is a prominent Montpelier law firm which provides a full range of legal services. Madison will not reveal the specifics of the will without John Withering's consent. If asked, he will say he has had Jacob Withering as a client for eleven years. They were not friends, but he did respect him. He cannot provide any insight into the case.

Interviewing the original archivist, Benjamin McCreery, is prudent. John can provide his address in Burlington. Though he has no telephone, he can be contacted in person or by mail. Ben's commentary is provided on page xx.

Analyzing Jacob's personal papers requires a trip to the lodge. Clues available among these include documentary evidence of his purchase of Lot #33 and payments for Margaret Davis' health care. This is described in the next section. The circumstances of Jacob's death should be the subject of the investigation. This should take the investigators to the Burlington Free Press (see page xx) and Essex County Sheriff's Office (see page xx). If asked, John and Madison can reveal that Jacob was buried in the small family plot on the lodge grounds.

Two other possible information sources are the café and general store in Maidstone, the village nearest Withering Lodge. Jacob patronized both fairly frequently. At Maidstone

Café, waitress Quality Summerville can recall that she last saw "Mr. Withering" sometime in November. He was in good health and spirits then. A similar story can be had from the clerk at Maidstone Goods, Tom Johnson. Both Quality and Tom have positive opinions of Jacob. If at some point they are asked about Margaret Davis (see page xx), they will admit that local rumor has it she left because of ghosts at the lodge.

Withering Lodge

Withering Lodge is located a few miles west of Maidstone Lake, a deep, clear lake created at the end of the last Ice Age. It is in a remote, forested area near a pond located southeast of Bull Mountain and northwest of where Granby Stream empties into Paul Stream. It is reached by a single lane dirt road. During winter months, the lodge is often isolated by deep snow. At other times of the year, heavy rains often wash out the road, preventing access to the lodge. There are no neighboring farms, houses, or inhabited properties.

Construction began in 1840 and was financed by the Wharton family of Montpelier. The desire was to create a comfortable vacation home in an isolated wilderness environment. The poor roads and lack of county infrastructure resulted in ballooning costs and delays and it wasn't until the autumn of 1844 that the lodge was complete.

The Whartons were wealthy landowners with properties throughout much of New England. Unfortunately, the family died out by the 1850s and the lodge was put up for sale by the executors of the estate of Thomas Wharton in 1856. Harold Withering purchased the property and intended for it to be a vacation home and perhaps even a place for him to retire.

There is nothing sinister or unusual about the history of the house or its construction. The Whartons were once well known in Vermont and New Hampshire and their names are prominently mentioned in regional historical records and newspapers of the first half of the nineteenth century.

The basic history of the house can be had from John Withering though he won't recall specific years or names. Pinning down the details requires research at the Vermont Historical Society in Barre. The chief historian, Hyman Fischer, can assist in locating records that confirm the story. Investigators who insist on doing their own research must succeed in Library Use rolls and spend one to three hours at the Society. Much of this information is also available in 1856 issues of the Burlington Free Press, but locating relevant articles is an inefficient use of time. Unless they know to consult only 1856 issues, many hours or even days might be spent looking for the information.

Land records on file at the county courthouse in Guildford document the acquisition of the lodge on March 10, 1856. No other information on the lodge or the Withering family is available there.

The Housekeeper

Forty-three year old Margaret Davis was Jacob Withering's full time, live-in housekeeper for fourteen years. She cleaned the house and arranged for contractors to perform needed repairs

and structural maintenance. Jacob relied heavily on her to care for the mundane day-to-day needs of the property. Jacob considered her to be a valuable friend and associate.

It was something of a surprise to area residents and to John Withering when it was learned that she had unexpectedly quit. The two were always good friends and Jacob paid Margaret very well. The circumstances leading up to her departure were never made public, but events after Jacob's death have led to rumors that she left because of the alleged haunting.

The rumors are nothing more than conjecture, but are nevertheless accurate. Margaret was unable to bear the increasing amount of supernatural activity. The screaming skull particularly unnerved her and this led to a nervous breakdown. Margaret left Withering Lodge and checked into the Brattleboro Retreat, a state run mental hospital in Brattleboro, Vermont. Jacob provided a substantial sum to the hospital to ensure she was properly cared for.

There are two ways to learn of Margaret's fate. The county sheriff, Phillip Döhring, knows what happened to her and can reveal this to the investigators. There is nothing secret about it, but he does not freely discuss the matter out of concern for Margaret's reputation. If asked, he will provide the information to the investigators as long as he knows they are employed by John Withering.

A more difficult means of discovering Margaret's fate is to find and read Jacob's most recent accounting ledger. His personal checkbook is still in the desk in his office. The ledger documents what checks he has written and shows one is made out to the Brattleboro Retreat for \$1,000.00. The entry is dated January 9, 1923. The Brattleboro Retreat is also known as the Vermont Asylum for the Insane. Investigators unfamiliar with Vermont will probably have to ask what the "Brattleboro Retreat" is. Though there is no explanation for what the payment is for, it is certainly unusual. Perceptive investigators might notice from the ledger that Margaret quit a few days before this payment was made. This ledger is described further later in the scenario and can provide other useful information.

Interviewing Margaret Davis is possible, but requires a trip to Brattleboro. The investigators must then convince her psychiatrist, Dr. Edmond Wallace, of the need. She is sufficiently stable to accept visitors, but he wants to avoid inducing stress. He will not discuss the details of her condition with anyone and is not susceptible to bribery or coercion. Gaining access requires the group's spokesperson to succeed in a Persuade roll at 20% of the normal chance of success. If any deaths have occurred at Withering Lodge since the arrival of the investigators, Dr. Wallace is more likely to agree. Persuade skill in this case is only halved. He will automatically grant access if the investigators get Sheriff Döhring to support them.

An interview with Margaret is revealing, but provides little that is concrete. She will explain that the house is haunted by "demons." She will graphically describe the terrifying screams that continue to haunt her nightmares. Because she never sought answers, she cannot pinpoint the source of the screams nor does she know what is responsible. If asked, she will recall that the screaming started sometime in December of last year. Her nerves gave out by the end of the month and she quit on January 2 of this year. Placing too much pressure on Margaret

may cause her to snap, prompting the staff to eject the inter-viewers from the premises. Merely recalling the events is not too stressful.

There is one bit of hard information she can provide. If the group asks about Lot #33, she can reveal it is from the estate sale of a "Roger or Richard Zerrien." She is unsure of the first name, but can reveal the auction was in Hartford, Connecticut in November of last year. This event is not of particular importance to her and she has not connected it to the phenomena which erupted soon after its arrival. She did not pay much attention to what was in the lot and did not help unpack it.

The Archivist

The original archivist John hired is Benjamin McCreery, a thirty year old unemployed librarian from Burlington. Ben lives in a two room flat in a low income area near the main campus of the University of Vermont.

Ben will grant an interview if approached openly and politely. He will insist any interview be conducted at a public place such as a restaurant. This is partly because he is embarrassed about his living conditions and partly out of concern for his safety. His experiences at Withering Lodge had a lingering effect and he is still a bit jumpy. No payment or bribe is required for him to talk. In fact, he will be insulted if someone makes a crass bribe attempt.

Though he has not discussed his experiences at Withering Lodge since leaving Essex County, he has no reason to keep these events secret. His commentary can provide a fair amount of insight into recent phenomena. Any Psychology rolls attempted on him during an interview indicate he is sincere and believes what he is saying.

Ben can say that he was hired just two weeks after Jacob Withering's death. He answered an ad John Withering took out in the Burlington Free Press. After an interview, he was hired and arrived at Withering Lodge on Friday, February 23. His job was to conduct a complete inventory of the artifacts in the house. The task is no small one. Ben immediately realized it would take weeks or perhaps even months for him to complete the job.

Ben was immediately uncomfortable being in the lodge. Though it was physically comfortable and there was an ample supply of foodstuffs, he nevertheless found it difficult to sleep. He always had the feeling he was being watched. At first, he dismissed these feelings as being caused by living alone in a large, isolated house.

After the first few days, Ben started noticing unusual things. Objects would go missing, only to reappear at places where they didn't belong. Cold drafts were felt in rooms that were well heated and shut up tight. Windows that had been closed and locked the night before were found open the next morning. Parapsychologists will recognize much of what he describes as being classic poltergeist-like activity. No overt manifestations were witnessed. After the first week, Ben heard the terrible scream. He was never able to locate the source, but is confident it came from somewhere on the second floor. The scream was usually heard at night, but did occur once in

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