

2017

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### Recommended Citation

Spicola, Carlo G. Jr. (2017) "The Haunting of Egmont Key: A Soldier's Story," *Sunland Tribune*: Vol. 34 , Article 7.

<https://doi.org/10.5038/2575-2472.34.6>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol34/iss1/7>

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# The Haunting of Egmont Key Key: A Soldier's Story

Carlo G. Spicola Jr



*For Antoinette, my loving wife and best friend for over one half century. Thank you for always being there for me.*

*I have been urged by family, friends and associates over the past half century to put my research of history, particularly local and military history, to print. Over thirty years ago while serving as a City of Tampa Councilman, I called for a thousand volunteers to form once again the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment 'Rough Riders' so as to celebrate 'Roosevelt's visit to Tampa in 1898. This was successful and the organization survives to this day involving itself in charitable, educational and historic preservations projects. This work is a result of some of that research.*

It was deep in the winter of 1896 when John O'Neil left home in Scranton, Pennsylvania. His mother had been widowed several years before when her husband was killed in a steel mill accident. No social security or company insurance policies were available in those days, so she endeavored to keep her home and household going by taking in boarders as well as washing and cooking for others. John had obtained the equivalent of a third grade education through his mother's efforts and the helpfulness of some of her boarders. It was from one of the boarders, Señor de la Cruz, a peculiar older fellow, with grey hair, beard and a heavy Spanish accent that John had learned of silver prospecting in New Mexico. Indeed, Señor de la Cruz had told many tales of adventure while prospecting in New Mexico. He related that on one stormy night he had taken refuge in a large crevasse or narrow cave on the side of a mountain in the New Mexico Jemez Range and by force of habit had taken a few sample stones from the narrow opening. He had hurriedly left the next morning heading for an area near Los Alamos where several recent silver strikes had been made. He had that evening built a roaring campfire, inspected the stones and discovered them to appear to be over 75% pure silver ore. He could never find the site again but did find a vein of silver later on in the Nacimiento Mountains, enough to retire on once he sold his claim.

When John had reached New Mexico, he had found towns such as Albuquerque, Las Cruces, Santa Fe and Silver City to be roaring boomtowns with all the appearance and activities of earlier

"Gold Rush Days" in California. It was 1897 and John had stayed clear of the towns as much as possible that first year, other than visiting for supplies and taking advantage of the local "watering holes" and "bawdy houses" that inevitably spring up when and where necessity dictates. Otherwise, he stayed clear of "civilization".

It was early August of 1897, when John, having worked over eight months in the Jemez Mountain Range, hit pay dirt. It appeared to be the same crevasse Señor de la Cruz had by chance found, taken refuge in and lost several years before. The ore was spectacularly rich, nearly 80% pure. The distance between his strike and the nearest claims office was forty miles as the crow flies and nearly three times that distance by the Indian trace paths and trails of that period. He wasted no time getting there and filing his claim.

John's pack mules could only carry about four hundred pounds of ore each and an abundance of outlaws in that area made for very dangerous trips from his mine to buyers in Albuquerque.

Seven months of pure mining took its toll on John, as he was used to hard work but mining was brutal labor. In addition one had to keep an eye open at all times for claims jumpers and bandits. It was February of 1898 when he brought what was to be his final load of ore to Albuquerque. The Battleship *Maine* had exploded and sunk in Havana Cuba's Harbor and war fever was abundant. News of Spain's cruelties directed at Cubans incited anger among New Mexico's citizens. O'Neil was taken up with war fever, too. On March 9<sup>th</sup>, Congress

unanimously appropriated \$50 million to be used by the President for national defense. On April 20 President McKinley demanded Spain withdraw from Cuba and within days, five companies of Georgia Militia arrived in Tampa, followed by New York's 69th Regiment. The units camped side by side in Tampa's Desoto Park, The Georgia Militia clothed in Confederate Gray and the 69th New York in Regular U.S. Army Blue, an unusual sight over 30 years after the U.S. Civil War.



President McKinley, within two months of the *Maine's* destruction and after intense but fruitless negotiations with Spain, asked for a declaration of War. Heavy lobbying by Assistant Secretary of The Navy Theodore Roosevelt and Colonel Leonard Wood resulted in permission to form a one-thousand-man volunteer western cavalry unit under Colonel Leonard Wood and newly commissioned Lt. Colonel Theodore Roosevelt. O'Neil quickly sold his claim, packed up some silver he had smelted and had it shipped to his mother in Scranton, Pennsylvania via wagon, then train. The letter he mailed her to tell of its shipment was never delivered. Then, along with one

hundred and seventy nine others from New Mexico, traveled to San Antonio, Texas to join Roosevelt's "Rough Riders." Volunteers were being mustered in from The Arizona, Oklahoma, and The Indian Territories as well as Texas, with a smattering coming in from many other areas including a few New York City Policemen and Ivy League Athletes. Hispanics, American Indians, Former Western Indian Fighters and Lawmen, many were tough and wild cowboys, some hardened miners and a few undoubtedly wanted men. A number of millionaires were included in their ranks as well. O'Neil did not quite reach that lofty status but with the sale of his claim he had moved in that direction when he had joined up.

The regiment having been put together and trained during the month of May, 1898 was eager and ready to leave San Antonio, Texas. The four day trip to Tampa, Florida, the port of embarkation, would prove to be tedious but stimulating. The night before leaving San Antonio, a concert was held honoring the regiment.



The music was conducted by the most famous band master in all of Texas,

Professor Beck, to signify closure at the end of the concert, three Rough Riders were to stand and fire their blank loaded pistols in the air. When the presentation ended, the three stood and fired. Suddenly, bedlam broke loose as hundreds of viewing Rough Riders, thinking they should do the same, arose and fired their loaded pistols into the air. Thousands of viewers in the audience panicked as hundreds of live round projectiles fell to the earth, virtually as a shower of metal.



Regiment Tiffany with Reg. Lieutenant Woodbury Knox. Captain Jenkins. Lieut. H. R. Demore.



*Rough Riders Training with Colt Machine Guns, Donated by Tiffany's*

It took seven locomotives and seven sizeable train sections to transport over 1200 horses and mules as well as to carry 999 Rough Riders to Tampa. The first stop was in New Orleans, Louisiana, where the men were given supervised permission to

visit the French Quarter. The quarter in 1898 was literally without inhibition. Houses of ill repute, oyster, beer and whiskey joints were plentiful and varied. Some advertised their wares by installing swings just inside enlarged windows and having some of the scantily clad girls swing out and over the sidewalk and over pedestrian's heads. John and many others had never seen or experienced commotion and sinful activity at such a magnitude, so they gleefully took part in it to the extreme.

The next stop was Tallahassee, Florida where news of their shenanigans had preceded them to the extent that they were met at the edge of town by citizens and law enforcement officials with food and refreshment and firmly told to stay out of town. It appeared that chickens and hogs had seemingly disappeared at nearly every rest stop made by the Rough Riders on their way towards that point in their journey to Tampa.

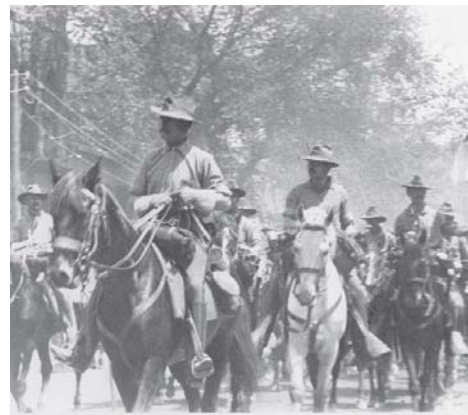
Their last stop before Tampa was Lakeland, Florida which in 1898 was a very rural farming and ranching area with very strong conservative Old South attitudes. These feelings surfaced quickly when black American troopers of the 10th Cavalry "Buffalo Soldiers" tried to get haircuts at a local barber. The barber refused and a shooting occurred leaving the barber dead and a black trooper in jail. He was later broken out by his fellow troopers. On June 1, Tom Tiger, Chief of The Seminole Indians of Florida, visited The Lakeland Camps of the Rough Riders asking if he and members of his tribe could join as scouts so as to be able to participate in the fight for Cuban Independence. Tom Tiger was at least six

and one half feet tall and created quite a sensation.

Tampa appeared to sit on pine-covered sand flats with occasional clusters of Live Oak Trees clad in Spanish moss. A collection of handmade wooden buildings and houses occupied most of the town except for the nearby Ybor City section's cigar factories, some of which were constructed of red brick. The greatest exception was the Tampa Bay Hotel, itself made of red brick, with several beautiful silver Moorish minarets crowning its roof. It was at this enormous winter hotel, that the army expeditionary force commanded by Major General William R. Shafter made its headquarters. At night, it was ablaze with light and music from its band was heard for miles in the darkness and silence of the surrounding town. The exception being the red brick El Pasaje Hotel and gaming palace, recently erected by the owners of the Ybor & Manrara Cigar Factory along with a nearby brewery. The Ybor Cigar Manufacturing and Latin Quarter District was about two miles away from the Tampa Bay Hotel. Tampa's main three industries in 1898 were cigars, fish and beer, in that order.

Upon their arrival, the Rough Riders Regiment traveled mounted through town along with their supplies loaded upon commandeered wagons. They were stopped by the Tampa Police Chief and presented with a Tampa City Council petition to "Keep Teddy's Terrors" within camp bounds. The petition was quickly disposed of by Colonel Leonard Wood, The Rough Riders senior commander.

The regiment rested for one day, then began drilling, first on foot then on horse. It was later learned that all cavalry units would have to leave their horses behind in Tampa due to a shortage of transports. In the evening, those who could afford it were given leave to visit local establishments for their refreshment and/or amusement. John O'Neil, having a number of fellow New Mexican troopers of Spanish descent always at his side and having learned a good bit of the Spanish language in the past year, blended in well with the local Spanish/Cuban population. Tampa Town's population in 1898 contained thousands of individuals of Spanish and Italian descent and nearly all favored Cuban independence from Spain. In fact many of those same ethnic groups had given cash donations directly to Cuban independence leader Jose Marti several years before, upon his last visit to Tampa. (Donors of \$5.00 in gold, more than a week's salary in 1894, included the grandfather of this writer.)



Tampa was divided into four sections in June of 1898 – The Ybor City Latin Quarter District, old Fort Brooke, Downtown Tampa which included the Tampa Bay Hotel and Port Tampa which

was about eight miles distant from the other three. All had their special items of interest.

The Ybor City District had become in just a few years “The Cigar Manufacturing Capital of the World.” Its Latin-majority population spoke Spanish and most worked in the cigar industry. Old Fort Brooke contained the remnants of Tampa’s earliest military post that had been active during the Seminole Indian wars, as well as a Confederate facility during the Civil War. The Fort was closed in 1882 and partially occupied by squatters and individuals who set up low-brow establishments out of the reach of local lawmen. Port Tampa was a shipping area nearest the deep water channels to the Gulf of Mexico. Immediately adjacent to it sprang up a ramshackle boom town called “Last Chance City” solely to supply “the needs” of the soldiers before they boarded the transports for the invasion of Cuba.



At one point on June 7th as the transports began to take on soldiers, supplies and equipment, there was a line over a quarter mile long leading upstairs over one shabby “Last Chance City” sundry store.

John O’Neil had brought along over \$1,000 in gold and silver coins, considered a

small fortune in those days and just a small part of his earnings from mining and the sale of his claim. He and his close New Mexican fellow troopers gravitated to the “Cherokee Club” located in Ybor City’s El Pasaje Hotel. The hotel and club had been erected by The Ybor & Manrara Cigar Manufacturing Co. to entertain important cigar dealers and distributors from all over the world. Accommodations or service of any kind was available there.

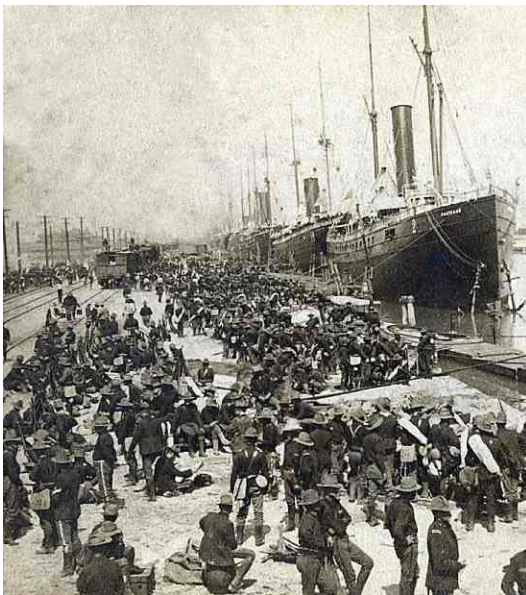
On his first visit to the Cherokee Club one evening, John had met a beautiful lady, possibly a server, in its restaurant area. Her name was Antonia DeTavola. He was struck by her classic beauty and charm. Her parents had emigrated to the U.S. from Sicily a few years before and had the misfortune of contracting yellow fever and passing away a year before. Antonia had tried working in the cigar factories but her fair skin had reacted badly to tobacco. John learned that she was of noble birth with ancestor’s traceable back to the time of the Eastern Roman Empire. The brutal advance of the Ottoman Empire’s Armies had forced family predecessors and tens of thousands of others to flee to Italy and Sicily. John spent every off-duty hour with Antonia utilizing the surprisingly modern Tampa Electric Street Car Line to tour the city and lunch at The Tampa Bay Hotel as well as at Ybor’s Las Novedades Restaurant. It was a torrid affair, only three remarkable evenings and parts of three days before Most Rough Riders, including John, were ordered to Port Tampa, eight miles distant, to board a ship for Cuba. He had offered to marry her but she was afraid and had refused, citing it was too soon and that they

would marry upon his return, a decision she immediately and forever regretted.



*The Tampa Bay Hotel hosted TR Roosevelt & Army Headquarters*

Chaos reigned as the transports loaded at Port Tampa. Several regiments of a thousand men each were regularly assigned the same ship, capable of holding less than one half that many. The Rough Riders fared no better after first having to commandeer a coal train to convey them eight miles to Port Tampa. They were allowed to take less than 600 of their 1000 man regiment and only a few officers' horses along with some mules.



When the invasion force had completed loading, they pulled out into the channel to await orders to depart. During the delay of several days, people set fire to "Last Chance City" near the shore line. A spectacular fire resulted, quite entertaining to the bored shipboard troopers. On June 13, 1898, the invasion force now called the 5th Corps finally sailed for Cuba, past Tampa's lighthouse on Egmont Key at the Mouth of Tampa Bay. Nine days of steaming brought them off the coast of Daiquiri, Cuba, a small coastal town near Santiago de Cuba. The shoreline was bombarded with naval cannon, the troops were then put ashore in lifeboats, horses were thrown overboard so as to make their own way ashore. After one night's rest, the "Rough Riders" were marched up the coast to the town of Siboney to rest and await reinforcements for the upcoming battles.

Early the next morning the regiment marched towards Santiago to an intersection of two trails in a heavily forested area called Las Guasimas. Upon approaching the crossroads, a dead Cuban insurgent was found on the trail, prompting the Rough Riders to disperse to the left and right. The movement had not yet been completed when the Spanish opened fire with their Mauser rifles, utilizing smokeless powder which made it difficult to spot them. Captain Allyn Capron and Sergeant Hamilton Fish were acting as point for the advance, in skirmish line fashion, under heavy Spanish Mauser fire. Within minutes that seemed like an eternity they had helped force a Spanish retreat at the cost of their lives. The "Rough Riders" had sustained thirty-four wounded and seven



killed. The dead were quickly gathered and buried alongside one another at the summit of the Las Guasimas Trail before the dreaded Cuban land crabs could get to them.



Several days had elapsed as the American Army's 5th Corps moved slowly toward Santiago. The first obstacles were a line of forts and entrenchments stretching from the town of El Caney to Kettle Hill and San Juan Hill, surrounding Santiago. The objective of the cavalry units, including the Rough Riders, was Kettle Hill, while the infantry targeted San Juan Hill and the fortified town of El Caney. The bombardment of El Caney began the day's fighting followed by a frontal assault by General Lawton's Infantry Division on its fortifications. A severe and brutal charge with fixed bayonets was ordered and after intense fighting the town was captured. Prior to the assault, many U.S soldiers had pinned their names on their backs so as to be readily identified should they fall in battle, a practice not unknown during The U.S. Civil War. The cavalry units and General Hawkins's Infantry advanced upon hearing the cannon bombardment of El Caney. The advance and disbursement of the regiments

was particularly hazardous in that their movements were easily visible to the entrenched Spanish troops in their fortified hillside positions. Many cavalymen were killed or wounded as they dispersed and lay under scant cover awaiting orders to advance, which seemed an eternity in coming.

Roosevelt was near desperate to charge the hillside. He sent messenger after messenger asking for orders to advance, as his men were suffering greatly from Spanish Mauser fire. Finally Lt. Col. Dorst on horseback rushed up to Col. Roosevelt with permission from General Sumner to "advance and assault the hill to your front."

Roosevelt's crowded hour had begun. He leaped upon his horse and ordered the men forward in skirmish column formation. The men first moved forward slowly, then more and more rapidly. They took casualties and exchanged fire with the entrenched Spanish troops. Finally, nearing the hilltop they leapt forward at a run until they swarmed over the Spanish trenches. Roosevelt having been fired at virtually point blank by a Spanish soldier, returned fire and killed his assailant. Upon taking Kettle Hill, the Rough Riders directed their fire at nearby San Juan Hill which was being assaulted by elements of Gen. Kent's infantry Division led by Gen. Hawkins. At nearly the same instant Lt. Parker's Gatling guns opened up on the Spanish positions, at first startling the Rough Riders, then causing them to cheer. The first Rough Riders to reach the hilltop were of Troops G, E and F. John O'Neil, of course, was in E Troop and virtually the first to reach the top uninjured, having clubbed

senseless two Spanish soldiers with the butt of his empty carbine after emptying his magazine into several others. The regiment along with the two other dismounted cavalry units rested only momentarily before moving forward to the next line of hills fully in sight of Santiago. There, they encountered heavy air-bursting artillery fire from the city itself which incurred casualties among the Rough Riders and other units. Spanish snipers also inflicted casualties until proper trenches could be scraped out by hand, rifle butt or the few digging tools available. The final siege of Santiago de Cuba had begun.

That evening the cavalymen lay in their shallow scraped-out depressions shivering in the coolness of the night and the settling dew, when at 4:00 a.m. rifle fire broke out from the Spanish lines and a fitful counterattack had begun. It was immediately beaten back by combined rifle fire from United States cavalry and infantrymen and the firing died out within a few minutes.

The next day Lt. Parker brought up his Gatling gun and placed it alongside the "Rough Riders", along with their Colt machine guns and a dynamite gun they had brought (forerunner of the modern portable mortar). In days to come they were used effectively against well-entrenched Spanish positions.

On the second and third day of the siege it became apparent that Spanish sharpshooters and guerillas were inflicting more casualties than the enemy regulars. It appeared that many of their positions had been overrun by rapid U.S. advances and

they had no time to escape. It was later learned that they had been told that U.S. troops showed no mercy or quarter if one surrendered. These "snipers" would shoot medical personnel, the wounded, water bearers, all with indifference. It became an unbearable situation so Col. Roosevelt sent out twenty hand-picked men and moved them into the jungle before dawn so as to spend the entire next day searching for the snipers and any other unfortunate Spaniards who exposed themselves. This they did with skill and daring.

It was July 4th, after three days of fighting that a truce was declared, even after which two guerillas to the rear had continued to fire on our men. Roosevelt dispatched his sharpshooters, one being John O'Neil, and the Spanish guerillas were swiftly sent into oblivion. Time passed slowly between the July 4 truce and the city's formal surrender on July 17th. Three days after the surrender, the Rough Riders were moved back to the foothills near El Caney where they went into camp. The area looked clean and healthy, but it was not, as the men were already suffering from lack of proper food as well as mosquito-borne malarial fever and the cool clear pond and creek waters contained deadly amoeba. Many of the troopers, sick or wounded, were sent back towards Siboney, most had to walk or be carried on litters. Few wanted to be sent to the makeshift hospitals which lacked cots, proper food and even cover. Many sick or wounded refused to leave the regiment and took their chances with their fellow soldiers. In many cases Roosevelt and his officers used their own money to buy fresh rations for their men. Finally by July

23, fresh meat was obtained, the men fared better but malarial fever was crippling. Yellow Fever broke out among the Cubans and caused a near panic among medical authorities in Cuba as well as in Washington D.C.



John O'Neil had contracted malaria and amoebic dysentery as well and was sent to Tampa's Egmont Key Quarantine Station, via an ill-supplied and staffed ship, where a field tent hospital had just been erected. He arrived there on July 31, 1898 with 180 other ill soldiers but no one had informed the station of their imminent arrival, hence few if any proper supplies were on hand to care for them. A great scandal erupted, mainly reported in *The New York Times*, it seems the Treasury Department was responsible for setting up the quarantine stations, only no one, particularly The War department, had informed them as to how quickly they would be needed. The Reverend Charles Herald returned on the same ship and reported the station was adjacent to a swamp of putrid stagnant water and the food was unfit for human consumption. Herald had to beg for and pay a dollar for a cup of coffee. The beautiful sandy beach was off limits to "detainees", guarded by sentinels with orders to shoot if need be. To

complicate matters, three days after their arrival, a tremendous storm blew over many of the tents which were old and leaky at best, soaking the ill, weakened soldiers. Antonia had heard of John's arrival on the Key on the day of the storm so she immediately booked passage on the day steamer that supplied the station and reached there as the exposure to cold rain extracted the last bit of John's strength. He had believed she would soon be present and had forced himself to live long enough to see her again. He passed away in her arms.



John was buried on the Island Key but disinterred in 1909 and reburied in The St. Augustine Florida Historic Military Cemetery with no mention of the war, his military unit or even date of death on his headstone until the year 2003 when discovered by the Tampa 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment "Rough Riders" In cooperation with Barbara Schmidt, a leading Egmont Key Historian and Preservationist. At their insistence and with the cooperation of the Florida National Cemetery staff of Bushnell, Florida, a new proper headstone was created and dedicated with proper military honors.



John's mother in Scranton, PA had never received his letter, but she did finally receive the proceeds of his silver mine after he had passed. She never had to labor again. Antonia never married but the results of their brief courtship produced a child and the funds John had left her in one of Tampa's two banks allowed her to purchase a small restaurant that exists to this day. John Jr. served in World War I, II and Korea, and his son in Vietnam and Desert Storm, both as highly decorated officers. His grandson presently serves in Afghanistan as a Special Forces operative, a most dangerous but necessary task.

It is now known to Egmont's more frequent visitors, that at dusk and even the very dark early morning hours, when normally all one could hear would be the soft lapping of waves on its vacant sandy shore, that movement, the sound of shuffling feet through sand and grass, along with soft voices, can barely but surely be sensed. One would wonder why until reading some of the known history of the Key.

It is known that Ponce de Leon sailed past it in 1513 in his failed quest for

gold and the fountain of Youth. In 1528, the ill-fated Panfilo de Navarez expedition passed near it with four hundred eighty men only all to die or be killed except three who finally reached Mexico. In 1567, Pedro Menendes de Aviles, founder of Saint Augustine, sailed past the key to visit Tocobaga, a Timuqua Village located near present day Safety Harbor, Florida. In 1757 Francisco Celi of Spain surveyed the Key followed by British Surveyor George Gauld in 1763 who named it Egmont after John Perceval, Second Earl of Egmont in England. In 1821 Florida became part of The United States and a state in 1845. In 1846, Congress funded a lighthouse to be constructed on Egmont. It was in operation only a short time before the hurricane of 1848 struck Tampa Bay, severely damaging the lighthouse (The Lighthouse keeper saved himself and his family by tying a rowboat to several palm trees for him and his family to ride out the storm in) and virtually destroying Tampa's Fort Brooke. In 1858 Egmont was used as a prison for Seminoles being shipped to Western Reservations and that same year a second and stronger lighthouse was completed. In 1861 The Union Navy fortified the Key to use it as a blockading station, prison and haven for runaway slaves as well as Union Sympathizers.

In 1882 it was declared a Military Reservation and in 1898 at the onset of The Spanish-American War, Fort Dade was constructed upon it, along with a Quarantine Station for soldiers returning from that conflict. The key is now a wild life refuge as well as a Florida State park. The burials on the key were many, some deaths

caused by wounds, sickness, hunger and/or despair. Of those burials many were disinterred and moved in 1909 but many others, whose wooden markings, if any, were lost to hurricanes and brush fires are unknown as to exact location. Is it any wonder why strange sounds and happenings have been heard and even observed there?



## **BOOKS OF INTEREST, REFERENCES AND SOURCES**

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