

A SÉANCE AT THE OCTAGON HOUSE

By Ellen Knight¹

“There are those who hold that houses inevitably assume something of the character of their owners,” H. P. Lovecraft wrote in *The Watchers Out of Time*. How true this is especially likely to be when the owner is also the builder, as is the case with one of Winchester’s most distinctive houses built by one of its more individual residents.



Artist, poet, author, and horticulturalist, Edward Augustus Brackett was respected in the community as a remarkable man of diverse attainments. “His character is unique and slightly eccentric,” family genealogist Herbert I. Brackett wrote. “By those who knew him as an artist his peculiarities were spoken of as the eccentricities of genius.” His house also was unique and slightly eccentric.

After commencing a career as an artist in Cincinnati and New York City, Brackett moved to Boston in 1841. A year later he married Amanda Folger of Cincinnati whose family, like his, had New England roots. While he retained a studio in Boston, the Bracketts soon moved to Woburn.

In 1848, Amanda Brackett purchased several acres of land in what was then a wooded and undeveloped area of South Woburn (soon to become Winchester) located near the end of Winthrop Street where Highland Avenue would later be laid out. The choice suited Brackett’s love of a life near nature. He used the land to supplement his income as a sculptor by growing grapes and strawberries and raising cucumbers under glass. He later raised Mongolian pheasants and bred Belgian hares there.

THE OCTAGON HOUSE

The house he built on the land was apparently driven by economy, inspired by a book written by Orson Fowler, titled *A Home for Ail; or a New Cheap, Convenient, and Superior Mode of Building* (pub. 1848). The possibility that he had the book because the phrenologist Fowler and the sculptor Brackett were acquainted in New York has been raised, but, though they had at least one friend in common (William Cullen Bryant) and a remote (and possibly unrealized) family connection (Amanda Brackett was a fifth cousin of Fowler’s sister-in-law), an actual association is unknown.

An anecdote in Brackett’s obituary related that he began drawing his house plans as an amusement during a snowstorm, basing them on Fowler’s argument that an octagon shape was more economical and healthful than a rectangle. When the house started to go up in the

woods in the early 1850s, townspeople reportedly laughed, warned Brackett that it would surely be blown down, and nicknamed it the "Crow's Nest." Over 150 years later, it still stands at 290 Highland Ave.²

SPIRITUALISM

At the same time the Bracketts were acquiring a home, Spiritualism surged in popularity across America. The 19th century was an age of many new developments and movements in science, philosophy, and religion, and Spiritualism was one of them. It began in Hydesville, N.Y. with the spirit-rapping of the Fox sisters, who went on to careers as mediums. Others followed suit, with simple spirit-rapping succeeded by alleged psychical communication during trances and spiritual manifestations. The appeal of spirits able to communicate with the living through mediums found a receptive audience in America, all the way up to the White House, especially after the massive losses suffered on the battlefields of the Civil War.

Brackett became interested in Spiritualism as an outgrowth of his studies on Mesmerism. He wrote that in 1840 he became acquainted with Dr. Robert Hanham Collyer, a mesmerist and phrenologist, who was lecturing on Mesmerism in New York (*pictured right*). Although originally believing Collyer to be "a humbug" and Mesmerism a fraud, a friend persuaded him to engage in some experiments. "What had started as an amusement," he wrote, "became a very interesting entertainment" and led to weekly meetings to study Mesmerism.



"It was during these experiments that I discovered the close relation between mesmeric sleep and what we call death, and to me it gave unmistakable evidence of another life," Brackett wrote.

After moving to Boston, Brackett continued these investigations, part of the time with Dr. William F. Channing (1820-1901), son of the philosopher William Ellery Channing (*pictured right*). Channing's great interest was electricity, and he loaned Brackett a galvanometer to assist in his investigations.



"When trance-mediumship became known, believing that it was only a form of Mesmerism," Brackett wrote, "I gave considerable attention to it." With both Mesmerism and Spiritualism a person could be put into a trance and controlled by another, in the former by a live person and in the latter by a spirit. Brackett decided to investigate "materialization," the alleged production of visible and tangible apparitions out of seeming nothingness.

He wrote that he was at first unsure about spirit communication. "I have a thorough abhorrence of fraud, whether in the séance-room or in the pulpit, regarding any one who

would trifle with the most sacred feelings of our nature as deserving the severest of punishment.”



With a letter of introduction from Luther Colby, founder and editor the Boston-based spiritualist journal *Banner of Light*, Brackett visited a medium, Anna Eva Fay, known as Mrs. H. B. Fay (*pictured left*). This was probably in the early 1880s.

Writing about his experiences, Brackett said that he attempted his approach to be cautious and scientific, investigating the mediums' cabinets and applying "test conditions." His conclusion, however, was based on witnessing materializations and dematerializations.

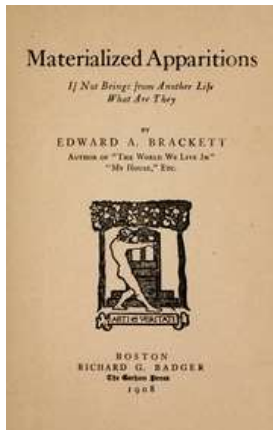
For example, at the first séance, a being exited the cabinet and claimed to be his wife (who died in 1871). At first skeptical, he was amazed when "she went down directly in front of me, within a foot of where I stood, her head and shoulders being the last part visible. On the carpet, where she disappeared, there was a glow of phosphorescent light, which gradually faded away."

He was confused but struck with the idea, "If real, – if the form had thus dematerialized, – then the reality of materialization followed as a matter of course." Unsure of what had happened, he determined "I would if possible adopt a system of investigation so thorough that nothing should escape me."

He attended other séances with Mrs. Fay and professed an inability to detect any fraud in her. He was persuaded that the apparitions were not the medium or her confederates, that they were not of this world. "The severest tests which I could apply to these manifestations convinced me that not only the forms which surrounded these spirits, but the garments which they wore were 'materialized' (that is, made visible and tangible out of previously invisible substances) inside of the cabinet. How this is done we may not comprehend."

Brackett also attended séances with other mediums, visiting over 100 by 1886, and saw many beings appear, assume solid form, and then disappear. One recurring visitor who showed up with different mediums over a period of two years purported to be his niece Bertha (whom Brackett never saw, she having died at age four in another state). Brackett was convinced she was not the medium or a confederate by such marvels as her dark dress turning instantly into an illuminated one and her producing yards of lace from her bare hands seemingly out of nothing.

During the same time period, there were, of course, other investigators. Newspapermen in particular exposed the mediums and their materializations as frauds. Brackett responded, "There have often been sensational reports circulated claiming to be 'exposures' of materialization, but when traced to their origin they have generally been found to be unreliable, and never the result of careful study or scientific investigation."



Brackett wrote about his visits to Mrs. Fay and other mediums, along with opinions, theories, and conclusions, in a book, *Materialized Apparitions: If Not Beings from Another Life, What are They?*³ The philosopher and psychologist William James, a founding member and vice president of the American Society for Psychical Research who attended séances with Brackett, owned an inscribed copy. Arthur Conan Doyle in his *The History of Spiritualism* (1926) quoted from the book and called it "remarkable."

The book does not recount any séances held in Winchester. However, on May 17, 1887, during the year after the book appeared, a séance was held in the Octagon House.

THE SÉANCE

On May 17, 1887, Edward Brackett, an investigator of Spiritualism, held a séance in his home, his Octagon House on Highland Avenue. An account was written by Alonzo E. Newton of Arlington and published in *Facts*, a monthly magazine devoted to mental and spiritual phenomena.⁴

The séance was held to demonstrate that one medium in particular, Mrs. Hannah V. Ross, was genuine. During the time Brackett was investigating materializations, several reports in various newspapers announced that one medium or another had been exposed as a fraud. Such newspaper revelations did little to hinder the popularity of mediums, especially when believers questioned whether the frauds were actually the reporters.



Newton said he was one of sixteen people at the séance held to demonstrate to some of Brackett's friends and neighbors "that tangible and visible forms, not of ordinary flesh and blood, and not the product of personation or confederacy, do appear in the presence of Mrs. Ross, notwithstanding what has recently been alleged against her."

Who the friends and neighbors were is not specified.⁵ Newton reported there were nine ladies and, among the men, two lawyers and a clergyman who were searching for evidence on the subject.

“A ‘cabinet’ or inclosure for the medium had been constructed by simply hanging curtains on brackets against a dead wall on one side of the sitting-room,— the curtains forming three sides of the small inclosure,— no window or door within several feet. I examined this wall on both sides, and found it to be of solid plaster, with no possible entrance for confederates either through that or the floor.”

Before the séance, Ross invited the ladies to the séance room where she disrobed and requested a thorough inspection of her clothing to show that she wore nothing but ordinary apparel. She then stayed in that room.

“Confederates being out of the question,” Newton reported, “under the circumstances, the appearance of any form not that of the medium, who alone entered the inclosure, was a demonstration; and *such forms did emerge therefrom to the number of twelve or more, of various sizes and apparent ages, from children of four or five years to full-grown adults, and dressed in the garb of both sexes.* These, I think, were seen more or less distinctly by all present, and some were touched or handled by their friends, proving their tangibility.

“Moreover, several of them were able to speak, and thus tell their names or otherwise identify themselves to their friends, though countenances were hardly distinguishable. The medium being of a large frame, the contrast presented by smaller frames was easily noticeable. The medium's voice was repeatedly heard in the cabinet, while forms were out in the room, and in several instances two forms appeared at the same time.

“I will not weary you with details, but simply mention that, among others, a male form appeared, who did not seem able to identify himself to anyone; but, taking the arm of a lady, walked across the room and asked if there was a Mason present, as he wished to give a sign pertaining to that order. A gentleman responded, and received what he declared to be a veritable masonic signal in a vigorous grip of the hand.

“A female in a white robe, claimed by a gentleman present to be a well-known deceased friend of his, exhibited a large quantity of lace, apparently manufactured on the spot. This was submitted to inspection, and was at first of a heavy variety, but was subsequently manipulated into a very fine, gauzy, fabric, and at length vanished as mysteriously as did its manufacturer.

“Mr. Brackett's niece, ‘Bertha’ (so interestingly described in his book), appeared with her characteristic sprightliness and vivacity.

“A female form, manifesting extreme lameness, hobbled from the cabinet, called for myself, and gave the name of an old and highly-esteemed friend known years ago at the South, but of whom I had not thought until her name was spoken. That friend, in her last years, had been

nearly disabled from walking in consequence of an injury to the hip. Of this person, or her name, I am confident no one present except my wife could have known anything. *This, to us, was a crucial fact.*"

Newton concluded his article by advocating "the adoption of more careful and truly scientific methods of observation, verification, and record of psychical phenomena," and, in view of methods used to expose frauds (including grabbing the "materializations" and police raids), protection of the mediums.

Were there other séances or manifestations at the Octagon House? That is unknown. Despite continued allegations of fraud and even confessions made by mediums, Brackett continued to



believe in Spiritualism. Though he did admit that "individuals could falsify," he believed that phenomena and communications around the world throughout time provided an accumulation of evidence of continued existence beyond death.

"In my long and exhaustive study of mesmerism I demonstrated to my entire satisfaction the existence of such a [spiritual] body. I care not what you call it, it is there just the same, and what is known as death is nothing more nor less than the breaking of the connection between it and the outward body," he wrote near the end of his life in his final book, *The World We Live In*. "The wonderful growth of Spiritualism," he averred, "was due to personal experience—to actual contact with the phenomena as expressed through mediums."

Brackett may have been tricked and bamboozled (in fact, a young woman reportedly later confessed to a *Boston Herald* reporter that she impersonated Bertha), but he appears to have been a genuine seeker of truth, one who never set out to fool anyone. *The World We Live In* attests to his belief in the spirit life and "the importance of a true religious feeling of our relations to the Divine Mind." This feeling helps build good character as "there is no one thing in the life of man so vital to the building of a noble character as a knowledge of his true relation to spirit life."

A person's true character, Brackett said, is indicated by his loves. "Man is what he feels. He may dazzle the world for a while with the splendor of his acquirements, but... the pride of his intellect is lost in the warmth of his affections."

If Brackett was deceived by mediums, his outlook on life did not appear to suffer. He believed in a healthy body and sound mind, the equality of matter and spirit, the manifestations of nature, unseen intelligences, and the richness of life.

"There is nothing prosaic or commonplace in this world unless, through our lack of appreciation, we make it so. In the fullness and richness of our natures, in that receptivity of mind which ought always to abide with us, we instinctively turn to the marvelous beauty of the world and the Divine Intelligence that everywhere pervades it. Freed from the baffling

influences of intellectual disease the inspiration of a true life comes to us as freely as the air we breathe.”

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² The house has been described in detail in James A. Newton’s “Crows’ Nests or Eagles’ Aeries?: The Octagon Houses of E. A. Brackett and H. P. Wakefield.”

³ Published in 1886, it has been digitized and is available online.

⁴ E. A. Newton, “Test Séance with Mrs. H. V. Ross,” *Facts*, Vol. 6, pp. 111-115.

⁵ In 1868, Catherine Folsom, a neighbor on Highland Avenue, wrote to her husband that her family had been “invited to the Bracketts to see the performance of a wonderful test medium Friday night,” according to a transcription of letters donated to the Winchester Archival Center. It is possible the Folsoms were guests again in 1887.

Another Winchester Spiritualist was the Hon. Abraham B. Coffin who apparently kept a low profile regarding religion. However, after his death in 1908, an article in the *Boston Post* reprinted in *The Winchester Star* of Jan. 13, 1908, stated that “he made profound study of religious beliefs and for many years he made a close study of spiritualism. He was deeply interested in psychic research. ... He was firmly of the opinion that communication between the mortals of his world and those who have passed to the great beyond would one day be quite common.” Coffin belonged to the Society for Psychical Research of London.