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July, 2005

The Ghostly Legends of Vinegar Hill

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The Ghostly Legends of Vinegar Hill

Like many schools, Western Kentucky University has its share of ghost stories—tales that evoke the spectral presences of long-dead employees, suicidal coeds and victims of freak accidents. As a correspondent for the *Bowling Green Messenger* learned in 1912, however, the high ground then known as “Vinegar Hill” was thought to be haunted long before WKU established its campus there.

Seeking out one Charles L. Jones, who had just sold his property after a 45-year residence nearby, the reporter absorbed “Old Charley’s” fascinating, all-too-brief reminiscences of the tragic and unsavory events that had turned Vinegar Hill into a cauldron of restless, even malevolent spirits. Here are portions of the *Messenger* article, with annotations in italics:

VINEGAR HILL STILL THE HABITAT OF GHOSTS AND HOBGOBLINS (December 19, 1912)

Yesterday, Charles L. Jones, a very respectable old colored man, who founded Jonesville in 1867, sold all his holdings on “Vinegar Hill” for the sum of one thousand and fifty dollars to Perry Hill, of Barren County.

Jonesville was an African-American community located on the west side of what is now WKU’s campus. Mr. Jones’s claim is one of several regarding Jonesville’s origin and age, and no record of a deed to his purchaser, Perry Hill, can be found. Jonesville survived until the mid-1960s, however, when its residents were evicted, under the guise of “urban renewal,” to accommodate WKU’s expansion plans. A historical marker on University Boulevard now commemorates the once-thriving community.

When he founded Jonesville and planted it on the west side of “Vinegar Hill,” there were no buildings of any kind on the hill.

Overlooking Bowling Green, a town of about 4,500 in 1867, Vinegar Hill had yet to be civilized. At its crest 232 feet above the Barren River, it might have afforded a lovely view of the surrounding countryside, but its thick covering of cedars, underbrush and limestone outcroppings marked it as a mysterious, even dangerous place. One legend claimed that a fortune in Civil War gold had been buried somewhere on its heights.¹ The hill’s name may have referred to the quality of the moonshine brewed, according to another legend, by an old crone encamped in its dense thickets and known as “Betsy Vinegar.” Betsy’s unsavory enterprise attracted assorted n’er-do-wells and gangs of bandits, posing additional risks for those traveling at night on the Russellville and Nashville Pikes. As a result, Mr. Jones continues, local residents made heroic efforts to redeem the hill from these undesirable characters.

¹ *Louisville Times*, 29 September 1892 (Typescript in Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University).

Mr. Rumsey Skiles, probably the most accomplished man who ever lived in Warren County, once owned "Vinegar Hill," and he tried to change the name to "Kopley Knob," but he never succeeded. Polly Bruff and her gang had occupied "Vinegar Hill" too long.

James Rumsey Skiles, a wealthy businessman and builder, purchased Vinegar Hill in 1836, and his effort to rename it Kopley (usually spelled "Copley") Knob did, in fact, help to change the area. In 1856, a group of citizens incorporated the Copley Cemetery Company with the intention of establishing a graveyard on Vinegar Hill.² The Civil War and the subsequent creation of Fairview Cemetery shelved their plan, but by the 1870s Copley Knob had gained some favor among Bowling Green's prominent citizens. Lawyer and banker Thomas Calvert, who had purchased the hill from Skiles in 1855, built a magnificent residence on its east side in 1870, which would become the home of Ogden College in 1877. By that time, of course, Vinegar Hill's mysterious female outlaw, "Polly Bruff," was gone.

Like wild Meg Merrilies, Polly made a long, hard fight to hold "Vinegar Hill," but what human hands could not do, the ghosts which have ever haunted "Vinegar Hill" were able to do. Polly was driven out of the cedars, and she and her gang made their last stand on the hill, at a point on the Russellville road, just opposite the house which C. L. Jones sold yesterday.

Perhaps moonshiner "Betsy Vinegar" was actually Polly Bruff, who the reporter compares to the gypsy Meg Merrilies of Sir Walter Scott's novel, Guy Mannering. The pitched battle that deprived Polly of her turf evokes an even more vivid picture if one imagines her as Scott describes Meg: "She was full six feet high, wore a man's greatcoat over the rest of her dress . . . and in all points of equipment, except her petticoats, seemed rather masculine than feminine. Her dark elf-locks shot out like the snakes of the gorgon, . . . while her eye had a wild roll that indicated something like real or affected insanity." After Polly's expulsion, Mr. Jones maintained that her presence lingered on the hill along with the ghosts of many other outcasts.

Old Charley could not give the date of all the suicides and hangings that have occurred on "Vinegar Hill," nor the names of the unburied dead who have been found on the hill, but he knew, however, that the hill was still haunted, that the spirits of Offutt, Evans and Emanuel still brood over "Vinegar Hill," and that any rainy or dark night in November Polly Bruff's white horses could be seen eating the grass in Ogden College lawn.

The hill, it seems, was where forsaken men and women were destined not only to drink moonshine, but to die. Although Bowling Green's only documented lynching occurred at the old Fairgrounds in 1892, other stories name Vinegar Hill as a site for such executions.³ Yet another legend tells of a young man who shot himself on the hill in

² Ky. Laws 1855-56, ch. 79; John B. Rodes to Mary T. Moore, 25 October 1939, Presbyterian Church Vertical File, Kentucky Library.

³ *College Heights Herald*, 25 February 1944.

1872, leaving a note requesting that he be buried precisely where he fell.⁴ His name was said to be Palmer,⁵ so the dark histories of “Offutt, Evans and Emanuel” remain a mystery.

Old Charley still thinks that in locating Jonesville on the west side of “Vinegar Hill” he acted wiser than Mr. Procter, who located on the east side.

On any dark night in November, the ghosts of Offutt, Evans, Harper and others, brood over the Nashville Pike, and after you pass the residence of Major Obenchain you have to ride like Tam O’Shanter past Ogden College, and past Mr. Procter’s cottage at the foot of the hill or the ghosts will get you, and you are never safe on this pike until you pass the pond on the left-hand side of the pike, almost one mile from town.

By 1912, prominent citizens like William A. Obenchain, a professor at Ogden College who lived at the corner of Fourteenth and Chestnut Streets, and lawyer Benjamin F. Procter, who owned substantial tracts on the east side of Vinegar Hill, had made the area one of the more fashionable places to live. The Western Kentucky State Normal School (now Western Kentucky University) had moved its campus to the hill and opened its grand new Administration Building (now Van Meter Hall) in 1911. The Messenger reporter, nevertheless, closed his story by inviting readers to explore that especially haunted east side of Vinegar Hill—where even a brave soul might have been well advised, like Tam O’Shanter, to invoke the aid of John Barleycorn—and then, like Ichabod Crane, spur his horse, shut his eyes tight, and break forth “with involuntary fervor into a psalm tune” for the ride out of town.

⁴ *College Heights Herald*, 27 October 1977.

⁵ *Ibid.*