

James J. Mapes, LL.D. (1806-1866)

James Jay Mapes, LL.D., is remembered primarily as an agricultural chemist, inventor, and professor of chemistry and natural philosophy. He was also one of the early investigators into the phenomena of spiritualism. It was reported that he undertook his investigation to rescue his friends who were “running to imbecility” over the spiritualism craze.¹ However, his investigation resulted in his becoming a believer in the phenomena of spiritualism.



Born in New York, a descendant of English settlers dating back to 1640, Mapes studied at the classical school of Timothy Clowes at Hempstead, Long Island. He gained a reputation as an analytical chemist, inventing a new system of sugar refining and a process for tanning leather. He is also credited with many improvements in tempering steel, and in methods of distilling and dyeing. He received the first patent in the United States for artificial fertilizer. developing the use of a superphosphate of lime which is said to have transformed American agriculture. He served as professor of chemistry at the National Academy of Design in New York and later as professor of chemistry and natural philosophy at the American Institute. In 1844, he was elected president of the Mechanics' Institute of New York and was a founder of the of the National Agricultural Society.

Mapes's curiosity seems to have been aroused by both his wife and his daughter displaying mediumistic ability. His wife, who had no known artistic talent, became a painting medium, producing exceptional art, while his daughter became an automatic writing medium. At one time, his daughter claimed to be receiving a message from Mapes's father. When Mapes asked for proof of identity, the daughter's hand wrote, "You may recollect that I gave you, among other books, an encyclopaedia; look on page 120 of that book, and you will find my name written there, which you have never seen."²

Mapes went to the warehouse where the books were stored, opened the box, which had been unopened in 27 years, and found his father's name written on page 120.

In 1854, Mapes traveled to Buffalo, New York to observe and study the mediumship of 14-year-old Cora L. V. Scott (later Cora L. V. Richmond). Beginning in 1851, at age 11, young Cora would go into a trance and lecture on subjects far beyond her education, experience, and exposure. The subjects of her lectures included social, political, economic, and religious matters, even extending to the emancipation of slaves. Large crowds gathered to hear her lectures and word soon spread of this amazing girl. In addition to subjects selected by her spirit guides, Cora (or her guides) invited questions or subjects from the audience. Mapes asked her to speak on "primary rocks," to which she (or the spirits) replied with a discourse on geology that left Mapes awestruck. "I am a college educated man, and have been all my long life an investigator of scientific subjects and associated with scientific men," he reacted, "but I stand here this afternoon *dumb* before this young girl."³

In a later writing, Mapes stated: "She renders the most abstruse points perfectly understandable to the most common auditor. In close analysis of words she is not surpassed, and her knowledge of natural law seems to be an intuition amounting to almost a certainty. Her high-toned moral character has at all times defied the tongue of calumny. In metaphysics she shows a degree of erudition hitherto among the greatest scholars of the world." ⁴

Mapes began attending various mediumistic circles but observed nothing to convince him that spirits were involved until on one occasion he received a message about something known only to himself and the spirit communicator. He asked the spirit communicator how he could satisfy himself as to the truth of it all and was told to form a circle of 12 individuals, six positive and six negative, and to find the best medium he could, then to continue the sittings until he received something he could accept. Mapes asked for clarification relative to the positive and negative minds. He was then informed that the positive minds were those who thought independently, unconcerned with what others thought, while a negative mind was one who relies on his or her friends before making a decision. "Both these classes of minds are necessary for an effective circle," the communication came. "When you have met twenty nights, you will have no further difficulty in inducing your friends to continue their sittings." He was further told that the positive minds should be non-believers.

Mapes had no difficulty finding the negative minds, but had a hard time persuading his non-believer friends to participate for 20 nights. "For the first eighteen nights, both questions and answers were extremely stupid," Mapes recorded. "The only curious phenomenon was the raps, and with all the theories of snapping of toe and knee joints, rubbing the ball of the foot on the sole of the boot, electricity, and all the other theories which had been from time to time advanced, the six positive minds were divided; but with negatives it was

affirmed that there was a marvelous fitness in many of the replies, although the positive minds would not admit it."

On the 19th night, when the positives expressed relief that their commitment was nearing an end, names of deceased relatives and friends began coming through for the positives with pertinent questions and answers given. On the 20th night, they experienced physical phenomena, including a guitar and a harmonica playing with no hands holding them. "The room was well lighted with gas, and the hands of the circle were placed on the top of the table," Mapes noted. "Even the positive members agreed to continue their sittings and the same circle sat for more than four years. once each week."⁵ They received much more dynamic manifestations during those four years.

Mapes also witnessed intriguing phenomena while sitting with D.D. Home and with the Davenport brothers. He summed up his observations by writing: "The manifestations which are pertinent to the ends required are so conclusive in their character as to establish in my mind certain cardinal points. These are:

"First, that there is a future state of existence, which is but a continuation of our present state of being, devoid of such portions of our organism as are now denominated material.

"Second, that the great aim of nature, as shown through a great variety of spiritual existences, is progression, extending beyond the limits of this mundane sphere.

"Third, that spirits can and do communicate with mortals, and in all cases evince a desire to elevate and advance those they commune with.

"Fourth, that spirits have, in a vast number of well-attested instances, proved their will and ability to ward off dangers, cure sickness, prevent crimes, reform criminals, restore lost property, and communicate many useful, scientific, and some highly-occult and novel ideas to mankind."⁶

¹ Doyle, Arthur Conan, *The History of Spiritualism*, George Doran Co., VI, 1926, p 134

² _____, p. 134

³ Barrett, H.D., *Life Work of Cora L. V. Richmond*, InterFarFacing Publishing,, 2010, p. 70 (originally published in 1895)

⁴ _____, p. 90

⁵ Hardinge, Emma, *Modern American Spiritualism*, University Books, 1970, pp. 142-143

⁶ Hardinge, p. 199