The Vampire of Rhode Island

THE TERRIFYING TALE OF SARAH TILLINGHAST

In the late 1790s, Stukeley Tillinghast, a farmer in Exeter, Rhode Island, began suffering from a terrifying nightmare. Night after night, he found himself standing in his orchard when he heard his daughter Sarah calling his name. He turned to look for her, but she was nowhere to be found. A cold wind whipped through the trees, nearly blinding him with leaves. When the wind finally died down, the apples were rotting on their branches and half the orchard had withered away. The smell of decay hung in the air. Then Stukeley woke up, only to find himself back in the same nightmare the following night.



He told his wife, Honor, and even spoke to his minister, who thought he might simply be worried about the harvest. The trees, however, were fine. Not long afterward, nineteen-year-old Sarah became ill. She developed a stubborn cough, grew thin and weak, and spent more and more time in bed. A doctor recognized the illness as consumption, a disease New England families dreaded. People knew its symptoms all too well, but no one knew what caused it or why it seemed to move through some families. Sarah's condition worsened until she died. The family buried her in their cemetery and hoped their troubles were over.

Instead, Sarah's younger brother James fell sick. He complained of pain in his chest and said that Sarah had been visiting him at night. According to the family story, his dead sister appeared beside his bed and pressed against his chest until he could barely breathe. James insisted the visits were real. Soon he was dead, too. Then sisters Andris and Ruth became ill, each reportedly telling their parents that Sarah came to them at night and complained of being cold. Both died. Another daughter, Hannah, who lived nearby, was also said to have experienced these visits before becoming sick and dying.

By now Stukeley had lost several children, and the nightmare of the dying orchard must have seemed less like a dream than a warning. His wife, Honor, reportedly began seeing Sarah as well, and another son, Ezra, grew ill. The family knew the name of the illness (consumption), but knowing its name had not helped them stop it. A farmhand suggested that someone who had died might still be drawing life from relatives. The idea was frightening, but after so many deaths Stukeley was willing to look for answers in a place he would never have considered before: the cemetery.

The farmhand didn't come up with the idea on his own. Across New England, families who were losing one relative after another to consumption had started digging up the dead, and some burned the heart to keep the sickness from spreading to the rest of the family. Researchers have since found more than 80 of these exhumations in New England between the 1780s and the 1890s. So when the farmhand made his suggestion, Stukeley was hearing about a remedy his neighbors already knew.

Stukeley and several men went to the cemetery and opened the graves. According to the account, the more recently buried children showed signs of decay, just as the men expected. But Sarah, who had been dead the longest, looked strangely well preserved. Her eyes appeared open, her hair and fingernails seemed to have grown, and what looked like fresh blood remained in her body. To the frightened men gathered around the coffin, those were signs that Sarah had never truly rested.

They removed Sarah's heart and burned it, believing the fire would end her visits. Honor reportedly recovered, though Ezra died. Stukeley thought he had finally stopped whatever was stalking his family. Had the grave revealed a vampire, or had the Tillinghasts mistaken something far more ordinary for the work of the undead?

The Vampire Evidence File

EVALUATE THE STORY

CASE QUESTION • What was really happening to the Tillinghast family?

The Tillinghasts were convinced that Sarah was causing the deaths in their family. Before you decide what really happened, judge the evidence they used to reach that conclusion.

Part A | Evaluate the evidence

Rate how strong each piece of evidence is as proof that Sarah was causing the deaths. Then write an alternate hypothesis that could explain it.

Evidence from the story	How strong is this as proof of Vampires	Your hypothesis
Before anyone got sick, Stukeley dreamed that half his orchard withered and rotted.	Strong Weak None	
One family member after another became sick with the same symptoms.	Strong Weak None	
The sick children said Sarah came to them at night.	Strong Weak None	
Sarah had been dead the longest, but her body looked the best preserved.	Strong Weak None	
After Sarah's heart was burned, Honor recovered but Ezra died.	Strong Weak None	

Test Your Hypotheses

Part B | Test your hypotheses against other cases

The Tillinghasts were not the only New England family to dig up a relative. Read these two documented cases and use them to test your hypotheses.

Willington, Connecticut • 1784

In June 1784, a man named Moses Holmes wrote a letter to the Connecticut Courant newspaper. A traveling doctor had been telling people in Willington that consumption could be cured by digging up relatives who had died of the disease and burning a "sprout" that grew from their remains. Isaac Johnson, who had lost two children to consumption, agreed to try it. On June 1, the bodies were dug up and examined by two local doctors, who found nothing unusual. Holmes, who watched it happen, said the small sprouts found under the coffin were most likely sorrel seeds (a common weed) that had fallen in during the burial, and he warned readers not to be fooled.

Exeter, Rhode Island • 1892

Almost a hundred years after the Tillinghasts, consumption struck George Brown's family in the very same town. His wife, Mary, died in 1883, and his oldest daughter, Mary Olive, died the next year. In January 1892, his 19-year-old daughter Mercy died, and his son Edwin became seriously ill. Neighbors convinced George to let them dig up the bodies, and on March 17, 1892, a group that included a local doctor and a newspaper reporter opened the graves. Mary and Mary Olive had decayed, but Mercy, who had been dead about two months, looked well preserved and still had liquid blood in her heart. The doctor, Harold Metcalf, said this was normal for a body buried that long and that her lungs showed signs of consumption. Mercy's heart was burned anyway, and the ashes were mixed into a drink for Edwin. Edwin died two months later.

1. What do all three cases have in common?

2. What evidence from the Tillinghast story was hardest to explain?

3. What is your explanation for what happened to the Tillinghast family?