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The Legend of Pemberton Hall

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Jessica and Ashley sat in their dorm room, a cool autumn breeze blowing in from the window. A single lamp illuminated the room in a soft yellow glow, casting shadows of stuffed animals on the walls. Ashley sat on the floor with a tablet in her lap playing Angry Birds, her back resting against the bed. Jessica, her roommate, sat on her mattress curled in a pink Snuggie.

Without warning, a door slammed shut, followed by the sound of something scraping across the old wooden floor. Jessica and Ashley jumped.

Ashley put down her tablet. “Oh my God, what was that?” she asked.

“Maybe it was Mary,” Jessica (or Jess for short) replied. Seeing her roommate’s puzzled expression, she continued. “You know this place is haunted, right?”

“Shut up.”

“It’s true,” Jessica said. “A girl was murdered here. The RAs won’t tell you about it, but my sister graduated EIU in 2006 and she told me the story.” Jess snatched the warm frappe off her desk and continued.

“The girl’s name was Angela. She was staying at Pemberton Hall over Christmas break in... I think 1918. The only people here were Angela, a stern headmistress named Mary, and the janitor. Angela was bored after studying all evening, so she decided to go up to the fourth floor to practice on the piano.” Jess paused. “The fourth floor was open back then,” she added, anticipating her roommate’s objection.

“Angela loved to play the piano,” she continued. “As she settled onto the bench and began to play, she didn’t hear the janitor come upstairs. He was a dirty old man, hired from the local poor farm. Attracted by the sweet melody, he crept up behind Angela and tore her nightgown with his thick, calloused hands. Her attempts to get away only excited him. By the time he fled, Angela was bruised and bloody. It took all her remaining strength to crawl downstairs to the headmistress’ room, where she hoped to find help.

“But Mary was asleep and her door was locked. Angela desperately clawed at the door and tried to cry for help, but her screams only spilled out as gargled sobs. The sight of Angela’s dead body, her fingernails imbedded in the wood, greeted Mary when she opened her door the next morning. Mary was so horrified and felt so guilty that she went insane and died in a mental institution. Since then, her ghost has wandered Pemberton Hall, making sure that never happens to any of us again. It’s all true, I swear.”

If the story Ashley told her roommate that night sounds familiar, it is because it has been passed down from one generation of Peinites to another for over half a century. The ivy covered walls of Pemberton Hall are home to one of the most famous ghost stories in Illinois—the legend of Mary Hawkins. Her ghost is said to roam the hundred-year-old building, protecting the young women who reside within. This popular campus legend greets many a college bound girl as she finds...
herself away from home for the first time, and has become an enduring part of campus life at Eastern Illinois University.

Pemberton Hall & Mary Hawkins

Pemberton Hall is the oldest all-female dormitory in the state of Illinois and was the brainchild of Livingston C. Lord, president of Eastern Illinois State Normal School from 1899 to 1933. In 1901, President Lord went before the Appropriations Committee of the Illinois state legislature and asked for $60,000 to build a woman's dormitory on campus. The committee denied the funding after telling the staunchly nonpartisan Lord that he “had made a fairly good joke.” One senator, Stanton C. Pemberton, took the idea seriously and began to lobby on President Lord's behalf.

Finally, in 1907, President Lord and Senator Pemberton plied $100,000 out of the legislature for both a dorm and an accompanying gymnasium. Two years later, as the construction neared its final stages, the state Appropriations Committee added $3,000 to finish the basement and the attic. The completed hall, named after Senator Pemberton, housed up to 100 women and officially opened on January 4, 1909. Miss Estelle Gross became the first headmistress, but only served in the position for a year before being succeeded by the now infamous Mary Elizabeth Hawkins. Senator Pemberton was enamored with the new dorm, which he said possessed “a fine high-sounding name.” President Lord was also proud of the building and once remarked, “I never go by in the evening when the girls are in their rooms and the lights [are on] in all the windows without feeling anew the satisfaction of it.”

The old-English look and feel of the dormitory was well suited for its first full time matron, Mary E. Hawkins, who possessed all the stoic air of an Edwardian Englishwoman. Born in Moat, England on September 10, 1877, Miss Hawkins immigrated to the United States in 1901 at the age of 24. Not much is known about the next decade of her life, but she assumed the position of dorm director at Eastern Illinois Normal School in August 1910, when she was 33 years old. “As head of Pemberton Hall,” she once wrote, “[the residents] are under my control entirely.”

She had no patience for libertine college life and imposed strict rules on “her girls,” which included a 7:30pm curfew and 10:30pm bedtime. Class and church services were the only places coeds were able to go unchaperoned. Female students were granted “entire freedom during the day until 7:30 PM” and were allowed to go home on weekends. Additionally, they were allowed to entertain guests on Saturday and Sunday evenings until 10pm.

Mary was a ubiquitous figure in the lives of young women at Eastern Illinois Normal School for sixteen years, but after more than a decade of service, her mental health began to deteriorate.
Miss Hawkins left her position at Pemberton Hall in March 1917. As her condition worsened, she spent two weeks in September 1918 at the M.A. Montgomery Memorial Sanitarium in Charleston. Her doctors described her as “depressed and irrational,” with delusions of persecution, hallucinations, insomnia, and memory loss. They believed she was suffering from “overwork and over worry.”\(^5\) She died at the age of 41 on the night of October 29, 1918 at the Kankakee State Mental Hospital in the shadow of the influenza epidemic and the end of the First World War. Hospital orderlies discovered her body at 5am the next day.

Her obituary read: “she was a woman of education and refinement and a most efficient person in the position she occupied. Very seldom, indeed, does one find in the same individual good business ability, a most excellent housekeeper, and a fine influence over young women... her work was highly esteemed by all who knew it.”\(^6\)

Her death certificate listed the cause of death as “general paralysis of the insane,” otherwise known as general paresis, a condition of motor paralysis and softening of the brain.\(^7\) General paresis occurs as a result of late-term (or tertiary) syphilis, which sets in a decade or more after infection and triggers abnormal eye reflexes, dementia, dramatic mood swings, and even seizures. She was buried in Charleston’s Mound Cemetery. Two years after Mary’s death, the university hung a bronze tablet near the entrance commemorating her service. The tablet remains there to this day.

The Legend of Pemberton Hall

It is unclear exactly when urban legend and historical fact merged to create the unique tale of the ghost of Mary Hawkins. Storytellers cannot even agree on which character the name Mary belongs to—the murdered coed or the distraught dorm mother (for the sake of clarity, I chose to call the murdered coed Angela). Sometimes Mary manifests herself as a prankster; a young woman who scratches at doors, leaves footprints, or wanders up to the fourth floor dressed in nothing but a white gown. Other times she is a benevolent matriarch who makes sure doors are locked at night and warns her girls of trouble. Some writers have attempted to clear up the confusion by suggesting that two ghosts may be at work—one of the unfortunate victim and the other of Mary Hawkins, who has come back from the dead to watch over her girls as she once did in life.\(^8\)

The earliest article I found concerning the Pemberton Hall legend was written by Karen Knupp in October 1976 for the Eastern News. Karen explained that the story, having been told for “years and years,” was handed down from veteran Pemb Hall residents to incoming freshmen through an oral tradition that included using the story as a topic in their speech classes. Numbered among the eerie proceedings she chronicled were a girl who
saw a light emanating from one of the windows on the fourth floor, a Resident Assistant who found that the lounge furniture rearranged itself, and a strange encounter with a girl wearing a white gown who went around asking for safety pins before she disappeared. Karen noted that some residents had celebrated their unique heritage by holding a "Mary Hawkins Day" the previous spring.

In November of that year, Karen wrote a follow up article after a 1921 resident of Pemberton Hall named Stella [Estella] Temple (her maiden name was Craft) contacted her and told her that she knew the origins of the ghost story. Mrs. Temple explained that a coed named "Uterpa Sharp" [Euterpe Sharp], a 30-year-old student with an interest in hypnotism, liked to scare the younger girls by jumping out of the janitor's closet. Mrs. Temple, who if she had actually lived there in 1921 could not have known Mary Hawkins (who would have been deceased at that time), claimed that, "no one would tell Miss Hawkins. She wouldn't have any monkey business like that. She was English and very strict." If it was true she knew Mary Hawkins, then the events featuring Euterpa Sharp must have taken place before 1917. At any rate, she suggested that Euterpa's strange behavior was the origin of the legend, not a murder.

After some investigation, I discovered that Euterpe Sharp graduated from EIU in 1919. Euterpe served as illustrator for the 1919 Eastern yearbook, the Warbler, and also participated in making crafts for a visiting third grade class in December. Her senior quote was "it is better to wear out than to rust out." Oddly enough, I found no mention of Estella Craft in 1919, 1920, or 1921. She was, however, listed among the senior class in 1922. That means Estella must have been a freshman when Euterpe was a senior. Regardless, it is unlikely that she attended Eastern when Mary Hawkins served as dorm mother, and her recollections of Mary may have been passed down to her from other residents.

Because Mary departed Eastern during the First World War, most storytellers allege the murder occurred around that time. Some have used the sporadic publication of the school's newspaper, which was actually the result of war rationing, as proof of a conspiracy to cover up the crime. The details of when either Mary or the coed met their unfortunate end have changed periodically. There exists a general consensus that the murder took place over winter break, but an October 1984 Daily Eastern News article written by Diane Schneidman suggested May as the month it occurred, and an article published in 1982 claimed it transpired during Spring Break. Jo-Anne Christensen, in her book Ghost Stories of Illinois (2000), depicted the crime being committed during a furious thunderstorm, which also suggests springtime. The National Directory of Haunted Places (1994), written by Dennis William Hauck, challenged all of those accounts by changing the year of the murder to 1920, long after the real Mary Hawkins was deceased. In Haunted Colleges and Universities (2014), Tom Ogden also claimed the murder happened "in the 1920s." He also mistakenly described Mary as a "former third floor resident assistant."
Schneidman, for example, wrote that the homicidal janitor's wife had died, implying that grief and desperation drove him to murder. During one of the notorious haunted houses held in Pemberton Hall, the guide told visitors that Mary's room had been number 308. One student attending that particular event told *Daily Eastern News* reporters that Mary had been having an affair "with a married professor, and that she had been killed to cover up the adultery." The murder weapon, though usually consistent, has changed as well. With a variety any fan of the game Clue would appreciate, it has been alternatively described as an axe, a blunt object, bare hands, and even piano wire.

Some writers, such as *Daily Eastern News* staff writer Jennifer Lavery, have attempted to weave historical events into the narrative. Not realizing that Mary Elizabeth Hawkins had no relatives living in the United States, Jennifer believed that a John Hawkins, who appeared in the Coles County court records in May 1917, had gone to trial for the murder of his "sister" Mary. "I think I finally found some truth to this supposed rumor," she wrote. A Hawkins family did live in Coles County at the time, and students sometimes mistake a Mary Hawkins buried in Lafleur-Ennis Cemetery, located behind the Charleston Stone Quarry, for Pemberton Hall's Mary. She was the daughter of Coles County pioneers Oliver D. and Mary Hawkins, however, and died a toddler in 1851. Mary was a very common name in the 19th Century, and Hawkins was a common English surname.

In 1984, William M. Michael, a writer for the Decatur Herald and Review, spent the night in the fourth floor piano room. He reported no encounters with a ghost. For every similar tale, however, there is one that seems to confirm that something strange is taking place inside those stone walls. The same day that Michael's article was printed, a story appeared alongside it that recounted one woman's experience with the ghost. Patty O'Neill, also a writer for the Herald and Review, lived in Pemberton Hall for three years and claimed that she had awoken one night in the spring of 1981 to see a young woman dressed in a nightgown standing beside her bed. Thinking it was her roommate, she tried to ask the girl what was wrong, but the intruder turned and walked away without a reply. In her own words:

"I was in a very light sleep when I got an awful feeling that someone was watching me... As I turned over to look, I glanced at the lighted digital numbers on the clock. It was 2:15 a.m. I saw a figure standing by the side of my bed dressed in something like a nightgown or robe. She stood there for several seconds, then turned and walked toward the door. She opened the door and started to leave when she turned around with one hand on the door and looked back at me for several more seconds. She left, closing the door behind her..."  

Patty's eerie tale was reprinted in Beth Scott and Michael Norman's book *Haunted America* (1994), which launched the story of Mary Hawkins's ghost to national fame.

Another bizarre incident occurred in 1984 when one Pemberton Hall resident discovered small, black footprints that appeared on the floor of her room. "They seemed to be the prints of someone tip-toeing across the room, and the prints proved impossible to remove," assistant editor Michelle Mueller wrote in the Verge section of the *Daily Eastern News*. "The prints led from the door to the closet and back out to the door." Other experiences included doors locking and unlocking, furniture moving by itself, electronic disturbances, and the faint sounds of footsteps or a piano playing on the fourth floor. One former resident director even claimed that her fiancé felt someone smack him on the rear end even though she was on the other side of the room!  

Kelly Bryan, a Pemb Hall resident in 2002 and 2004, told me that she never experienced anything unusual while living there and did not believe in the story, although she noted that the basement always gave her the creeps. "From what I've read, I just don't think it has much..."
basis in reality,” she said. “If you really believe in it, you’re more likely to blame things on the ghost.”

Pemberton Hall’s ghost has been described in various ways over the decades, but there is a general consensus regarding her appearance. Patty O’Neill, former EIU student-turned-journalist, recalled the young woman, who visited her room wearing “a long nightgown or robe.” The young woman spotted asking for safety pins before disappearing at the fourth floor landing was also described as “wearing a long, white nightgown.” One student who had lived in Pemberton Hall for four years told Margaret Allen-Kline, “If you ever see [Mary], she has a long, white robe but no feet... and long hair.” Another coed told her, “She comes to the door, apparently, or somebody does, and they are in a white robe, long hair.”

Putting these accounts together, an image emerges of an attractive woman in her early 20s with long, blonde hair spilling past her shoulders, wearing a white nightgown. In other words, a stereotypical American college coed from the late 1960s, not a refined, educated matron from the 1910s. In reality, Mary Hawkins was a middle-aged woman with curly, dark hair that she pinned up in the fashion of her day. In the 1910s, women commonly wore their hair in a bun, chignon, knot, or pompadour to support the large hats that were in fashion. It was considered inappropriate for women over the age of 17 to wear their hair down. If the ghost of a young woman with long, blonde hair has indeed been spotted wandering Pemberton Hall, it is not Mary Hawkins.

This inconsistency does not seem to bother students, faculty, and staff at EIU, who have celebrated their ghost story as a colorful part of campus culture. Over the years, Pemberton Hall has opened its doors and its notorious fourth floor around October 31st in an effort to raise money and entertain students with the story. According to an article by Bob Glover in the Daily Eastern News, the tradition of turning Pemberton Hall into a haunted house began in 1978. “The stories that have haunted Pemberton Hall and the secrets of the fourth floor will finally be available for public scrutiny,” Glover wrote. “On Saturday, the one and only fourth floor will be opened for the first time in many, many years.”

The event was repeated the next year for a small fifty-cent fee. Apparently the experience was not well received, since the Resident Housing Association haunted house was moved to an abandoned residence on Seventh Street in 1983. “The act will be more convincing than the usual RHA haunted house at Pemberton Hall,” the project chairman commented in an article about the move. The haunted house did add its own contribution to the legend, however, when drops of fake blood were left on the wooden floor and piano keys on the fourth floor, giving a chill to anyone who was lucky enough to venture up there. Pemberton Hall resumed its haunted house in 1997, complete with an actress who played the X-Files theme on the fourth floor piano and a man in a black robe who told the ghost story to groups of bemused college students. The Pemberton Hall Council opened the dorm once again in 2001, although the haunted house was strictly confined to its lower levels. Because of safety concerns, visitors were only allowed to “peek” at the mysterious fourth floor.

The Roommate’s Death

According to folklorists, the tale of Pemberton Hall’s murdered coed is a variation of a folk motif known as “The Roommate’s Death.” First written down by Linda Dégh in her essay “The Roommate’s Death and Related Dormitory Stories in Formation” in Indiana Folklore 2 (1969), she had heard it from a student at Indiana University who had been told the story as a
freshman in 1964. In the original version, the killing took place in a sorority house, and it was the victim’s roommates who discovered her body. Todd Webb, in Too Good to Be True by Jan Harold Brunvand, wrote that he first heard the story while he was an undergrad in Georgia in 1983. The incident, interestingly, was alleged to have occurred at the University of Illinois in Champaign–Urbana. The story is told, Brunvand explained, “as a warning to freshmen by upperclass students or by resident advisors in the dormitories.”

It is a story that feeds on the fears of college-bound women all over the country.

The following version of “The Roommate’s Death,” as retold by Toni Ogden, comes from Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green:

“Schneider Hall now houses the Academy of Mathematics and Science, but it was a girls’ dorm when it opened as West Hall in 1929. During the building’s years as Whitestone Hall, a lunatic who had escaped from an asylum climbed the walls and crawled through an upper-story window. The place was empty because it was spring break, but he broke into the room of one of the resident assistants (called Judy in some versions of the tale). He woke the girl before striking her in the head with an ax. As the man ran off, Judy dragged herself down to the far end of the hall to the other RA’s room. Too weak to call out, she clawed at the door for help with her last ounce of strength. The girl inside awoke but was too terrified to answer. In the morning she found Judy’s body lying on the floor outside her room, the blade of the ax still embedded in her skull and bloody scratch marks from her fingernails on the door.”

In this version the roles are reversed and the resident assistant is the one who is murdered, but all the other essential elements are there: a nearly-empty dorm on holiday break, an escaped lunatic wielding an axe, the victim clawing at the door for help, the girl too scared to open the door, and the bloody scratch marks. These elements are all consistent with the “Roommate’s Death” motif. Details may vary from place to place and from telling and retelling, but that is the nature of folk tales.

The meaning behind these tales is hotly debated, and social commentary has inevitably crept its way into the telling of the Mary Hawkins story, most often in the form of criticism of Mary’s “strict rules.” Margaret Allen-Kline, in her Master’s thesis on the tale, speculated that “there are warnings within these stories, warnings regarding consequences for women who go against established gender roles, women who allow themselves to remain unprotected, isolated from society or community.” Jan Harold Brunvand agreed, citing conclusions by folklorist Beverly Crane in his analysis of “The Roommate’s Death” that the story contains a lesson in woman’s liberation. According to Crane, the story warns, “If women wish to depend on traditional attitudes and responses they had best stay in a place where these attitudes and responses are best able to protect them.”

The idea that Mary’s stringent rules were an engine of gender oppression, however, is simply another part of the myth. Her rules, in fact, were designed to liberate, not oppress. They were meant to convince parents that Eastern Illinois State Normal School was a safe place to send their daughters in order for them to receive a college education. After funding was approved for the residence hall, President Livingston C. Lord wrote to Senator Pemberton, “Generations of young women will be grateful to you for making it possible for them to have a delightful home while attending this school.”

It is easy for someone living today to paint the period with a wide brush, but not everyone at the time had the same opinion in regards to gender relations. Livingston C. Lord, for instance, had no patience for puritanical attacks on co-ed activities. He displayed this point of view during a controversy over dances held in the Pemberton Hall gymnasium (now the textbook rental). Despite having been raised to view dancing as a sin, in 1909,
when a student at Eastern joined a local preacher in condemning the dances held on campus, President Lord thought of him as a "hypocrite" and a "sneak and a liar" who "was talking filth about the girls." Some of the young man's fellow students even tossed him into the campus pond. President Lord refused to punish the boys, and instead suspended the agitator. During the course of another series of evangelical revivals in the community, President Lord took a female student aside and told her, "Don't let anyone tell you you are bad or wicked—because you are not." 35

Until now, all the analysis of this legend has focused on the murdered coed and her metaphorical "punishment" for transgressing conservative social norms. The focus, however, should be on the character personified by Mary Hawkins. The assault of the coed (who is not even named in most versions) is there to present the ultimate challenge for Mary. Mary is supposed to be a protector and guardian, but she fails at her duty when it matters most.

Even in alternative versions of the folktale, in which it is a roommate who is too terrified to open the door and save her friend, the lesson is clear: sometimes you have to put your own personal safety aside and overcome your fears for the sake of others. Failure to do so could result in terrible consequences for those close to you. By failing to live up to her responsibilities, the fictional Mary Hawkins is driven to suicide by guilt and forced to spend eternity making up for her mistake. That, I believe, is the real lesson in this story.

Mary's Legacy

Thanks to its enduring appeal, the version of "The Roommate's Death" told at Eastern Illinois University has taken on a life of its own. The victim and the victim's guardian—personified by Mary Hawkins—have both transcended their ordeal and now haunt the hall as ghosts. Over the years, an old plaque dedicated to Miss Hawkins, a popular urban legend, and a touch of imagination have combined to create one of the most popular oral traditions in east-central Illinois.

As Pemberton Hall passes its 100-year anniversary, interest in the legend of Mary Hawkins seems unabated. Its inclusion in books on Illinois ghost stories has become obligatory, and a steady rotation of students arriving each year at Eastern Illinois University guarantees that the story will be passed down from one generation to the next. For the young women of Pemberton Hall, the spirit of Mary Hawkins will always be there with them; watching, protecting, and playing pranks.

About the Author

Michael Kleen holds a M.A. in History from Eastern Illinois University and a M.S. in Education from Western Illinois University. He is the author of Haunting Illinois, Paranormal Illinois, Six Tales of Terror, and Tales of Coles County, and more. Most recently, he edited and published the anthology Secret Rockford.

His nonfiction articles have appeared in publications like Historic Illinois and the Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, and his short stories have appeared in anthologies like Hunting Ghosts: Thrilling Tales of the Paranormal and Mythos: Myths & Tales of H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard. In 2011, his short story "Coed Terror in the Ivory Tower of Doom" was adapted into a short film called Headline News, which won Best Actor for Michael Wexler as Dr. Ethan Campbell at the 2011 Chicago Horror Film Festival.

Michael has spoken about local history and folklore at conventions, libraries, cafes, museums, schools, and colleges; and he has presented research papers at the 2007, 2010, and 2011 Conference on Illinois History in Springfield. He has also been a guest on radio shows like The Mothership Connection on AM-1050 WLIP, Thresholds Radio, the Michael Koolidge Show, the Kevin Smith Show, and the Bobbie Ashley Morning Show. He has also appeared on 30 Odd Minutes, WGN Channel 9 News, WTVO Channel 17/FOX 39 News, WREX Channel 13 News, WICD Channel 15 News, and Ghost Adventures.

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Notes

1. Eastern News (Charleston) 22 October 1965.
2. Ibid.
4. Eastern News (Charleston) 19 April 1967; Coleman, 125.
6. Daily Courier (Charleston) 31 October 1918.
15. Tom Ogden, *Haunted Colleges and Universities: Creepy Campuses, Scary Scholars, and Deadly Dorms* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2014), 171.
20. Allen-Kline, 74.
31. Ogden, 105-106.
32. Allen-Kline, 34.
34. Coleman, 123.
35. McKinney, 238-240.