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Historic house holds spicy tales

Early resident was bigamist with two names

BY JENNIFER V. HUGHES
For the Star-Ledger

When Jack Gordon bought the historic Bond Force House in Roseland six years ago, he and his family knew nothing about the people who lived there long ago.

Gordon took pride in restoring the home, parts of which date back to 1760, filling it with period-appropriate antiques and taking even more drastic steps to be historically accurate. When the dining room needed painting, Gordon took a sample from the wall to a historic paint company, which analyzed it like the rings on a tree, identifying the oldest shade.

But when the history and filmmaking buff took on a documentary film project as a hobby in 2002, he started to hear strange stories from local seniors about one of the house's earliest residents -- Johnathan Force III. The rumor was that Force was a bigamist who shocked the community after abandoning his sickly wife and two small children to marry a woman 20 years his junior from the next town.

Intrigued, Gordon started researching. He found evidence of a Johnathan Force in Livingston who had been such a valued member of the community that his widow con-



JIM WRIGHT FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Lawyer and filmmaker Jack Gordon stands in front of his home, 1760 Bond Force House in Roseland. Gordon, who made a documentary about one of the house's earliest residents says, "As silly as it sounds I feel like there are spirits about."

vinced a local church to dedicate a stained-glass window in his memory after he died. He also found a Johnathan Force in Roseland (then called Centerville) who had a lackluster life before marrying his Civil War buddy's sister -- the homeliest daughter of the wealthy Bond family. That Johnathan Force sired two children, but then seemed to vanish from local records.

Comparing church ledgers, Gordon discovered they were indeed the same man.

"The more I learned about this character, it struck me that it was so ironic that this guy could be

thought of so highly, but be such a cad," Gordon said.

Gordon, a 45-year-old lawyer working in Manhattan, spent \$75,000 of his own money to create a one-hour documentary about the man, called "The Bond Force Legacy." Sales of the DVD, priced at \$14.99, will benefit the Roseland Centennial Celebration fund for the 2008 event. So far, Gordon said, he has sold about 400 copies.

"I have zero aspirations of breaking even," admitted Gordon, who said about 10 percent of the film was paid for by corporate sponsors such as the Provident Bank Founda-

tion and by local historical groups.

Robert Bush, who founded the Roseland Historical Society and was interviewed in the film, said Gordon was able to reveal a fascinating and practically secret tale about the town.

“Very few people are interested in history,” he said. “Hopefully this will stimulate people’s interest and get them thinking.”

To make the film, Gordon pored through local newspapers, court records, and business and church ledgers. The film uses a PBS-style narrator and features interviews with senior citizens who recall stories of the Bond and Force families. There are shots of many old photographs and documents, but ironically, Gordon said he never found one of Force himself.

Making the film was a family affair. Much of the editing was done in Gordon’s home office, and his wife, Anna, and work colleagues do voice-overs. In a sepia-toned reenactment scene, Gordon’s daughter, Alexandra, plays the home-wrecking second wife. The college sophomore said she was game to take on the role because her dad was so excited about the project.

“It was interesting to see how the story developed,” she said. “He’d come home and say, ‘Guess what I found out!’”

Many elements of the Bond Force story could be ripped from today’s tabloids. Force had met the woman who would become his second wife, Susan Amanda Baker, while shopping for medicine for his ailing first wife, Dorinda.

When he left Dorinda, he presumably took her sizable dowry with him. He was discovered as a bigamist six months later and was ex-



A 1910 photo shows one of the house’s previous owners, Annie Force, riding a sleigh.

communicated from the Baptist church.

Just four months after he was cast out, Dorinda died “mysteriously,” Gordon said, allowing Force to re-enter society, and he eventually became a church leader. Gordon said he believes Force had something to do with his wife’s death, but the money he got from her family allowed him to “buy his good name.”

“People with money tend to be forgiven,” he said.

Force never re-established contact with his children, Anna and Frank, from his first wife, and the siblings became scandalous in their own right. The two had a relationship that bordered on “incestuous,” Gordon said, as local townspeople all assumed they were husband and wife.

The siblings had no money of their own, so they used a hodgepodge of ways to make ends meet. Frank worked as a dog catcher and tried to convince others that dog skins could be used as clothing or blankets. He was a bee-

keeper, and the siblings took in boarders for the summer months.

Frank later married a woman named Irene White, but their relationship failed within a year, sparking a bitter divorce trial that was covered in local papers. At one point, Irene claimed Frank and Anna were trying to oust her from the family by locking her in an unheated portion of the house -- the space Gordon and his family now use as a kitchen and dining room. At another point, Frank and one of Irene’s sons got into a fistfight on the front lawn.

Gordon said every old house has character, but his has particularly active ghosts.

“I feel like there’s a very warm presence in the house,” said Gordon. “As silly as it sounds, I feel like there are spirits about.”

For more information or to purchase copies of the DVD, go to www.TheBondForceLegacy.com