

Meeting Notes

March 10, 2017



The Solution to the Long Island Cave Mystery

Given by Harrison “Terry” Hunt

Reported by Carla Coupe

It was cold outside, but warmth and comradeship greeted the attendees of the March Red Circle meeting at the Hyatt Regency in Bethesda. The convivial hour before dinner saw old friendships renewed and new ones established, and provided time to buy a coveted Red Circle pin, courtesy of the talented Tom Fahres.

Peter Blau introduced Harrison “Terry” Hunt (ASH, BSI), who gave our after-dinner presentation, expanding on Steve Doyle’s solution to the Long Island Cave Mystery, mentioned in “The Red Circle.” Doyle’s solution was published in *Mandate for Murder*, part of the BSI manuscript series. Terry’s background as a Long Island native and Senior Curator of History and Supervisor of Historic Sites for Nassau County, New York, permitted him access to additional local resources and allowed him to delve deeper into the mystery.



According to local accounts, on July 2, 1891 some boys were picking berries in the woods near Islip, Long Island, and came on a fire with a kettle propped over it with fresh food inside. They reported it, and those who searched the area discovered a “skillfully constructed cave.” Christopher Morley noted that there are no caves in Long Island, and Terry pointed out that the discovery should more properly be called a bunker—but such an odd discovery deserves some leeway in how it was described by reporters.

A hidden entrance led to an underground bunker with two bunks, walls lined with logs, and a ceiling lined with muslin to prevent loose soil falling on those inside. A fire pit boasted a hidden pipe that could be raised or lowered. The bunker showed signs of being recently inhabited and was well stocked with food, clothing, dishes, and wine stolen from nearby summer houses and a local hotel. There was even a newspaper clipping describing the robberies tacked to the wall!

More chillingly, the bunker also contained a post set into the ground with an attached chain—one that could be used to restrain a person.

The searchers hadn't bothered to use stealth or covertness to hide their presence, and they missed the opportunity to catch whoever lived there. But who lived in this bunker?

According to the newspaper reports, the chief suspect was Tom Richardson, a local constable who married a Justice of the Peace's daughter. Tom was a drunk who abused his wife and disappeared in 1890. He briefly returned to the area in 1891, then vanished again. His partner was thought to be a local man named Slate Jackson. Shoe prints were discovered at the site, and Jackson was arrested and jailed on that evidence.

A few days later a second bunker was discovered a couple miles away. Bigger and more elaborate than the other, this bunker included another post and chain, along with a gag. There was speculation that Richardson planned to kidnap his estranged wife and hold her in the bunker.

Although this time the searchers were more organized and laid in wait, hoping to catch Richardson and receive a \$1,000 reward, they were unsuccessful.

Tom Richardson didn't show, but his brother was captured when he arrived at the bunker to bring Tom money, and he confirmed that Tom intended to kidnap his wife.

As it turned out, Tom was never captured. As with so many of these types of tales, Tom's story took on a life of its own, and he was blamed for any robberies or other suspicious happenings in the area.

The last reported 'appearance' of Tom Richardson was in October 1894, when another bunker was discovered near Jamaica, Long Island, its presence attributed to Tom.

What's the connection between this tale of theft and intended kidnapping in Long Island and Sherlock Holmes?

Coincidentally, that Arthur Conan Doyle was in the area for a lecture tour two months after the last reports of Tom's appearance. It's entirely possible that he heard about the case, and some of its outré elements appealed to him sufficiently to remember it when he wrote "The Red Circle."

As Terry concluded: there has never been a successful conclusion to the Long Island Cave mystery, and the game is still afoot.