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Ghosts & spirits roam our streets

When it comes to reports of hauntings and ghost sightings, Virginia is no slouch, as chronicled in such major works as L.B. Taylor's nine-volume "Ghosts of Virginia."

Talk of the spirit world abounds during the Halloween season, ranging from humorous costumes and pranks to tales designed to send chills down the spine.

In this region, however, the ghost sightings even include the father of our country.

Washington's ghost

Mount Vernon is replete with spectral sightings of George Washington at his former home, writes Jackie Behrend in "Ghosts of America's East Coast."

Behrend is also author of "The Hauntings of Williamsburg, Yorktown and Jamestown."

Washington's ghost, he said, is most frequently spotted in the pine-paneled study of Mount Vernon where the head of America's revolutionary army and first president of the United States spent many an early morning and late night.

Former employee Rebecca Starbridge even claims to have had a "face-to-face encounter" with the former president one night, when in her usual routine after closing of public tours she was checking the rooms to ensure no stragglers were left behind.

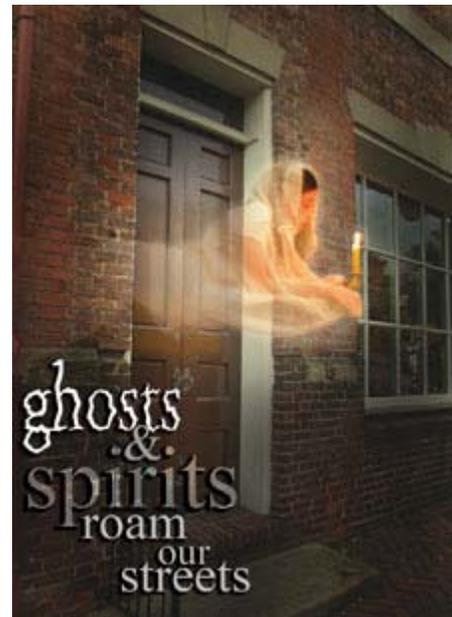
She recounted for Behrend that she had just looked into the study, when "I saw George Washington's ghost sitting in a chair behind the desk. I could actually see right through him! He was busy writing something with a quill pen. It took him over a minute to notice me standing in the doorway. When he finally looked up and saw me, he motioned for me to come in. I took a couple of steps toward him, but he just faded away."

But Mount Vernon is just one of the places where Washington's ghost has reportedly sighted. Among the many others are Annapolis, Valley Forge, Philadelphia and Williamsburg.

Alexandria's Ghosts

Colonial Tours highlights even more local spirit stories in its "Alexandria's Original Ghost & Graveyard Tour," which is also featured on "The Travel Channel" and in the pages of "Southern Living" magazine.

This after-nightfall tour is a six-block, one-hour walking excursion, of the type popular in many old cities. Here, the tour is led by a lantern-carrying guide in 18th Century costume, who "tells ghost stories, legends and folklore of Old Town, and tidbits of colonial culture and American history."



Alexandria Times Staff Photos/Bob Lennox

By MARY CLAIRE KENDALL
Alexandria Times Features Writer

Owner Wellington Watts said the tour helps local as well as out-of-town visitors "learn about the legends of Old Town and chase a few ghosts." Those spirits, he said, include two named Clem and Rosebud.

Watts started in the business six years ago as a tour guide at the predecessor company, Doorways to Old Virginia. When the owners decided to retire, they turned to Watts, who runs the business with a combination of affability, efficiency and ghost-appreciating twinkle in the eye.

He said the ghost tour business suffered after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, but that he "built" it back up over time and that it is now busier than ever.

To hear Watts tell it, the ghosts are numerous, but they are also copyrighted.

This writer had to ask whether there are ghosts at 201 King Street, where both Alexandria Colonial Tours and the Alexandria Times have offices.

Watts said while he has yet to actually find one, "it's the strange little bump in the night. And it's the mysterious things where you think you see someone there, but it's not. Or someone pays you a visit that really shouldn't be behind a locked door."

Paranormal phenomena

What's one to think of all this ghost-seeing jazz? According to "The Paranormal: A Guide to the Unexplained," both British poet Robert Graves and American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne claimed to see ghosts of friends, but the book said the explanation could be as simple as "expectation... combined with an emotional state (providing)... a receptive mind for ghostly phenomena."

Not to totally throw cold water on ghosts and goblins prior to Halloween.

W. Haden Blackman's "The Field Guide to North American Hauntings" said that "hundreds of people across the continent are convinced that they share their homes with some sort of phantom or spirit."

Those who study the paranormal define "ghost" as the life force of someone who has died. Ghosts may stay around from people who died violently or well before their time, believers say, or whose spirit cannot accept the fact of death. Other speculation holds that ghosts are those who lost their way to the afterlife, or retain abnormally strong ties to the living.

As to the true source of these and other stories, we may never know. But, one thing's without doubt: The fascination with the phantom is here to stay.

Where to go

Ghost & Graveyard Tours begin each night at 7:30 p.m. Depart the Alexandria Visitors Center, corner of King & Fairfax. Reservations are made by calling (703) 519-1749 and are recommended. For more information, see www.alexcolonialtours.com. Special Halloween Tours on Saturday, Oct. 29, and Sunday, Oct. 30, 6:30 to 9:15 p.m., lasting one hour and starting every 15 minutes.

Carlyle House ghosts — apart from tales of spectral visits from Mrs. Green, deceased wife of the proprietor of Carlyle Hotel (built in front of the house in 1855) — are largely non-existent. However, as Curator Jim Bartlinski writes, Carlyle House does have its "unseen guardian," which was "a mummified, or more accurately, a dried cat" that staff considered a "good luck charm." It was found during the 1970s restoration, as having been built into the foundation of the structure's southeast chimney before its completion in 1753. This, writes Bartlinski, is in keeping with "the ritual of entombing a cat in the foundation or chimney (that) dates back to the Dark Ages" to "ward off evil spirits."



Alexandria Times Staff Photo/Bob Lennox

Ghost tour guide Anne Dryden tells tales during her tour last Sunday night.