



Gettysburg is spooked by stories of supernatural

By Susan and John Cosgrove

GETTYSBURG

In early July 1863, the unspeakable happened at Gettysburg: In a devastating three-day battle, Americans slaughtered each other, soaking the ground with Union and Confederate blood.

Today, many people believe the area is haunted by the spirits of those who died in the battle — wrenched from life so violently that they've been unable to find eternal peace. Stories of sightings and other encounters abound, and a cottage industry has sprung up around the ghosts of Gettysburg.

On a recent weekend, we decided to see for ourselves just how haunted Gettysburg is.

Quiet and small — it has only 8,000 permanent residents — Gettysburg is an odd and charming jumble. On almost every block are beautifully restored buildings and crumbling shells; cheesy souvenir shops and stores selling authentic battle memorabilia; good local restaurants and standard fast-food chains. The Civil War theme is everywhere — there's even a restaurant called General Pick-

ett's Buffet (and, yes, they take charges).

We stayed in the middle of town at a hospitable B&B called the Gaslight Inn — our kind of place because it combines yesterday's charm with today's bathrooms. During our first night, we didn't encounter any ghosts — but we were spooked by something that could definitely wake the dead: the Volunteer Fire Department siren. Sleepless townspeople argue that pagers, cell phones, and scanners — which the firefighters have — would do the same job without waking the world, but the VFD insists on its siren, a noisy skeleton in the closet of a town that caters to tourists.

The next morning, over a world-class breakfast of lemon waffles, we told our innkeepers we were interested in local ghosts. They suggested we take a "ghost walk" — so we did.

At 8 o'clock on a chilly evening, we and about 25 other people assembled on Baltimore Street at the 1834 building that's home to the "Ghosts of Gettysburg" — the brainchild and business of Mark Nesbitt, a former National Park Service ranger and longtime Civil War buff who maintains that "Acre for acre, Gettysburg is the most haunted

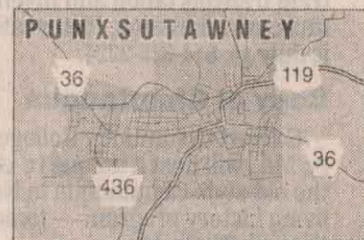
TRAVEL

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place in America."

A genial, literate man, Nesbitt has collected more than 200 ghost stories — from Park rangers, townsfolk, old diaries, and other sources — and published them in a series of paperback books and videos. He says he continues to be amazed at the reactions: "Many, many calls and letters from people who say 'It's such a relief to know I'm not crazy — somebody else has seen and heard what I have.'"

In 1994, a local friend suggested that Nesbitt offer tours based on the ghost stories he's collected, and now on busy days hundreds of people set off in small groups for guided tours of different areas of the town and the battlefield. The tours are led by trained guides (part-timers, many of them otherwise employed at Gettysburg College) dressed in period costume and lighting the way with candle lanterns. Nesbitt says the stories the guides tell are correct in their historical facts — but he's also careful to say that the ghostly parts of the stories are oral history, some of it not well documented.



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Our tour — a brisk 1½-hour walk through downtown Gettysburg — made six or eight stops. Each time, we'd gather around our guide and hear a ghost story about the place we stood — and as darkness fell, we found ourselves clustering closer and closer around the guide's bright candle flame. Among the stories we heard:

- At a building that housed an art gallery run by a mother and daughter in the early 1900s, Civil War figurines on the mantel were mysteriously rearranged into different tactical positions. Then, working late one evening, the mother encountered a Union officer — and not long after that the daughter saw a Confederate soldier, both apparently ghosts who played war games with the figurines. Neither woman felt threatened, and, says Nesbitt, that's typical of the ghosts of Gettysburg. "In almost every report, the ghost is a lost soul, but not a harmful one," he says. (The one nasty specter he's heard about has been reported not at Gettysburg but at Fort McHenry, where it occasionally assaults unlucky tourists.)

- On the third day of the battle, a young woman named Jennie Wade was in the kitchen of a modest home baking bread for hungry Union soldiers when a stray bullet crashed through the door and killed her. (The women in our tour group were quick to draw a lesson from that.) Until the battle subsided, Jennie's body was laid out in the basement because going outside to bury her would have been too dangerous — and, more than a century later, people have reported seeing Jennie's father mourning where she lay.

- On the site where a museum and motel now stand, an orphanage once housed children whose parents had died in the war. One matron was said to be especially cruel, and townspeople reported hearing the cries of orphan children being beaten. The matron was eventually run out of town — but some people say that on dark and quiet nights, they still hear the cries of the orphans.

The "Ghosts of Gettysburg" stories are well-told and sometimes even chilling but never gory. The result isn't fear or revulsion but just a delicious shiver — even for the kids in the group.

Just blocks from the heart of town, the Gettysburg College campus is a serene geometry of broad lawns and stately buildings — two of which are said to be haunted. Among the stories that have become part of college lore:

- Pennsylvania Hall, known as "Old Dorm," today houses administrative offices. But during the Civil War it was a hospital tending the wounds of both Union and Confederate soldiers. Not long ago, two administrators working late took an elevator down to the first floor

If you go ...

Gaslight Inn: 717-337-9100

Ghosts of Gettysburg walking tours: 717-337-0445
Farnsworth House B&B/-Mourning Theater/Ghost Walks: 717-334-8838

Cashtown Inn: 717-334-9722 or 800-367-1797

Gettysburg Convention and Visitors Bureau: 717-334-6274

Convention and Visitors Bureau Web site: www.gettysburg.com

— and were surprised and a little frightened when the car continued to the basement. As the elevator doors opened, the two women were astonished to see before them a Civil War hospital — a gory operating room filled with the screams of men whose limbs were being amputated without anesthesia. A weary-looking, blood-spattered surgeon turned toward the women and beckoned them to enter. They frantically stabbed at the elevator's buttons — and eventually were lifted to the first floor without further incident.

The administrators immediately reported what they had seen to the college's security department, but officers who raced to Old Dorm expecting a fraternity prank instead found only an ordinary old basement.

- Several students over the years have reported seeing Union soldiers in the cupola of Old Dorm. Investigations have revealed that Union soldiers did indeed use the cupola for signaling during the Civil War.

- In Stevens Hall, a college dormitory built right after the war, young women students are said to have sheltered a terrified young boy who'd escaped from the town orphanage. When the orphanage matron came searching for the boy, he hid outside on a window ledge — and disappeared into the wintry night. Generations of students have reported seeing mysterious messages — for instance, HELP ME — written backwards in frost on the dorm windows.

Charles Emmons, a professor of sociology at Gettysburg College, has a longtime interest in the paranormal. He carefully investigates what he calls "evidential cases" — situations where credible people report a happening that can't be explained by logic.

His reactions to the stories of ghosts at the college are mixed. He's "cautiously positive" about the administrators' report of the basement Civil War scene, saying "We can probably rule out a hoax or a misunderstanding since two apparently credible people saw the same thing."

While he doesn't know the administrators — they requested that the security department not reveal their identities — Emmons is well-acquainted with one student who saw the cupola soldiers, and says he tends to believe the account. But the Stevens Hall story gets a thumbs-down — there are no first-person accounts, and Emmons says the tale "smacks of folklore."

Does Emmons believe there are ghosts in Gettysburg — on or off the college campus? Well, sort of. "Any particular experience could be something or nothing," he says. "But when I look at all the data and see the recurring patterns — well, I do think there's something going on that can't be explained by science."

We next decided to investigate Farnsworth House, a B&B in the middle of town. During the Civil War, the attic of Farnsworth House sheltered Confederate sharpshooters — possibly including the one who shot Jennie Wade — and today the building is said to be home to several ghosts.

An addition to the building contains newer rooms, but we checked into what the desk clerk called "the most haunted place in the house," a second-floor front-facing room in the original structure. The room's intensely Victorian decor — gloomy and crowded, with a dressmaker's dummy clad in an old wedding dress — made it easy to imagine the ghosts other guests have reported, but our night passed peacefully.

The basement of Farnsworth House is home to the "Mourning Theater." In a delightfully spooky setting, complete with candlelight and a coffin, a local actor and actress in period costume tell first-person stories from the era of the Battle of Gettysburg.

Unfortunately, the stories are over-gory, under-interesting and not terribly well-delivered. Most in the small audience were disappointed.

Farnsworth House also offers ghost walks, although we didn't try them, and a dining room that serves period fare, including pumpkin fritters and peanut soup.

The final place we ghost-hunted was a 1797 building a few miles west of Gettysburg on Old Route 30. A Confederate headquarters during the battle, the Cashtown Inn is today a B&B that appeared in Ted Turner's 1993 film "Gettysburg."

According to reports from the 1860s, a hapless Confederate soldier was shot by a local farmer furious because the Confederates had confiscated his only horse. The young soldier was carried by his comrades to the Cashtown Inn, where he died — and, some say, where he remains to this day.

Innkeeper Eileen Hoover shows visitors several photos that are in fact pretty mysterious — one, taken by a local photographer, shows in the shadows of the front porch a



John and Susan Cosgrove photos

Above: The 1797 Cash-town Inn, a few miles west of Gettysburg on Old Route 30, was a Confederate headquarters during the Battle of Gettysburg. Today it is a B&B that appeared in Ted Turner's 1993 film "Gettysburg." According to reports from the 1860s, a hapless Confederate soldier was shot by a local farmer furious because the Confederates had confiscated his only horse. The young soldier was carried by his comrades to the Cash-town Inn, where he died — and, some say, where his ghost remains to this day.



Left: A Ghosts of Gettysburg walking tour guide in period garb lights the way on nighttime rounds of popular haunts.

Confederate soldier the photographer swore wasn't there when the picture was shot. Other photos taken by guests through the decades show what seems to be a shadowy soldier looking out a front window. "The guests," says Hoover, "mail us the pictures with letters saying they're certain the soldier wasn't in the window when the photos were taken." And guests at the inn occasionally report hearing odd noises — for instance, footsteps when there's nobody around to make them.

Hoover, a warm and sensible

woman, says she herself has heard the footsteps and has occasionally felt cigar smoke being blown in her face — when she's alone in the inn. "I don't feel a really strong presence," she says, "but there's just too much evidence to disbelieve..."

Are there ghosts in today's Gettysburg? Do the spirits of those who suffered and died remain near the battlefield, revealing themselves only occasionally and selectively?

Maybe — and maybe not. Credible people report happenings that logic seemingly can't explain, but

that's not proof.

In the end, it really doesn't matter. The fact is that, whenever we think about what happened at Gettysburg 136 years ago, we honor the soldiers who served there — and, ghosts or no ghosts, that's worth doing.

Based in Pittsburgh, John and Susan Cosgrove travel often for business and pleasure. They are partners in Cosgrove Communications, which provides writing, producing and consulting services to clients across the country.