

HistoricalLandscape

SEEKING SPIRITS

Are ghosts haunting the Berkshires?

Find out by taking one of these guided ghost tours ...

By Aaron Simon Gross
The Berkshire Eagle

Do you believe in spirits? Over the past few years, ghost tours have surged in popularity in the Berkshires. Two decades ago, historical spots like Ventfort Hall Mansion and Gilded Age Museum, Hancock Shaker Village or The Mount offered none. But today, those venues host a large variety of tours for adults and children alike. Both locals and out-of-towners head to them either in search of a fright, wanting to learn about local history or a little of both.

The Mount was an early adopter of the practice, starting ghost tours in 2009 after the television show “Ghost Hunters” featured an episode built around Edith Wharton’s home.

“They found some nice spooky things in their investigation,” said Anne Schuyler, director of visitor services at The Mount, who remembers their visit. “That experience made us realize that there was a lot of interest in ghost stories and the paranormal.”

Today, The Mount offers frequent 120-minute ghost tours through October and even ones specifically for kids and families, removing some stories’ more illicit details for younger tourists.

This year, they’re offering “On the Trail of Ghosts,” an Oct. 26 tour led by paranormal investigator Nick Smith-Koblitz that covers the methodology and history behind ghost hunting outside of the more traditional storytelling aspects.

Schuyler said that the ghost tours have acted as a way to bring visitors to The Mount who might not normally be interested in going to a literary house.

“We get some people who’ve never heard of Edith Wharton before who come back the next day for the house tour,” she said.

On the tour, guides share stories of ghostly experiences people have had at the house — of which Schuyler has had her own. She claims that once, she was in Wharton’s third-floor bedroom when she suddenly smelled perfume. The second she said aloud that the scent was there, it was gone. “It sends a little shiver through your spine,” she said.

Schuyler added that many employees of The Mount say they don’t believe in ghosts when they start working there but since then, they’ve had experiences that they felt were undeniable.

Still, The Mount always tells visitors outright: “We can’t guarantee that something will happen the particular day you’re there.”

Robert Oakes — who is hosting ghost tours at Ventfort Hall Mansion on Oct. 21 and 28, in addition to events at The Mount on Oct. 22 and 28 — has had his own spooky experience on The Mount’s third floor.

In 2019, he was leading a tour for MASS Paracon, a paranormal convention that operates out of the Boston area, when a member asked if he’d ever tried to make direct contact with the spirits.

“No,” he said. “I’m the storyteller.”

“Well you really should,” that guest answered. “Because they want to talk to you.”

He figured he might as well try it out. So he stood on third floor and asked “Do you know my name?” leaving a pause after he asked. In the moment, he heard nothing in that pause.

But later, when he and the group listened to an audio recording of that moment, they heard a voice in a gravelly tone slowly say, “Rooooooobbbbeeeerrrrttt.” “Wow! Did I get the chills!” Oakes said. “To



EAGLE FILE PHOTO

“It might not be the official story you see in the history books,” Robert Oakes said, of tours in sites like the Pittsfield Cemetery. “But it’s the experiences people have had.”

IF YOU GO

GHOST TOURS AT VENTFORT HALL

What: Tour Ventfort Hall with Robert Oakes, author of “Ghosts of the Berkshires,” as he leads you through the rooms and halls of this historic estate sharing tales of its hauntings. Ages 12 and up.

Where: Ventfort Hall Mansion and Gilded Age Museum, 104 Walker St., Lenox

When: 8 p.m. Oct. 27; 10 p.m. Oct. 21

Tickets: \$30. Reservations required.

Registration and more information: 413-637-3206, gilded-age.org

GHOST TOURS AT THE MOUNT

What: Veteran tour guides share tales of the many eerie encounters that have been reported at The Mount for years.

Where: The Mount, 2 Plunkett St. Lenox

On the Trail of Ghosts: 7 p.m., Oct. 26

Ghost Tours for Kids: 6 p.m. Oct. 29

Ghost Tours:

•6 p.m. Oct. 28

•6:30 p.m. Oct. 20, 27, 31

•8:30 p.m. Oct. 20, 27, 29, 30, 31

•10 p.m. Oct. 28

Tickets and information: 413-551-5100, edithwharton.org

HAUNTED HANCOCK

What: An after-hours, spine-chilling evening of ghosts and mystery. Walk the dark paths of the village with an expert guide, hear tales of ghostly sightings, and discover the Shakers’ role in the spiritualist movement. Ages 12 and up.

Where: Hancock Shaker Village, 1843 West Housatonic St., Pittsfield

When: 7 p.m., Oct. 19, 20, 21, 26, 27 and 28

Tickets: \$30, nonmembers; \$27, members. Reservations required.

Reservations and information: 413-443-0188, hancockshakervillage.org

MACABRE PITTSFIELD TOURS

MACABRE PITTSFIELD: CITY OF THE DEAD

What: Explore the lives and tragic stories of the less well-known individuals residing in Pittsfield Cemetery.

Where: Pittsfield Cemetery, 203 Wahconah St., Pittsfield

When: 4 p.m., Oct. 21, 28 and 29; 6 p.m. Oct. 30

Tickets: \$10

Registration: berkshirehomehistorian@gmail.com

Information: mysteriousshillsdotcom.wordpress.com

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOE DURWIN

“Fifteen years ago, these spots would have given us the cold shoulder,” said Joe Durwin, seen leading a history tour in downtown Pittsfield. “Now they’re booking out tours left and right.”

GHOSTS & HAUNTINGS OF UPSTREET PITTSFIELD

What: Explore ghoulish legends of the historic Park Square district. Walking tour begins near Berkshire County Superior Court.

Where: Berkshire County Superior Court, 76 East St., Pittsfield

When: 7 p.m. Oct. 21

Tickets: \$10

Registration: berkshirehomehistorian@gmail.com

Information: mysteriousshillsdotcom.wordpress.com

MACABRE PITTSFIELD: 1800s

What: This downtown walking tour explores the murders, mayhem and mercantilism that grew a colonial village to a city.

When: 2 p.m. Oct. 22

Tickets: \$10

Registration: berkshirehomehistorian@gmail.com

Information: mysteriousshillsdotcom.wordpress.com

GHOSTS & HAUNTINGS FOR KIDS

What: A kid friendly version of the regular Ghosts tour, guided by Taylor Staubach of Berkshire Family Hikes. Geared for ages 3-10.

When: 6 p.m. Oct. 20

Tickets: \$6, adults; \$4, children. Advanced registration required.

To register: taylor@berkshirefamilyhikes.com

Information: berkshirefamilyhikes.com

to groups because “when we’re all in, I think we electrify each other and inspire the spirits to want to be close to us,” he said.

Other guides are more skeptical.

Ruth Burday, is among the guides of Hancock Shaker Village’s Haunted Hancock Tours — which have been offered throughout the month of October since 2017 — including ones specifically for families on Oct. 21 and 28. She admits that she doesn’t think she’s experienced anything that couldn’t be explained by, say, a creaky floorboard or an old steam heat system.

Burday is more interested in the folklore and stories, she said, which have a lot of significance for the Shakers. “The Shakers have a strong interest in the spirit world.”

Another Haunted Hancock guide, Stephen Pepper, also said he’s a nonbeliever. And yet, he remembers a time he was the Brick Dwelling and heard a door slam.

“I couldn’t find any doors that were open and had been closed. Twenty minutes later, the same thing happened. No doors out of place,” Pepper said. “I can’t explain it.”

Berkshires historian Joe Durwin, on the other hand, said, “My training was in anthropology and folklore so I treat [ghost stories] as narratives, without being dismissive of people’s lived experiences.”

Durwin is hosting seven public tours on Pittsfield’s macabre history this fall; only two are specifically about ghosts. In the past, he was more open to pseudo-scientific thinking than he is now.

“I’m a pretty pro-science guy and I think in the past couple of years, I’ve drawn a firmer line,” he said. “My journalism’s a little more strict now because I’ve seen how there can be damage to magical thinking in society run amok.”

He is a great admirer of Oakes’ work — a feeling that’s mutual even while their levels of skepticism differ.

“When it comes to these things, we have to turn off our rational mind a little bit and step into the unknown,” Oakes said. “Follow our instinct. That involves more our imagination and our intuition than our scientific tools or our rational minds.”

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have something that tangible, potent, direct. It was really something.”

He said his own belief and skepticism has oscillated over the years. But whether his

guests on tours are believers or not, he simply wants them to be “to be open to the possibility that there are mysteries in our world,” Oakes said.

More recently, Oakes was sitting by the windows in

Ventfort Hall Mansion’s library, before a ghost tour, when he felt the sensation of a hand touching his head.

“I’m definitely pro science,” he said. “It helps us rule out other possibilities,

like that a sound we hear is just condensation or something. But I don’t think it helps us get in touch with these experiences.”

He loves giving tours