



OCTOBER 2025

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A Newsletter for the volunteers & friends of the Stephenson House



Mourning Col. Stephenson A Glimpse into 19th-Century Grief

This October, the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House in Edwardsville, Illinois invites visitors to step into a poignant chapter of early American life with its immersive exhibit, *Mourning Col. Stephenson*. Running from October 2–31, the exhibit commemorates the death of Col. Benjamin Stephenson on October 10, 1822, and explores the mourning customs of the era through room settings and interpretive storytelling.

Each space in the historic home is transformed to reflect the final days of Stephenson's life and the rituals that followed. The main bedchamber is staged as a sick room, where family members likely cared for Stephenson as he battled malaria—a diagnosis inferred from store records of medicine purchased just days before his death. With no civilian hospitals or funeral businesses in the area at the time, the parlor depicts the home funeral, complete with a locally crafted coffin and traditional visitation setup.

Visitors will also encounter the deep mourning practices observed by the family, including dress, behavior, and household changes. Artifacts and interpretive materials in the children's bedroom and servants' quarters illustrate how grief permeated every corner of the household. In the

kitchen, docents bake funeral biscuits—a customary token for mourners—offering guests a taste of history. The dining room reveals the economic aftermath of Stephenson's death, where assessors inventoried possessions for a public auction held just weeks later.

Tours are available Thursday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., and Sunday from 12 to 3 p.m.. (last tour begins by 2 p.m.). Due to staffing limitations, reservations are strongly encouraged. The exhibit is not recommended for small children.

For those seeking a richly detailed and emotionally resonant experience, *Mourning Col. Stephenson* offers a rare opportunity to witness the intersection of personal loss and public history.



Ghost Hunts at the Museum

October 11 (*Almost Sold Out!*) & November 8
6:00 PM – Midnight | \$40 per person | Ages 13+

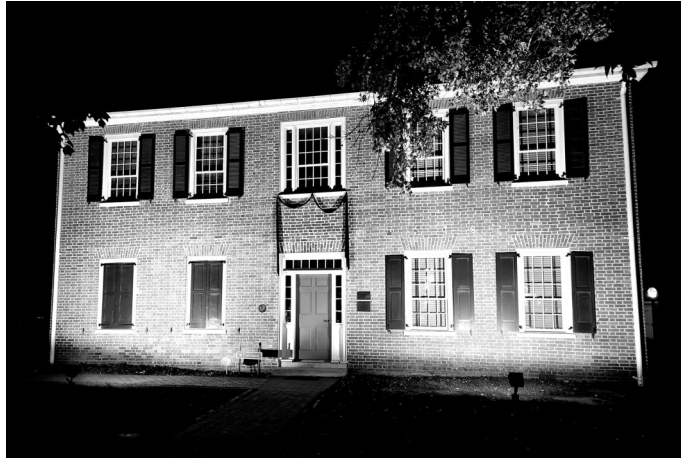
This fall, Stephenson House invites the brave and the curious to experience its storied halls after dark during two exclusive *Guided Paranormal Ghost Hunts*.

Hosted in partnership with the Midwest Paranormal Investiga-

tors Consortium, these events offer participants a rare opportunity to explore one of Edwardsville's oldest homes through the lens of the unexplained.

Built in 1820, the house has long been a site of historical significance—and paranormal activity. Over the years, both guests and staff have reported unexplained paranormal activity: a ghostly woman in white drifting across the grounds, phantom footsteps echoing through empty rooms, doors that mysteriously refuse to stay shut, and “fainting spots” where visitors have been suddenly overcome.

During each ghost hunt, participants will investigate throughout the property, including both floors of the original home, the detached kitchen and quarters above, and the servants' cabin. The consortium will provide professional ghost-hunting equipment, though guests are welcome to bring their own. No prior experience is necessary—just a healthy dose of curiosity and courage.



The first hunt, scheduled for October 11, has nearly reached capacity, with only one ticket remaining. The second and final opportunity to join this season's investigation will take place on November 8. Each session is limited to just

ten participants to ensure a focused and immersive experience.

Tickets are \$40 per person, nonrefundable and available at www.stephensonhouse.org. Guests must be at least 13 years old, and those under 16 must be accompanied by an adult. The hunts will be held at the Stephenson House, located at 409 S. Buchanan Street in Edwardsville, Illinois.

Don't miss your chance to walk among the whispers of history—and perhaps meet one of its lingering residents.





Greetings from the President

Dearest Gentle Volunteers,

The leaves are changing, the wind is blowing and we are headed into Autumn. And it is a spooky time at The House.

We will be having the Guided Paranormal Ghost Hunt this month. Get your tickets before they sell out! And remember it is also Mourning Col. Stephenson Special Exhibit time. And if you have extra time come and volunteer. We have many time slots to fill.

And if you haven't seen, tickets for the event of 2026 is on sell. Yes, The Jewels Ball will be happening on June 26, 2026! And we have an Advance Ticket Price until November 30th. So get your tickets now and start working on your costumes now!!!

We will be having a blast in June. In the meantime enjoy the beginning of Fall!!!

Truly Yours,

Lady Blue

Fall Auction Supports Historic Preservation

As autumn arrives, the Stephenson House is gearing up for the *Sid Denny Memorial Antiques & Collectibles Auction*. Held in honor of longtime friend and supporter Sid Denny, this event plays a vital role in sustaining the legacy of the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House.

Proceeds from the auction directly fund restoration efforts and educational programming at the museum. Every donated item and winning bid helps maintain the historic site and enrich community engagement with early Illinois history.

This fall's auction will take place online, beginning in October and concluding in November. Final dates will be announced soon. In the meantime, donors are encouraged to search their homes, barns, and storage spaces for items that could contribute to the event's success.

The auction welcomes a broad range of quality items. While antiques remain popular, the scope has expanded to include:

- Durable furniture with craftsmanship
- Musical instruments
- Vintage kitchenware
- Decorative pottery
- Collectible and rare books
- Unique pieces with character

All items must be in good, functional condition. Damaged or broken donations cannot be accepted. Select contributions may also be sold through alternate platforms to maximize their impact.

To arrange a donation, contact the museum at:

- (618) 692-1818
- stephensonhouse1820@yahoo.com

Please note:

- Items must be usable and in good condition
- All donations become museum property
- Unsold items will not be returned

This fall, help us build an auction filled with history and heart. Your generosity ensures the continued preservation of a local landmark and the stories it holds.

News & Needs

Thank you...

- **Mark Myers** for the man's coat, two pairs of pants, vest and hat

Needs...

- We still need volunteers to help cover stations and tours on Friday and Sunday of Living History Days.
- Our first ghost hunt of the year is on October 11. We could use 1-2 volunteers to help with security and guest support.
- Please return Volunteer Training binders, if you have one.

Wanted...

- **Spring, Summer, Fall 2026 Internship Alert!**
Make history come alive at the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House! We have three internships available:
 1. Videographer – Film stories & events
 2. Social Media – Share history with style
 3. Admin – Learn museum & nonprofit ops**Apply now:** <https://stephensonhouse.org/internships-%26-volunteers-1>

Deathhead Buttons: Utility, Symbolism, and Craft



A gentleman wearing a coat with Deathhead buttons. *Alderman Thomas Wilson* by George Romney, 1761.

In the quiet rhythm of early 19th-century domestic life, few objects embodied both utility and artistry as gracefully as the Deathhead button. These buttons are a type of thread-wrapped fastener, typically made by winding silk, linen, or cotton around a small wooden mold or disc in a geometric pattern. The resulting motif resembles a diamond or starburst, often rendered in contrasting colors. These buttons were part of the broader Dorset button tradition, a cottage industry that flourished in Dorset, England, from the 17th century onward. Deathhead buttons represent one particular subtype within this craft. By the early 1800s, they had become popular across Britain and North America, appearing on waistcoats, shirts, and sometimes children's clothing and household linens. Their appeal lay not only in their durability but in their decorative charm: each was a miniature canvas for color and pattern.

Though not exclusively associated with mourning, its name and design carry symbolic weight. The criss-cross thread pattern is often interpreted as echoing the skull and crossbones motif—a popular memento mori

in the 18th century, reminding wearers of mortality. Some historians trace the term to the German word *Totenkopf*, meaning “dead man’s head,” while others note its visual resemblance to motifs found in mourning jewelry such as Stuart crystals. These associations suggest a subtle continuity of symbolic language, even as the buttons appeared in a variety of colors and everyday garments. Whether through name, pattern, or cultural memory, Deathhead buttons retained a quiet resonance with themes of mortality, woven into the fabric of daily life.

Button-making was a domestic skill, practiced by women and girls as part of household sewing routines. Patterns circulated among families and communities, and in some cases, buttons were produced for sale or barter, contributing to local economies before the rise of industrial manufacturing. The process required a steady hand and a keen eye for symmetry. Makers began with a solid wooden base, then carefully wound colored threads in a specific sequence to form the Deathhead design. The result was both functional and expressive—a small but meaningful act of craftsmanship.

By the 1830s, machine-made buttons—metal, glass, and cloth-covered—rapidly displaced hand-wrapped styles. The Dorset button industry lingered for a few decades, but by 1851 it had largely collapsed under industrial competition. Yet Deathhead buttons persisted in some rural areas and among traditionalists who valued their aesthetic and tactile qualities. Today, they are cherished by textile historians, reenactors, and craftspeople who seek to revive historical techniques. They offer a tangible link to the domestic lives of early 19th-century women—an art form born of necessity, sustained by skill, and remembered for its quiet beauty.

Sources:

- Pat Earnshaw, *The Dorset Button Industry: A*

(Buttons, Continued on page 6)

(Buttons, Continued from page 5)

Study of a Traditional Craft (1994)

- Textile Research Centre, Leiden – “Deathhead Buttons”
- Dorset History Centre Archives – “Dorset Buttons: A Brief History”
- John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital’s Textile Tokens, 1740–1770* (2010)
- • Burnley & Trowbridge historical sewing resources – “Handmade Buttons in the 18th and 19th Centuries”
- The British Museum – Stuart Crystal mourning jewelry collections
- Oxford English Dictionary – Etymology of “Death’s Head” and “Totenkopf”



Try It Yourself: Make a Deathhead Button

Curious about the craft behind these historic fasteners?

Fabric & Fiction offers a beautifully illustrated tutorial that walks you through the process of making your own Deathhead button using traditional techniques.

Whether you're a reenactor, educator, or textile enthusiast, this hands-on guide brings 19th-century craftsmanship to life—one thread at a time.

Image courtesy of Fabric & Fiction

<https://fabricnfiction.wordpress.com/2018/02/12/tutorial-deaths-head-buttons/>


Upcoming Events, Tours & Activities

- **Mourning Col. Stephenson exhibit, Oct. 2-31**
- **Living History Days, Oct. 3-5, 10 am—3 pm.** We will have free demonstrations (funeral biscuits in the kitchen, laundry, & children's games on the front yard) and mourning tours on the hour.
- **Guided Paranormal Ghost Hunts, Oct. 11, 6 pm– 12 am.** Join the hunt for things that go bump in the night.
- **Tour (adult), Oct. 16, 1-2 pm.** This will be a cooking demo in the kitchen for a local D.A.R. chapter



OCTOBER

**Sun****Mon****Tue****Wed****Thu****Fri****Sat**

			1	2	3 Living History Days	4 Living History Days
5 Living History Days	6	7	8	9	10	11 Paranormal Ghost Hunt 6 pm
12	13	14	15	16 Adult Tour 1 pm	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	23	25
26	27	28	29	30	31 	

Be Our Friend...

*Renew your membership or become a new Friend.
Fill out and mail the following information to us.*

YES! I want to help. Enclosed is my contribution:

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State & ZIP: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Amount Enclosed: _____ Membership Level: _____

Please send me information about volunteering at Stephenson House.

Checks should be made payable to the:

Friends of the Col. Benjamin Stephenson House

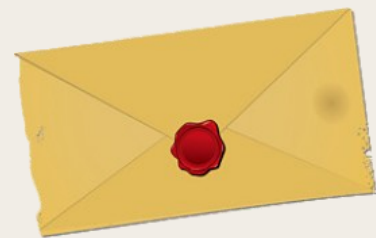
Payments may also be made in our online store:

www.stephensonhouse.org

***Memberships are from January to December.** Benefits of membership are extended to an individual and his/her immediate family. We accept cash, check or credit card donations. Memberships are extended for monetary donations only. The Friends of Col. Benjamin Stephenson House is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization FIN 37-1395804



**Send your membership to the
Friends of the Col. Benjamin
Stephenson House
P.O. Box 754
Edwardsville, IL 62025**



Membership Levels

Friend of Ben & Lucy
\$25

Stephenson Family Friend
\$50

Landmark Friend
\$100

Heritage Friend
\$250

Living History Friend
\$500

Founding Friend
\$1,000 or more

**Corporate membership information
available upon request.**

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