

# The Berkshire Eagle

## Berkshire haunts host ghost tours for the brave

**By Jennifer Huberdeau, Berkshire Eagle Staff**

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Volunteer Robert Oakes leads a ghost tour through the stable at The Mount in Lenox on Friday, Oct. 10, 2014. (Jennifer Huberdeau / Berkshire Eagle Staff)

The Berkshires are rife with tales of wandering spirits; spectral beings re-enacting their last moments and homes still inhabited by the lingering spirits of previous owners.

Opportunities to visit several of the region's more famous "haunted" locations are becoming just as prevalent each October, as more locations and organizations embrace the growing paratourism market -- hosting ghost tours, lectures about paranormal events and even ghost hunting events.

### **The Mount**

The Mount, the former home of author Edith Wharton, has embraced its haunted history. In 2009, the Lenox estate appeared on an episode of the SyFy channel's "Ghost Hunters," and has hosted weekend ghost tours since the show aired.

"The stories go as far back as 1942, when the house was used as a dormitory by the Foxhollow boarding school," said Nicole Knapp, executive assistant at The Mount, during a recent interview. "One of the stories from that time period, when the attic was used for dormitory, is that a black shape would appear at the foot of the girls' beds."

Stories of apparitions, the sounds of footsteps and unexplained smells and voices have continued over the years, as told by members of Shakespeare and Company, which once called the estate home, as well as by staff members, volunteers and visitors.

"The most common stories we hear are of people hearing footsteps, names whispered in their ears and banging sounds, as well as smells that can't be explained -- lilacs or heavy perfumes," Knapp said. "We haven't had an actual sighting of a ghost in a couple of years, but many people will catch figures in photographs."

This year, The Mount has undertaken the task of collecting stories and photos from visitors, which the organization has been sharing via its blog.



A close up of a photo sent to The Mount by Nancy L. Pastor, which reportedly shows a 'ghost' in Edith Wharton's drawing room. (Jennifer Huberdeau / Berkshire Eagle Staff)

"One of the stories we've shared came to us out of the blue," she said, referring to story in which a visitor recounts how she and her daughters spoke with a woman, dressed in period clothing, who seemed annoyed they were on the property. The woman is assumed to have been the ghost of Wharton herself. "It's the story we call 'The Lady in White.' It was a huge surprise, especially because the story comes from the 1980s. It's a time period we haven't heard many stories from. It's phenomenal, because the experience is very life-like."

## **The Tour**

On a recent Friday night, our tour group met in the stable, where our guide, Robert Oakes, began spinning tales of ghostly sightings -- from the hulking shadowy figure of Wharton's

driver, Charles Cook, which is often accompanied by the smell of cigar smoke, to the more ominous figures that lurk in the upstairs loft and attic space where a pregnant maid is said to have hanged herself.

"We've had reports of people hearing things rolling around upstairs," he said. "We recently had an inspector come in for a grant. He spent some time upstairs and reported that he felt there was someone crouched in the corner, watching him the entire time he was doing the inspection."

There's also reports of a disembodied head that floats back and forth between rooms on the stable's second floor, which once served as a costume shop for Shakespeare & Company. While the floating head didn't make an appearance, walking through dark hallways and abandoned bedrooms with only the steady beam from a flashlight to guide the way creates an ambiance akin to the spookiness of campfire ghost stories.



Volunteer Robert Oakes leads a ghost tour through drawing room at The Mount in Lenox on Friday, Oct. 10, 2014. (Jennifer Huberdeau / Berkshire Eagle Staff)

Leaving the ghosts of the stable behind, we made our way up to the main house, walking along the moonlit road until we veered off into the woods to visit Wharton's pet cemetery. Here, the Whartons buried their four beloved canine companions. Each dog has its own headstone, engraved with its name and the years of its birth and death. Two other graves, belonging to dogs of the family who purchased the state from Wharton, complete with headstones are also located in the cemetery. While activity is not reported in the pet cemetery, it's interesting to know that Wharton had the cemetery placed on a hill that she could see from her bedroom window.

From there we make our way into the house, where multiple paranormal events have happened -- full body apparitions, heads being stroked by unseen hands, disembodied voices and long-neck shadow figures appearing in photos.

Oakes said it is believed that one of the ghosts is Wharton's husband, Teddy, who suffered from manic ups and downs while living at the estate. His study, where women have had their heads touched and hair stroked, is small, with stark institutional white walls on three sides. A fourth wall, made up of glass doors, leads out onto a balcony.

"Today we know he suffered from bipolar disorder," Oakes said. "He'd stay in his study for days on end. Edith seemed to flourish while they lived here, while he slipped further into depression and manic mood swings."

But the most dramatic otherworldly display takes place in a third-floor bathroom window, where tour participants are encouraged to take photographs and see if they can capture the image of a floating human face outside, as many others have done in the past.

### **The Houghton Mansion**

The former home of the first mayor of North Adams, A.C. Houghton, has been under the ownership of the Lafayette-Greylock Masonic Lodge since Houghton's daughters, Florence Gallup and Susan McKeon, sold it to the local masons for \$1 in the late 1920s. Although damaged by fire on two separate occasions in the 1950s and 1960s, the house remains intact, with only a ballroom and Masonic temple being added on to the main structure.

The subject of local lore for years, the building gained national attention when it was featured during the first season of the reality series, "Ghost Adventures." It has also been featured on the Bio Channel's "Haunted Encounters: Face to Face," and WGBY's "New England Legends: Spooky Berkshires."

The house's permanent guests allegedly include Houghton, his daughter, Mary, and chauffeur, John Widders. Mary Houghton, 37, was one of two women killed in a car accident in Pownal, Vt., when the family went for a drive on Aug. 1, 1914. Widders, who was driving the car, killed himself in the family's carriage house the next day. Houghton, who had suffered heart problems for years, died 10 days later. Other spirits are believed to roam the house -- the souls of deceased Masons are thought to hang out in the temple, while a child's spirit is said to roam and play in the basement, according to Kyle Demarsico, a lodge member who coordinates tours and private ghost hunts.

"The 'Ghost Hunters' recently spent some time here, filming for a show that should air in January," he said.

### **The Tour**

Having participated in several ghost-hunting events at the mansion over the last few years, I opted to take the shorter ghost tour on a Saturday night. After listening to a lodge member

recount the tragic events of the Houghton car crash and the associated deaths, we were split into three smaller tour groups and hustled off to our assigned floors. (This tour is a mini-version of a ghost hunt.)

Our first stop was on the second floor of the three-floor home, where we were taken into the Masonic temple. Demarsico, who led our group, explained how this part of the building was added on by the Masons in 1927.

"We find that people will see shadows walk by in the outer hallways and women will be pushed out of the chairs reserved for the lodge's highest ranking members," he said, before placing a K-II electromagnetic field meter on an altar in the middle of the room. The K-II, which measures changes in the electromagnetic field with a series of flashing lights, can supposedly be manipulated by ghosts who are answering questions. A series of faint flashes resulted after numerous questions were asked, but the activity here was not strong.

From there we traveled to two second-floor bedrooms, one said to belong to A.C. Houghton and the other to his daughter, Mary. Both rooms are known for having strong K-II question-and-answer sessions, as well as having numerous EVP (electric voice phenomenon) recordings made in them. In each of these rooms, Demarsico employs the K-II and a 'spirit box' -- a device that quickly scans radio frequencies which ghosts can supposedly manipulate to answer questions with real-world voices. Neither room has much activity.

"It's still early yet. We get most of our activity between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m.," our guide says, noting that it's only 7 p.m.

We find little activity on the third floor, a surprise for fans of the house, which has a reputation for strange occurrences in "Widders' room."

"Even though John Widders killed himself in the barn on another part of the property, we believe his spirit is here, watching over the property. This would have been a room used by servants," Demarsico says.

Before the tour ends, we head into the basement, where chairs are set up in a circle around a pile of dingy toys: Dolls and toy strollers, pin wheels and balls of assorted sizes.

"These are trigger items -- things that make the spirit we call 'Laura' more likely to engage with us," he said. "We call the ghost Laura after Houghton's first daughter, who died as a toddler. We don't know if it's her, but she seems to respond to it."

Here the K-II meter flashes a few times and the spirit box repeats the name Michael several times. Several members of the group report temperature drops in their areas and a few feel as if they've been touched by unseen hands.

## **Ventfort Hall**

This Gilded Age mansion and museum recently joined the growing list of sites where ghost hunts are being held. After appearing on an episode of "Ghost Hunters," the museum teamed up with Berkshire Paranormal, a Northern Berkshire-based paranormal investigation group.

While the mansion has been used as a private home, an inn and a dormitory for Tanglewood musicians, all of the paranormal events are said to be the work of the Morgan family. Sarah Morgan, sister of J.P. Morgan, and her husband George, built the home as a summer cottage. Following Sarah's death, George would take a second wife named Sarah (known as Sally) and spend his remaining years in Lenox. He would die at the home.

Over the years, staff members and volunteers have reported hearing voices coming from rooms that are empty, a ghost dog that roams the halls, floating faces and bodies on the main stairwell and strong odors of perfumes, alcohol and flowers.

Josh Mantello, co-founder of Berkshire Paranormal, said during a recent interview, he's experienced strange rappings on windows and the sudden strong smell of a woman's perfume.

"During one ghost hunt, our group was on third floor, and we had small squares of asphalt thrown at us," he said. "A year later, in the same room, a penny was thrown at the group."

## **Paranormal normals**

Looking to take in some haunted fun? Know the difference before you sign up for one of the local attractions happening this month.

- A ghost tour is a walk around a property or building, during which stories of past paranormal experiences and history of the location are told. Photographs are typically encouraged, but other ghost hunting equipment is discouraged, as groups are kept together and move throughout the venue on a regular schedule. Tours are usually conducted by flashlight. Recommended for the curious, the skeptical and those who aren't inclined to spend hours sitting quietly in the dark.
- A ghost hunt allows participants to explore and investigate with ghost hunting tools -- cameras, digital voice and video recorders, infrared sensors, K-II and EMF devices, etc. -- over several hours during a set period of time or as part of an overnight stay. Be prepared to spend hours in the dark, sitting quietly or asking questions of spirits, who may or may not be present. Also be prepared to spend hours reviewing digital files and photos.

## **Upcoming events**

### **The Mount**

2 Plunkett St., Lenox

### **Ghost tour**

What: A tour of the most haunted parts of the estate.

When: 5:45 p.m. and 7 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 25;

Cost: \$22 for adults; \$18 for youth (12 to 18) This spooky tour is not recommended for children under 12.

### **Halloween Ghost Tour**

What: A special Halloween evening tour.

When: 10:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 31,

Cost: \$30 for adults; \$25 for youth (12-18)

Information: [www.edithwharton.org/programs-and-events/](http://www.edithwharton.org/programs-and-events/)

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### **Houghton Mansion**

172 Church St., North Adams

### **Private overnight ghost hunts**

What: Ghost hunt for four or more people. Hours of the overnight are 7 p.m. to 8 a.m.

Where: 172 Church St., North Adams

Cost: \$350 for 4 people. Any number above 4 is \$80 per person.

Information: <http://www.houghtonmansionghosttours.org/> or find them on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/pages/Houghton-Mansion-Ghost-Tours/571215622972789](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Houghton-Mansion-Ghost-Tours/571215622972789))

### **Ghost Tours**

When: Check the Houghton Mansion Ghost Tours Facebook page for upcoming tours

Public tour: Friday, Oct. 24, 6 p.m.

Cost: \$5 per person.

## **Halloween Costume Party and VIP Investigation**

What: Halloween Costume Party and VIP Investigation with Kris Williams from Ghost Hunters

When: Saturday, Oct. 25; Costume party, 5 to 10 p.m.; VIP investigation, 10 p.m. to 1 a.m.

Cost: Costume Party: \$50; VIP (costume party and ghost hunt): \$60

Tickets: [houghtonmansionghosttours.org](http://houghtonmansionghosttours.org)

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## **Ventfort Hall & Gilded Age Museum**

104 Walker St., Lenox

### **A Paranormal Evening at Ventfort Hall with special guests Steve Wilson and Bety Comerford**

When: 7 p.m. to midnight

Saturday, Oct. 25,

What: Ghost hunt and workshop/lecture with Shaman Steve Wilson and empath Bety Comerford

Cost: \$35

## **Halloween Night Ghost Hunt at Ventfort Hall**

What: Ghost Hunt, limited to 12 people

When: 7 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Friday, Oct. 31, Cost: \$89 (limit 3 tickets per group/individual)

Tickets and program information: <http://www.jmantello.com>

More information can also be found on the Berkshire Paranormal Facebook page: <http://facebook.com/berkshireparanormal>

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## **Ghosts & Legends of Upstreet Pittsfield**

What: 1.5 hour walk beginning at Pittsfield Common. Local folklorist Joe Durwin, who chronicles local paranormal history as These Mysterious Hills, will delve into ghost stories,



legends, lore, and strange-but-true tales attached to many Upstreet locations, including several of the city's premiere cultural venues.

When: 5:30 p.m. Oct. 23; 7 p.m. Oct. 24; 1 and 3:30 Oct. 25; 5:30 p.m. Oct. 29 and 30. Rain cancels.

Cost: Suggested donation of \$5

Information: See the Facebook event page at [www.facebook.com/events/294824780721512/](https://www.facebook.com/events/294824780721512/)