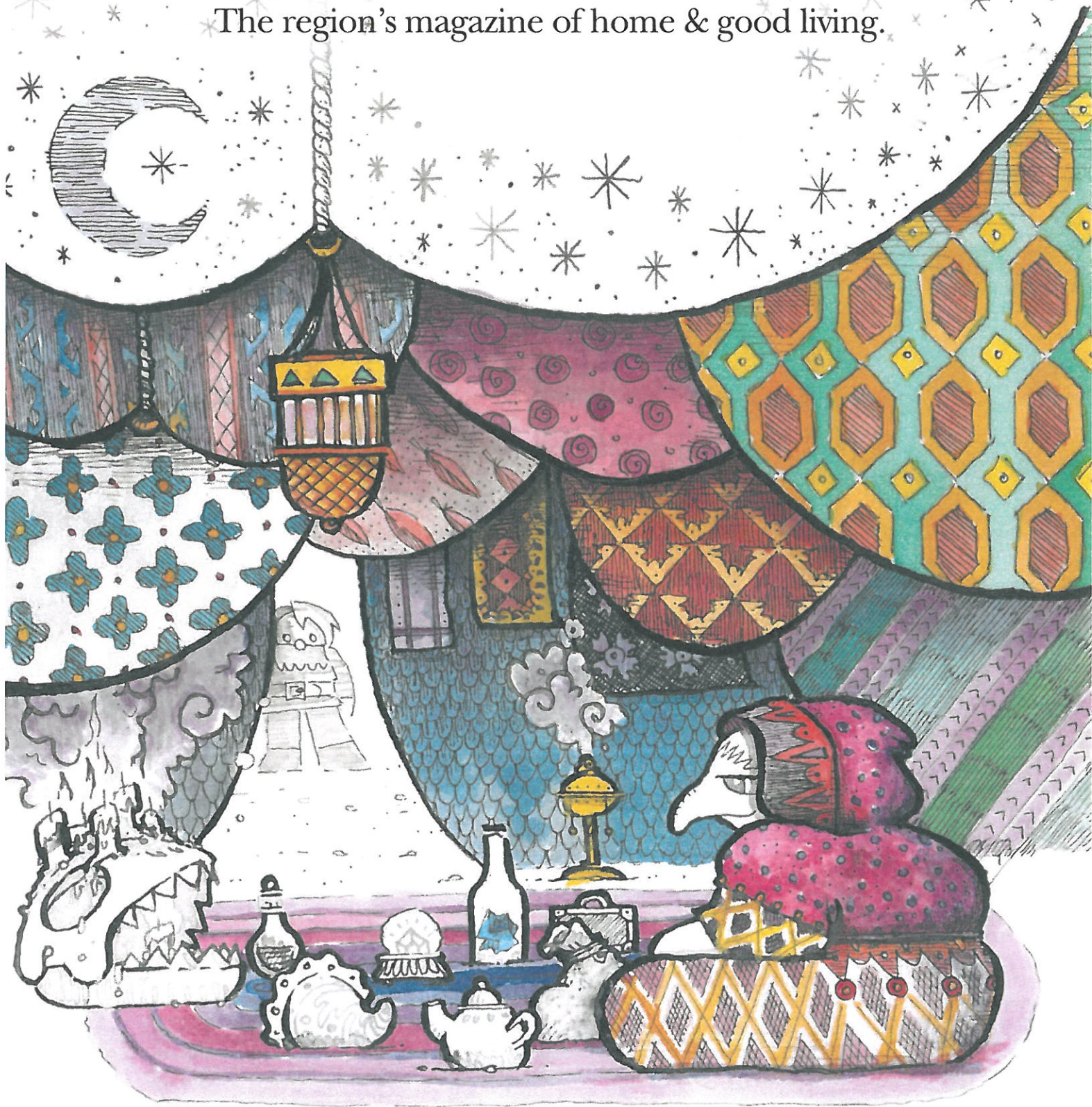


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## HOME & DESIGN

by Charles Bonenti

# Ghost Houses



Nathan Winstanley's property in Lenox, MA, shows a dapper gentleman on the porch and as a mysterious woman appears in the window. Photo courtesy of Nathan Winstanley

I grew up near a haunted house. At least that's what my friend, Earl, and I called it as we dared each other years ago to run up and knock on the door.

Its name was Oak Hill and it stood on a knoll overlooking what is now Artpark in Lewiston, NY. Oak Hill was a Greek Revival-style showplace built by customs collector Seymour Scovell in 1834. By the time Earl and I made it our "dare" challenge in the late 1950s, it was in sad shape.

Mr. Scovell's aged, great-granddaughter Nina Starkweather, a reclusive figure whose domineering mother thwarted her marriage, was its sole occupant. I glimpsed her briefly and fled in terror when my knocking brought her to the door one day. She died in 1966 and the house, unoccupied, burned three years later.

Nina Starkweather was a harmless old woman. But the sinister peculiarities of her mother and aunt, Isabella and Minnie Starkweather, inspired playwright Joseph O. Kesselring, a visitor to Oak Hill in the 1930s, to use his hostesses as models for two murderous old ladies in his 1939 hit play, "Arsenic and Old Lace."

Many old buildings are beset by creaks, groans and rattles; cold drafts; doors that open by themselves; and odd smells.

Nathan Winstanley discovered that firsthand when he moved his advertising company 25 years ago into what had been a home for aged women in Lenox, MA.

His staff started hearing bumps and footsteps when no one was there, and even saw apparitions. Few were willing to work after hours. "Lots of souls passed through," he said of the building's former use as a rest home. "It was kind of a gateway to the beyond." The disturbances eventually faded away.

Although Mr. Winstanley did not call in a paranormal investigator, an online search today brings up scores of them.

I spoke with Bob and Carol Rymanowski of Cohoes, NY, who call themselves the Cohoes Paranormal Society. "I was always into weird things," chuckled Mr. Rymanowski, who decided to formalize his interest after watching episodes of the "Ghost Hunters" television series in 2009. "It's interesting and a lot of fun. You go in with an open mind, not to prove or disprove anything, but to give the owners peace of mind."

The couple have done 35 to 40 investigations so far as "a public service." They do not charge for sleuthing. Their tools are a camera, an audio device and equipment to measure magnetic fields.





Cherry Hill hosts its annual "Murder Tours" on October 27-28. Photo courtesy of Cherry Hill



An appetition on the left appetizes during a ghost tour at The Mount. Photo courtesy of The Mount

Most paranormal happenings can be easily explained, they told me. A door opens because of a faulty hinge; neighbors' voices carry from next door; tree branches cast eerie shadows inside the house. About 10 percent of occurrences elude explanation. In those cases, they said, they ask a priest to bless the house and give the homeowner peace of mind.

Real or otherwise, there will be ghosts haunting neighborhoods everywhere on Halloween.

Supposedly haunted houses are everywhere. The website [www.hauntedplaces.org](http://www.hauntedplaces.org) lists more than 7,000 of them. A handful lie in the Upper Hudson and Berkshire region and some will create scary experiences for Halloween:

#### Ten Broeck Mansion, Albany

9 Ten Broeck Place, Albany, NY, [www.tenbroeckmansion.org](http://www.tenbroeckmansion.org)  
Built for Gen. Abraham Ten Broeck and his wife, Elizabeth Van Rensselaer, the 1798 Federal-style dwelling, headquarters of the Albany County Historical Association since 1918, has had reports of a child's voice in an upstairs nursery, an angry man in the kitchen, and unexplained flute music.

The organization will sponsor its annual "Haunted Pub Crawl" on October 17, 19 and 25.

#### Cherry Hill, 523 S. Pearl St., Albany, NY [www.historicherryhill.org](http://www.historicherryhill.org)

Home to five generations of the Van Rensselaer family, Cherry Hill was the site of a much-publicized 1827 murder. Businessman John Whipple was the shooting victim in a plot by his wife, Elsie, and her lover Jesse Strang. Mr. Strang was convicted and hanged, the last to be so executed in Albany. Mrs. Whipple was acquitted.

Historic Cherry Hill's annual "Murder Tours" are October 27-28 this year.

#### Legs Diamond House, 67 Dove St., Albany

Jack "Legs" Diamond, aka "Gentleman Jack," a gangster during the Prohibition era, was shot to death in 1931 in a small upstairs room in what was then a boarding house. Later occupants reported being awakened late at night by footsteps and voices on the stairs leading up to that room.

The building is a private home today.

#### Loudon Cottage, 4 Cherry Tree Lane, Loudonville

When President Lincoln was shot, one of his guests

at Ford's Theatre was Sen. Ira Harris's daughter Clara, whose white dress was stained with blood. Returning home to this cottage, she had a closet built for it and sealed it up. Later, it was said she saw an apparition of President Lincoln in her room. Others reported meeting the former president's ghost as well. The cottage is a private home today.

#### Houghton Mansion, 172 Church St., North Adams, MA

Four deaths are associated with the home of North Adams' first mayor, Albert C. Houghton, and his family, all within 11 days of each other.

Mr. Houghton's daughter, Mary, and a family friend, Sybil Hutton, died in an auto accident in Vermont on Aug. 1, 1914, when the chauffeur, John Widder, swerved to avoid a road crew. Anguished with guilt, Mr. Widder committed suicide the next day. Mayor Houghton died just nine days later, some said of overwhelming despair.

The house passed to the Masons in 1920, who erected a huge addition at the rear. They have reported unexplained sounds in the building and some believe the ghost of young Mary Houghton still inhabits it.

#### Ventfort Hall, 104 Walker St., Lenox, MA [www.gildedage.org](http://www.gildedage.org)

Ventfort Hall, a setting for the 1999 film "The Cider House Rules," is a Jacobean-style Gilded Age mansion built in 1893 by Sara Morgan, sister of J.P. Morgan, and her husband George Morgan. Witnesses have reported seeing a woman in old-fashioned dress in a mirror by the staircase and encountering whispering voices, unexplained scents and doors that open and close on their own.

#### The Mount, 2 Plunkett St., Lenox, MA [www.edithwharton.org](http://www.edithwharton.org)

Featured on TV's "Ghost Hunters," the estate and museum of artifacts relating to novelist Edith Wharton is said to be home to the ghost of Mrs. Wharton herself. Husband Teddy Wharton and a servant girl also have been reported seen, as well as Mrs. Wharton's close friend, novelist Henry James.

Through October, "Friday Night Fright" will be held at 5:45 and 7 p.m. On the Saturdays of October 14 and October 28, "Saturday Night Spirits" are planned for 5:45 and 7 p.m. Halloween, October 31, will feature Ghost Tours at 8 and 10 p.m. ☼

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