

History and Hauntings

Mysterious goings-on add spice to heritage-rich settings in Virginia.

In a state filled with historically significant sites, it's not surprising that nearly 200 places in Virginia claim ghost-related goings-on. History, legend and public fascination

with ghosts all contribute to "ghost tourism" in Virginia.

Here are four Virginia sites overflowing with history — and, some say, ghosts.



(Above) Originally built in 1747 as Quantico Church's vestry house, the Weems-Botts House was used by both George Washington's first biographer Mason Weems and attorney Benjamin Botts, who used it as a law office while defending Aaron Burr, former vice president under Thomas Jefferson, at Burr's famous treason trial. (Top right) "Mary's Room": Mary Merchant lived here until age 18. Many ghost legends revolve around the Merchant family, who owned the home for 100 years. (Bottom right) Erica Bridges, assistant director of the Weems-Botts House.

Weems-Botts Museum, 3944 Cameron Street, Dumfries, Virginia

Dumfries is home to the Weems-Botts Museum, a 1749 house originally built as a church vestry house. Named for Mason Weems, George Washington's first biographer, and Benjamin Botts, an attorney who served on Aaron Burr's defense team during Burr's infamous 1804 treason trial, the building was used by Weems as a bookstore and by Botts as a law office. The nonprofit Historic Dumfries Virginia, Inc., oversees the property, which is owned by the town of Dumfries and leased to Historic Dumfries. It opened to the public in 1974.

Although assistant director Erica Bridges says "the entire location is haunted," many ghost stories revolve

around the Merchant family, who owned the house from 1858-1968.

The house has been featured on TV's *My Ghost Story* and will be included in a 2017 episode of the Travel Channel's *The Dead Files*.

But legend doesn't always equal reality: some say Mary Merchant, who died in her 20s, was kept in a room at the house and fell down stairs to her death. Not true, Bridges says.

"The upstairs bedroom on the Victorian side of the house we call Mary's Room, and she did live there until age 18. But she was sent to Western State Asylum in 1901 and passed away in 1906," she explains. "She was diagnosed as having 'epileptic dementia'; as far as we know,

she died from tuberculosis."

Bridges says some of the 16,000 people who visit annually have reported "apparitions, shadow people and EVP (electronic voice phenomena) collected on digital recorders."

The museum hosts nighttime "Ghost Walk" tours every weekend in October; visitors must call ahead to book a tour. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$8 for students for the Ghost Walk tours.

Ghosts notwithstanding, Bridges says visitors can expect "a lot of great history ... people go away feeling they have learned something new."

www.historicdumfries.com
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(Above) Built in 1859, the stately Exchange Hotel served passengers on the Virginia Central Railroad. In 1862 the hotel was converted to Gordonsville Receiving Hospital, where 70,000 patients were treated. It is the only receiving hospital still standing in Virginia. (Inset top) This amputation kit included a large serrated saw used for cutting large bones, such as femurs. This kit belonged to Gordonsville's Dr. John W. Scott, and was used in the Civil War. (Inset bottom) Angel May, administrator/vice-president of Historic Gordonsville, Inc., at The Exchange Hotel.



The Civil War Medical Museum at the Exchange Hotel, 400 South Main Street, Gordonsville, Virginia

Built in 1859, the stately Exchange Hotel was so named because passengers on the adjacent Virginia Central Railroad stopped in Gordonsville to exchange tickets for the remainder of their journeys. Steam-powered trains could refuel with wood for their fireboxes, and weary passengers could spend the night at the hotel.

Everything changed in 1862 when the hotel was taken over by the Army of the Confederacy during the Civil War, becoming Gordonsville Receiving Hospital. From 1862-1865, 70,000 people were treated at the hotel turned hospital.

Historic Gordonsville, Inc., has owned the site since 1971. Angel May, administrator/vice-president, notes, "Because it was a receiving hospital, patients only stayed three days. It was a

triage hospital. Once they [patients] were well enough, they were usually sent to a hospital in Richmond."

Amazingly, there were only 900 deaths. More than 700 people were originally buried on the property, but many graves were moved after the war. The hospital's low mortality rates were credited to the use of sterile bedding, medicinal plants and homeopathic remedies.

Today, over 6,000 people annually visit the National Historic Landmark and the only receiving hospital still standing in Virginia. Visitors browse the medical-artifacts collection, learn some American history, and look for ghosts. Among the site's ghosts are gravedigger George Plant and Annie May, a freed slave who worked at the hotel while slavery was still in practice.

"She was 4 feet 11 inches tall and mean

as a snake. Photos and EVPs have been captured of her," May says of Annie.

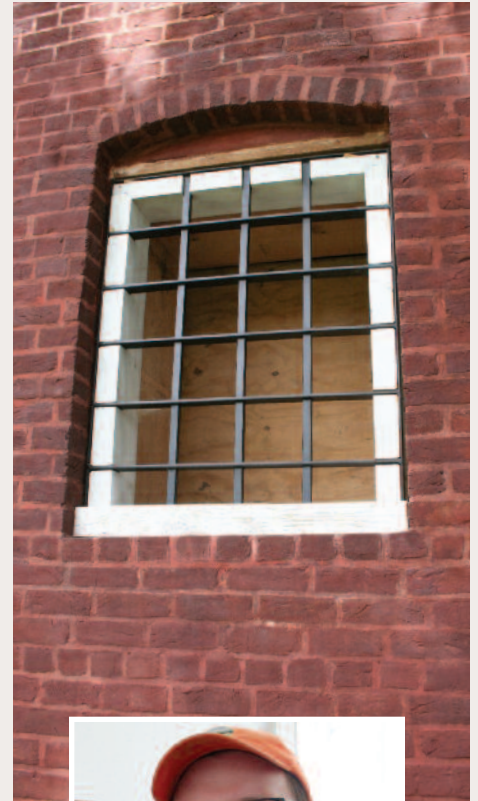
Listed on numerous "haunted places" lists, the Exchange Hotel has been featured on TV's *My Ghost Story*, *The Haunting*, and a BBC show called *The Hairy Bikers*. In October the Exchange Hotel celebrates the fifth anniversary of "Halloween Scarefest." Held the last three weekends in October, it combines candlelight tours with "haunted attractions" on the grounds. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$3 for children, plus special-attraction admission fees.

"We had 2,500 people attend last year. We hope to double that this year," May says.

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(Above) The 1822 Brentsville Courthouse, where James Clark was scheduled to be tried. He was shot in his jail cell and never went to trial. (Top right) The 1850 jail, the only 19th-century jail open to the public in Virginia that has regular hours, is undergoing restoration. (Inset) Bill Backus, site manager of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre.



Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre 12229 Bristow Road, Bristow, Virginia

Several ghost legends are attached to Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre, but the one that's attracted the most attention over the years is a doozy.

Back in 1872, the 1850 jail housed James Clark, then-commonwealth's attorney for Prince William County. Clark, 30, had left his wife and children to enter a relationship with 16-year-old Fannie Fewell. According to Bill Backus, historic site manager, "She got cold feet and went back to her parents and [Clark] was arrested and thrown into jail for kidnapping."

Awaiting trial, Clark was shot in his cell by Fewell's older brother and died the next day.

The brother was later caught, but many ex-Confederate generals and Virginia politicians came to the aid of the defense and he was acquitted.

"This was the 19th-century equivalent of the O.J. Simpson [trial]. It made

national news because these were two prominent Virginia families," Backus explains. "After the trial, a reporter tracked down a jury member who said Clark got what was coming to him. The legend is the ghost is in the jail because he never got justice."

County-owned, the 28-acre complex includes archaeological sites, the 1822 courthouse, the jail, Union Church (1874), a 1928 one-room schoolhouse and Haislip-Hall House (1853). The Haislip-Hall farmhouse is the only building not originally on the property; it was moved from its original location a few miles away when a developer agreed to move it to the site as a proffer. All buildings are restored except for the jail, where restoration is in progress.

On Oct. 28-29, visitors can have what Backus calls "a unique experience"; they can spend a night in the old jail for \$300 per room/cell, each accommodating four

people. On Nov. 12, "Paranormal 101" will be held from 7 p.m. until midnight in partnership with ECRIP (East Coast Research and Investigation of the Paranormal"); tickets are \$100. These are special-event prices. Normal admission to the park is \$5 for adults.

About 12,000 people visit Brentsville annually. When the jail was featured on TV's *Ghost Hunters* in 2009, visitation increased, but history remains the main draw.

"This is the only 19th-century jail open to the public in Virginia that has regular tours," Backus notes. "People can walk where these events took place, go into the jail cell where Clark was shot ... it's a unique site where you can experience history."

**www.pwcgov.org/brentsville
(703) 365-7895**



(Above) The grand Georgian-style mansion was built between 1768-71 by wealthy landowner William Fitzhugh. The colonial revival gardens here date to the 1920s; the original gardens would have been in back of the home overlooking the Rappahannock River. (Inset) Chatham was used as a Civil War hospital after the Battle of Fredericksburg. Original graffiti carved into the home's brick walls by soldiers is still visible today.

Chatham Manor & Spotsylvania National Military Park 120 Chatham Lane, Fredericksburg, Virginia

Over 500,000 people visit this sprawling 8,504-acre national park listed on the National Register of Historic Places each year. The complex includes a national cemetery where 15,300 Union soldiers are buried, two family cemeteries, four battlefields (Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Wilderness and Spotsylvania Courthouse) and four historic structures including Chatham Manor, a magnificent Georgian-style mansion built between 1768 and 1771.

Chatham attracts 32,000 people annually and has a storied history. As with many Civil War locales, visitors over the years have reported sightings of Civil War soldier ghosts.

And, there's the enduring "Lady in White" legend.

The story goes that an English girl in love with a man who was not "approved of" by her parents was sent to Chatham, but her beloved followed her and they planned to elope. George Washington caught the girl, had the suitor arrested, and the girl was sent back to England. Legend says

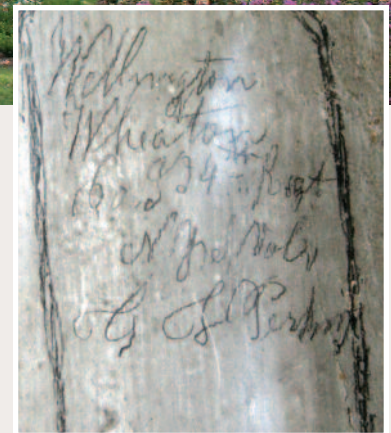
she married someone else and had children, but she said Chatham was the only place she was ever happy. An apparition is seen every seven years on the anniversary of her 1790 death. The next seven-year anniversary of her death is June 20, 2021.

The only problem is that the story is "all legend," says the park's chief historian, John Hennessy.

"I have never seen historical [proof] of that story," Hennessy says. "I've [been] here for over 21 years and have never seen anything that frightened, concerned or didn't make sense to me."

The legend persists, although Hennessy says "we don't do anything here related to the paranormal or ghosts."

Once the center of a thriving plantation, Chatham Manor attracted visitors like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Robert E. Lee. It's the only home in America that both Washington and Abraham Lincoln visited. After the disastrous Union defeat at the Battle of Fredericksburg (12,600 Union casualties) during the Civil War, wounded soldiers were brought to Chatham for care.



Volunteers like poet Walt Whitman came to help at the home-turned-hospital, where 130 soldiers died and are buried on the grounds.

Whitman had come to Chatham searching for a brother wounded in the fighting and was shocked by the carnage. Outside the house he noticed "a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, etc. — about a load for a one-horse cart."

"He did find his brother, who was wounded but not severely. Once Whitman realized that, he decided to help," Hennessy says.

For people who have not visited Chatham, Hennessy has some advice: "Don't come for the ghosts. Come because it matters. Places like this tell us about our nation and our predecessors. It is far more vivid than any ghostly images."

www.nps.gov/frsp/learn/history/culture/chatham.htm
(540) 693-3200 ■