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Photos by Becky Hyatt Rickenbaker*



# SPOOKY Columbia

For those who know a good story when they hear one or a ghost when they see one, Columbia's historic district is peopled by the living dead. Some survive in tales of lives once led, and others are said to linger in spirit. They enhance tours year-round, but especially at Halloween.

Columbia's interest in the living dead is not new. Between 1914 and 1916, as World War I brewed and then bubbled, large crowds gathered on spring nights along Blanding Street near its intersection with Bull to wait for a phantom stallion and its rider to appear above the trees. Early witnesses said the stallion reared and pawed the air. The rider's features were said to be so clear that few doubted who he was—Gen. Wade Hampton, looking ready to ride off to war as he had years before when South Carolina seceded from the Union.

By 1915, some described the rider as a woman riding sidesaddle, and in 1916, the horse was said to appear as a riderless skeleton, *The State* newspaper reported, speculating that the seasonal apparition was really an optical illusion of moonlight through emerging leaves.

Whatever it was, lots of people believed it was real. They quit congregating only when the figure stopped showing up.

The intersection that captured the public's attention—or, as the newspaper suggested, its imagination—is just a few blocks from two historic homes where reports of unexplained events and shadowy figures have persisted since at least the 1960s. One is the Hampton-Preston House, where the Civil War general and two



THIS PHOTO COURTESY HISTORIC COLUMBIA FOUNDATION

*Mary Cantey Hampton, wife of Wade Hampton I, is only one of many historical characters who come into play when "ghost busters" go busting into the capital city. Above: the Robert Mills House.*



*Historic Columbia Foundation tour guide Jackie Rhodes induces Moonlight Cemetery Tour participants to tighten their wraps. Facing page: Cliff Spann portrays the tarred and feathered Phineas Frazee.*

other Wade Hamptons lay in state before their burials. The other is the Robert Mills House across the street. The first is named for the most prominent families who lived there and the other for its famous architect.

The builder of both was a wealthy planter, Ainsley Hall. He sold his first house to Wade Hampton I and his third wife, Mary Cantey Hampton, in 1923. His own wife was so incensed by the sale that Hall vowed to build her another house that would “look down on” the one that was sold. He died before the new house was finished, and without enough money in his estate to complete it, it was sold at

auction. Sarah Cook Goodwyn Hall never got to live in it—at least, not in her lifetime. Some who claim to have seen her since say she appears to be still ticked about that and has taken up residence despite being dispossessed.

(Names are included for any who might encounter these living dead and wish to say hello.)

Both homes are now owned by the Historic Columbia Foundation and are open for tours and special events.

Beginning about the 1970s, docents and other HCF personnel began noticing a presence they suspected to be Sarah. It had an attitude. Carol Ann Gallivan, as-

sistant director of the HCF, 1973-76, later told *The Columbia Record* she was cleaning a window when someone or something jostled the ladder. She fell and broke her tailbone. Other staff members reported they felt like they’d been pushed when they twisted ankles or fell.

The house would be closed at night, with curtains drawn and beds smoothly made. In the morning, a bed would be rumpled and curtains opened. In one room, the staff tried to keep shutters closed to protect a valuable wax doll from sunshine. They even tried nailing the shutters shut, then screwing them, but repeatedly found them wide open. In what they called

the French bedroom, several staff members said they saw a woman carrying a candle, but nobody was really there.

Once during Christmas tours of the two mansions, the Hampton-Preston house was locked after all candles were snuffed. While closing the nearby Robert Mills house 45 minutes later, someone noticed candles burning in the sitting room across the way. Police found no sign of forced entry, and security alarms had not sounded, but every candle in that room was burning.

Some odd goings-on in the Hampton-Preston House appear to have ties to its history, which includes being commandeered as headquarters for Yankees while Gen. William T. Sherman was in town setting fires. One of the first reported sightings of an ethereal woman on the stairs occurred several decades ago when an Air Force officer toured the historic house in uniform. He thought the woman in a gray dress was a costumed part of the tour, but only he saw her staring sternly at him before turning and disappearing upstairs in a house where blue uniforms historically were despised.

The woman on the stairs has continued to turn up into this century, and one person who's seen her is curator John Scherer. He said she was there and then, quickly, she wasn't. "I just shook my head and went back to what I was doing," said he, neither the first nor the last to catch a glimpse of Mary Cantey Hampton, who lived in the house for 40 years until she died in 1863. During that time, one of her daughters died in childbirth in an upstairs bedroom that HCF staff members have said is always

cold. At times, they have heard the sounds of children playing when none are there.

The houses are only part of the foundation's Halloween tour, which always includes Elmwood Cemetery, a popular tourist site year-round, often obliged by Jackie Rhodes. By day she manages the foundation's museum, but she is one of several people who frequently don black Confederate widows' weeds for the cemetery trek.

The Halloween tour features numerous others in period costumes portraying 19th-Century grave diggers, Confederate soldiers, and a Union sympathizer—carriage shop owner Phineas Frazee, who was tarred, feathered and sent North when he challenged secession. (His son is buried at Elmwood. He died two weeks after joining the Confederate Army when he broke his neck in a fall off a gun carriage.) Frazee returned to Columbia after the war and was elected sheriff.

Rhodes admits Elmwood Cemetery is more serene than sinister, but "it's a wonderful place to talk about the history of Columbia through the stories of people who are buried there."

Folks to "meet" among the hundreds at Elmwood include eight-month-old Grace Mary Dougall, the first person to be buried there in 1856 (although she had been dead for 20 years). She is buried alongside her parents, two siblings who also died as infants and a brother who survived childhood only to die young in the Civil War. The bodies were moved from a Potter's Field to make way for railroad construction.

Then there are William and Mary Hunt. He was South Carolina's secretary of state during the Civil War and scurried to get documents out of town when Sherman's troops arrived. The Huntts fled with the Order of Secession and State Seal sewn into her skirts.



And, bless her heart, Nannie Thornwell, whose daddy was president of South Carolina College during the Great Biscuit Rebellion of 1852, when half the student body left campus rather than eat bad dining hall food. Nannie died at 20 on the eve of her wedding and was buried in her bridal gown.

And so it could go through a century and a half of stones and stories where people are buried but the past is not. In Columbia, you don't have to try hard to find the living dead. They are all around us. ❖

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*Columbia writer and avid cemetery explorer Margaret N. O'Shea chronicled the restoration of St. Peter's Church in the summer issue. Lexington photographer Becky Hyatt Rickenbaker contributes frequently to the magazine.*

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For more information about Historic Columbia Foundation's Moonlight Cemetery Tours, call (803) 252-1770, Ext. 33, or visit [www.HistoricColumbia.org](http://www.HistoricColumbia.org).