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Journal/Craig Ruttle

The White house in Upper Red Hook: Home to a ghost who walks the staircase.....but only to the first landing.

Ghost stories

Spirits who haunt Northern Dutchess

By Clare O'Neill Carr
Journal staff

"The first time I heard him - it was about this time of year - I was reading in the living room," said John White, lowering his voice.

"Footsteps sounded in the dining room. They reverberated with a hollow sound."

"But when I went to investigate, there was no one, only sound.

"He stepped toward me. I stopped. Then he stopped."

As he stood still, White said, the footsteps went deliberately past him, through the foyer, and up the stairs to the first landing of the 200-year-old house.

"Then they stopped," said White. Then what?

"Nothing - he just stopped. He always stops," White said.

White, of Upper Red Hook, tells that ghost story often. And the story has the ultimate twist: "It's true," he says.

White is one of three families of northern Dutchess County who say they sometimes share their old houses with spirits.

County Legislator Fran Mark and her

husband, Raphael, and their family lived with their ghost on Hollow Road for over 10 years. But now he seems to have left their sprawling, 19th century home, Toad Hall in Frost Mills, Town of Clinton, said Mark. And they miss him.

Rokeby, the Red Hook mansion built on River Road by William Astor in 1811, and home to Aldrich descendents, is said to be haunted by the spirit of Jane Cross, says owner Winthrop Aldrich.

Aldrich says he has never witnessed the wanderings of the ghost, a freed black servant who came to work for the family in 1863. But, he says, his grandmother loved the notion that the spirit walked the old tower room at Rokeby.

The ghost who inhabits White's house is one of two that have lived in the historic Revolutionary War home in the hamlet of Upper Red Hook, according to White..

The story goes that the ghost was a Tory sympathizer who was hanged for treason in the home, the former Red Brick Tavern which was built by Jacob Thomas, a lieutenant in Chancellor Robert Livingston's Hudson Valley regiment.

See GHOST, page 12A

Ghost stories:

Continued from page 1

The soldier has reappeared quite amiably to the scene at least once a year for 20 years, according to White.

The only variation to his climbing the stairs half way, was the sound of chains, said White.

That leads the family to believe the spirit was probably imprisoned before his death.

The Whites don't feel frightened of their ghost, whom they describe as never threatening.

"We've gotten used to him. We'll hear footsteps one fall evening, and say, 'Oh, he's back again.'" said White.

A German Shepherd they once had was not quite as comfortable. One evening when his sister-in-law was babysitting, the sound of footsteps sounded through the old house and the dog could not be stilled, recalled White.

"His hair rose on end, he cowered, then howled, then began to whine. My sister-in-law couldn't find the cause, but the dog wouldn't go near the foyer."

"She said she'd never come back here by herself again," White said.

The Whites say the soldier is not the only ghost in the house.

Their most recent ghost has a strong personal presence and possibly a feeling for mischief.

That ghost, who appeared about seven years ago and whom White believes may be one of his Civil War ancestors, rocks in his grandmother's old rocking chair which is placed by their fireplace, and loves to listen to music which it turns on from seemingly nowhere.

She — they believe this spirit to be female — always comes around on holidays when they have company, said White. Visitors have sensed her presence several times, and instincti-

vely avoid the chair, he said. Once, White said, classical music sounded in the house and, though White searched, he could not find the source. When he entered the living room, the chair was rocking in place, and the cheerful presence of another person filled the room, he said.

"They do seem to be happy ghosts," he said.

"Only one time did one of his ghosts get a little angry."

For some reason one — he believes it to be his ancestor — has something against a framed memento of the Grand Army of the Republic which White had attempted to hang with the rest of his collection of Civil War memorabilia and pictures on the stairwell in his house.

The first time he hung it, he and his wife were disturbed by a great commotion, related White. Of all the framed pictures along the stairwell, the Civil War memento alone was flung from the wall, across the stairs and smashed on the newell post into pieces, said White.

"Everytime I remount it, it has come off the wall and been destroyed. I've tried three times, but they won't let it stay," he said.

The theory of spirits returning to the scene of their death is born out in the story of White's murdered Tory and the Marks's family ghost.

The Marks's ghost is believed to be the spirit of a former owner who committed suicide in the old house, but who was extremely attached to the house which had been in his family for over 100 years.

"We called him Frank, the good ghost," said Fran Mark.

For at least 10 years, Frank walked throughout the house, turned on water faucets and set clocks back, according to the Marks, who have lived in Toad Hall for over 20 years.

But he also seemed to keep an eye on the place, alerted them once to broken water pipes in the basement, and they believe, prevented a tree limb from falling through the house during a storm.

The ghost disappeared when his elderly spouse died a number of years ago.

"We do miss Frank," she said.

Mark speculates that ghosts are perhaps spirits who cannot rest until they finish something left undone here on earth and with Frank, he waited until his mate joined him in the hereafter.

That may be the case with the Rokeyby ghost, Jane Cross, who helped raise eight of the 11 Chanler orphans left at the Hudson River mansion house in the 1870's after their parents Margaret Astor and John Winthrop Chanler both met early deaths.

Her spirit is said to constantly sweep the upper tower room in which

she died, though she is buried in the small Methodist cemetery on Cherry Street in Red Hook, said Aldrich.

But his grandmother had a theory about spirits, as well as a special feeling for the spiritual herself, recalled her grandson.

"When people would ask her, as they often did, if the house was haunted, she would always answer 'yes' and wait to see the look of shock come into their eyes," said Aldrich.

But the ghosts she referred to were not evil spirits, but the spirits of the very people who lived and worked there, the children who grew up there, and all those whose spirit remains a part of the place they love, said Aldrich.