

Spooky Streets



If you dare take the [Ghost Talk, Ghost Walk](#) in Savannah, Georgia, and are willing to fork out ten dollars for an evening's entertainment, guide Chris Connelly will try to horrify you. Pointing to the placid Savannah River, he will paint a scene of frightened slaves disembarking their stinking ships, trudging in chains toward a tunnel, leading to a holding area where they will suffer the indignity of intimate examinations before being auctioned to labor-hungry Georgia planters. Connelly, an earnest young man with a soft Georgia accent, will tell you that even today people who stand on this spot hear the ca-tink, ca-tink of clanking chains and the moans of miserable slaves carried on the wind.

Few historians will be surprised to learn that slavery caused untold suffering in Savannah. After all, this was the town about which the African-born slave-turned-abolitionist Olaudah Equiano said, with considerable understatement, "I had not much reason to like the place." Equiano had traveled the world from Africa to the Caribbean, from Turkey to Greenland, and perhaps in no place was he subjected to greater cruelty than Savannah. There he was beaten within an inch of his life in 1765, threatened with flogging in 1766, and, even as a free man in 1767, spent a night in a Savannah jail for no real cause.

What is surprising is that Connelly tells his horrible ghost story at all. Mainstream heritage tourism in Savannah shies away from slavery the way a Southern matron avoids the subject of money in polite conversation. Brochures and tourist offices would rather focus on Spanish moss hanging lazily from live oaks and the lovable oddballs of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. If they venture into the world of early American history at all, Savannah's mainstream tour guides are most likely to wax eloquent about the heartwarming friendship between Georgia founder James Oglethorpe and Creek leader Tomochichi.

This is the strange position of ghost tours in the U.S. and Canada today. Compared with most heritage tourism, ghost tours—by turns campy and didactic—offer visitors unblinking and, no doubt, at times unwelcome views of the skeletons in the closet of early American history: slave coffles, Indian massacres, debtors' prisons, and the sundry other sad and sorry fates of people you might expect would want to haunt America's cities.



Ghost tours are a relatively recent phenomenon in North America. Such tours have been around in England for as long as anyone involved in the trade can remember, but the first on this side of the Atlantic was Richard T. Crowe's [Chicago Supernatural Tours](#), which started in the mid-1970s. Crowe was well ahead of his time: the real boom in ghost tours began only a few years ago.

Today, it seems, every city with a vigorous tourist trade has ghost tours year-round (or nearly so). Savannah, Charleston, New Orleans, Boston, Philadelphia. Sure, all those make sense. But [Orlando](#)? Is there a less spooky city in America? Yet there in the town that Mickey built, a "professional, costumed guide" leads weekly, year-round tours. If you're lucky the guide will tell you about the time spooks took over the controls at Walt Disney World's Haunted Mansion and replaced the usual soundtrack of screams and moans with something even more horrifying: a never-ending loop of "It's a Small World After All."

And once October rolls around every even vaguely historic hamlet looks to cash in on the craze. In my own little corner of western New York, Halloween means hunting spooks in the sleepy Erie Canal town of Lockport, listening to ghost stories in Forest Lawn Cemetery, or summoning the courage to visit "Fortress Possessed" (or Old Fort Niagara as it's known the rest of the year) to hear guides work through their psychological issues related to years of dealing with poltergeists within the fort's dark stone confines.

Perhaps because of the remarkable growth of ghost tours in a short period of time, they follow a fairly standard format. You go to a designated location in the city of your choice: a haunted hotel, perhaps, or a landmark on the site of a grisly murder. Evening tours are most common but daytime tours are not unheard of. You pay your fee, in cash, usually ten to twenty dollars—kids under five free! The guide then tells you ghost stories while taking you on a short stroll. And I mean short in distance, not time: either in deference to Americans' appalling lack of fitness, or because garrulous guides prefer talking to walking, ghost tours rarely cover much ground, even though they last two or even three hours.

Let me be frank: even for me, who confesses to a nearly bottomless fascination for history, ghost tours can be tedious. Guides vary widely in their historical knowledge and storytelling ability. And, because the tours follow geography rather than chronology, they offer a jumble of anecdotes covering several centuries with no particular connecting thread, except that the tales all relate to a single, small city neighborhood.

But, other than restless toddlers strapped into strollers, skeptical and disappointed paying customers seem to be in the minority on most tours. On ghost tours I've taken in the last few months, I've paraded through spooky streets with mostly contented customers. In San Francisco, a local mother and her ten-year-old son, celebrating the boy's birthday, traded stories with the guide about ghosts they'd seen. In Toronto, a hulking Filipino-Canadian man named Raff insisted quite earnestly that he felt the presence of a spirit as we trudged through the cold rain past a haunted house in Chinatown. For those open to the possibilities of the paranormal, ghost tours offer a pleasant blend of haunts and history, not to mention a sense of community, as they can meet others similarly inclined to ascribe unusual feelings or events to the activity of ghosts.

If you ask guides why they think there has been such a proliferation of ghost tours, they sound more like sociologists than ghost hunters. Some point to the flowering of New Age beliefs in angels and spirit communication (what religious studies folks call a turn toward "spirituality" rather than "institutional religion"). Others mention the broader growth of heritage tourism, of which ghost tours are a relatively small part. In a postindustrial world, cities manufacture not transmissions and tires but images of their historic past.

Another reason there are so many ghost tours is that it requires very little capital to start a tour outfit. Jim McCabe, founder and chief storyteller of [New England Ghost Tours](#), looks like a banker because he was one, until the Bank of New England went belly-up in the recession of the early 1990s. Rooting around for something more fulfilling than credits and debits, McCabe thought historical tours were a perfect match for his love of history and his Gaelic flair for spinning tales. Other tour outfits were similarly put together on a shoestring and have since grown into thriving operations. But many guides still aren't about to give up their day jobs in museums and retail sales.

Students and salesmen: ghost tour guides are a more ordinary lot than you might have imagined. Indeed, most go to great lengths to distance themselves from the psychics of late-night TV that many tourists seem to expect. Chris Connelly of Savannah has the demeanor of a librarian (and a degree in architectural history to go with it). My tour guide in [Washington, D.C.](#), Elaine Flynn, has as much of the air of the paranormal as a suburban soccer mom. And the founder of Toronto's [A Taste of the World](#), Shirley Lum, wears dark-rimmed glasses and carries a three-ring binder and looks uncannily like a graduate student.



Fig. 1. Shirley Lum in Toronto's Chinatown. Courtesy of Erik Seeman.

Ghost tour guides like to present themselves as historians. Even the kookiest tour guide I've encountered highlights his scholarly approach to research. Jim Fassbinder of the [San Francisco Ghost Hunt](#) dresses for his tours in an all-black outfit that conjures the image of a nineteenth-century itinerant preacher—or maybe a patent-medicine huckster. Fassbinder has a goatee and flowing locks, a tall top hat, a long leather Dickensian coat, and a black bag with the words “GHOST HUNT” in silver studs.



Fig. 2. Promotional graphic for the San Francisco Ghost Hunt depicting Jim Fassbinder

He gets plenty of attention in this garb, even in San Francisco. But once Fassbinder begins his tour, he adopts a scholarly demeanor. He starts by assuring us, “all the stories you hear are very well documented.” Later he re-emphasizes the thoroughness of his research: he knows a particular woman did not die in the Queen Anne Hotel because he “checked all the records.”

And like professional historians, ghost tour guides accuse one another of plagiarism. Jim McCabe of Boston is one of the most affable fellows you're likely to meet, but his voice turns icy when he tells me about being ripped off by a rival tour outfit. According to McCabe, a more established tour group sent a representative to take his tour and, unbeknownst to McCabe, the man was a mole, complete with tape recorder. The rival group now runs a suspiciously similar tour—they even copied his promotions!



Like historians, ghost tour guides are also outsiders to mainstream heritage tourism. Even though they are part of the heritage tourism industry, they generally have no chamber of commerce connections and no particular incentives to put their cities in a favorable light. Indeed, their focus on the paranormal requires them to delve into the seamier side of history. This means not just unsolved murders and grisly suicides, but slave pens and violations of Indian burial grounds. I suspect that for many tourists the resulting picture of early American history is very different from what they received in high school. For some tour guides this educational purpose is not merely incidental. As Elaine Flynn of D.C. proudly told our group of twenty-two tourists, such subject matter “is not just politically correct but correcting political history.”

Consider the story told by Mike Brown of [The Original Charleston Walks](#). Drawing on the lowcountry's culture of Gullah—a creole language with African and English elements spoken by slaves and their descendants—Brown gives tourists chills with his description of boo hags. These freaky vampires without skin enter your house through a keyhole or crack, sit on your chest while you sleep, and suck your breath. If successful, the boo hag inhabits your skin and causes you to hunt for more victims.

The climax of Brown's story is that the presence of boo hags is tied to Charleston's long history of racial inequality. Much of Charleston today is built upon reused land, some of which was colonial-era slave graveyards. Boo hags are most often found, Brown insists, above these displaced burial grounds. Tourists come away with a striking metaphor for how Charleston's past racial sins suck the life out of its present self-satisfied sense of heritage-based dignity.

Thirty-five miles west of Boston, Jim McCabe's "Colonial and Native American Spirits" tour likewise connects past injustice with present pain. In the Scratch Flat section of Littleton (immortalized in John Hanson Mitchell's 1984 environmentalist classic *Ceremonial Time*), McCabe weaves a tale grounded in millennia of Indian occupation. Many Indian spirits haunt the area, according to local residents. One reason for all this ghostly activity is the tragic history of Nashoba, a "Praying Town" of Christian Indians established by the Puritan missionary John Eliot. During King Philip's War of 1675-76, many Puritans saw Christian Indians as a dangerous fifth column. So the entire village of Nashoba was rounded up and herded to Deer Island in Boston Harbor, the infamous prison isle where hundreds of Indians were interned and dozens of Indian corpses were interred. One Nashoba Indian in particular, Tom Dublet, is said to have cursed Nashoba—now Scratch Flat—because of the shabby treatment he received.

Ghosts linger above Scratch Flat, tormenting the locals and providing plenty of fodder for McCabe's tales. One of his favorites is that the ghosts seem to have disrupted several development attempts, including a massive office park planned but never completed by Cisco Systems. McCabe and residents seem to believe the story of the antidevelopment spirits, but a spokesperson for Cisco is less impressed by the ghost of Tom Dublet. "We don't have a policy," she says, "regarding predictions from medicine men."

Like Scrooge meeting Clio, Ghosts of History Past haunt these tours. In their quest for spooky stories, ghost tour guides mine sources overlooked by most other heritage tour operators. We could do worse than a ghost tour for a lesson in local history.



This cautiously celebratory reading of ghost tours must be tempered, however, by the recognition that such tours ultimately reproduce some of the most troubling facets of early American society. Euro-American colonists, like tour guides today, were fascinated by the deathways of Others they encountered in North America. Whites collected Indian ghost stories, drew pictures of slave funerals, and recorded the deathbed words of countless Indians. Sometimes this Euro-American interest was respectful and driven by a desire for cross-cultural understanding. Experience Mayhew, an eighteenth-century Christian missionary to the Indians of Martha's Vineyard, immersed himself so fully in Indian society—spending his entire life on the island and speaking Wampanoag like a native—that he seems to have absorbed the Indian belief in ghosts' presence at deathbeds and forgotten the orthodox Protestant skepticism toward the same. He recorded without comment the appearance of "two bright shining Persons, standing in white Raiment" at the deathbed of an elderly native woman named Ammapoo.

Sometimes, though, there were darker motives in Euro-Americans' descriptions of nonwhites' deathways. African American funeral practices were often Exhibit A when authors made the case for slaves' alleged barbarity and lack of fitness for freedom. Such was the intent of British proslavery writer Bryan Edwards when he wrote about people of African descent in the West Indies in the late eighteenth century. According to Edwards "their funeral songs and ceremonies are commonly nothing more than the dissonance of savage barbarity and riot." Even antislavery authors like Frederick Law Olmstead betrayed their racism when they described African American funerals. In 1861 Olmstead was impressed by what he viewed as the primitive simplicity of slave funerals: "I was deeply influenced myself by the unaffected feeling, in connection with the simplicity, natural, rude truthfulness, and absence of all attempt at formal decorum in the crowd." Olmstead's condescending attitude turned downright hostile when he discussed the slave preacher at this funeral: "I never in my life, however, heard such ludicrous language as was sometimes uttered by the speaker."

In parallel fashion, Indian ghosts haunted early American literature, as Renée Bergland's *The National Uncanny* (Hanover, N.H., 2000) has recently demonstrated. From the beginning of the colonial period, many whites equated the Indian inhabitants of North America with a satanic presence. As Cotton Mather wrote in 1692, witches "generally say [the Devil] resembles an *Indian*." By the nineteenth century, dead and dying Indians—along with their spectral incarnations—helped perpetuate the tragic and romantic myth of the vanishing Indian. Many Euro-American colonists seemed most comfortable with Indians once they were dead; their very deaths seemed to prove Indians' incompatibility with the march of Euro-American civilization. Fictional Indian characters were often rendered speechless as they died, as was Uncas in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and Wind-Foot in Walt Whitman's *Franklin Evans; or,*

The Inebriate (1842). Granted no dying words by their white authors, Uncas and Wind-Foot were the epitome of the vanishing Indian.

Today, ghost tours aren't so obviously implicated in these patterns. But they do tend to exoticize all things Indian and African, including their dead. That tour outfits profit from the grim history of interracial misunderstanding is still another disturbing legacy.

And there's another, simpler reason ghost tours sometimes make my skin crawl. Despite the power of stories like the boo hag and the curse of Tom Dublet, tour guides feel the need to keep the patrons happy and the banter light. So they jump from deep reflections on the meaning of history to goofy jokes and magic tricks. History Dark, History Lite.

Sit some day in Warren Square, one of Savannah's beloved little parks. Gaze across the street at the understated beauty of the early-federal-style John David Mongin House (1793). Admire its graceful entryway and its classic sense of proportion and symmetry. And then think of those in chains who toiled in the sticky heat to build this house, think of those who died in the fields at Bloody Point on Daufuskie Island to give the Mongin family its wealth, and try to keep the goose bumps from rising on your arms.

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