

Haunted Herndon

A Trilogy of Herndon Ghost Stories

By Barbara Glakas

In our conversations with people around Herndon we often hear tales of “strange things” that occasionally happen in their buildings – that is, things that indicate their homes may be haunted. Not surprisingly, these buildings are often ones of age. Whether or not you believe in ghosts, we think you will find these three tales interesting.

The Brush Strokes Building

In little wood framed building at 711 Pine Street is a business called Brush Strokes, a salon that has been in business at that location since 1998. The building dates back to circa 1900, possibly a little older.

Former Mayor, Elisha Dyer, once owned that property in the late 1800s. Dentist, Dr. Ben Dewiler, bought the property from Dyer in 1888, and then he sold it to his brother, Dr. Edwin L. Detwiler, MD, in 1893. Dr. Ed had also previously bought the property next door (now the Herndon Clock and Watch Co.) in 1886. It is not clear which years Dr. Ed he lived in these buildings, but he ultimately ran his medical practice out of the Brush Strokes

Unfortunately, the beloved Dr. Ed came to an untimely demise in 1916, when the deranged son of a patient shot and killed the doctor while he was on a house call. The building was later sold to the Wheeler family, who lived in it for many years. In more recent times the building was occupied by Dr. Finley’s Family Eyecare business, until he moved into an adjacent newer building.

Once the Brush Strokes business moved into the building, the owner set out to decorate the salon to make it bright and cozy. The interior was painted with soothing colors and decorated with lace curtains and beautiful antique furniture. She also displayed a photograph of Dr. Edwin Detwiler prominently in the front foyer room.

The week she had an open house for the newly opened salon, the owner entertained many visitors, one of them being Roberta “Bobby” Keys, the granddaughter of Dr. Ben Detwiler and the grandniece of Dr. Edwin Detwiler. Mrs. Keys was a senior citizen by then. She described to the owner how, as a young girl, she would play in her uncle’s office. Mrs. Keys, approving of how the salon had been newly decorated, said to the owner, “I love what you’ve done with the place.” Mrs. Keys passed away a few years later.

Since opening, the Brush Strokes owner says that a few of her clients have indicated that they have “felt a presence” in the salon. She says that these clients were not necessarily psychics, per

se, but were those who described themselves as having certain sensitivities. No one described the presence as being negative, but rather a presence with a positive energy.

One such client came into the salon about five years ago to have her hair cut. Along with the client was her 20 year old daughter, who sat waiting in the front foyer room. While waiting, the daughter, known to be a person with special senses, said she suddenly felt a lot of strong energy and then a little girl appeared to her, sitting on the foyer floor. The little girl told her, "I love what you've done with the place."

The Home of a Former Herndon Doctor

On an old street in downtown Herndon is a home that formerly belonged to a beloved local doctor. He was born in 1899, served as a physician in World War I and was discharged in 1919. He was married but had no children, and he practiced medicine until he died in 1960.

Records indicate that his home was constructed sometime around 1927. The doctor operated his family medical practice out of his home. Many current Herndon residents still remember the doctor. One resident, who is now over eighty years old, recalled how he delivered both her and her brother.

Prior to the home being built, Herndon lore told of a small school building that used to be located on that same lot. Historical documents refer to this early school which supposedly burned down not too long after being built in 1869.

A book written in 1949 by members of the Herndon's American Legion and its Auxiliary group, also mentioned this early school, saying,

"In 1868 and 1869 a public school building was erected. This probably was the building on the northwest corner of what is now [the doctor's] front yard which is remembered as the site of the first public school in town ... presumably the building burned, for a little later school was being taught in the 'Yellow House.' "

Fast forward to the year 2012 when the doctor's home was occupied by another young Herndon family. The owner described some strange things happening in the house, things he said he initially tried to "explain away."

The husband was the first to move into the home, with the wife arriving on a later date. The day the wife started moving in, the lights started flickering as the boxes were being carried into the house.

One day, while the wife was in the bathroom, she noticed that the toilet paper roller was spinning on its own. The toilet paper fully unraveled and piled up on the floor. She called her husband

into the bathroom and told him what had happened. He did not believe her – until the exact same thing happened to him two weeks later.

Children's toys were kept in a small room off of the living room. The door would be kept closed. Some evenings, very late at night, the homeowner would hear the toys go off, playing tunes, beeping and talking. These were all battery toys whose sounds had to be initiated by pushing a button. This would occur even when the children were not in the home but were spending the night elsewhere. This happened so frequently that the owners got used to it. They would wake up and say, "There go the toys again."

Two other incidents convinced the homeowner about a ghostly presence even more. While dressing his little two year old son in the boy's bedroom, the boy said, "Who's that?" The father said, "Who?" The boys said "That-that," pointing to a door in the bedroom. The father asked his son if it was a boy or a girl. The son said it was a girl. The father asked, "Does the girl have a name?" The boy said, "Nina."

The owner explained one last thing that had occurred in their attic. The attic was accessed by a set of pull-down steps. The floor of the attic was paneled so the owner could walk around. When they moved into the house the attic was empty except for the HVAC unit and an old, antique school desk which had been left there in the corner of the attic. He was the only one to go into the attic and only did so to change the air filter. He said he never moved the desk, as it was always out of his way in the far corner.

One day when the owner went to go into the attic to change the air filter, he pulled the string to open the pull-down staircase. To his disbelief, sitting directly in front of him at the top of the staircase was the old desk.

The Griffin-Owens Insurance Agency Building

The Griffin-Owens Insurance Agency is located in downtown Herndon at 847 Station Street. The brick four-square building was first constructed as a home in the early 1920s, not too long after Herndon's catastrophic 1917 "Big Fire."

For several years in the 1940s and 1950s the home was occupied by George and Agnes Chappell. Reportedly, after George died in 1959, Chappell's widow lived there for many years and took on boarders. Agnes died in 1981.

A gentleman named Jim Whitehurst sold the home to Joe Skaggs in 1982. Skaggs used it as an office for his construction company. Skaggs built an addition onto the back of the building in 1989. Since then the building was occupied by other businesses until Griffin-Owens bought it in 2003.

Mr. Skaggs once reported in 1989 *Reston Times* newspaper article that many of his friends and employees had experienced unusual noises and sightings in the building. Three of Skaggs canoeing buddies once camped in the building one summer night. One of them awoke to see an elderly lady standing at the foot of his sleeping bag. The other friends saw her as well. They later asked Skaggs if anyone else had been staying in the house. There wasn't.

One other night Skagg's secretary slept in the attic with her sister. They heard footsteps on the stairs and called the police to report someone being in the building. Nothing was found, and neither woman spent another night there. Skaggs also explained that he could not keep evening custodians employed for very long. He said, "No one wants to work in the office after hours."

Skaggs himself did not believe in ghosts and discounted the stories, considering them figments of people's imaginations – until he saw the ghost himself, that is.

"She was standing in the kitchen door," he remembered. "I walked past and just happened to look over my shoulder. That's when I saw her. She looked like your grandmother... very frail with stooped shoulders. She had long hair pulled back – I'd say the word is 'severely.' I don't believe in ghosts, but I don't know how else to explain what I saw. There is definitely a presence in the building."

In 2016, the owners of Griffin-Owens had not experienced any ghostly encounters themselves but, unbeknownst to them, some of their employees had. When two employees, who sometimes worked at night, were asked if they had ever experienced anything strange in the building, one immediately said, "Yes." She explained how she heard noises above her in the attic which she described as sometimes sounding like footsteps.

The second employee said she believed there was a presence the building, saying, "Sometimes I can feel her." When asked why she used the word "her," she said because another employee had once seen the ghost and it was a female.

That the third employee who saw the ghost told us that she has always known that she could sometimes "feel" certain things. She says she occasionally stays late at work. One day she was working at the front end the building. Things got busy at the desk with multiple phone calls. At that moment she saw someone who was wearing white attire in the nearby hallway going into the FAX room. She called out to the lady in white, thinking it was another employee, to ask her for some assistance at the desk. The person did not respond. She later went into the FAX room and saw that no one was in there. She went to speak to another employee to ask her if she had been in the FAX room. She said no, and it was obvious that it was not her because the other employee was wearing a red outfit. No one else was in the building.

The employee who saw the ghost then accepted what she had actually seen. She said the ghost she had seen was a short female, an older person, wearing white, who had a mix of blonde and gray hair. She said the ghost was short because she appeared to be stooped over, with a

hunchback type of posture. This employee was unaware of the 1989 article in which Joe Skaggs had similarly described the ghost he had seen. She also reported that some other employees sometimes talk with the ghost and they nicknamed the ghost “Dora.”

Research was conducted to discover who previously owned the building before Skaggs. We wondered if the ghost could be Agnes Chappell. We spoke to one of Mrs. Chappell’s nieces who said. “I’m certain it is *not* my Aunt, despite what others have said and agreed upon.” She described her Aunt as being tall, big boned with brown hair.

However, the niece then went onto say that it could be her Aunt’s mother, Lutie, who lived on Dranesville Road and often visited at the house, saying the grandmother does “fit the description in some ways. In later years, she was short, bent over (very rounded hump back), and had long silver hair which she *always* wore in a Gibson girl type of bun on top.” The speculation continued.

We obtained a photo of Lutie and showed it to the third employee at the Griffin-Owens building who had previously seen the ghost. She said, “This lady looks a lot like the lady that I saw a few years ago. She was very short and with her shoulders a little hunched. It is surprising how she didn't really get to spend her life in this property but for some reason her spirit still comes to visit.”

About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.