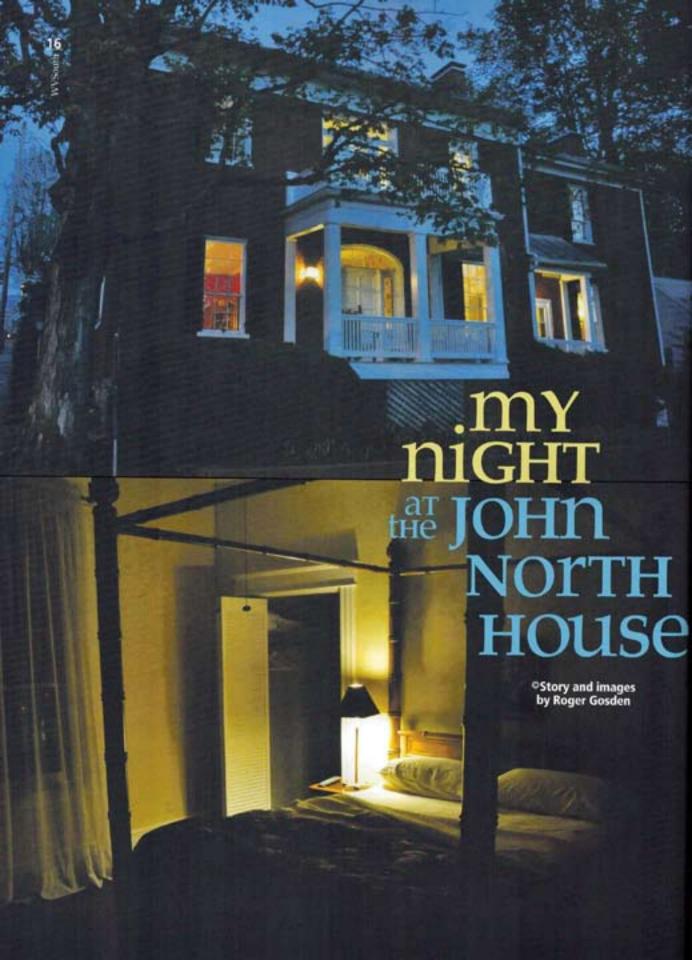
## MY NIGHT AT THE JOHN NORTH HOUSE

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ha! So that's the house I heard rumors about. Surely my family can't believe it's haunted? After parking on a steep rise above the town center I stared at the rambling brick mansion with Georgian windows and a balcony that overlooked the front porch where pumpkins were lined up like sentries. When I peered through a window, I saw a huge fireplace and an oak table formally laid out with candlesticks. It was easy to imagine the former owners living there graciously in the 19th century.

But the house is a brooding presence over a narrow street and harbors unhappy memories. Someone looking out of the window during the Civil War could have witnessed skirmishes and heard cannonballs whizzing overhead. They might even have seen Col. George Crook leading a cavalry charge through the town, and bodies lying in the street.

Those thoughts quickly faded when Aimee and Paul swung the door to welcome me inside with open arms and to savory aromas from their kitchen. But after a hearty meal and chatting about old Lewisburg, they gave me a book, saying, "Don't let spooky stories keep you awake tonight!" I grinned like most scientists would. I was sure they were only tales and the stories always concluded with an absence of evidence, although that doesn't necessarily mean evidence of absence.

Afterward, I climbed a steep staircase to my bedroom on the second floor. Apparently, it hadn't changed much over the years apart from a few modern paintings; a four-poster bed dominated the room with a nightstand separating it from a large closet. I padded across the plank floor to pull aside a sheer curtain for cracking open the window. Looking through the darkness toward the sleeping town, I remembered our earlier walk through the graveyard and the tourists standing in the unlit street below.

My family was settling down for the night, but I wasn't sleepy yet. After getting ready for bed I dove under the comforter, and, pushing the book aside, turned over on my back to fix my eyes on the high ceiling and recall the evening.

Following dinner, Paul had invited me for a stroll around town with his 9-year-old son while the two younger boys were packed off to bed by Aimee. I took Alex by the hand while he carried his Magic Quest wand in the other. At our street corner we noticed a group of people huddled in the gathering dusk. One man, who was pointing at the house, dropped his hand when they turned to stare at us.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"We are on the town ghost tour," Paul said. "It's popular at this time."

They looked at us like celebrities. I guess they are curious about who lives here. I was tempted to ask if they really believed in ghosts, but not wanting to spoil the entertainment for the visitors, I only waved. It was just a bit of fun, wasn't it?

We strolled down the hill to the main street a couple of blocks away. It had shut down for the night. Stools were upended on tables in the coffee shop and someone was locking a restaurant door. The only signs of life were customers in an Irish pub where a trombone was being played.

We turned down a side street past the glow of floodlights around Carnegie Hall to reach the gloomier end of Church Street. Paul urged us to take a shortcut past Old Stone Presbyterian Church, which is said to be the oldest west of the Alleghenies, and where the Confederate dead were laid out. Alex was reluctant to cross the graveyard at that hour, but used his wand to zap things I never dreamt of. As we wandered among gravestones I told him that when I was a Cub Scout our parents let us walk home alone and we dared each other to cross the town cemetery. We didn't want to be called "sissy." No one ever saw anything eerie, of course; although when I grew up I wondered if I was insensible to the occult.

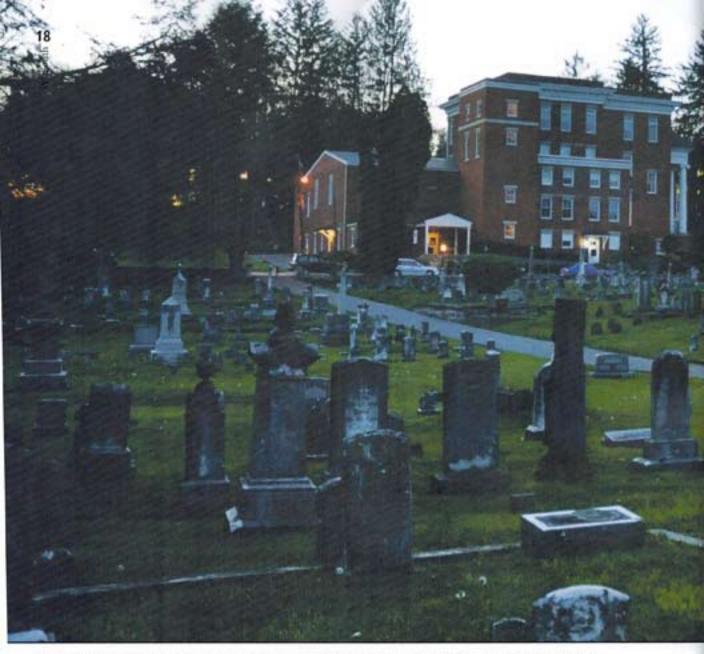
Now, after propping myself up in bed with a pillow, I opened the book to the story about the John North House where I was staying. It told of a young woman who fell in love with a Union soldier garrisoned in her home town in South Carolina during the Civil War. After she tried to run away with him, her mother sent her to stay with relatives at this house until his regiment moved him away. She hoped her daughter would forget him, but the lass was broken-hearted, shut herself away at the top of the house and refused to join the family or attend church. On a visit back home for Christmas, her parents were so alarmed to see how thin and depressed she had become that they invited the soldier to see her under strict supervision. But when they were distracted for a moment, he whispered a plan to elope.

When he was free to follow her, the relatives turned him away. He stood at the street corner every day hoping to see her at the window of the bedroom where I was now curled up. They never met again before he rejoined his regiment, though he asked local children to deliver fresh flowers to the house every day.

As months passed without news, she wondered if he had been killed in battle and she sank back into despair. One day when she didn't reply to her uncle's calling and couldn't have left the house unnoticed, he came upstairs for her. He found her in the closet, hanging by the cord of her robe. The story didn't quite end there because a Union soldier (some say it was her lover) was shot afterward in the street below.

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TOP: The John North House by night. Strange sightings as well as the fragrance of fresh flowers where none exist have been reported at the Lewisburg home where a young, heartbroken woman took her life during the Civil War. BOTTOM: The closet in which a heartbroken girl hanged herself because her parents did not approve of her romance with a young Union soldier. Some claimed to have seen her ghost standing in the window, peering down on the street; others claimed to have observed a young man looking up.



The graveyard at Old Stone Presbyterian Church, where Confederate dead were laid out during the Civil War.

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Passersby then began reporting the sight of a strange young woman on the second story of the house and a man's apparition in the street, though never on the same day. The gossip continued into modern times.

Unhappy souls unable to rest during heartrending times are usually the core of ghost stories that are prone to exaggeration, so it was time to put this one to rest. Closing the book, I drifted off but I never sleep soundly in a strange bed, and Paul's stories kept breaking into my consciousness. Perhaps they disturbed me more because I know him well enough not to dismiss his talk lightly. The nightlight was still burning when I woke up with his stories on my mind.

He had told me that before he married Aimee she was living in the house on her own. She sometimes heard banging at night as if doors were suddenly flying open for no reason, and a mysterious clip, clip, clip on the stairs sounded like the hard indoor soles women wore in the past. Other family members reported the same things, and a robust young man who helped them

move furniture refused to enter the house because of its reputation. On one occasion, she thought she heard a relative arriving late and was surprised he was gone by the morning. When she called him, he denied being there.

As I continued to drift in and out of sleep other stories kept popping into my mind. After they married, the house was flooded one day with water that seemed to come from nowhere, and a loud bang that was never explained sent their dog into a fit of barking. On another occasion, when an old transom broke in the porch where Paul was working



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The church is said to be the oldest west of the Alleghenies.

and an upstairs window shattered soon after, he thought a boy was throwing rocks at the house, but the street was empty. He decided to visit the previous owner, hoping he could explain these strange events.

"Neighbors sometimes saw an unfamiliar woman at the window or balcony," the man said. "And the young couple before you smelled fresh flowers in the house when none had been brought in."

I dozed off again, convinced there are always natural explanations if one only looks hard enough. Scientists are dismissive of the paranormal, just as I had been as a Cub Scout. But the next time I woke, it was with a start, perhaps because the room was cold from a breeze billowing out the curtains. In the comfort of the bed I knew it was nothing, but perhaps one story that stuck in my mind had startled me during a dream.

Paul told me he had actually seen her one day while passing an open door. She was standing where I had sat in front of the fireplace. Barely five feet tall, the woman wore a full skirt of dark cotton gathered tightly around her waist and a light-colored blouse, her hair lifted up in the old-fashioned way. It all happened in an instant, but the shock sent him back to the previous owner.

"I'm not surprised," he was told.
"By the way, was she standing next
to the mantel?"

I lay back in bed imagining the star-crossed lovers from long ago. When Paul described the encounter with the woman's ghost, his expression had seemed to appeal to me: Please don't think I'm flaky! I didn't know what to think.

But then the nightlight suddenly went out on its own, making my heart race. Was it on a timer? Now I began to feel spooked.