

Hotel Haunts

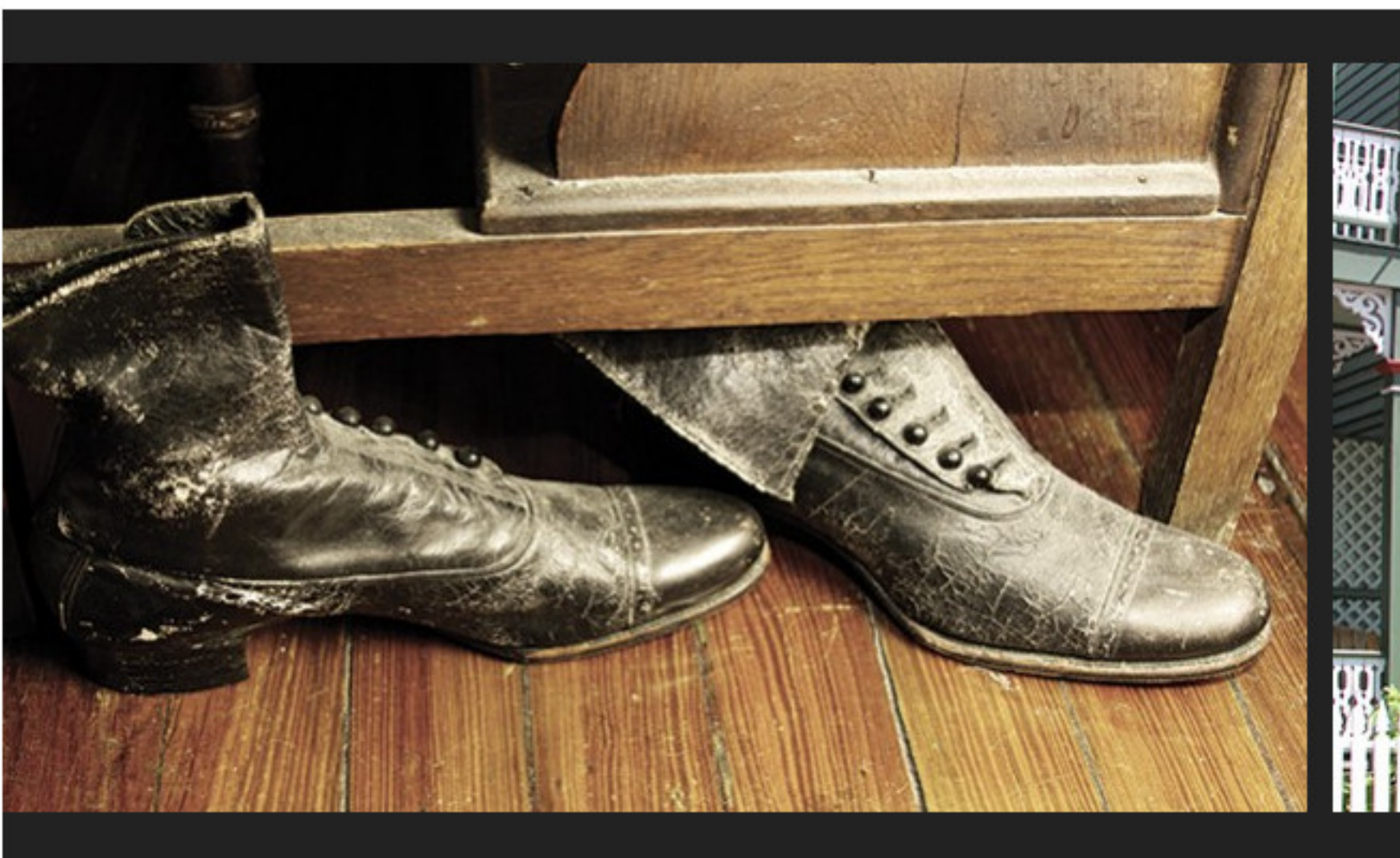
Written and Photographed by Maggie FitzRoy



If only these walls could talk...

Guests are generally attracted to historic hotels for their ambiance, unique architecture, quaintness and charm. *Not their ghosts.* But people are fascinated by spooky things, and if an inn has a reputation for being haunted, it can add to its allure.

The Florida House Inn



The older a place is and the more history it has, the greater its chance for ghosts – and the Florida House Inn pre-dates the Civil War. Built in 1857, its front porch rocking chairs, Sunday Bloody Mary's, buttermilk fried chicken and gracious hospitality welcome guests and friendly spirits. "They're not here to hurt anyone," innkeeper Emily Sands says with a grin.

David Yulee constructed the inn as a boarding house for his railroad employees; it housed Union officers during the war. One of them, Major Leddy, bought the Grand Antebellum-style inn after the war and ran it as a hotel with his wife. They added living quarters and a dining room, where they entertained guests, including the Carnegies, Rockefellers, Morgans and DuPonts. Over the years, other visitors included U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant, Cuban revolutionary Jose Marti, automotive tycoon Henry Ford, and early film stars Mary Pickford and Laurel and Hardy.

But it seems that of all the people who have come and gone from the inn, the Major's wife, "Miz Leddy," had a particular fondness for the place, and never left. The room that now houses the main office was likely her sewing parlor.

"She's been seen here by several people," says Sands. Once in the 1990s, someone was robbing the office and their actions were captured on a video surveillance camera. When police looked at the footage, Miz Leddy was there too, Sands says, "in the background, dressed in period dress, pointing her finger. It was really creepy."

One night, a bartender closing alone saw her standing at the hostess stand in her long dress, Sands says. "I myself have experienced the smell of lavender – super strong – at random times." She believes it's Miz Leddy's perfume. "A lot of people have smelled it."

The inn also allegedly has other spirits, including a man and his young son. They were guests in room 12 many years ago, on a family vacation. The story is that the man and boy went fishing, leaving the mother behind. The father and son drowned, and have been looking for the mother ever since, Sands says. "The boy is mischievous." She says that the silverware in the dining room gets rearranged in mysterious ways. And a puddle of water sometimes appears in the middle of room 12 with no apparent cause.

Then there's the case of the traveling antique shoes, which look like they could have belonged to Miz Leddy. Sands found them in a closet, and displays them next to a desk in a downstairs hallway. But at times, they'll randomly move upstairs, Sands says, and appear in one of the guest rooms, "like room 12."

St. Francis Inn



The St. Francis Inn in St. Augustine has a legendary ghost – in a city supposedly filled with them. The inn is a stop on many ghost tours, as it is thought to be haunted by a young woman named Lily. One of the guest rooms is named Lily's Room. "We didn't play it up at first," says Joe Finnegan, who has owned the inn with his wife Margaret since 1985. But "she's famous," and "we've had lots of guests and employees who have had encounters."

Lily's story is romantic and sad.

St. Francis Inn on St. George Street – St. Augustine's oldest bed and breakfast – was built in 1791 by Spanish soldier Gaspar Garcia as a home for his family. After Garcia sold it to a sea captain, it passed through the hands of several owners, one of whom converted it into a lodging establishment in 1845.

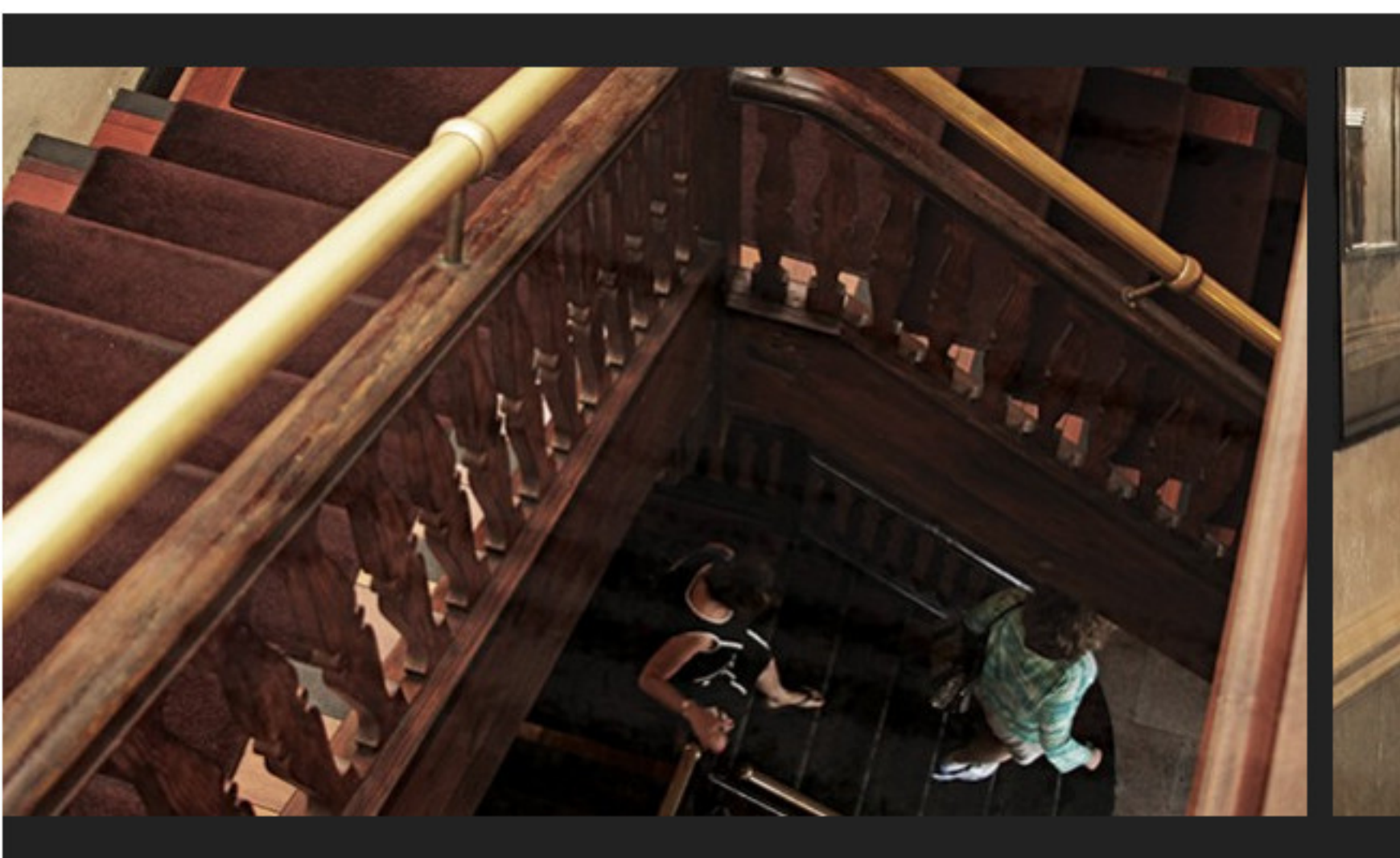
Apparently, Lily was a slave that belonged to one of the owners in the early 1800s, and she and the owner's nephew became "an item," Finnegan says. They met in secret on the third floor, until the owner found out and sent the nephew away to school. "The story is that Lily became distraught and killed herself and has been wandering around looking for her boyfriend since," Finnegan says.

Once, a handyman working on the third floor saw an attractive African American woman who he thought was a new employee, and waved to her. He went downstairs and asked the manager when they had hired the new "cute" housekeeper. She's upstairs making the bed, he said.

"We don't have a new housekeeper," the manager said. They ran upstairs, but the woman was gone and the bed was made.

"Room 3A is Lily's room, because it's haunted, but the whole inn is haunted," Finnegan says. Spirits "have been seen everywhere."

The Casa Marina Hotel & Restaurant



At the Casa Marina Hotel & Restaurant in Jacksonville Beach, maître de Sterling Joyce has many ghost stories for guests who want to hear them. Many do. He even has a tale about his own encounter with a spooky presence: one day in the dining room a guest told him she woke up during the night in a cold sweat because a "black headless shape" was pulling her hair.

"She said she was never so scared in her life," Joyce says. Just then, as she was talking, one of the chandeliers on the ceiling suddenly started swinging back and forth. "Her eyes got really big," Joyce says. "And so did mine."

Ghost stories are particularly effective at night, Joyce says with a twinkle in his eye. "Some people say they want to stay here to see if anything happens."

The oceanfront hotel opened in 1925 – at the height of Florida's first land boom. During the 20s, 30s, and 40s, Jacksonville Beach was known as "The World's Finest Beach," and visitors from around the country flocked there to enjoy its beaches, boardwalk and resorts, including the white stucco Mediterranean-style Casa Marina.


During World War II, it was used for military housing, and after was converted into apartments and businesses. In 1991 it was renovated back into a hotel, reflecting its 1920's glamour and style.

It has long been rumored to be haunted by several spirits, including a headless man. It's said he's a maître de who once worked there, fell out a window and severed his head, Joyce says.


He seems to like to cause trouble. Housekeeper manager Marlen Castillo said a guest told her that her TV started going on and off during the night, and that she and her husband saw the shadowy figure of a man on the sofa. "They covered their heads with their sheets and didn't sleep for the rest of the night," says Castillo, who sometimes hears a man's voice coming from a room she knows is unoccupied. When she goes to check, no one is there.


Bar manager Kyle McManus once saw a black figure crossing the room one night, and then disappear. Another time when he was at the front desk, he felt someone's finger run down his leg. "The front manager said my face went completely white," he says.


"There are many stories," Castillo says. "Somebody, or something, is there."




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