

Born Bad:
American Architecture and Horror in Three Case Studies

Darby Campbell-Firkus

History 6551: Seminar in American Architectural History

December 12, 2019

“The setting of a story is everything. It creates mood and atmosphere. It triggers memories. It helps our minds fill in the blanks. Adding tension and suspense where there was only words and images. What would *The Shining* be like without the long hotel hallways of the Overlook?” - Aaron Mahnke, *Lore*

INTRODUCTION

Close your eyes and picture a haunted house up on a hill. Chances are good that you conjured an image of a dilapidated Victorian home. Our associations with particular styles of architecture have permeated throughout American culture. These mental and



Figure 1 Cover of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*.

emotional ties can be seen echoing through film, literature, audio media, and oral traditions. The poster for video game *Arkham Sanitarium* reads, “Some places are built evil.” Shirley Jackson’s novel *The Haunting of Hill House* says, “It was an evil house from the beginning, a house that was born bad.” This sentiment is repeated in the tagline of Stephen King’s *Rose Red*, “Some houses are born bad.” Over and over the assertion that

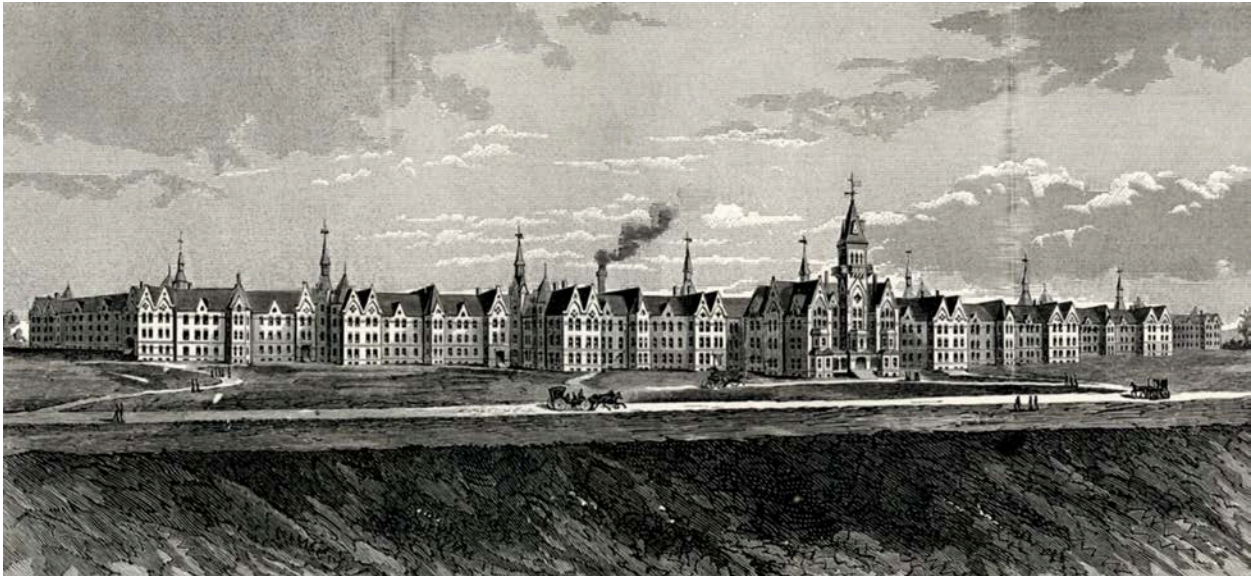
evil can originate with the structure is made, which is an interesting comparison to much of the thought surrounding dark tourism—the idea of a neutral place becoming tarnished or sacred as a result of what takes place there.¹

In this paper I will discuss three preeminent American architectural aspects that commonly feature in horror and Dark Tourism: the Gothic Revival institution, the Victorian and Gothic Revival vernacular, and the isolation of the frontier home. The case studies presented here also represent different categories as they relate to dark tourism and the fate of each within the realm of historic preservation. The Danvers State Hospital has been all but destroyed, the remaining building is privately owned and an excellent example of adaptive reuse. The site does not capitalize on its dark past. The Winchester Mystery House, as Sarah Winchester's Victorian home is now known, is privately owned, but ran as a museum utilizing the professional historical practices with their research, interpretation, and preservation efforts. Lastly, the Bell Witch Cabin and Cave represent the kitsch-roadside potential for dark tourism. The "Bell Cabin" is a reconstruction (of the wrong sort of house) and the interpretation is more ghost story than actual history.

¹ Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone, ed., *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism* (Tonawanda, NY: Channel View Publications, 2009).

GOTHIC REVIVAL INSTITUTION

Danvers State Hospital²
Hathorne, Massachusetts
Built: 1874-1878
NRHP: January 26, 1984



The Victorian era was bursting forth with new movements- women's rights and suffrage, abolitionism, industrial and medical practices reform. Dr. Thomas Kirkbride's³ plan for sanitariums was meant to remedy the current ills of treating mental patients like prisoners. His architectural plans were long, stretching narrow buildings widely spaced out. The result of which were airy structures with good ventilation, full of sunlight,

² The original 1878 name of the institution was "State Lunatic Hospital at Danvers." In 1898, it was renamed "Danvers Insane Hospital." And renamed again in 1909 as the "Danvers State Hospital," which is now it is commonly known today and I will be referring to it here. The main resource for this section is DanversInsaneAsylum.com, which has repositories of historic images, maps, employee interviews, patient abuse reports, patient artwork, timelines, and an archive of the remaining paper work that was recovered before the hospital's destruction.

³ The first and equally notable mental hospital designed by Kirkbride was the Trans Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, which the Danvers State Hospital was modeled after.

including gardens and grounds for patients to get exercise, fresh air, and enjoy the outdoors. Louis Sullivan would have been proud, for the Kirkbride plans, form followed function. The surgical theater located in the top of one of the menacing towers had 360° windows to let in as much light as possible into the sterile white, gloved-and-gowned space.



Figure 2 Surgical theater located at the top of a tower with 360 degree windows for lighting. (DSH archives)



Figure 3 Danvers State Hospital in the 1880s, gardens and staff. (DSH archives)

Boston architect Nathaniel Jeremiah Bradlee adapted the Kirkbride plan for the 500-acre campus in Hathorne, Massachusetts. His other notable works are the First Church of Jamaica Plain in 1854 and Boston Young Men's Christian Union in 1876—both also NRHP sites built in the Gothic Style. No doubt that the Gothic Revival style was meant to lend these institutions a sense of grandeur. Much like in the case of the Tennessee State Prison, the association with the medieval castles soon became an association with medieval torture practices that could rival the Tower of London.

The building was constructed to accommodate about 250 patients with an upward maximum of 500. However, with these new medical ideas the definition for lunacy greatly expanded. In addition to currently recognized mental illnesses like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, people could be institutionalized for all manner of causes listed on an 1878 admissions census. They included deranged menstruation, religion, over-study, masturbation, menopausis [sic], connected with the affections, and not insane.⁴

The result was an explosion in the number of individuals institutionalized in America. By 1912, the Danvers patient population was 1,200; it peaked from the 1920s to the 1940s with over 2,000, and remained as high as 830 in 1976. The original staff was only a

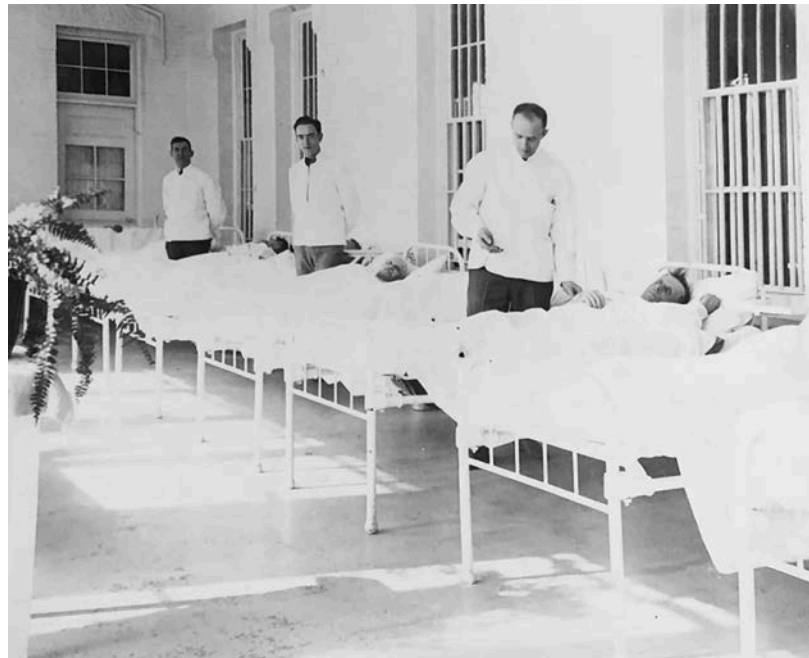


Figure 4 Bed rest was a frequent treatment plan, many patients spending their days and nights confined to bed. (DSH archives)

⁴ Danvers State Hospital Archive. "Admissions from Causes 1878 State Lunatic Hospital at Danvers." Not listed on this form, but a prevalent reason for admittance was homosexuality (which remained listed as a mental illness in the DSM until 1973).

dozen doctors, nurses, and staff. In 1943, the night staff was only 9 people who were responsible for 2,300 individuals.⁵ With the influx of patients and a decrease in state funding, conditions at the hospital rapidly deteriorated. Those kept there were



Figure 5 Danvers Women's Tuberculosis Cottage, later turned into the Arts and Crafts building (DSH archives)

“sick, filthy, and it was not uncommon for someone to die unnoticed, only to be found days later.” The staff used straightjackets, isolation, hydrotherapy, electroshock therapy, and physical abuse to manage the overcrowded sanitarium. That is—until a new more horrific method for control was developed.

During this period, Dr. Walter Freeman pioneered the transorbital lobotomy (or as it is colloquially known, the “icepick lobotomy” for the name of the implement originally used). The procedure was performed by inserting a metal pick into the corner

⁵ Ibid. “Certified Beds in Massachusetts Psychiatric Facilities, November 1976.” *New York Times*, “\$15,000 Blaze in Insane Asylum,” January 25, 1912.

of the eye-socket, using a mallet to force it through the thin bone, and scrambling the prefrontal cortex of the brain until the desired results were achieved. Freeman alone performed over 3,500 lobotomies, including 19 on children, the youngest of which was only 4 years old. The surgery had a mortality rate of 15%. One patient died when Freeman stopped to pose for a photo during the procedure and the surgical instrument penetrated too far into the patient's brain. This was all done without gloves, a mask, or anesthesia. He traveled the U.S. teaching his method. It was practiced by Freeman and continued at Danvers where it became a staple until the 1950s when drugs were developed that achieved similar effects.

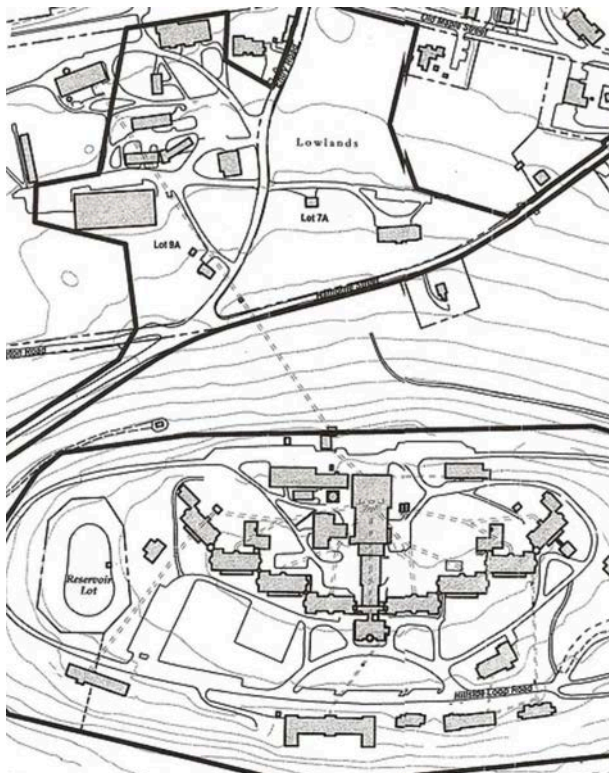


Figure 6 Dashed lines represent the underground tunnel system at Danvers (DSH archives)

In the 1960s, a string of teenage patients that went missing and were believed to be murdered by a staff member utilizing the tunnel system that had been intended for movement during the harsh New England winters. The facility finally closed for good in 1992. The Kirkbride Administration Building was saved from the 2006 demolition through historic preservation efforts and is now the

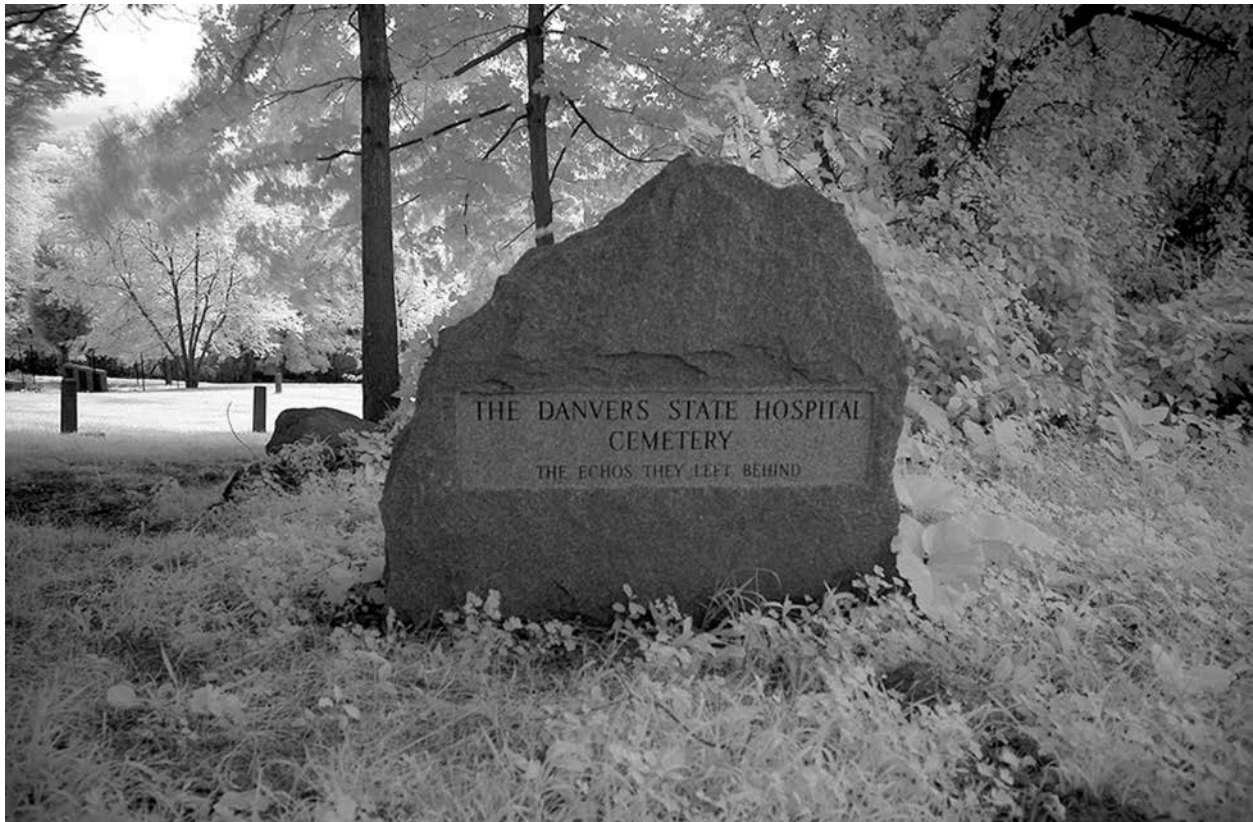
centerpiece of an apartment complex built on the former grounds of Danvers State

Hospital. In 2007, a mysterious fire was set damaging the building. There was no solid evidence, but the only security footage had cut out just before the fire.



Figure 7 Top to bottom- Bradlee Danvers Apartments adaptive reuse of building (apartment website), Google Earth view 2019, the complex is easily spotted from over 10,000 meter view of area due to the identifiable

While this site has an unambiguously dark past and would rightfully be counted as a dark tourism site (people still visit even though it is discouraged), the current owners and historians associated with the site have no interest in entertaining that aspect. The contact form for the website has a disclaimer that reads, "Any emails or inquiries asking about tours, visiting the property or the paranormal get automatically deleted. Any other questions or inquiries are welcome." The only other part of the complex that remains is the patient cemetery. A marker at the entrance reads, "The Echos They Left Behind."



Other echoes of Danvers remain in our popular culture. H.P. Lovecraft's "Arkham Sanitarium" from *The Thing on the Doorstep* (short story published in 1937) was inspired by the Danvers State Hospital, which in turn was the inspiration for "Arkham Asylum" first created by *Batman* comic book writer and editor Dennis O'Neil in 1974. The fictional director Jeremiah Arkham states in the introductory comic, "Arkham Asylum is not just any institution for the criminally insane. It's the Ivy League of insanity."



Lore, an award winning, critically acclaimed podcast that exposes the darker side of history and is hosted by Aaron Mahnke has devoted two episodes (6 and 60) to aspects of the Danvers State Hospital. Some films and television shows that use of the horror setting of the Victorian insane asylum are *Mouth of Madness* and *American Horror Story Season 2 "Asylum."* The book *Project 17* and film *Session 9* (2001) were set at Danvers and *Home Before Dark* (1958) was filmed at the asylum. The hospital has

made appearances in several video games as well. Even though the vast majority of the complex has been demolished, Danvers State Hospital firmly survives in our collective nightmares.



Figure 8 1880s photo of Danvers State Hospital attendants with patient peering out of a window in the background. (DSH archives)

VICTORIAN AND GOTHIC REVIVAL VERNACULAR

Winchester Mystery House

San Jose, California

Built: 1884-1922

NRHP: August 7, 1974



Figure 9 Winchester Mystery House, photo by author. Door to nowhere visible at center.

The Winchester Repeating Rifle, famously known as the “gun that won the West” was as profitable as it was deadly. After her father-in-law and husband died in 1880 and 1881, Sarah Winchester inherited their fortune of 20 million dollars, plus nearly 50% of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company stock—which, in turn earned her roughly \$1,000 dollars per day in royalties for the rest of her life. In 2019, that would be a lump sum of about \$504,600,000 and daily income of \$25,230.

Sarah felt the weight of source of her wealth acutely and was an avid practitioner of the Occultist movement that took place during the Victorian era. While still living in Boston, she consulted a psychic medium that told her those who died by the Winchester rifle would curse her family. The only remedy was "that she might escape the curse by moving west and building a house. As long as the building continued, the vengeful spirits would be thwarted and Sarah would live."⁶



Figure 10 Historic photograph of the Winchester house prior to the 1906 earthquake with the seven-story tower intact.

Sarah Winchester moved to San Jose, California and bought an eight-room farmhouse surrounded by an orchard. She immediately commissioned artisans to begin the nonstop, daily

work.⁷ The resulting 38 years of construction created Llanada Villa,⁸ one of the most unique homes ever built. In addition to the 24,000 square foot main house, the estate

⁶ Antoinette May, *Haunted Houses of California: A Ghostly Guide to Haunted Houses & Wandering Spirits* (San Carlos, CA: World Wide Publishing, 1990), 156-168.

⁷ The Winchester Mystery House does a brilliant job of emulating the soundscape during their tours. Classical music from the late 19th century plays in the courtyard and inside the home recordings of carpentry play in the background in various spots in the house to show what the house would have sounded like day and night for 38 years. Biographer Mary Jo Ignoffo disputed this claim, but it is an oft-repeated part of the lore of the home.

⁸ This was the name Sarah Winchester gave her estate. The following owners opened it up to the public in 1923 and after Harry Houdini referred to it as the "Mystery House" it was renamed the Winchester Mystery House.

included a carriage house, foreman's house, fruit drying shed (plums were grown on the estate), tank house, pump house, greenhouse, aviary, four decorative statue fountains, and gardener's tool shed. The buildings were surrounded by a gated entrance and driveway with formal gardens in front of the house and herb, vegetable, and flower gardens along the paths in the back of the house where the work buildings resided.

Due to her extreme wealth, Llanada Villa was outfitted with technologies and conveniences rarely found in Victorian homes including steam and forced-air heating (in addition to the 17 chimneys), three elevators, extensive modern indoor plumbing with a



Figure 11 Winchester house after 1906 earthquake.
(Winchester Mystery House website)

hot shower, and push-button gas lighting.

The foundation is a floating raft system that saved the house from total destruction in the "Great" 1906 San Francisco, which toppled a seven-story tower that once stood in the courtyard, and the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquakes.

Sarah's belief in the occult and mysticism was incorporated into the strange Queen Anne style home. A massive undertaking with no master plan, the house is a labyrinthine maze that twists, turns, and goes between stories without distinction. The number thirteen was thought to be significant, so many of the windows had thirteen panes, staircases with thirteen stairs, thirteen palm trees along the driveway, or

alternatively, multiples of thirteen frequented the ornate custom glasswork and wood designs. While the tour attributes some of the windows to Louis Tiffany himself, recently unearth documents revealed that the Pacific American Decorative Company designed many of the windows for the house. One that was never installed and remains in storage in the home would be worth an upwards of \$375,000 today.⁹



Figure 12 Winchester House Ballroom, photo by author.

⁹ Katie Dowd, "An envelope, hidden in a wall for 100 years, helps solve a Winchester Mystery House riddle," *SFGATE* (September 16, 2019).



Figure 13 Staircase to nowhere, photo by author.

Other oddities designed to confuse or trap ghosts included a winding staircase that abruptly stops at a ceiling, a second floor exterior door that leads nowhere, or rooms that were constructed and then closed up without a door. One such room was eventually opened and found to simply have a couch and porcelain doll. One of the 160 rooms was devoted to the séances

hosted there, where Sarah claimed to

receive instructions on what and how to build. The film *Winchester* depicts her using “automatic drawing,” a method by which occultists believed spirits would guide the hand to communicate. One of the turrets’ interior space was designed so that the circular walls and arched ceiling act as an acoustic mirror to create a sort of whispering gallery. Instead of the traditional design where even a whisper from one point in the room may be heard in another (like the Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol); this room is constructed in such a way that if a person stands in the exact center and speaks, even at a whisper, their voice reverberates and is amplified in an eerie, layered manner

which can only be experienced where they are standing. The intent was to better be able to hear the voices of the dead.

Sarah's behavior was as eccentric as the home. She never slept in the same bedroom two nights in a row and the front door was never to be used. It wasn't until the Winchester Mystery House added the "Explore More Tour" in 2016, that the \$3,000 glass doors were opened.¹⁰ This tour requires hard hats and showcases portions of the home that were damaged in the 1906 earthquake and areas still under construction when Sarah Winchester died September 5, 1922 and the work finally stopped, the carpenters famously laying down their hammers with nails not yet hammered in.



Figure 14 "Explore More Tour," photo by author.

The restoration efforts began in 1973 and have continued to the present. The irony of work going on for the past 46 years in addition to the first 38 is not slight. Today the house is a museum open to the public for tours, weddings, private parties, and events. They offer a Winchester Rifle museum and a museum of Victorian era objects near the gift shop.

¹⁰ This is the claim made, and perhaps it was true during Sarah Winchester's life, but the author finds it implausible.

The house museum has embraced its spooky reputation. They capitalizes on it with “Flashlight Tours” every Friday the 13th, a day they also ring the bell in the old bell tower 13 times at 1300 hours in tribute to Sarah Winchester’s obsession with the number. Additionally, they offer “Candlelight Tours” at night where guests travel through the mansion with only the light of a single candle to guide them.¹¹

Winchester Mystery House has a clear association with the supernatural. This begs the question why Victorian homes without being built at the behest of ghosts are more frequently depicted as haunted than any other American architectural style. Art Historian Sarah Burns suggests in her article “Better for Haunts: Victorian Houses and the Modern Imagination,” that public opinion shifted due to the depiction in photography and art. She gives *Haskell’s House* (1924) and *House by the Railroad* (1925)



by Edward Hopper and Charles Addams’ *The Addams Family* cartoons that debuted in *The New Yorker* in 1938 as prime examples to demonstrate this turn in public perception. These artists took the sharp

Figure 15 Edward Hopper, *House by the Railroad*, 1925, MoMA website.

¹¹ Winchester Mystery House website and marketing materials.

lines, spires, and intricate scrollwork and showed them thrown into deep shadow, high contrast, abandoned, looming towers that harkened back to a darker age. "Fellow painter Guy Pène du Bois—one of the few intimate confidantes of the famously taciturn Hopper—hinted at other meanings embedded in his friend's architectural portraits:

'There is...a stillness which has its counterpart in the calm preceding a storm, an ominous lull, eery [sic], void, inhuman. These dead American houses—Victorian in architecture generally, ugly, whimsical exaggerations in tortured wood—are haunted.'"

Burns also includes the inclusion of at home funeral proceedings in photography. In the 20th century, this practice had mostly died off with the exception of isolated traditional pockets.

As Burns put it, "In the early twentieth century, all things Victorian—including houses—came under such a withering onslaught that if words alone could destroy, not a single structure would have been left standing."¹² The July 1928 edition of *House and Garden* magazine included the feature, "Laying the Ghost of a Victorian House," which advised removing the decorative trim, overhanging gables, and ridgepoles and favored painting a monochromatic palette and enlarging windows to make the house appear closer to the colonial style.

¹² Sarah Burns, "Better for Haunts: Victorian Houses and the Modern Imagination," *American Art*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Fall 2012), Chicago Press. 2-25.



Figure 16 “Laying the Ghost of a Victorian House,” *House and Garden* 54 (July 1928)- 68. Indiana University Libraries, photo, Sarah Burns.

In his 1938 book *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865-1895* Lewis Mumford wrote, “The commonest axiom of history is that every generation revolts against its fathers and makes friends with its grandfathers.” This explains why the

generations that lived through the miserable decades with their own economic depression following the Civil War might have rejected Victorian architecture for what it



Figure 17 *Psycho* house, Alfred Hitchcock Presents film still

represented to them (and certainly why we see this shift in America, but not in England), but not why it is still so pervasive today. Perhaps this initial rejection, followed by the wars and the Great Depression that occurred in the early part of the twentieth century contributed to why so many of these expensive-to-maintain houses were abandoned and left to ruin.

The cultural shift most fully manifested in film in the later half of the twentieth century, by then these houses had time to become properly haunted. Most films that wanted to evoke a haunted, chilling setting chose Victorian houses. The iconic Bates home with the skeleton in the basement in *Psycho* (1960), the many depictions of *The Haunting of Hill House* (novel 1959, *The Haunting* films in 1963, 2002, and series in



Figure 18 Figure 18 Top- *Winchester*, Bottom- *The Haunting of Hill House* (film stills depicting the house post earthquake)

2018), the menacing house that children dare each other to approach on Neibolt street in *It* (1986 novel and 1990 and 2017 films) and *It: Chapter Two* (2019), the lighter depictions that use the trope like *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and *Casper* (1995), the story of a house that lures people to their deaths and collects ghosts in *American Horror Story:*

Murder House (2011), and *Mother!* (2017) which takes place entirely in an isolated home, all feature the Victorian home as the centerpiece.

Countless tales use the trope of the old crumbling Victorian house up on the hill luring people to their deaths or hiding some secret within its walls. Both the story of *The Haunting of Hill House* and the film depiction of *Winchester* feature an ongoing battle with ghosts inhabiting the house until a climactic last stand during which the ghosts unleash such turbulent psychic energy that it causes an earthquake. In *Winchester*, the catastrophic 1906 San Francisco earthquake was attributed to the fury of restless spirits. It is interesting that in *Winchester* the construction was meant to keep the ghosts at bay and in *The Haunting of Hill House* it is the restoration efforts that starts the paranormal activity.

The fictional architect-owner is described as eccentric and deviant. The Hill House is built without any square angles with the doors hung “wrong” so they swing shut on their own. “No wonder it’s impossible to find your way around. Add up all these wrong angles and you get one big distortion in the house as a whole.”¹³ Both houses are frightening for the element of not being able to find your way around. All of these illustrations combine to build up a code in our cultural lexicon—Victorian houses are haunted, even if only in our imaginations.

¹³ *The Haunting of Hill House*, (2018) and *The Haunting* (1963).



Figure 19 *The Haunting of Hill House*, Netflix promotional materials.

FRONTIER WILDERNESS

Bell Witch Cabin and Bell Witch Cave

Adams, Tennessee

Built: 1874-1878

NRHP: (Bell Witch Cave only) January 26, 1984



Figure 20 Historic etching depicting the poisoning of John Bell by the Bell Witch

The story of the Bell Witch¹⁴ spread across the western hemisphere in the 1800s, but the Legend persists in folklore and film today. In 1804, John and Lucy Bell, their nine children, and an unknown number of enslaved workers moved to the Red River

¹⁴ Nick Moretti, ed. *The Bell Witch Anthology* (Lexington, KY: 2006).; "Bell Witch." Tennessee State Library and Archives exhibit Tennessee Myths and Legends.; Bell Witch Cabin and Cave. Adams, Tennessee. Two guided tours and staff interviews. October 5, 2019. Participant observation and interviews by author.

Valley in Tennessee and built an "I" house log cabin and at least one slave dwelling with a 1,000-acre farm.

The Bell family's trouble¹⁵ started in 1817 when John Bell was out in his fields and shot at a black dog-like creature, later two of the Bell children reported seeing strange



creatures. Soon after the Bells heard disturbances at night, often in the form of banging on their cabin walls, chains dragging, the sounds of strangling, or scratching sounds on

Figure 21 Historic etching depicting Dean, an enslaved worker, with a two-headed black dog, TSLA.

their bed posts—all

sources undiscoverable when investigated—and in one instance stones falling from the ceiling inside of their cabin. Soon, the spirit took to tormenting their daughter Betsy—striking her, pulling her hair, pulling her out of bed or removing her covers at night.

Eventually the spirit began speaking to the Bells. She spoke with the voice of a woman and was kind to Lucy Bell, while tormenting John and Betsy Bell—who she later harassed

¹⁵ Using all of these resources, I will be stating the account as given, but it is not a confirmation of belief in the supernatural.

until she changed her choice of prospective husband. She was also harassed the enslaved workers, particularly one named Dean. The Bell Witch was very racist toward African Americans, even by the standards of the time.

When the voice was questioned about who or what she was, she said, "I am a Spirit; I once was very happy, but I have been disturbed and made unhappy. I am the Spirit of a person who was buried in the woods nearby and the grave was disturbed, my bones disinterred and scattered, and one of my teeth was lost under this house. I am here looking for that tooth." The voice taunted them while they took apart the floorboards to find the tooth. Later she claimed to be, "a Spirit from everywhere, Heaven, Hell, the earth; am in the air, the houses, any place at any time; have been created millions of years." At one point, she manifested as four voices. Declaring themselves to be called Blackdog, Mathematics, Cypocryphy, and Jerusalem—each voice was distinct from the original voice of Kate, but soon it was just Kate again.

Kate was the name the Bells used to refer to the "witch." "Witch" in the 1800s wasn't the traditional idea of a woman who had made a pact with the devil, but rather could be used to describe a spirit that was believed to do someone's bidding, like a golem. The Red River Baptist church minutes show a quarrelsome relationship that John Bell had with Kate Batt's husband.¹⁶ Kate Batts was an eccentric woman in the Adams community; she was known as a boisterous woman that "believed herself above her

¹⁶ *Minutes of the Red River Baptist Church, 1791-1826, Robertson County, Tennessee.* Transcribed by Mary Holland Lancaster. Greenville, SC: A Press.

station," often handling the business affairs due to her husband's ill health. It doesn't take much stretching to imagine why she might have taken the blame for conjuring a witch. Thus, the spirit went from being called "Kate Batt's witch," to simply "Kate."

As it turned out, Kate was quite the conversationalist. She reportedly repeated two sermons that happened simultaneously dozens of miles apart word-for-word. She regularly conversed with the Bell family and their great many visitors who traveled to witness the haunting of the Bell Witch—skeptics, supernaturalists, religious leaders, and curious people from near and far—purportedly including President Andrew Jackson. Eventually, Kate escalated her torment of John Bell, before finally poisoning and killing him. There were prophecies that she would return, but after the death of John Bell, the haunting settled down.

During the early nineteenth century, Robertson County had a population of about 10,000.¹⁷ In the American frontier, churches were at the center of community life. Before they had formal courts and magistrates to settle differences or impose legal and moral sanctions, the group of men that presided over the church was the authority in the community. John Bell was an Elder of Red River Baptist Church. Historian David Britton compares mania surrounding the Bell Witch to a second wave of the Salem

¹⁷ Albert Virgil Goodpasture, *Goodspeed History of Tennessee – Robertson County, 1886*, p. 836.

Witch Trials panic sweeping in the South.¹⁸



Figure 22 Red River Baptist Church. Left- as it appears today, photo by author. Right- Depiction in *An American Haunting*.

The wilderness and isolation from the rest of mankind instilled a special sort of fear in the pioneers. Historian Richard Trask suggests that the heightened state of fear from the elements, strange creatures, and Native Americans left those living on the frontier in a state of mind vulnerable to panic and susceptible to believing in supernatural threats. For a group of highly religious Christians, the wilderness was where the Devil tempted Christ. They associated the Native Americans with evil.¹⁹ When they settled into the hunting grounds of the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, and Chickamauga groups, conflict was a constant threat. Isolation, a house out alone in the wilderness, added an element of horror to life on the colonial frontier.

¹⁸ *Astonishing Legends*. "Episode 85: The Bell Witch Part 1" and "Episode 86: the Bell Witch Part 2." Podcast by Scott Philbrook & Forrest Burgess. October 2017.

¹⁹ Unobscured. Podcast by Aaron Mahnke. "Season 1, Interview 3: Richard Trask."



Figure 23 *The VVitch: A New England Folktale*, film still.

One modern film that explores this theme best is *The Witch: A New England Folktale*, [sic] set in 1630 New England. William and Katherine are banished from their puritan colony due to a disagreement with the church. Cast out, they set up a homestead on the edge of an impassable, thick and dark forest in the deep wilderness. With their five children, teenage daughter Thomasin, son Caleb, and twins named Mercy and Jonas, and infant Sam. They build a one room (and loft) English cottage with a thatched roof, wood siding, and a mud-and-stick chimney and a small barn in the same style. One day, Thomasin is playing peek-a-boo with the baby and he mysteriously vanishes. The mother, Katherine, slowly goes insane, praying all the time and mistreating and blaming her daughter. Soon, their crops fail and their goats are found

slaughtered. At first, they believe there is a wolf coming from the woods. When one of the younger children takes ill, writhing on the floor, the twins join in (highly reminiscent of the Salem witch trials stories) and the family begins to turn on one another. Finally, questioning if their daughter is a witch and the root of all evil happenings.



Figure 24 *An American Haunting*, film still.

An American Haunting, a film based on the accounts of the Bell Witch haunting, attributed the supernatural phenomena to a psychic manifestation of the trauma that was caused to Betsy Bell by sexual abuse at the hands of John Bell. This was a unique interpretation of the events. The family that now owns the “Bell Witch Cabin and Cave” adamantly denied that John Bell was a child rapist. However, one fact not often mentioned lends credibility to their theory—John and Lucy were married when he was 32 and she was only 12 years old. This rendition represents a different sort of evil that comes from isolation.



Figure 25 Bell Witch Festival, Tobacco Wars storytelling, photo by author.



Figure 26 Dramatic reenactment of the Bell Witch Haunting at the Bell Witch Festival, photo by author.

The legend of the Bell Witch is still told in Adams, Tennessee and the surrounding areas. Adams celebrates the Bell Witch Festival every October (dark tourism’s prime season) and the site gives specialized tours for that month. The festival has ran for seventeen years, drawing thousands of visitors, and features a theatrical rendition of the story of the “troubles,” a dramatic rendition of the Tobacco Wars, and music. During my visit when there were

electrical problems, the local presiding over the festivities addressed "Kate" directly. The only remaining structure built by the Bells, a log cabin that wasn't part of their residence, has been moved to the site where the festival is held along with other period buildings to form a small outdoor museum.



Since the Bell farm changed hands in 1993, it has been run as a tourist attraction. Although interesting in its own way, it is a glaring example of a historic site done badly. The visitor's center is posted ceiling-to-floor with "historical" documents. Along with old-fashioned soaps, there is a shelf full of dolls that have been painted with dark circles under their eyes to appear haunted for sale. One counter is pasted with the letters of people returning small



objects they took from the site, because they believed they have been cursed by Kate herself and befallen maladies since their visit (this is actually commonly report by NPS workers at sites with Native American associations as well).



Figure 27 Clockwise from top right: reconstructed cabin loft, main room, mannequin of John Bell, incorporation of new materials, photos by author.

The “Bell Cabin” is a reconstructed saddlebag cabin set on piers that was moved from elsewhere and an outhouse attached to the back by a porch—the original Bell house was an “I” house. The reconstruction is a hodgepodge of the remains of a cabin from the 1800s and new materials. Recordings play in each room telling the story of the Bell Witch haunting, there is little to no site interpretation and no historical information offered with the exception of a genealogy and a few historic pictures posted on one of the walls.



Figure 28 Top- Historic photo of the Bell home, 1909. Bottom- Saddlebag reconstruction, photo by author.

The cave on the property is a NRHP site even though it was only loosely associated with a minor instance of the haunting where Kate was said to save a boy from drowning. During the tour the current owners said that the former owners had found the bones of a Native American in the and discarded them in a shed, which were later thrown away by the sheriff's department after determining that they were not evidence of a recent homicide. The lack of respect for the cave itself is as egregious as the treatment of the bones. The most basic precautions of ensuring the preservation of the cave and wildlife are not met.



Figure 29 Left- Native American burial site, Right: "Witch Rock" formation in Bell Witch Cave, photos by author.



They seem to have found success as a dark tourism roadside attraction. When the tour guide/owner asked the visitors for a show of hands, "Who believes in ghosts?" Almost every individual there raised his or her hand. The day I visited, a group of four

Figure 31 Bell Witch Cave Tourists, photo by author. were wearing "Cryptid Studies Institute" t-shirts. They host a podcast exploring the paranormal and were visiting the site for part of their research.



Figure 30 Farm land surrounding the Bell Witch tourist attraction, photo by author.

One aspect that is well preserved is the sense of isolation. The small town of Adams, Tennessee had only 666 people living there during the last census in 2017.²⁰ Driving to Adams means passing miles of fields and forests. The property with the “Bell Cabin” and Bell Witch Cave is still surrounded by several acres of farmland. The only things that mar the view shed are the visitor center, house where the owners live (a modern ranch style home), and the gravel parking lot.



Figure 32 Barn Quilt in Adams, TN, photo by author.

²⁰ United State Census Bureau.

CONCLUSION

Dark tourism sites are as much about the physical location as the events that have transpired there. Our culturally conditioned responses to Gothic and Victorian architecture and deep-seated religious ideas that have imbedded into our culture about the wilderness transform historical sites in the imagination before we have even learned their dark past. If Sarah Winchester had lived today, and built her strange house, covered in vinyl siding with a plain cement driveway empty of the adornments of the Victorian period, would it capture the imagination the same way? Or would we simply view it as a mentally ill person with too much money to burn? If the Bells had lived in a populated city, would their troubles still be passed down two hundred years later? Would Danvers inspire stories for centuries to come if not for the Gothic spires and towering heights? There's no way to know for sure, but if we are to believe the movies, some places are just, "born bad."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Horror Story. "Season One, Murder House" and "Season Two, Asylum." 2011 and 2012.

An American Haunting. Directed by Courtney Solomon. After Dark Films, 2006.

Anderson, Katherine and Robert Duffy, introduction by John Archer. *Danvers State Hospital*. Arcadia Publishing, 2018.

Astonishing Legends. "Episode 85: The Bell Witch Part 1" and "Episode 86: the Bell Witch Part 2." Podcast by Scott Philbrook & Forrest Burgess. October 2017.

Bell Witch Cabin and Cave. Adams, Tennessee. Two guided tours and staff interviews. October 5, 2019. Participant observation and interviews by author.

Bell Witch Haunting. Directed by Ric White. 2004.

"Bell Witch." Tennessee State Library and Archives exhibit Tennessee Myths and Legends. <https://sharetn.gov.tnsosfiles.com/tsla/exhibits/myth/bellwitch.htm>

Brocklebank, Lisa. "Psychic Reading." *Victorian Studies*, Winter 2006, Vol. 48, No.2.

Burns, Sarah. "Better for Haunts: Victorian Houses and the Modern Imagination." *American Art*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Fall 2012), Chicago Press. 2-25.

Casper. Directed by Brad Silberling. Amblin Entertainment, 1995.

Danvers State Hospital archive.

D'Costa, Krystal. "Why are Victorian Houses Haunted?" *Scientific American*, *Anthropology in Practice*. October 27, 2016.

Dixon, Wheeler Winston. *A History of Horror*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010.

Dowd, Katie. "An envelope, hidden in a wall for 100 years, helps solve a Winchester Mystery House riddle." *SFGATE* (September 16, 2019).

Ferro, Shaunacy. "Why Are Victorian Houses So Creepy? Frank Lloyd Wright, the Addams Family, and Hitchcock: How Victorian architecture became the default haunted house." *Fast Company*. October 30, 2014.

Foster, Gerald. *American Houses: A Field Guide to the Architecture of the Home*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

Goodpasture, Albert Virgil. *Goodspeed History of Tennessee – Robertson County, 1886*, (836.)

The Haunting. Directed by Jan De Bont. Dreamworks, 2002.

The Haunting. Directed by Robert Wise. Warner Bros., 1963.

The Haunting of Hill House. Directed by Mike Flanagan. Paramount, 2018.

Ignoffo, Mary Jo. *Captive of the Labyrinth: Sarah L. Winchester, Heiress to the Rifle Fortune*. Columbia, Mo: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2010.

Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*. Viking Press, 1959.

Jones, Darryl. *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film*. London, Great Britain: Hodder Arnold, 2002.

King, Stephen. *It*. Viking Press, 1986.

Lore. Written and produced by Aaron Mahnke. "Episode 6: Echoes." May 18, 2015.
"Episode 60: If Walls Could Talk." May 15, 2017.

May, Antoinette. *Haunted Houses of California: A Ghostly Guide to Haunted Houses & Wandering Spirits*. San Carlos, CA: World Wide Publishing, 1990.

Moretti, Nick, ed. *The Bell Witch Anthology*. Lexington, KY: 2006.

Olson, Colleen O'Connor and Charles Hanion. *Scary Stories of Mammoth Cave*. Dayton, OH: Cave Books, 2002.

Psycho. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Shamley productions, 1960.

Red River Baptist Church (Adams, Tennessee). *Minutes of the Red River Baptist Church, 1791-1826, Robertson County, Tennessee*. Transcribed by Mary Holland Lancaster. Greenville, SC: A Press.

Rocky Horror Picture Show. Directed by Jim Sharman. 20th Century Fox, 1975.

Sharpley, Richard and Philip R. Stone, ed. *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism*. Tonawanda, NY: Channel View Publications, 2009.

Unobscured. Podcast by Aaron Mahnke. "Season 1, Interview 3: Richard Trask."

The Witch: A New England folktale. Directed by Robert Eggers. Lionsgate, 2015.

Winchester. Directed by The Spierig Brothers. Lionsgate, 2018.

Winchester Mystery House. San Jose, California. Two guided tours and staff interviews. February 23, 2019. Participant observation and interviews by author.