



The Onondaga Historical Association's annual Ghostwalk reveals the hidden history of Fayetteville.

Going Ghost

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Grover Cleveland stood on the steps of a clapboard house in Fayetteville, N.Y. With his formal suit and top hat, delicate white gloves, and sturdy hooked cane, Cleveland was a stark contrast to the surrounding modern neighborhood.

Ironically, when our small tour group approached his doorstep, it was he who jumped in surprise. After a moment of recovery, he slowly made his way down the steps and shook all of our hands, declaring how delighted he was to meet us. To the unknowing passersby, the scene must have seemed surreal.

Bringing back spirits from the grave is an annual affair at the Onondaga Historical Association's Ghostwalk, which is held in a different part of Central New York every fall. This year's walk focused on past Fayetteville residents, such as E.R. "Curly" Vadeboncoeur, a renowned Syracuse broadcaster; Matilda and Henry Gage, who offered their home as a station on the Underground Railroad; and, of course, former President Cleveland.

Fortunately, these ghosts are not actually rising from the dead.

Scott Peal, director of the ghostwalk, hires skilled actors from local community theater groups to do the job. "Doing a ghostwalk is not just for fun," Peal says. "You're doing the same thing over and over again, six, seven, eight times a night, so it's really kind of a grueling experience. It takes a lot of concentration."

But even when reciting back-to-back 12-minute monologues about their characters' histories, these actors showed nothing but enthusiasm. David Baker, who played the broadcaster Vadeboncoeur, showed particular zeal as he sat on the front porch

of a historic house on Fayetteville's Elm Street. "Can you imagine Broadway here in Fayetteville?" he asked our tour group as he gestured across the yard. Some people shook their heads—the tiny village hardly seemed noteworthy enough to attract big-name talent. Baker proceeded to explain how in 1946, he, as Curly, had co-founded the Famous Artists Series, which brought Broadway talent to Syracuse area. Famous actresses like Eartha Kitt, Vivian Vance, and Veronica Lake once displayed their talents on the nearby playhouse stage.

Local historians provide these stories about past residents with Peal's input, and Peal writes the scripts for each actor's monologue. The actors begin practicing their lines anywhere from one month to one week before opening night. Peal says he finishes the scripts for newer actors sooner, so they have enough time to practice. This process is much more uniform than the early days of the ghostwalk, when the actors wrote their own scripts.

But a well-written script is not the only prerequisite for a successful ghostwalk. "It's always nerve-wracking, because I know just finishing the scripts is not the end of the process," Peal says. Putting together the ghostwalk also involves choosing a location, finding two volunteer guides for each tour group, and staying organized when 50 to 120 people show up for the tour each night.

When possible, Peal has the actors present their monologues at their characters' actual former homes. In one of the last homes on this year's walk, an actress portrayed Ladye Love Smith in the same home where she lived with her husband in the late 1800s. The sharp smell of sawdust greeted us as we entered and gathered around the stairwell to hear Smith's heartbreak story, which began with tales of devotion to her husband and ended with her death after childbirth. From her perch on the stairwell, Smith's

character gestured toward the living room, where she said her funeral was held more than 100 years earlier.

Everyone on the tour looked around, as if expecting to see Smith's ghost floating in the space. But the feeling of eeriness was lessened by the home's ongoing renovation, evident in its unfinished wood floors and spotless granite countertops. A couple purchased the home a few years ago and are attempting to restore it to its former beauty. "The lady who owned the house contacted me about the ghostwalk because she had done a lot of research and has a spiritual connection to Smith," Peal says.

This homeowner isn't the only person asking to be involved in the ghostwalk. Peal has already received interest from surrounding areas about hosting the walk in their neighborhoods next year. Inquiries have come from Baldwinsville, Liverpool, Skaneateles, and the Strathmore neighborhood of Syracuse. The structure of the walk will remain the same in the future, but Peal takes the suggestions of attendees into account. "The walk changes a little bit every time we do it. From our surveys, people sometimes say it's too long, or they say there should be more ghosts," Peal says with a laugh.

Regardless of its location or length, the ghostwalk brings the history of these towns to life. As we parted with our tour guides at the Fayetteville Village Hall, I glimpsed a portrait of Grover Cleveland hanging by the exit. After our night of ghostly encounters, I half-expected him to come alive as I walked out the door.