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

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 starch-buckled 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 to 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 passerby, 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.B. “Curly” Vadeboncoeur, a renowned Syracuse broadcaster; Matilda and Henry Gage, who owned their home as a haven on the Underground Railroad; and, of course, former President Cleveland.

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

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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, shadowed particular teas as he sat on the front porch of a historic house on Fayetteville’s Main 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 worthy enough to attract big-name talent. Baker proceeded to explain how, in 1846, he, as Curly, had co-founded the Famous Actors Society, which brought Broadway talent to Syracuse area. Famous actors such as James Cagney, Vivian Vance, and Veronica Lake even displayed their talents on the nearby playground stage.

Local historians provide the stories about past residents with Peal’s input, and Peal writes the scripts for each actor’s monologues. 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 were their own scriptwriters.

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 90 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 Lady Love Smith in the same house where she lived with her husband in the late 1940s. The sharp smell of sawdust greeted us as we entered and gathered around the stairwell to hear Smith’s heartbreaking 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 eerie was lessened by the home’s ongoing renovation, evident in its unfinished wood floors and spindled grime-covered window. A couple purchased the house 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 homeown 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 Ithaca, Binghamton, Liverpool, Skaneateles, and the Strathmore neighborhood of Syracuse. The structure of the walk will remain the same for the future, but Peal takes the suggestions of attendees into account. "The walk changes a little every year, so every year we know 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 nations to life. As we parted with our tour guides at the Fayetteville Village Hall, I glimpsed a portrait of Grover Cleveland hanging by the door. After our night of ghostly encounters, I half-expected to come alive as I walked out the door.