

GHOST STORIES

These haunted tours of historic landmarks across Ohio will capture your imagination and put a chill in your bones.



NIGHT TALES: Learn the hidden history of Washington Park and Music Hall during Haunted Cincinnati Tours' Buried Secrets excursion.

Haunted Cincinnati Tours

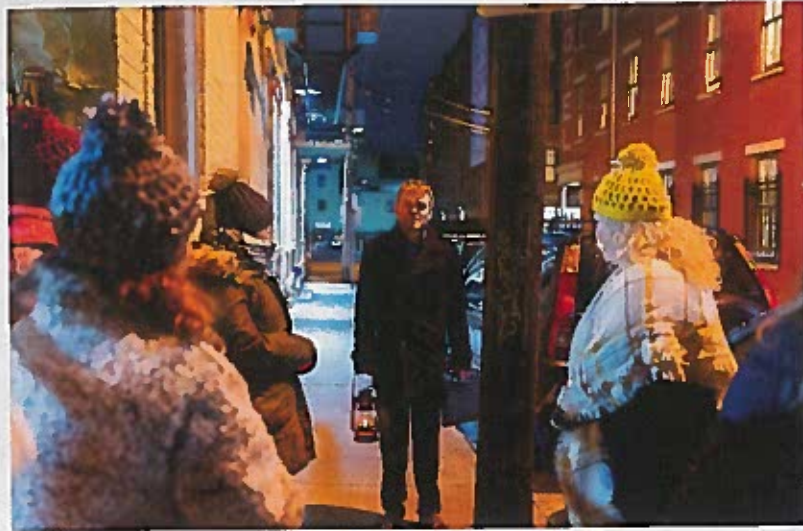
Explore Washington Park and discover the secrets of Music Hall during this trek through the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. *By Rich Warren*

In the grand finale of our two-hour walking sojourn filled with paranormal stories linked to Cincinnati's past, our guide, Dan Smith, hands out electromagnetic devices, he says, will detect energy levels from spirits wandering through Washington Park.

Although the apparatus I select neither blinks nor beeps, a tool several others choose — made up of bulbs that glow in accordance with activity — is particularly lively. On one, all five lights quickly radiate neon red.

"That's the equivalent of a microwave oven working!" Smith exclaims to the startled woman who holds it. "[The energy level] is that big."

In the 19th century, Washington Park was the site of Cincinnati's Presbyterian and Episcopal cemeteries. Across the street, the city's magnificent Music Hall sits



atop what was once a potter's field, where thousands of bodies of indigent people and cholera victims were unceremoniously dumped in mass graves.

As Smith shares these chapters of Queen City history during Haunted Cincinnati Tours' Buried Secrets excursion, none of us are surprised that the park has become a magnet for spirit hunters. It's said a child in pigtails is often seen here late at night, and photos taken of the area sometimes pick up shadowy forms. I shudder when hearing that for decades swimmers in what is now a long-gone pool inside the park reported the sensation of their feet being pulled by something below.

Buried Secrets focuses on Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, where tens of thousands of German immigrants once resided. Naturally, there were also dozens of beer gardens. (My favorite story Smith relays during the tour is how famed temperance activist Carrie Nation, who was known for entering taverns and smashing bottles of liquor with a hatchet, took one look at all the drinking establishments in the area and turned



SPIRIT GUIDES: Buried Secrets focuses on the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood (left and above) and lets you try a little ghost hunting (below left).

back, claiming she'd have "dropped from exhaustion" after just one block.)

Central Parkway, a major thoroughfare, now covers what was once the city's portion of the Miami & Erie Canal, which traversed western Ohio all the way to Toledo. The largest abandoned subway tunnel system in the country lies beneath it. Along the way, we pass the site of the former Commercial Hospital and Lunatic Asylum as Smith regales us with ghost stories galore.

One recounts how a Music Hall night guard once encountered a ballroom of dancers dressed in formal attire. They were gone when he returned minutes later. Another tells of a family who's seen a man climbing the stairs in the home he occupied for 62 years before them. The kicker? He is still alive and residing in a nearby nursing home. Our guide calls such occurrences "residual hauntings," an eerie replay of events from the past.

"I love both history and the paranormal," says Smith, who is also the author of *Ghosts of Cincinnati*. "Putting the two together is a passion of mine."

The Buried Secrets tour takes place on Saturdays at 9 p.m. For more information, call 877/891-3374 or visit hauntedcincinnati.com.

Hidden Marietta Tour Co.

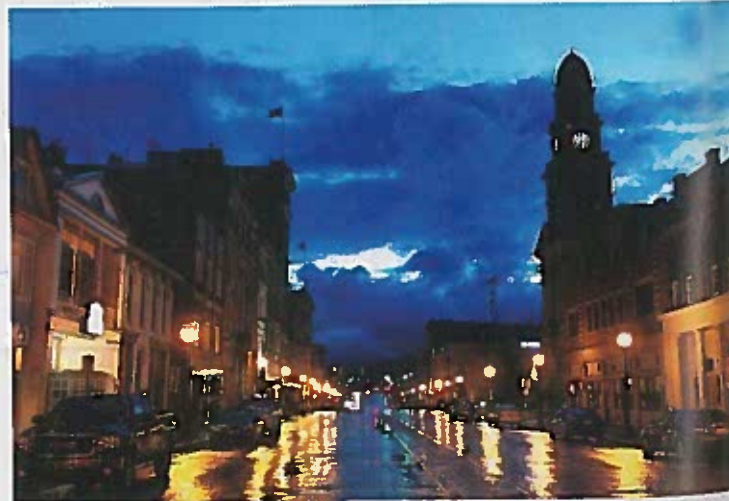
Learn the creepy backstory behind a local church, and visit the site of this historic river town's only public execution. By Taylor Johnston

Founded in 1788, Marietta has the distinction of being the United States' first permanent settlement north and west of the Ohio River. But beneath the history and charm of this quaint southeast Ohio town lies more than a few spine-tingling ghost stories.

"[The founders] created the type of community they left in the East, with wide streets, a school and a church," says Kat Watkins, a guide for Hidden Marietta Tour Co. "They hoped Marietta would eventually become the capital of the United States."

Costumed in a black Victorian dress representing the era we're going to learn about, she greets us beneath the eerie glow of the Washington County Courthouse clock tower, located at the corner of Second and Putnam streets.

The first stop in our 90-minute Putnam Street Ghost Trek walking tour is under the arch that graces the front entrance of



the Mid-Ohio Valley Players Theater, also known as the Putnam Theater. Legend has it the original owner of this community theater, built in 1915, makes appearances to enjoy 21st-century performances.



HIDDEN HAUNTS: Hidden Marietta Tour Co.'s Putnam Street Ghost Trek shares creepy stories tied to the historic town (opposite page bottom and above).

Next, we pause outside The Betsey Mills Club on Fourth Street, established in the early 1900s by a community-minded resident as a place where girls could learn skills that would lead to reputable careers. Today, the center hums with activities ranging from lap swimming to exercise classes and offers long-term lodging. Watkins smiles at the astonished looks we give as she reveals it's been reported that students who lived here 100 years ago frequently return to turn off lights and "borrow" clothing from residents.

The First Unitarian Church of Marietta, located a block away, is steeped in history as well, along with a creepy backstory.

"The bricks don't look exciting but it's what gives this church an aura like no other [I know]," says Watkins.

She explains that Marietta residents built the house of worship in 1858 using bricks made with clay taken from burial grounds of the Adena and Hopewell people, and constructed it on land the Native Americans used to celebrate the winter solstice.

"There have been people who have stated they have occasionally heard people singing in the church when they are the only one in the building, as well as scratching along the pews," says Watkins.

Our final stop is behind the Dime Bank Building, which was built in 1901 and is the site of the town's only hanging, which took place in 1867. Watkins recounts the story of former Parkersburg, West Virginia, resident John Eubank, whose headless body was found in the river. Hanson Baumgardner, a man with a history of lawlessness, was arrested and jailed for Eubank's murder. On the day of his execution Baumgardner vehemently proclaimed his innocence, but he was put to death anyway.

"He was by no means innocent, but was he hung for the wrong crime? Nobody can answer," says Watkins. "That's why it is the only execution we've ever had [in Marietta], because they were afraid of making that mistake again."

Tours are offered every Saturday at 8 p.m., early July through Oct. 31 (some exceptions apply). Tours depart from the corner of Second and Putnam streets in Marietta 45750. For more information, call 740/538-0520 or visit hiddenmarietta.com.

Haunted Cleveland Ghost Tours

Step inside Grays Armory and visit the tunnels beneath the Soldiers' & Sailors' Monument on this bus tour through the city. By Kate Bigam Kaput

As I step inside the lobby of the Variety Theatre on Cleveland's West Side, I envision its former glory of gilded ages past. When it opened in 1927, the Spanish Gothic-style theater was a vaudeville hot spot and a pinnacle of glamour. Sadly, it has fallen into disrepair since closing in 1986.

Patrick Colvin, board member of Friends of the Historic Variety Theatre, is passionate about restoring the building to its former splendor. He also insists it's haunted by as many as 19 spirits, including his brother, David, who was helping with the project before his death in 2016.

"They're much more like Casper — friendly ghosts, as opposed to malevolent," Colvin assures me. But as the wind whistles and lights flicker, I can't help but wonder if his pronouncement is entirely true. Later that evening, I find a tiny crystal from one of the theater's crumbling chandeliers stuck in my hair.

Of course, a city as old as Cleveland is bound to hold a spooky story or two. That's why Chuck Gove, a former homicide detective and longtime history buff, established Haunted Cleveland Ghost Tours in 1999 as an alternative to commercial haunted houses. Each year, Gove adds new spots to keep spirit seekers and history lovers coming back for more.

The Variety Theatre is currently one of four stops on the tour. Our group, numbering 40 strong, piles into a large, comfy tour bus that takes us to designated locations where we learn a bit about the city while exploring.

We park in front of Grays Armory, an ominous, castle-like fortress once home to the city's independent militia. Constructed in 1837 and rebuilt in 1893 following a devastating fire, it's now a military museum filled with artifacts including the first cannon captured by the Union in the Civil War. Our group ducks beneath a portentous, black iron drop-gate and files inside, where a docent explains the space is thought to be haunted by a former caretaker named Lou who suffered a fatal heart attack there.