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## Witches Tree Casts Its Spell Over Louisville

Ghost Tours Offer Eye-Popping Views Of Historic Neighborhood

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At the corner of Sixth Street and Park Avenue in Louisville, Kentucky, stands a twisted, gnarled tree, its trunk covered with massive burls, its canopy of thin branches crazily extending every which way, making it look like the tree is caught in a perpetual whirlwind. Strewn on and around the tree are dozens of Mardi Gras beads, tarot cards, candles, even liquor bottles, like offerings to some pagan idol.

Behold the Witches Tree of Louisville, long a place of mystery and pilgrimage — yes, those are broomsticks propped against it. As the legend goes, a beautiful maple tree once graced this spot, which was a place of gathering for those involved with the dark arts, witches casting their spells and performing their rituals.

In 1889, the city fathers of Louisville proposed using the tree as a May pole in the city's May Day celebrations. The witches strenuously objected, but the tree was chopped down anyway, sending the witches into a frenzy of cursing, telling Louisville to "beware the 11th month."

Exactly 11 months later, on March 27, 1890, one of the most powerful tornadoes in Kentucky history struck Louisville, destroying hundreds of buildings and killing dozens of people. During the storm, according to folklore, a freak lightning bolt hit the spot where the maple tree had been chopped down. The disfigured and contorted tree now standing at that location sprouted and began to grow.

That tree's fame and allure has only intensified over the decades. Nowadays, it even has its own



Witches Tree of Louisville

Facebook page. And if you so choose, you can still just walk up to the tree and visit it yourself, either by cover of darkness or in broad daylight if you're trepidatious about what takes place there after nightfall.



Historic Home in Old Louisville featured through Louisville Historic Tours

But one of the best ways to visit it is by taking part in a ghost tour conducted by Louisville Historic Tours. The Witches Tree is the grand finale of this tour, which wends its way through the Old Louisville neighborhood just south of downtown. Once the residence of Louisville's titans of tobacco and barons of bourbon, Old Louisville brims with eye-popping Victorian mansions that you can bet are also filled with plentiful ghost stories.

And some of those stories are doozies. To this day, people report hearing anguished

lamentations and seeing a woman with jet black, long flowing hair walking back and forth in front of the neighborhood's Church of Christ, Scientist. She's weeping for the lover she thought had spurned her, who, unbeknownst to her, had just perished in the influenza epidemic of 1918, from which she herself was about to become a victim. Across the street at the Filson Historical Society, a poltergeist named Sally occasionally flings books around willy nilly.

In the neighborhood's prestigious St. James Court, where mansions face each other across a park-like green, other stories center around the hard-to-miss "Pink Palace," where a ghost named Avery warns residents of mishaps about to take place. Once, he appeared to a woman lounging in a bubble bath. Startled, she leapt out of the tub into which a huge chunk of concrete suddenly landed, heaved through a window by potential burglars on the sidewalk outside.

The magnificent Conrad-Caldwell House, at the other end of the Court, has been visited by the SyFy channel's "Ghost Hunters" and is open for tours. But nosy visitors who wander off or furtively open closets and drawers when the guide isn't looking have reported suddenly encountering a short man in a bowler hat and tweed jacket who shames them by shaking a finger in their faces. It's reportedly the spirit of Theophilus Conrad, the original owner of the



Church of Christ, Scientist, featured through Louisville Historic Tours.



Another historic home featured in Old Louisville along the "ghost tour."

house, who died of a heart attack on the home's grand staircase. His grandchildren, who have reported he was a bit of a control freak, aren't surprised by his behavior in the afterlife.

Spinner of these tales and owner of Louisville Historic Tours is David Domine, whose storytelling has extended to a number of different books that include coverage of Kentucky food and bourbon in addition to volumes focusing on Old Louisville's history and ghostly spirits. His own eerie experiences residing in the Widmer House in Old Louisville are recounted in his book "Voodoo Days at La Casa Fabulosa: An Unconventional Memoir." He's currently at work on another book focusing on a different house where a gruesome murder and burial in the basement of a drag queen make up what he calls "Kentucky's American

### Horror Story."

A transplant to Louisville, Domine has promoted his adopted Bluegrass State with gusto. He is convinced the magnificent mansions of Old Louisville will become the country's next Savannah or Charleston. Since he started tours through the neighborhood in 2004, visitors from all over the U.S., Europe, and Asia have come calling. Enthusiastic Internet endorsements on Trip Advisor and elsewhere have helped pull visitors, as well as a mention in the New York Times' "36 Hours" series when it focused on Louisville in 2016. Still, Domine is gratified that at least half of his tour takers are residents of Louisville wanting to learn more about their city. He never wearies of showing off Old Louisville. "I love it. That's the reason I keep doing it," he said.



Home in Old Louisville along the "ghost tour".

Although the 19th-century witches who cursed Louisville are obviously long gone, there's still a thriving community of witches in the Derby City. Andrew Jaycen, Marji Cook and Taylor Morris all proudly identify themselves as witches, not Wiccans, which they explain is a contemporary nature-based religious movement introduced in 1954 that draws upon ancient pagan beliefs. "I'm a witch and don't care who knows it," said Marji Cook. "I'm definitely out of the broom closet."

As for what they believe and what rituals they perform, Andrew Jaycen explains that for every hundred witches, there are most likely a hundred ways they practice their craft and a hundred different personal credos. He has done blessings in the paddocks of Churchill Downs and performed cleansings to get rid of negativity in local breweries and distilleries, but his general belief is that there is life and energy in everything, energy that can be directed with the proper intention. He says that his personal idea of “magic” is to “mold circumstances into a specific outcome.”

Taylor Morris agrees, describing himself as a “bender,” trying to bend events in particular directions, basically using techniques of creative visualization to help his clients achieve their goals. “Imagination is key,” he said. “It helps you realize what you want as a goal. I help them find steps towards getting there.” And lest there be any doubt, most witches use their practices to help people towards positive goals. Andrew Jaycen cites the “Law of Three,” which maintains that all good and all negativity projected into the universe are returned to you times three. So putting “a hex” on someone does no good for anyone.

And what about “casting spells?” Marji Cook sees that as a very generic term but cites the power of the language used in their rituals. “Words have power. I can’t stress that enough,” she said. Her own practices often center around healing. She’s quick to demonstrate the powerful warmth that comes from her hands, which she uses to reduce the discomfort of those in pain.

For witches, the approaching holiday of Halloween is known as Samhain, one of the most significant dates on their calendar, a time “when the veil is thinning between the supernatural and the natural,” Marji Cook explains, a time when the boundaries between this world and the Otherworld can more easily be crossed. The depictions of witches as crones on broomsticks doesn’t especially bother them. Andrew Jaycen points out that the crone is just one expression of the female form of divinity, one that has wisdom and great power.

The witches community of Louisville is fairly loosely organized, the three explain, although many of them know each other. They describe Louisville as a very tolerant, “live and let live” type of place, and though the time when witches were burned is sometimes on their mind, they are currently benefiting from a generally positive attitude towards witches in society, as demonstrated by the series “The Good Witch” on the Hallmark Channel.

As for the Witches Tree itself, Marji Cook challenges visitors to first touch neighboring trees and then put their hands on the Witches Tree. “There’s a power coming from it that you’ll definitely feel,” she says. Andrew Jaycen sees it as a place of great healing, a place where a wound was created when the first tree was taken down, but now whenever someone visits to learn from the tree, it adds to the healing process.

The three witches personally doubt that the tree is visited by groups of witches performing any rituals — most likely individual witches come like ordinary visitors to quietly leave their

personal offerings and tributes. Hecate, Queen of the Witches, is cited by Andrew Jaycen as one of his favorite goddesses. Since she loves animals, proper offerings to her might be dog biscuits or kitty treats. St. Expeditus, who offers quick action for those in urgent need, has a sweet tooth and especially loves pound cake. “But it has to be Sara Lee,” he laughs.

Taylor Morris comes to the Witches Tree each Halloween evening to distribute candy to trick-or-treaters. They come “by the truckload,” he says, cleaning him out every year. He uses the time to educate the children, letting them know that witches are agents of good and that “magic” is a power they can find within themselves also. He finds most of his young visitors are “very polite, even sedate,” and he hopes his contact with them “adds a little to their education.”

After Halloween, the witches return to their regular routines, meeting with clients for private consultations. Word of mouth is their most powerful form of advertising, and they never know when their telephone is going to ring. “Witches are like doctors,” Taylor Morris explains. “24/7, we’re on call all the time.”

For more information on the ghost tours offered by Louisville Historic Tours, go to [www.louisvillehistorictours.com](http://www.louisvillehistorictours.com) or call 502-718-2764.

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