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CONFEDERATE GHOST WAS 'RELEASED' FROM SELMA 'VISITOR' WAS A COMMON SIGHT AT CITY MANSION

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Staunton - The young Confederate's knuckles showed white as he gripped an army Colt revolver and raced, breathless, across the manicured lawn of Selma mansion. With heart hammering, he took the front steps two at a time, darted past the home's stately white columns and bolted through its generous front door.

He paused by the mantle in the dining room to catch his breath. Where to hide? Where could he go that the pursuing Yankees wouldn't find him? He had only a few moments to decide. On one of their frequent patrols of the area, several soldiers had flushed him from a copse of trees on the 790-acre estate near Staunton and pursued him here, to the house in which he had once lived.

Suddenly he heard a noise behind him. Whirling, he saw a blue-uniformed soldier standing in the doorway of the dining room. Before he could bring up the big Colt, a flash of fire erupted from the bluecoat's rifle. The young Rebel spun backward against the mantle as a .58-caliber minie-ball crashed into him. He was dead by the time he hit the floor.

As Union control of Staunton and the Shenandoah Valley increased in the waning days of the Civil War, scenes such as this one were played out many times. This one, however, would not disappear into the mists of time. It would live on - and so would its unfortunate Confederate soldier - for almost another 120 years.

Selma - a splendid example of Greek Revival architecture that still stands today - was built in 1856. After the war it was bought by the Williams family of South Carolina, and while both servants and family members reported seeing a ghost from time to time, it wasn't until 1872 that such sightings were widely reported.

A published account of the day reported that a visitor to Selma asked her hosts, "Who was the man who just walked by?" The visitor, who had no prior knowledge of the mansion's history, insisted that "a soldier in uniform" had passed her as she went out.

In the later years, the young Confederate would be seen on the stairs, entering the dining room, or standing by the blood-stained hearth "as if he were a member of the family circle." His presence was so plain that a new servant once asked if she should set a place at the table for the "gentleman."

"What gentleman?"

"Why, the soldier gentleman."

Selma's spectral Confederate went on to receive writeups in many articles and books about ghosts.

One writer described him as "polite, attentive, as though listening to the conversation of the family, but not taking part." His form was "so clear and distinct that he was often mistaken for a living man, his manner was so calm and casual, his presence so convincing, that residents often accepted him."

In 1982, a Blue Ridge Community College parapsychology class visited Selma as part of a field trip. One member of the group was Phyllis Atwater of Charlottesville, a woman whose sensitivity to psychic phenomena had led her to many encounters with spirits in so-called haunted houses. At Selma, the group was told they could go anywhere in the house except the attic.

As soon as no one was looking, Atwater made her way to the attic. "I had to," she said. The feelings were very strong from that portion of the house."

She said once her eyes adjusted to the dimness of the attic, she saw a spirit which "had no earthly form, but rather presented a hodgepodge of blotches hanging in mid-air. I'd never seen anything like it."

Atwater said the entity spoke to her, telling her to go away. She replied that she was there to help, not to do harm.

"Something was happening I didn't think was possible," she said. "This was a soul that literally was dissipating. All the other energy forms I'd dealt with stayed true to their own coherent structures. This one was breaking up."

Atwater told the group's leader, David McKnight, that a "release ceremony" had to be conducted.

She and McKnight convinced Selma's landlady that the soldier was terribly unhappy, that his presence now was "very foreboding and confrontational." The landlady agreed and the ceremony was set up for that evening.

Once the ceremony began, Atwater "counseled" the spirit of the Confederate.

"I said I understand the circumstances of its death, of the terrible era it had come from, and I told it forcefully that it needed help." Atwater said, "I said it must go to the light before it was destroyed."

Then, she said, she had to force the spirit "by dint of will" to leave the house. She said he finally - "sighed with resignation" and moved on to the afterlife denied it for 118 years. At that moment, the clock struck midnight.

"After death, the spirit normally progresses on," Atwater said. "But here we had a young man who died traumatically. He was imprisoned in Selma by his own emotions and by the selfishness of others [who enjoyed having a ghost around and didn't want him to leave]. We did the right thing and freed him."

So much malarkey? Overactive imaginations and too much free time? Many people think so. However, there's one thing about the "release ceremony" that can't be ignored.

Since that eerie night in 1982, there have been no further sightings of Selma's unhappy young Confederate.

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