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## I Ain't Afraid of No Ghosts

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# I Ain't Afraid of No Ghosts

## **Abstract**

I had no plans of writing a blog post this week. I said my piece [on ghost tours](#) last year. This Halloween, it was the next generation's turn to share their opinions on the matter. Jules and Jen both did a spectacular job on the subject, and I commend them even though our perspectives differ. But when I learned that my stance had come under fire from another blog, I eagerly leapt from the comfort of my editing armchair and returned to the front lines to compose this piece [*excerpt*].

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Gettysburg ghost tours, Ghostlore, Thaddeus Stevens, Civil War Club

## **Disciplines**

History | Social History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### I Ain't Afraid of No Ghosts

*October 31, 2015*

*By Kevin Lavery '16*

I had no plans of writing a blog post this week. I said my piece [on ghost tours](#) last year. This Halloween, it was the next generation's turn to share their opinions on the matter. [Jules](#) and [Jen](#) both did a spectacular job on the subject, and I commend them even though our perspectives differ. But when I learned that my stance had come under fire from another blog, I eagerly leapt from the comfort of my editing armchair and returned to the front lines to compose this piece.



*Gettysburg skyline from the roof of the Appleford Inn on All Hallow's Eve Eve. Photograph by the author.*

In a post earlier this week, [The Sundance Kid of the History Bandits](#) wrote a piece arguing that I “[missed the point](#)” of ghost tours. He argues that they are an expression of folklore that should be considered an equally important part of the town's historical landscape. I didn't miss the point. I rejected it.

Now, I should clarify that I'm not rejecting folklore as a valid form of making sense of suffering. I firmly believe that it is a core component of Gettysburg's heritage. I am only rejecting ghost

tours as an authentic expression of folklore. It is true that spiritualism has long predated the emergence of the ghost tours industry. But I believe it is problematic to confound folklore with the stories told by ghost tours.

Let us for a moment distinguish between folklore and ghostlore. Ghostlore, I would argue, is merely one element of folklore. It is flashier, more marketable, and more prominent on the streets of Gettysburg than other forms of folklore. It is not the folklore of yesteryear—stories told to help people explain what we don't understand. Gettysburg ghostlore is a commercial appropriation of a tragedy spread industrially. Can we really call this an “homage” to suffering, when profit is made from the exploitation of others' sorrows?

Moreover, although the Sundance Kid seems to be convinced that ghost tours are in need of defending, Gettysburg's ghosts are far from endangered. The same holds true for its Civil War history. But what about Gettysburg's connections to **Thaddeus Stevens**, the legendary Radical Republican? What about Camp Colt and the **town's mobilization during the First World War**? What about Mary Jemison, a white woman taken captive by Native Americans not far from town and who found a new family with her captors? Gettysburg's folklore is very much a valid expression of the past, but it should include so much more than the ghosts that haunt it.

Ghosts have become just as much a part of the mainstream narrative that dominates all else as Lee and Lincoln. There is too much history and too much folklore already being left out of the Gettysburg narrative even before ghost tours are factored in. There are so many stories not being told that it grieves me that the ones that are told are told to death—and for profit.

I should mention here that I myself have taken part in a ghost tour. As a naive young first-year student, I roped Civil War Club into giving ghost tours to some of my classmates. I gave one myself. We didn't stop at ghostlore, however. We covered it, for sure, telling stories of the Blue Boy, Penn Hall basement, and a few rumored suicides from the early twentieth century. But we didn't seek to bring these stories to life so much as to explore their existence in context. Our fundamental goal was to convey the tragic history of Gettysburg College. If nothing else, we wanted my classmates to understand that our campus was part of the battlefield, even though it doesn't look like it today. And, might I add, we weren't charging money. This was campus lore being passed from student to student for the sheer joy of understanding the past. There was no economic incentive to spice things up a bit. That's how folklore should be passed.

Folklore is a part of history, and history is a part of folklore. But although closely interwoven they are not indistinguishable, and to treat them as such can preclude a more nuanced understanding of each.

I like my folklore the way I like my art: with a good helping of perspective and historical content so that it can actually be understood. Framing the past with smoke and mirrors, I feel, detracts from understanding both folklore and history. Appreciating both with a nuanced mind is so much more rewarding than appreciating them superficially.

That's not to say I don't believe that history should be fun. But I think we should be aware of the temptation for fun, dark, and exciting stories to eclipse a meaningful understanding of any topic.

I'll concede that **crusading for the truth** likewise risks ignoring that which is most wonderful and exciting about history: the stories. But history is like no story ever told. It is *the* Story. It can't be constrained by the popular dimensions of what makes a good tale.

In conclusion, I suppose the title of this post is wrong, because I am afraid of ghosts. I am afraid of their imagined presence in Gettysburg dominating this town's historical landscape and further obscuring stories equally or more worthy of being told. I am afraid of them appropriating genuine folklore and perpetuating myths that obscure the past. I am afraid of them contributing to a sense that there is one way to experience Gettysburg: battlefield tours at day and ghost tours at night.



*Steinwehr Avenue: Ground-zero for Gettysburg paranormal activity activities. Photograph by the author.*

But, of course, ghost tours aren't going anywhere in the near future. Business is good for them, and there's no point in hoping that the public's interests will change overnight. As such, I consider this blog post little more than a rhetorical exercise, albeit a fun one. The truth is that I don't want the ghost tour industry to go anywhere. As Jules observed, with the end of the sesquicentennial, and with the restoration of the **Lee's Headquarter's site**, the town's economy can't afford to lose such a powerful draw. But I do wish their overbearing dominance would end, to give the town an opportunity to become more economically and historically robust.

One final word: I would remind my critics that if rejecting ghost tours is to whitewash the past, then embracing them without a healthy dose of skepticism is to ignore their complex implications for public engagement with history. Gettysburg is more than its ghosts.

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2015/10/31/i-aint-afraid-of-no-ghosts/>