

Ghostly Cries From Dixie

Pat Fitzhugh



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The names of the people and places discussed in this book are a product of the author’s research, which he believes to be accurate to the best of his knowledge at the time of publication. The stories contained in this book come from history, folklore, and eyewitness accounts. This book contains both factual *and* fictional elements.

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❧ PREFACE ❧

FROM THE DEEPEST THICKET IN TEXAS, TO THE OLDEST mansion in Virginia, the American South is enshrouded by a mystical element that rouses the senses and kindles the imagination. For years, this mystical element has inspired storytellers to relate tales of ghosts haunting old houses, strange creatures roaming the forests, Civil War battles raging on in spirit, and headless apparitions waving lanterns in the darkness.

Much of the region's supernatural mystique is traceable to its violent and bloody past, when bloody battles, disastrous accidents, sweeping epidemics, and brutal murders claimed countless lives and left behind a spiritual residue that lingers on. Nearly every graveyard, old house, and battlefield in the American South has a resident spirit and a ghostly tale to tell.

I wrote this book for the many people who enjoy such tales. It includes stories from Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. You are probably familiar with some of the stories, but read them anyway; ghost stories often change when new information comes to light.

I kept three objectives in mind while writing this book. The first was to intrigue, fascinate, and entertain people with Southern ghostlore. That's right—to entertain! Although a great deal of research went into writing this book, it is a storybook above all else.

My second objective was to achieve quality over quantity. Instead of filling this book with a multitude of short, watered-down stories to increase its page count, I

cover fewer stories in greater detail, which gives the reader more insight and makes the book more enjoyable. Longer stories also add *depth and dimension* to a book. Simply proclaiming, “Junior saw a ghost, wet his pants, and ran like hell,” doesn’t tell the reader much, does it?

My third objective was to strike a healthy balance between history and ghostlore. I have tried, wherever possible, to corroborate the stories with real events and historical data. As a historian – someone who studies history and shares their findings with others –, I feel that striking such a balance helps the reader develop a greater appreciation for history and the sense of validity it adds to ghost stories.

History often proves the existence of people and places mentioned in a story, but it doesn’t always bear witness to the *entire* story. Where does one draw the line between fact and fiction? That’s up to you. The stories contained in this book have at least *some* basis in historical fact.

Each chapter of this book contains my version of a different ghost story, written from scratch. Although I’ve known these stories most of my life, I scoured libraries, newspapers, and other sources for additional information to include.

Come with me on a terrifying, mystical journey down the road less traveled, where ghosts, haints, and spirits stand a vigilant watch over cypress-filled swamps, forgotten graveyards, old houses, and majestic mountains.

I am dedicating this book to those who are intrigued, fascinated, and entertained by stories of the supernatural. Until next time, pleasant dreams.

Pat Fitzhugh

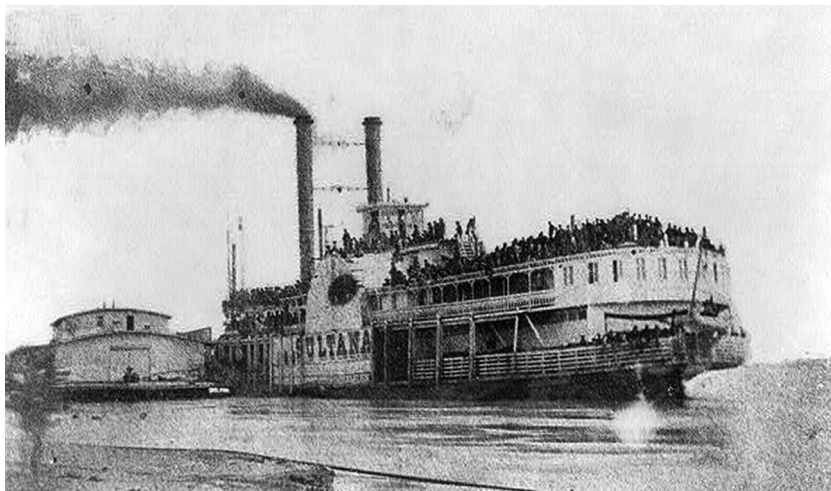
❧ ONE ❧

Mayhem on the Mississippi

ONE OF THE MOST TRAGIC EVENTS IN CIVIL WAR history occurred on the Mississippi River, seven miles north of Memphis, Tennessee. The steamer *Sultana*, carrying 2,400 passengers, burst into a hellish inferno of molten steel, hot coals, and human carnage when her boiler exploded in the early morning hours of April 27, 1865.

Those pinned in the wreckage were slowly burned to death, while others drowned in the dark, frigid depths of the Mississippi. About 1,900 men, women, and children perished that fateful morning, and their restless spirits still linger at the disaster site. This is their story.

When the Civil War ended, the government offered to pay steamboat companies \$5 for each Union soldier they carried home. Steamboat companies liked the arrangement because it allowed them to boost their profits by overloading their boats. Carrying 600 soldiers on one boat would generate more profit than carrying 300 soldiers on two boats would. An overloaded steamboat meant a healthier bottom line.



The 280-foot *Sultana* was the most profitable steamboat on the Mississippi. Equipped to carry only 376 passengers, she routinely transported soldiers in groups of 500 or more and always arrived on time. Union Army officers were so impressed with her stellar performance that they began soliciting kickbacks from her owner. In exchange for the kickbacks, they would put more soldiers on the *Sultana*.

A contingent of 1,900 homebound Union soldiers and officers gathered at Vicksburg, Mississippi on the morning of April 24, 1865 to await the *Sultana*'s arrival from New Orleans. She had left the Crescent City three days earlier with 230 passengers and a cargo of sugar and cattle. She steamed into Vicksburg at 5:30 P.M., more than six hours late, under reduced power. One of her boilers had malfunctioned downriver.

While crewmembers repaired a large crack in her main boiler, Union officers discussed how they would squeeze all 1,900 soldiers onto the *Sultana*. Their kickback would be almost \$5,000 if they succeeded. Boiler repairs were completed by 9 P.M., and the *Sultana* steamed away from Vicksburg with 2,130 passengers.

When she docked at Helena, Arkansas, two days later, onlookers noticed that she was listing (leaning) to her port (left) side. At least one onlooker was concerned enough to take a picture. Taken at Helena on April 26, 1865, the picture on the previous page shows the Sultana listing under the weight of 2,200 soldiers.

After a brief stay in Helena, the overloaded Sultana chugged her way upriver to Memphis, Tennessee, where she arrived early that evening. A routine boiler inspection revealed another large crack, which required her to stay in Memphis until repairs could be made. Many soldiers went ashore and visited local taverns to pass the time. A drink and a leisurely stroll didn't seem like a bad idea; the battle-worn soldiers wouldn't be able to go ashore again until they reached Cairo, Illinois. Meanwhile, over 200 more passengers boarded the Sultana, many of them women and children.

Crewmembers wound up the boiler repairs by 11 P.M., and the soldiers who had gone ashore earlier began returning to the vessel – a few were lucky enough to be left behind. At midnight, Captain J.C. Mason, the Sultana's 34-year-old master and part owner, gave the engine room a “steam up” order and sounded her whistle. The overstressed Sultana hissed, heaved, and chugged off into the darkness.

Flooding in the Midwest had made the river's current much stronger than usual, and the Sultana – so weighted down with passengers that she could hardly move – would be plying against the current. It would require a great deal of steam pressure to maintain her forward progression. She also would lose considerable time because a thick layer of fog had settled on the river after a late-evening downpour. A treacherous voyage lay ahead for the Sultana and her 2,400 weary passengers.

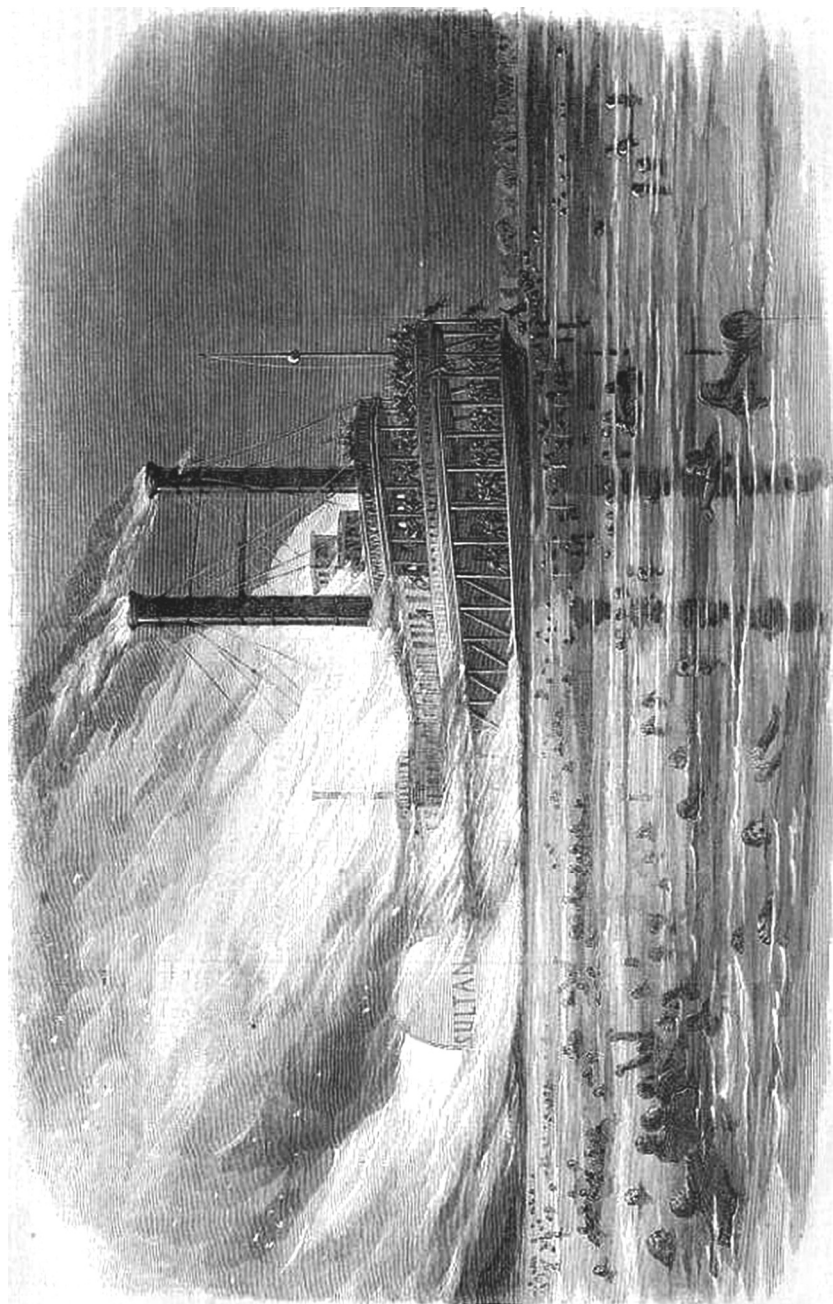
The lack of space aboard the overcrowded Sultana made it difficult for passengers to settle in for the

evening. The wealthier passengers had staterooms to sleep in, but the soldiers were forced to make do with the outer decks. Children slept on the main deck, near the boiler room, because the warm air from the boilers and the slow, repetitious straining of the engines helped put them to sleep. Almost every mother and child on board the Sultana that morning slept near the boiler room.

Navigating through heavy fog and laboring against the swift current, the Sultana had been underway for only two hours when she passed “The Chicken and Hens,” a small cluster of islands just seven miles north of Memphis. It was 2 A.M.; the coal oil streetlights back in Memphis had long since faded, and nothing but the dark, winding Mississippi River lay ahead. An eerie silence befell the Sultana as she plied through the dead of night, her passengers fast asleep.

Suddenly, a strong blast sent passengers flying over the deck rails and into the river. Some were killed by the impact of the blast; others suffered broken limbs and tried to stay afloat, but their badly injured bodies were no match for the river’s fierce current. Their agonizing screams quickly turned into gurgling and choking sounds. A ghastly chorus of shrill, gut-wrenching screams came from the boiler room, which had become a stew of burning wood and melted steel.

Another blast jolted the Sultana one minute later, hurling a mixture of red-hot coals and burning bodies into the river. Fire began spreading rampantly. Chaos and panic ensued. The remaining passengers rushed frantically to the outer decks to avoid being consumed by smoke. Many had severe injuries and couldn’t move quickly enough; they were helped along by other passengers, in some cases. Others weren’t so lucky. In minutes, the Sultana had become a floating inferno of burning wood, melting steel, and charred human carnage, drifting aimlessly in the dead of night.



Several passengers jumped overboard and clung to floating driftwood, but the chilly water temperature brought on hypothermia. These would-be survivors were found five miles downstream the next morning, frozen to the driftwood they had hoped would save their lives. By daybreak, the once luxurious and dependable Sultana had been reduced to a bed of ashes; only 500 of her 2,400 passengers survived.

Authorities at Memphis saw the bright glow in the night sky and formed a search party. Searchers found survivors along the riverbanks and took them to a Memphis hospital, where many later died from burn complications. Identifying bodies recovered from the river proved difficult because many victims were either burned beyond recognition or severely disfigured by the blasts. Other bodies had become entangled in submerged brush; wild animals found them when the floodwaters receded two months later.

The Sultana disaster claimed almost 2,000 lives, yet the tragedy received little news coverage. It's likely that the disaster was overshadowed by other newsworthy events of the period, such as Lee's surrender to Grant on April 9th, Abraham Lincoln's assassination on April 14th, and the capture of John Wilkes Booth on April 26th. However, the spiritual residue left behind by the Sultana tragedy has never been overshadowed; the disaster site is a treasure trove of supernatural activity that can be seen, heard, and even felt.

Always changing its course, the mighty Mississippi River now flows three miles east of the disaster site. The Sultana's remains rest twenty feet below a soybean field in Arkansas.

For years, tugboat captains on the Mississippi River have reported seeing a yellowish-orange mist glowing high above the field, usually late at night or in the early morning hours. The glow, which appears randomly and

sometimes lasts until daybreak, resembles the glow emitted by a fire.

On a spring night in the late 1980's, a group of four local paranormal investigators set out to study the mysterious glow and investigate changes in temperature at the disaster site. Their investigation was based on the premise that a significant change in temperature would indicate the presence of a heat source nearby.

Proving the existence of a heat source would help to debunk a popular theory that suggests the glowing mist comes from airborne luminescent chemicals. The investigators would document the temperature at the disaster site and remote sites, and then try to match their data to the timeframe in which the glow appeared. An average of the temperature readings taken at remote sites nearby would form the baseline.

A marked increase in temperature at the disaster site when the glow is present would suggest that the glow is related to a heat source as opposed to luminescent chemicals in the air.

The investigators first spotted the eerie glow when they came within a mile of the disaster site. They stopped their vehicle at that point and began their investigation. Equipped with an outdoor thermometer, a pedometer, and a walkie-talkie, two investigators walked toward the disaster site while the other investigators remained in the vehicle. When they reached the disaster site, they didn't see the glowing mist or anything out of the ordinary, but the field seemed much warmer than the area around it. Their thermometer registered a balmy eighty-six degrees.

They walked a half mile away from the disaster site and checked the temperature again. Their thermometer registered fifty-nine degrees, which was consistent with the local weather forecast. They radioed the other investigators, who checked the temperature at their

location a mile away. Their thermometer, too, registered fifty-nine degrees. Oddly enough, they could see the glowing mist looming over the disaster site. From their vantage point, it had been visible the entire time they were there.

The most important observation made by the investigators – even more important than the change in temperature – was the glowing mist. From a mile away, one team observed the glowing mist in the sky above the disaster site. At the same time, however, the team stationed *at* the disaster site saw nothing in the sky. Although data suggest the presence of a heat source, its origin essentially remains a mystery. However, some believe the mysterious heat is of a supernatural origin.

Paranormal researchers feel that the glowing mist and warm temperature at the disaster site are evidence of a *residual haunting* in which lingering spiritual residue forces the disaster to replay itself. Evidence of a residual haunting taking place at the site isn't limited to unusually warm temperatures and a fiery glow in the night sky, however. For years, people have heard ghostly sounds and seen horrific apparitions at the disaster site.

Men hunting raccoons in the nearby woods late at night have heard cries, choking, gasping, and other deathly sounds coming from the disaster site. Interestingly, these ghostly sounds are usually heard when the glowing mist appears above the field. The combination of intense heat, a fiery glow, and scores of people fighting to stay alive describes perfectly the Sultana disaster. The disaster also has a sequel, which replays itself a few hours later.

People driving near the disaster site just after daybreak have seen disfigured human-like apparitions walking about the field and occasionally sifting through the dirt. Clad in period clothing, the figures fade into the early morning fog after a few minutes. Paranormal

researchers have theorized that the figures are ghosts of Sultana victims trying to find, and perhaps dig up, their lost belongings.

With so many years having passed, it's nearly impossible for one to understand the pain and agony felt by those who perished in the Sultana tragedy. The spiritual residue left behind is perhaps the best indicator of what those 1,900 men, women, and children felt that dreadful morning; the residual haunting will always remind us.

It is disheartening to know that the disaster site, with all of its gruesome sounds and ghastly apparitions, is but a subtle reminder of a tragedy so big that it claimed more lives than the Titanic disaster, yet because of little news coverage, it will remain a mere footnote in the annals of American history.

❧ FOURTEEN ❧

The McRaven House

*H*OME TO NEARLY A DOZEN SPIRITS, THE MCRAVEN House in Vicksburg, Mississippi is reputed to be the state's most haunted house. Over the years, countless people have reported seeing apparitions, hearing voices, and being shoved while walking inside the house or on its grounds.

The McRaven house was built over time, in three distinct phases. The first part of McRaven was built in 1797 by Andrew Glass, and consisted of a kitchen with a bedroom above it. Known as the "Pioneer Section," this part of the house is intact today and furnished with period furniture.

In its early years, McRaven served as a way station for pioneers traveling the Natchez Trace, a footpath that connected Nashville, Tennessee with the Mississippi River. In the early 1830's, McRaven became a way station on the Trail of Tears, a migration path used to forcefully relocate 15,000 Cherokees from their homes in the East to the Oklahoma desert.

In 1836, Stephen Howard bought the house and added a dining room and a middle bedroom. In August



of that year, Howard's wife, Mary Elizabeth, died in the middle bedroom while giving birth. A misty female apparition now occupies the corner of the room. Although very frightening at first sight, the apparition is harmless; it disappears after about five seconds. Mary Elizabeth Howard's deathbed still exists, as does her wedding shawl. The wedding shawl reportedly gives off so much heat that people can't hold it for long. The lamp next to Mary Elizabeth's deathbed allegedly turns itself on and off.

In 1849, John Bobb purchased the house and added a hallway, a flying wing staircase, a parlor, a dressing room, and a master bedroom. Although the flying wing staircase wasn't there during Mary Elizabeth Howard's lifetime, her ghost took an instant liking to it. Visitors have reported seeing her apparition – the same apparition that haunts the middle bedroom – standing at the top of the staircase.

The McRaven House served as a Confederate field

hospital and campsite during the Siege of Vicksburg in 1863. The house undoubtedly saw its share of mortally wounded soldiers agonizing for days and sometimes weeks before their misery ended. The number of Civil War soldiers actually buried at McRaven is unknown, but visitors have seen Confederate soldiers wandering about the grounds on many occasions.

The most prominent Civil War ghost at McRaven is that of Captain James McPherson, a Vicksburg resident who left town at the war's onset to join the Union Army. McPherson was an aide to Colonel J.H. Wilson, the officer put in charge of Vicksburg after its fall in July 1863. Because of McPherson's close ties to the area, Wilson made him the official liaison between the Union Army and the residents of Vicksburg.

Despite his having close ties to the area, McPherson was disliked among the residents. They saw him as a traitor, a local boy who ran away and fought for the enemy. McPherson disappeared late one night after making rounds. Union Army scouts searched for him the next morning but found nothing. The next day, he was declared missing.

Two weeks later, Colonel Wilson, while sleeping at the McRaven House, rolled over in his bed and spotted a blood-soaked Captain McPherson sitting in the rocking chair across the room. Struggling to breathe, McPherson said a group of angry residents had killed him and disposed of his corpse in the Mississippi River. The apparition vanished before Colonel Wilson could regain his composure.

The apparition would return eventually, and stay for eternity. Wearing a Union Army uniform and sporting a bullet hole in his forehead, the ghost of Captain McPherson roams the grounds at McRaven by day and haunts the streets of Vicksburg by night.

Not long after Vicksburg fell to Union forces, John

Bobb saw a group of Union soldiers picking flowers from his garden on McRaven's front lawn. He darted outside and ordered them to leave. The angry soldiers stomped and crushed the remaining flowers, then began cursing him. Bobb hurled a brick, striking a soldier in the head. The soldiers left but vowed revenge.

Bobb reported the incident to General Henry Slocum, who promised to discipline the soldiers responsible. When Bobb returned to McRaven, 25 Union soldiers met him at the front gate. The vengeful soldiers dragged him to a nearby pond and shot him in the head.

John Bobb's ghost often appears in a room just off McRaven's main foyer, watching from a distance as visitors enter the house. People have also witnessed a ghostly figure walking along the edge of the pond where Bobb was murdered. Having seen John Bobb depicted in a painting, most witnesses agree that both apparitions are indeed him. Some theorize that he is watching over the foyer and nearby pond in hopes of seeing his killers and getting revenge on them.

Little is known about McRaven's ownership during the period of reconstruction that followed the Civil War. John Bobb, who had owned McRaven in the years leading up to the war, was murdered in 1863. The next owner was William Murray, who bought the house for his family in 1882.

Five members of the Murray family died at McRaven, the last of whom was William Murray's daughter, Ella, who lived by herself for many years. A recluse, she rarely communicated with anyone but her doctor; she allegedly burned furniture to heat the place. She died in 1960.

The ghost of William Murray often stands atop the flying wing staircase and greets visitors. The ghosts of Murray's wife and daughters allegedly roam the grounds early in the morning and late in the afternoon. One

visitor reported seeing Ella Murray standing by the stove in the kitchen.

In 1961, McRaven was sold to the Bradway family, who restored the aging structure and opened it to the public. The Bradway's – who didn't actually live in the house – occasionally received late-night phone calls about the lights being on at McRaven. Oddly, the lights were turned off when the house closed each afternoon. In one case, a caller reported seeing human figures walking around inside the house after the lights came on mysteriously. It was 2 A.M. and no one but the Bradway's, who had been sleeping for hours, had keys to the place.

In 1984, Leyland French purchased McRaven and made further restorations. French encountered William Murray's ghost on the staircase one night and became frightened, although he knew it wouldn't hurt him. After a second encounter with Murray's ghost, in which a desk drawer shut on his hand, he asked a local priest to bless the house. The paranormal activity subsided for a short time after the priest's visit, but returned in full force.

In 1999, parapsychologists William Roll and Andrew Nichols, both professors at the State University of West Georgia, came to McRaven to investigate. Armed with a vast array of field instruments, the professors carefully analyzed the numerous electromagnetic fields present in and around the house.

The fields, they say, break down filtering mechanisms in the brain and allow us to perceive a level of reality that's there all the time, even when we don't think it's there. Hence, the longer one lives around such fields, the more sensitive they become to a higher level of reality.

Roll and Nichols discovered a very powerful energy field at McRaven, which allegedly comes from a natural source underneath the house. They likened McRaven to

a “storage battery,” where people enter the house or take a walk on the grounds and expose themselves to the energy, which in turn breaks down their filtering mechanisms and facilitates an encounter with the paranormal.

McRaven’s dark and bloody history makes it the most haunted house in Mississippi. With so much ghostly activity reported over the years, and so much energy on the property, McRaven may very well be the most haunted house in all of Dixie.

❧ APPENDIX ❧

THE RESOURCE TABLES ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES contain driving directions and web addresses related to the stories in this book.

Every well-known legend, folktale, and ghost story has many different – and often conflicting – versions. Read the different web resources and decide which version you like the best. The web sites appear as a courtesy, and their being listed doesn't imply an endorsement. Each web address was functional at the time of publication.

Driving directions are provided for those wanting to see the locations mentioned in this book. The author wishes to make it clear that entering any location without proper permission is illegal, and that he does not promote, encourage, or condone any kind of illegal activity.

Furthermore, some of the locations are unsafe. Dress for safety, use your common sense, and watch for hazards. Checking out allegedly haunted locations is a lot more fun when you are legal and safe.

~ ALABAMA ~
Sloss Furnaces

Web Sites

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sloss_Furnaces

<http://facstaff.uwa.edu/ab/sloss.htm>

<http://www.frightfurnace.com/main.asp>

Getting There

Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark
Twenty 32nd Street North
Birmingham, AL 35222
Phone: (205) 324-1911

~ ALABAMA ~
Cedarhurst Mansion

Web Sites

<http://www.realhaunts.com/united-states/sally-carter/>

<http://facstaff.uwa.edu/ab/Cedarhurst.htm>

<http://www.unsolvedmysteries.com/usm42048.html>

Getting There

Cedarhurst is now a gated community at the corner of Whitehurst and Northampton.

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