Things go bump in the night at historic home

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Waldorf, MD - The historic home will be framed in early evening light, illuminated inside and out for The Dr. Samuel Mudd House Museum’s 14th annual Victorian Christmas Celebration Sunday, Dec. 6.

One might expect to see the ghost of John Wilkes Booth or Dr. Samuel Mudd, the physician who set the broken leg of President Abraham Lincoln’s assassin April 15, 1865, unaware at the time that his patient had just committed one of the most horrific crimes in American History.

Indeed, docents at the Dr. Samuel Mudd House Museum will tell you there are ghosts who roam the hallways of the historic Charles County home, and Booth, they say, may be one of them.

“We know there are several ghosts in the house,” one docent suggested. “One is a little girl. A paranormal investigator who toured the house told us that there are a lot more than we are aware of,” she said.

One volunteer recounted standing in the doorway of a small room off the back porch one day when someone tugged on his coat.

“I apologized for standing in their way,” he said, adding that even as he begged forgiveness for blocking the passageway, he became keenly aware that he was the only person anywhere around.

The real ghosts of the Dr. Samuel Mudd House Museum are not ephemeral. Artifacts and art original to the home more than adequately tell the story of the tumultuous Civil War-era structure where this small dark chapter of American History will ever be told.

Contrary to what some have asserted, Dr. Samuel Mudd was not an innocent victim of a happenstance visit in the weeks following the bloody conclusion of the War Between the States. He was a known Confederate sympathizer and slaveholder. He had met Booth on at least two previous occasions and the year before the war’s end, Booth spent the night at Mudd’s house after purchasing a “one-eyed nag” from a neighbor.

Booth was considered to be “the handsomest man in Washington,” whose mother was of Portuguese descent. Booth’s father abandoned a wife and son in England and came to America where he wedded again. Booth had his mother’s dark curly hair and eyebrows which curled as well.

“He had it all,” a docent remarked.

When he showed up at 4 o’clock in the morning April 15, 1865 with Booth co-conspirator David Herold, Booth’s leg, broken when he leaped from the balcony at Ford’s Theater, was so swollen from the 30-mile ride to Mudd’s home, the physician had to cut the boot off.

“He just tossed it away,” the docent noted.

That boot was to prove a crucial piece of evidence when Union soldiers later showed up at the home.

Mudd’s wife innocently said a man had shown up with a broken leg which her husband had treated, saying, “Here is the boot right here.”

The bloody boot had Booth’s name inscribed inside the leather, and the tumultuous story of Dr. Samuel Mudd’s emergence into history began there.

Mudd went into town to procure a carriage in which to transport Booth. It was at this point in the tale where Mudd learns of Lincoln’s assassination.

In the ensuing trial, Mudd denied having ever met Booth before he showed up at his door. That statement came back to haunt him when it was revealed during the trial that the physician was “well acquainted” with the assassin.

“He missed hanging by one vote,” according to a docent.

Mudd was sentenced to life in prison at Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas in Florida. In 1867, an outbreak of yellow fever at the prison killed the physician, so Mudd stepped in and his work may have ultimately helped procure his early release after three years and eight months.

Some pieces of furniture Mudd constructed while in prison were obtained by the museum and are on display there, including a checkerboard table.

Docents are proud to point out that Mudd’s descendants continue to live all around the property. Across the road from the historic home are many houses of the physician’s great-grandchildren who live there to this day.

With its astonishing history, there is nothing quite as compelling as the Mudd House with its unique artifacts, many of which were there when Booth made his ill-fated ride to and from Charles County.

In the bedroom where Booth’s broken leg was mended, a painting by Mudd’s wife Sarah hangs over the mantelpiece, just as it did in 1865.

Pointing out the exquisite work, one docent noted, “This is the girl that knows all the secrets.”

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