

Top 10 Haunted Lighthouses

Even ghosts seem to love these majestic coastal beacons.

Text by Steve Millburg and Mamie Walling

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(Photo: Gayle Christopher)

1. Owls Head Light, Owls Head, Maine
Owls Head Park, open year-round, provides lovely views of Penobscot Bay. The pretty little lighthouse and keeper's residence are part of the park but not accessible, though that doesn't prevent a ghost from trespassing. The 3-year-old daughter of previous keepers once awakened her parents and announced, "Fog's rolling in! Time to put the foghorn on!" They discovered she had an "imaginary friend" who resembled an old sea captain. Current residents recognize his footprints in the snow and welcome his services—polished brass and frugally lowered thermostats; 207/941-4014 or lighthouse.cc/owls. In nearby Rockland, Maine Lighthouse Museum displays the country's largest collection of Fresnel lenses; 207/594-3301 or mainelighthousemuseum.com.

2. Port Boca Grande Lighthouse, Gasparilla Island, Florida

This lighthouse and the assistant keeper's dwelling stand on a sunny Gulf of Mexico beach near Fort Myers. A museum in the lighthouse building and the surrounding Gasparilla Island State Park make the island's southern tip a nice place to visit—by day. By night, as one worker put it, one might encounter "some things that are a little bit weird." A young girl, presumably the ghost of a keeper's daughter who died in the building, can be heard giggling and playing upstairs. More ominously, the headless body of Josefa, a Spanish princess decapitated by a pirate, wanders the sand; 941/964-0060 or barrierislandparksociety.org.

3. St. Simons Island Light, St. Simons Island, Georgia

Above the waves at this quiet beachfront on the southern tip of St. Simons Island, you may still hear the echoes of a decades-old killing. In 1880, an argument between head keeper Frederick Osborne and assistant John Stevens ended with a fatal gunshot. John, never charged in the case, continued to tend the light. But legend says he often heard the accusing sound of Frederick's footsteps at night in the vacant tower. Over the years, many others have claimed to hear the footfalls. The tower invites climbing the 129-step spiral staircase—if you dare; 912/638-4666 or saintsimonslighthouse.org.

4. Point Sur Lightstation, Big Sur, California

Who wouldn't want to linger at such a lovely location? Maybe that explains the gentleman in the 19th-century keeper's uniform seen inside the visitors center. Point Sur's beacon has shone since 1889 atop a massive volcanic rock just offshore in the amazingly scenic Big Sur area. Non-spectral beings can visit during scheduled tours—weekends year-round, plus Wednesdays April–October, and Thursdays July–August. For the most deliciously spooky atmosphere, take a "moonlight tour," which finishes the 2006 season October 6–7; 831/625-4419 or pointsur.org.

5. Big Bay Point Light, Big Bay, Michigan

Here on the north shore of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, William Prior, who became this station's inaugural keeper in 1896, finally may have given up his duties. Surveying Lake Superior from atop a 60-foot bluff, the light station now operates as a romantic bed-and-breakfast with fireplaces, a sauna, even spa services. William, dead these past 105 years, apparently still insisted on "helping"—until innkeeper Linda Gamble angrily told him off when his slamming of kitchen cabinet doors awakened her one night a few years ago. Neither William nor the other five resident ghosts have been heard from since. Well, so far, anyway; 906/345-9957 or bigbaylighthouse.com.

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(Photo: Gayle Christopher)

6. St. Augustine Light, St. Augustine, Florida

The scent of cigar smoke is sometimes detectable in the oil-house building. Records show no fatal oil-house explosions, but any ghost who smokes around flammable liquids must not be the brightest bulb in the U.S. Lighthouse Service. Tour guides claim to hear someone climbing the tower steps, but the footfalls fade away, and no one appears at the top of the tower. This lighthouse's collection of spirits also apparently includes a prankish girl in the keeper's dwelling, a tall man in the basement,

and a merchandise-disturbing poltergeist in the gift shop. The St. Augustine Lighthouse & Museum doesn't exactly encourage these spooky speculations, but its Web site does at least acknowledge their existence. It also provides a factual history of the seven people known to have died on the lighthouse grounds; 904/829-0745 or staugustinelighthouse.com.

7. Battery Point Light, Crescent City, California

The lighthouse sits near downtown on a little peninsula (or, if the tide's in, on a little island; one should plan carefully unless one wishes to swim back to shore). Perhaps the resident phantom feels safe here, since the sturdy building with the light on top survived the 1964 tsunami that destroyed much of Crescent City. The spirit seems playful, setting a rocking chair in motion and moving a caretaker's bedroom slippers in the middle of the night. However, the caretakers' cats react warily to its presence. Slippers, cats ... could it be the ghost of a dog? The lighthouse is open Wednesday-Sunday, April through September. During the off-season, visitors can wander the grounds; 707/464-3089 or delnortehistory.org/lighthouse.

8. Heceta Head Light, Yachats, Oregon

Rue (such a perfect name for a ghost!) doesn't like changes. She's been blamed for setting off a fire alarm and moving random objects during work on the keeper's house, which is now a bed-and-breakfast. Overall, though, the "Gray Lady" (so nicknamed because of her sometimes-wispy appearance) comes across as rather benign. She supposedly manifested herself to one worker in the attic, scaring him badly. He refused to re-enter the room, even to clean up the glass from a window he broke while working outside. Another worker investigated and found the glass swept into a neat pile; 866/547-3696 or hecetalighthouse.com.

9. Point Lookout Light, Scotland, Maryland

Aficionados of the paranormal consider this the most haunted lighthouse in America. Male and female apparitions materialize and then vanish. Doors open and close without visible reason. People hear voices, footsteps, even snoring, but no one is there. So why does it rank only ninth? Because the beam at this modest, house-style structure went dark more than 40 years ago. A lighthouse without its light appears so forlorn. Then again, a hospital and a prison camp for Confederate soldiers existed here during the Civil War, so perhaps an unlit lighthouse represents an appropriate memorial to such a mournful heritage. Today, visitors enjoy the much more pleasant surroundings of a state park; 301/872-5688 or dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/southern/pointlookout.html.

10. White River Light, Whitehall, Michigan

One ghost here apparently likes to help with the dusting. Oh, that we all could be so haunted! This Great Lakes lighthouse was deactivated in 1960, though its lens remains in the museum that now inhabits the limestone tower and keeper's quarters. Captain William Robinson, the light's first keeper, served for 47 years and died in the building. Some think the mysterious pacing sounds heard upstairs indicate that he still tends his beloved lighthouse. Meanwhile, the museum curator reports that if she leaves a dust rag near a certain display case, she returns to find the rag moved and the case dusted. The supernatural suspect: William's wife, Sarah. The museum is open June-October, and by appointment during the other months; 231/894-8265 or whiteriverlightstation.org.