

The Ghost of Government House?

It was, indeed, an unusually warm, dark, and stormy night at Government House on Thursday, February 10, 1870. Reverdy Johnson, 84, a former attorney general of the United States and close friend and ally of President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, was a guest of Governor John Lee Carroll. He had come to Annapolis to argue a case in the State House before the Court of Appeals. Governor Carroll invited Mr. Johnson to stay at Government House.



In those days the house did not look as it does now. It was a big, dark, brick mansion, more like one of those houses you would think of as a ghost house on Halloween than the home of Maryland's governor. It had only recently (1870) been completed as the governor's residence. The old Governor's Mansion had been sold to the Navy as the residence for the Naval Academy Superintendent after the Civil War when the Naval Academy came back to Annapolis from Rhode Island.

Governor Carroll told a newspaper what happened that dark night of Mr. Johnson's visit:

Mr. Johnson came to town last night to argue a case in the Court of Appeals ... By invitation he came to my house, as I told him I could make him more comfortable here than he could be elsewhere. Today I invited [the Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals] and six or eight other gentlemen to meet Mr. Johnson at dinner. We dined at half-past five o'clock. He enjoyed his dinner very much; was agreeable as usual, talked, laughed and told anecdotes. We were talking about Madeira wine after dinner, and Mr. Johnson took one glass, but not more. He turned and said, "Governor, will you take me into the parlor?" I said, "Certainly, Mr. Johnson; let me take you in." So he took my arm and walked into the parlor and sat down on a sofa. I said, "Mr. Johnson, I think we will have coffee brought in here." He replied, "If you want to smoke I will remain here." I said, very well, we will join you in a few moments." I then returned to the gentlemen and sat down. I felt very uneasy about my guest being alone, and said, "Gentlemen, suppose we go in and join Mr. Johnson." His son-in-law, Mr. Charles G. Kerr, who had come in after he left the table, said "he always takes a nap after dinner, and I presume he has gone to sleep." I then dismissed it from my mind, and we went on talking, when a servant appeared, calling me out, said "Mr. Johnson is lying in the yard." This was about 8:15 p.m. o'clock and we went out and found him lying there apparently dead.



The room from which Mr. Johnson fell was probably what is now the Victorian Parlor. No one really knows what happened to Mr. Johnson and how he came to fall into what is now the parking yard of Government House. But, as you can see, the house had floor to ceiling windows that would have been easy to walk through and fall to the ground.

So, if there is a ghost of Government House, it is probably that of poor Reverdy Johnson, who walks the grounds at night, protecting the residents within and, if you listen carefully, you might hear him practicing his arguments that he intended to use before the court in the State House the following day.

*As told to William O'Malley by
The Maryland State Archivist
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