



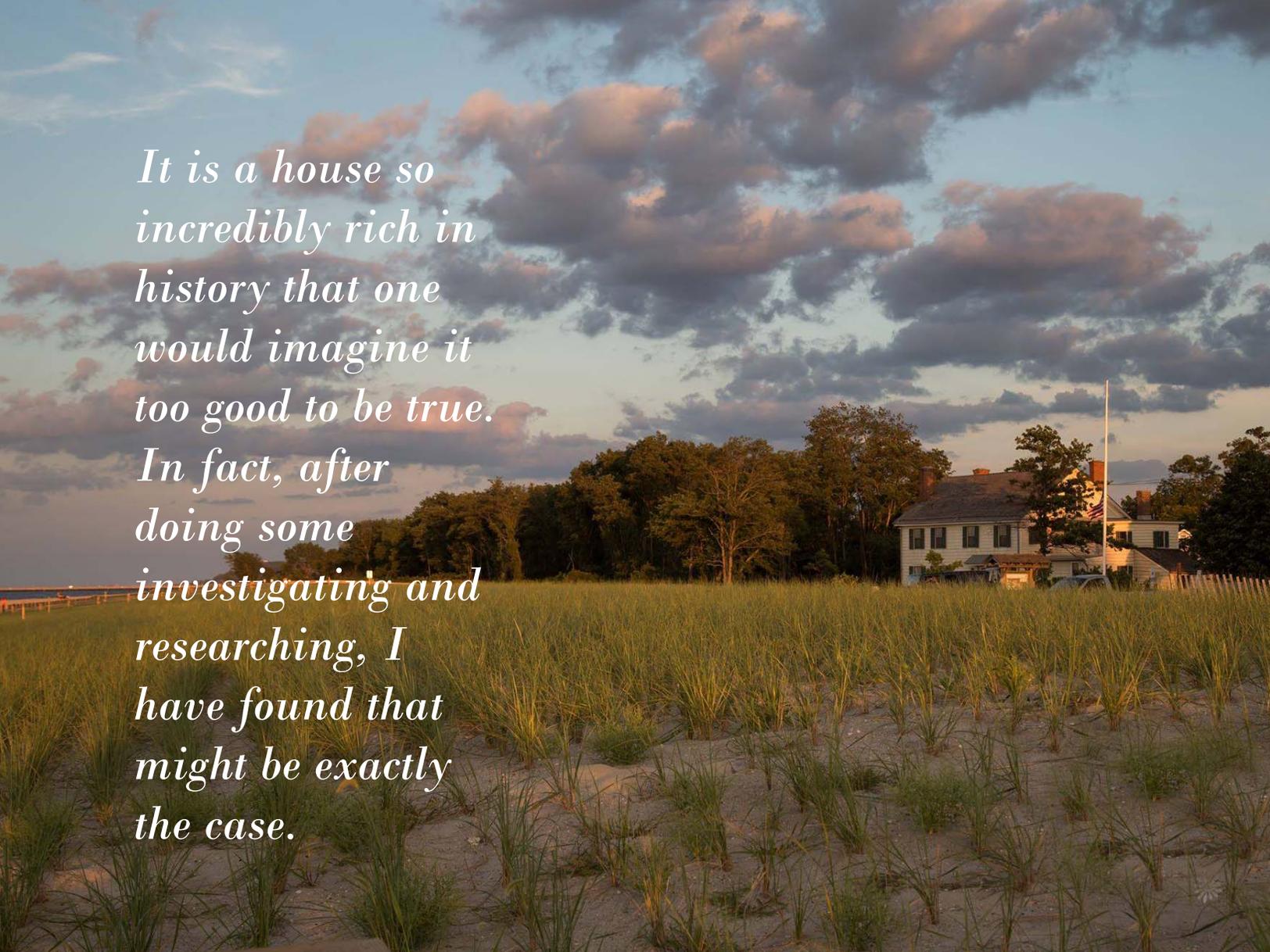
The Invented History of Port Monmouth's "Spy House"

Image: Carly Vena

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There is an old saying that goes, "When legend becomes fact, print the legend." That is exactly what the late Gertrude Neidlinger, former curator of the Spy House Museum in Port Monmouth, did during her time from the 1970s through the 90s, only she went one step further: she did not just print the legend, she made it up entirely.



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Image: Carly Vena

There might not be a more alluring and mysterious house in all of New Jersey than the humble little establishment that rests close to the beach overlooking New York City on what was once known as Shoal Harbor. It is a building historically known as the Seabrook-Wilson House (after the two families that made it their residence during its history), and more affectionately by folklorists and locals, as the "Spy House." There are many different myths and legends surrounding it which have been cultivated over the last few decades. It is a house so incredibly rich in history that one would imagine it too good to be true. In fact, after doing some investigating and researching, I have found that might be exactly the case.

Look online and you will find some outlandish stories. Psychics and paranormal investigators claim it to be the most haunted house in the Garden State, possibly even the country. Stories of ghosts will no-doubt abound in any "old"

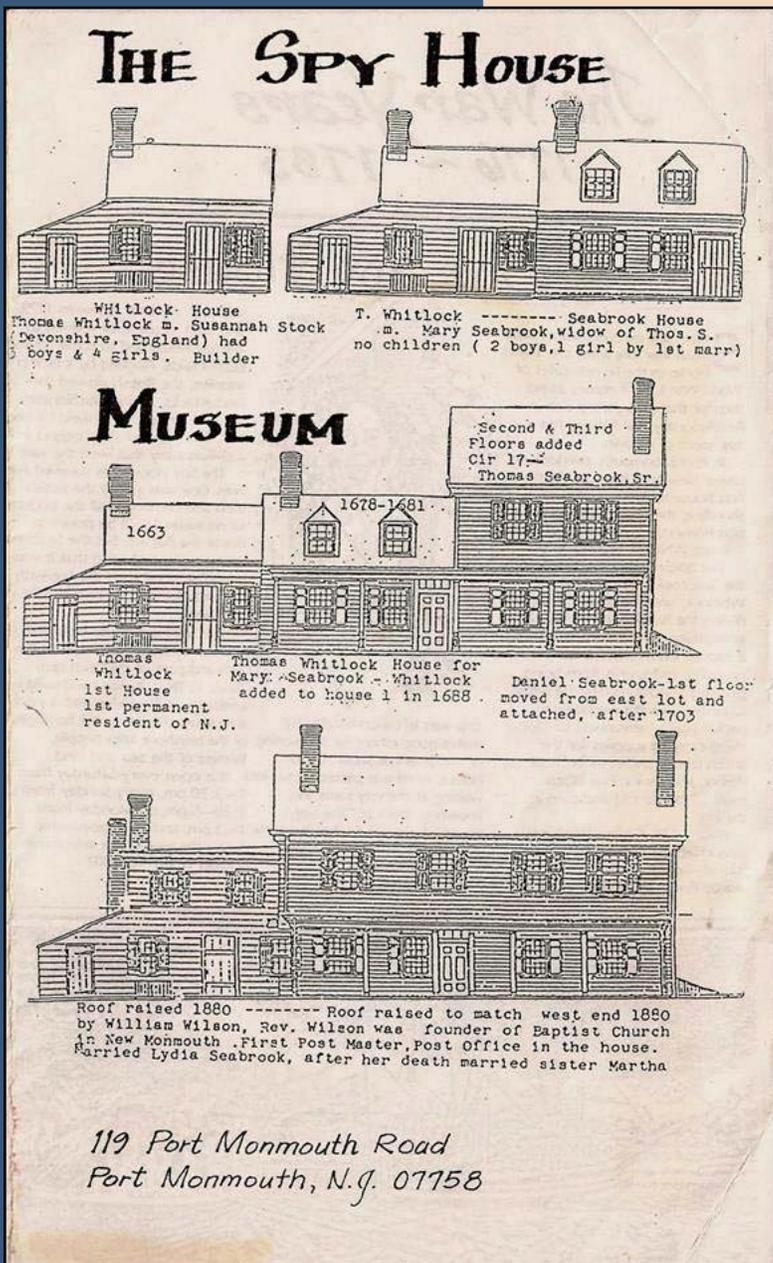
house, but it is not these which get my attention or damage the credibility of the site as a historical location. As a paranormal investigator myself, I love a good ghost story, but part of my job is to debunk any falsehoods that might come up along the way. My journey through the fact and fiction of the Spy House inadvertently took me a step further. The house may indeed be haunted, but it is the history itself which I must call into question, because the facts simply do not add up.

Even the most ardent believer in the paranormal or enthusiast of folklore will be blown away by what they hear coming out of this single location. Pirates, spies, Indians, a small Revolutionary War battle fought on the property, an evil sea captain, murders and dead bodies in the basement, secret passageways, a solemn widow doomed to haunt one of the upstairs rooms because her husband never returned from sea, and ghosts of children haunting the front lawn and nearby woods are just a few pieces of what you might find.

Much like a game of telephone spiraling out of control, the internet can sometimes be useless when it comes to debunking the paranormal and folklore. Everyone has an opinion of the Spy House. This goes both ways. There are a decent number of people who wish the source of these stories never existed because it damaged the credibility for all eternity, but there are far more who think it actually helped keep the house from slipping into oblivion (and/or the wrecking ball) and provide for a "fun" atmosphere. No matter which side you take—and there are solid arguments for both—there are certain

items which cannot be ignored or even debated.

The entire popular history of this location stems from one person, the previously mentioned caretaker who we will just refer to as Gertrude. She became curator of the house-turned-museum sometime in the 1970s or early 80s, as far as I can tell. She then turned it into a local history museum, with a seafaring theme aimed at educating the people of Middletown, of which Port Monmouth is a part. While the house is old, and has no doubt had a wide range of owners, some of whom probably with personalities more colorful



The evolution of "The Spy House" from a pamphlet prepared by Gertrude Neidlinger.

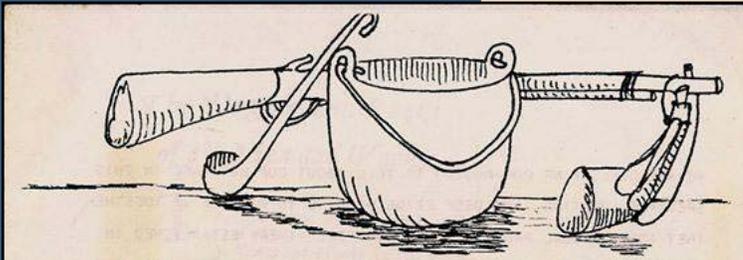
Source: The Author

than the others, that apparently was not enough for Gertrude. After giving a lecture at the location in 2014 titled, "Haunted History," one of the visitors stayed in contact with me. She sent several scanned documents to me which was in her family pertaining to the Spy House from the 1980s. They were the actual pamphlets and guest literature drawn up and typed by Gertrude herself. That became my starting point in trying to identify what exactly is fact and fiction in this surprisingly small and unassuming house.

All I needed was a tiny bit of research, to fill a few slides for my lecture presentation, but what I ended up getting was a full-blown collection of information that I originally did not know what to do with. As a folklorist, it appeals to the nostalgia in me to believe that the many yarns Gertrude spun were at least *based in truth*, even though they seemed so far-fetched. Of the many stories you might read is that of Thomas Whitlock building the house in any number of years (Gertrude stated in her pamphlet to visitors that the date of construction was 1663; although other records show he came to the area between 1664 and 1668). That date is certainly attractive to different people for different reasons—history buffs would see it as a shining relic worthy of a visit, while those disinterested in history could ponder, "Wow! That's really old!"—but Gertrude had to go a step further and claim Whitlock was the first permanent resident, not just in Monmouth County or Middletown, but the entire colony of New Jersey itself.

She wanted something unique and special, and who was there to question her?

The house had always been there, and truly was old, so it stands to reason that it must have been built by the first New Jersey resident. That was the first lie, as both the County of Monmouth and National Register of Historic Places confirms the house, or the oldest section of it (more on that later) was built in 1720, and a Thomas Whitlock is not mentioned anywhere. The house is still a relic, but when something so simple and relatively tame such as a date of construction is tweaked, the rest of the history must also be called into question.



THE SPY HOUSE MUSEUM COMPLEX IS A LEARNING CENTER OF MANY PERIODS, BECAUSE THE WHITLOCK AND SEABROOK FAMILIES LIVED HERE FOR MORE THAN 250 YEARS. THOMAS WHITLOCK CAME, IN 1648, TO LOOK OVER THE LAND, WITH FRIENDS, WHO WERE SEEKING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, WHICH THE DUTCH ON LONG ISLAND REFUSED TO GRANT THE ENGLISH. AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS OF CAMPING, SCOUTING, AND MAKING MAPS OF THE UNKNOWN RIVERS AND NECKS OF LAND, THE ENGLISHMEN BOUGHT IT FROM THE INDIANS. THOMAS WHITLOCK WAS THE FIRST PERMANENT RESIDENT OF NEW JERSEY. OUR ON-GOING EVOLUTION RESTORATION, MUSEUM STAFF AND TOUR-BY-TAPES, HELP OUR VISITORS LEARN ABOUT THE EARLY SETTLERS AND THE INDIANS, HOW THEY BUILT THEIR HOUSES, COOKED, DID THE LAUNDRY, SLEPT, PRESERVED THEIR FOOD AND CREATED A SETTLEMENT. THE WATERMAN TRADES ARE THE HERITAGE OF THE BAYSHORE. THE COLLECTIONS ON LOAN ARE FROM THE BAYSHORE FAMILIES WITH SIGNS TO EXPLAIN THEIR USE. STUDENTS ARE BROUGHT FOR TOURS WHICH GIVES THEM THE OPPORTUNITY TO RELATE WITH THE PAST AND THE HERITAGE OF THE AREA BY TOUCHING, FEELING AND SEEING THE CRAFTS OF MAN. THE FINE OLD HOME TELLS THE STORY AND HISTORY OF OUR BAYSHORE PEOPLE. INSIDE AND OUT, IT IS A RECORD OF THE WAY PEOPLE LIVED WHEN OUR NATION WAS YOUNG. THIS MUSEUM OFFERS A SPECIAL TYPE OF CULTURAL ENRICHMENT THAT BUILDS THE MIND AND ENLARGES OUR CAPACITY TO APPRECIATE PAST GENERATIONS. THIS IS OUR INTRODUCTION TO THE FINE WORKMANSHIP FROM THE 1663 CABIN END ON THE WEST, TO THE CENTER PORTION BUILT BETWEEN 1676 AND 1680 AND THE EAST SECTION, DANIEL'S HOUSE, BUILT BETWEEN 1695 AND 1698, WHICH HE MOVED OVER AND ATTACHED TO HIS MOTHER'S HOME SOON AFTER 1703. HERE IS OUR PIONEER INDIVIDUALITY, THE BEGINNING OF NATIVE CRAFTSMANSHIP IDENTIFYING WITH AMERICAN CULTURES.

A history of "The Spy House" from a pamphlet prepared by Gertrude Neidlinger.

Source: The Author

There are reasons for the vast confusion, though, because the house has undergone several restorations over the centuries. The original structure was nothing but a small cabin (the lower section on the left side, if you are facing it from the front looking towards the water) and more sections of the house were added on in years to come by other owners. There appears to have been three major alterations (again, according to the literature): the first doubled the size from left to right, the second tripled it, and the third added a second floor that stretched over the two newest additions, leaving the original cabin area intact. Gertrude's pamphlet dates are wrong every step of the way. The final addition was completed in 1896, her figure shows 1880.

However, as annoying as it is to confuse simple dates, I cannot quibble with that as much as I can the actual history. This is where the journey really begins. The first legend, according to a 1988 issue of *Coast Magazine*, which ran a profile of Gertrude and the museum, noted that the house was built atop the grave of the fierce American Indian chief named Popamora. The chief did exist and some landmarks in the region even bear his name, but there is no evidence to suggest that he lived or was buried in the area where the Spy House currently sits. Research shows that he would have been located a little further south, in the Atlantic Highlands, Highlands, and Navesink areas of Monmouth County.

Just like you would see in the movies, the building of this site upon an alleged Indian burial ground was the catalyst for hauntings, which was then accelerated by the spirit of an "evil" sea captain. Websites and this magazine article both mention a pirate captain (it can range between the two famous figures of piracy on the eastern seaboard, William Kidd and Henry Morgan) who used to raid the New York Harbor area, and then stash the dead bodies of the people the captain murdered in the basement. Since this raiding would have occurred in the 1600s, that legend is nixed as well because both Kidd and Morgan were dead by 1701 and the house was not around for almost another 20 years. In any event, the house in question at this particular time would have been little more than a simple cabin with no basement or cellar to speak of. Other basement related stories include a secret passageway or tunnel system that ran from the house to the water. When excavations were made by archaeologists in the 1990s, it was shown that this tunnel was nothing more than a plumbing and sewer system.

Of course, the most famous stories regarding the house relate to the American Revolution and the moniker of the

COAST
Mystery

Above inset: The Spy House Museum in Port Monmouth holds a variety of antiques, from farm tools to children's toys. The exhibits sometimes seem alive with the presence of those who once used them daily.

Right: Curator Gertrude Neidlinger, dressed in appropriate historical dress, stands before the centuries-old museum. Psychics have said the museum contains twenty-four ghosts.

From an evil sea captain to a legendary Indian chief, this Port Monmouth museum is said to contain a variety of ghostly visitors.

The Spirits of the

By Rich Youmans

If the Smithsonian museums in Washington are thought of as the country's attic space, then the Spy House Museum could be the Smithsonian of the Shore. The centuries-old Port Monmouth house contains a potpourri of antiques, everything from furniture to farm tools, and the combination infuses the building with an almost palpable sense of history. The exhibits seem alive with the presence of those who once used them as a part of daily life.

Walk through the front door, into what used to be the public room of a tavern during the Revolution, and you come across the heating unit of old, an iron parlor stove. Through a doorway to the right, the marine museum contains old fish pound nets and a large fossil retrieved from the ocean floor that dates back sixty-five million years, and whose surface contains imprints of crustaceans that scientists still cannot identify. On the wall of a back room hang old wooden farm tools such as a barley fork and a hand hay drag, a precursor to the rake. Upstairs, scattered among several bedrooms, are old quilts, a spinning wheel, and an assortment of antique beds and furniture.

Each visitor no doubt comes away with a favorite exhibit, from the original portion of the house that dates back to 1663 to a tunnel through which early settlers hid from both Indians and British soldiers. But to some, the most interesting exhibit is the mannequin.

The mannequin sits in a back bedroom, on a rocker that dates back over a century. A red and black paisley shawl covers its torso, and a white bonnet is tied over its straw-colored hair. Its hands are broken off, and its legs have been removed, but the mannequin still looks life-like. To many psychics, it is alive.

"We had two psychics come in here about two years ago," says Gertrude Neidlinger, the museum's founder and curator. They went upstairs, and a few moments later one came down again and asked if anyone named Lee or Li had ever lived here." It was only until Neidlinger was accompanying the

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Article in the 1988 issue of *Coast Magazine* profiling the house and its legends.

Source: The Author

Without Gertrude, there is no flamboyant history. Without her, there are very few ghosts and legends. Could this woman be responsible for singularly creating a history out of thin air?

"Spy House." According to Gertrude, patriot spies would use the house as a meeting place to spy on British ships entering and exiting New York Harbor, and then relay that information to Washington. It makes perfect sense, considering we know how extensive Washington's spy rings were, and prominent in New York and New Jersey. Other variations include the house serving as a tavern where British officers would meet and the innkeeper would attempt to get them drunk so he could get information out of them. There is no record which shows the house serving as a tavern at that time, therefore that version can be debunked, but the other does at least have some credence to it. Or at least it would seem.

Throughout my research, I have noticed that there was spying done on British ships in New York Harbor from the Port Monmouth area, just not from that house. It would have been done on Garrett's Hill, which may not even exist today. The exact location of the spying appears to be lost. From atop the hill, and not from inside a small cabin, is where the spying would have occurred. This was confirmed to me when I met a member of the group who forced Gertrude out of the Spy House and helped transfer control to the county in the early 2000s. She informed me that the part of the house that would have been standing at the time did not even have any back windows facing the water. This means if you were inside the house, you could not see the harbor at all. It would not make much sense to stand on the beach with a spyglass, if one wanted to remain unseen, so we can then conclude that no spying was done from the location at all. This source, who I cannot name, then went on to confirm to me that everything was made up, all of it coming from one place: Gertrude Neidlinger.

Without Gertrude, there is no flamboyant history. Without her, there are very few ghosts and legends. Could this woman be responsible for singularly creating a history out of thin air? "She was an actress," my source told me, "a very good actress." She had to be really good to completely fool generations of people for many years. But is it really that simple? Everything she made up, did have basis in truth, it just did not have a connection to that particular house.

Popamora, the Indian chief, was a real person, and his tribal land, at one point, stretched from Keansburg to the Navesink River. Pirates really did raid New York Harbor, though much of the specific information has been lost to history. There is a Revolutionary War tie-in, only it is something as simple as one of the owners just happening to have fought in the war. Lastly, it is possible there was spying done in the area, just not from the house. Everything she

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said did make sense, and was locally relevant. All of these people and events happening to converge on this small house is but mere fantasy, and these stories will never die, no matter how concretely they are debunked. It will always contribute to the aura and mystique of the Spy House.

"She made everything up. There were no Indians, no pirates, no spies," I was told, much to my dismay. If there was, in all likelihood, the house would have been known as the Spy House before Gertrude became the curator. Like everything else, she is the be all and end all—without her, there is nothing but an old building. And as for the ghosts, which is how the house gains most of its notoriety today, my source was friends with a woman who owned the building before Gertrude took over. She noted that in decades of residence there, she never had one paranormal experience—and she was a believer in ghosts. There is hope, though, as she added, "Don't count it out as not being haunted. It probably is haunted, just not to the severity everyone thinks."

The beginning of the end came for Gertrude in the late 1990s, after reports came out of strange goings-on. She would hold candlelit séances with psychics and visitors, and even let children from the neighborhood spend the night in the house as a sort of ghostly challenge, all without any supervision and candles allowed to burn brightly. Upon her removal, in an unprecedented lawsuit which rocked the local museum community, Gertrude sued for the artifacts and items inside the house, and won. She passed away shortly after. Still, even with this invented history, Gertrude did manage to accomplish one thing: she saved the building. While her alterations to history have made a frenzy for historians, perhaps without her stories, the old house would be gone, replaced by high-rise apartments in a very attractive area.

Today, the building operates strictly as an environmental center, where talks about ghosts, pirates, and spies are few and far-between. In February of 2014, I became the first person since Gertrude to be allowed to talk about ghosts within the walls, as part of a Haunted New Jersey lecture series I have developed. We later conducted an actual investigation, where we did not find any outstanding evidence. Towards the end of the presentation, I had just a few slides about the Spy House, with most of the bullet points ending in question marks, pointing out the fine line between fact and fiction. Since that lecture, which sold out and was a huge success and quite an enjoyable experience, and subsequent presentations on the college level, I have actually learned more than I have informed. People from all over have been

The truth of the matter is the Spy House really is a fascinating place, owned by different families, and serving a number of uses over nearly 300 years.

kind enough to share documents and information with me that have made this research project possible.

Sometimes paranormal investigating spins you in different directions. We have to examine or call into question something that *is* of this earth, rather than something supernatural. In all honesty, finding out that nearly everything about the Spy House that has become its "Pop Culture" is false is very disappointing, but as an educator and historian, it is a necessary part of the job. An exposé like this certainly will not do much to quell the rampant legends that have sprung up thanks to the internet because there is a little something inside all of us that wants to believe in the mysterious. Or maybe it does not want to fathom something we have been told all of our lives has been made up. But that should not deter us from the ultimate goal, which is the truth.

Whenever I conduct a workshop with people on paranormal research, I always say that it is better to investigate a location and find absolutely nothing than to mistake something for being paranormal without properly vetting it or help perpetuate a falsehood. We must remain skeptical at heart. It might not be as interesting, but we can use moments like this as a learning experience. There can always be something gained, even if we think we have wasted our time or discover something we initially don't want to acknowledge.

The truth of the matter is the Spy House really is a fascinating place, owned by different families, and serving a number of uses over nearly 300 years. Its proximity to the shore, and its potential use as an environmental and cultural center should be celebrated, but that does not take away from the damage done by a very good actress and pseudo-historian. That is also part of the house's history. A blend of fact, fiction, and a little in-between that could hardly be matched by many other houses of the same age. There is a reason why my presentations are subtitled, "Fact or Fiction?" and this is one of them.

