



## HAUNTED HAMILTON GHOST WALKS & EVENTS

Feature Article - [www.hauntedhamilton.com/68\\_article\\_charlestonjail.html](http://www.hauntedhamilton.com/68_article_charlestonjail.html)

Main contact - [info@hauntedhamilton.com](mailto:info@hauntedhamilton.com)

---

### **The Charleston Jail – Charleston, South Carolina, USA**

*A Message for the Devil*

By [Dan Terry](#)

The weary traveler, wet and cold from the rain, saw the beacon of light in the windows of the Six Mile House. The storm would continue through the night, making the rest of his business trip to Charleston unpleasant if not dangerous. He only had a few miles to go, but the gathering darkness and blowing wind would make the trip seem like forty miles.

The businessman stopped at the famous Inn, where he was greeted by the beautiful Lavinia Fisher and her husband John. The inn keepers were well known in Charleston society, and he had met them before. Lavinia, with her slightly flirtatious smile and quick wit, made sure the tired traveler was fed and made comfortable while she entertained him with stories and asked questions about his business, all the time with the sly smile of an attractive 27 year old woman charming the middle age businessman.

Lavinia offered the gentleman a last cup of tea before retiring for the night. She quietly led him to his room, smiling over her shoulder as her husband, John, promised to check one more time on the guests stabled horse. As the wealthy man entered his room, he suddenly realized just how tired he was. He undressed in the dim light of the lamp, yawning, amazed at how he seemed to be getting more exhausted by the minute.

Blowing out the lamp, he nearly fell into the soft bed, covering himself with the huge quilt. As sleep came over him, he thought he heard some sort of scraping noise under the bed. “Probably mice...” was his last thought.

The powerful sedative Lavinia had put in the tea that night had done its job well. The man barely woke up when the trap door opened under the bed, dumping him into the pit below. The heavy club, wielded expertly by John Fisher, killed him before he truly realized what had happened. One more victim of the Six Mile House.

The local law enforcement had received many reports of missing persons, all believed to have been wealthy businessmen, traveling alone, and possibly last heading to the Fisher’s Inn. However, no evidence of wrong doing had ever been found, and John and Lavinia Fisher were well known and respected in the city of Charleston. Besides, missing people in this area in the years following the war of 1812 were hardly uncommon.

How the murders were uncovered remains a mystery. Some believe a member of the gang turned them in, another is that a guest was alerted by his dog, getting out of the bed just before the trap door was sprung. A third theory says a paranoid guest slept in a chair behind the door, concerned about the questions Lavinia asked concerning people waiting for him in Charleston and the amount of gold in his purse. But eventually they were caught, and the bodies found.

Again, reports vary from 30 to 300 bodies. The Fishers were held in the Charleston jail, which was also used as a prison. John Fisher was sentenced to death and hung. Lavinia wore her wedding dress to court, emphasizing her soft, womanly shape in hopes of leniency. The ploy failed, and Lavinia was sentenced to hang on February 18, 1820. While the newspaper reports of the time do not say, local legend has her last words as asking “ If you have a message for the Devil, give it to me. I am going to meet him.” Rumor also says that Lavinia jumped off the gallows rather than waiting for the trap door to spring.

But the messages may never have reached the Devil. Lavinia, still wearing the white wedding dress, is one of the spirits still roaming the grounds of the old Charleston jail, now the home of the American College of the Building Arts, and an exclusive tour stop for Bull Dog tours of Charleston.

Four acres of land was set aside in 1680 for city use. That square would start as a potter’s field, a term used for a graveyard for the poor and unclaimed. Eventually, it would serve as a hospital, a factory used to punish runaway slaves, and a jail, with construction on that gothic style building being completed in 1802 and used until 1939, when it was closed as unfit for human occupation. It originally had an additional floor and a two story tower, which was damaged during an earthquake in 1886.

The Fishers were not the only famous prisoners housed here. Denmark Vesey, a freed slave who attempted to form a slave revolt and take over the Charleston area, was held here with over 170 of his men accused of being part of the revolt. In 1822, Denmark Vesey and 66 others were convicted of inciting slave riots, and Vesey and 34 others were hung. As a result of the paranoia from this alleged revolt, all black seafarers were held in the prison until their ships left port.

Members of the famed 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first black unit to fight in battle during the Civil War and the subject of the movie “Glory”, were held here after being captured. Some 600 POW’s were held at the already overcrowded Charleston jail. Because they were black, no mention of what happened to the men of the 54th was ever found; whether they were executed or released is unknown.

The gallows stood in the courtyard until it was destroyed by Hurricane Hugo. The last execution in the old jail occurred in 1911. Daniel Duncan was a black man convicted of the murder of a white businessman because he was seen standing over the body found on a city street. The unique gallows system, which included a pulley system allowing the prisoner to stand on the ground, and heavy weights dropped into a five foot hole yanking the noose up instead of the traditional dropping from the platform, failed to break his neck. Duncan slowly strangled to death, taking 39 minutes before being declared dead. Evidence would later indicate he was innocent.

During the life of the prison, it would never see electricity, indoor plumbing, running water or glass in the windows except for the guards quarters. One torture device, called the Crane, used weights, pulleys and shackles to hold “problem” prisoners. At the nearby slaves market, where slaves sold vegetables, fish and meats, whatever was left at the end of the day, having sat in the hot Southern sun, was purchased at discount and fed to the prisoners. Inside it’s massive stone walls lived and died bootleggers, gangsters, pirates and murderers, and debtors.

On the same grounds, a workhouse was set up for runaway or trouble making slaves. Unlike popular fiction, most slaves were not whipped, tortured or mutilated because of the great cost in purchasing and training a human servant. Instead, owners would sent their problem slaves to this workhouse, where they would learn the error of their ways with hard work and discipline. Slaves were often worked to death or beaten to death in an attempt to break their spirit. In 1856, three slaves were accused of poisoning a child, and all three were burned at the stake. However, these were the exception rather than the rule.

Ginger Williams is a local expert on the jail. Ginger is a guide with Bulldog Tours, who has several historical and ghost tours of Charleston, including exclusive tours of the Charleston Jail. And, Ginger has been doing research on the jail at the library and historical archives.

In January of 2007, she was walking a tour group past a cell when Ginger saw a frightening sight. A dark skull with red rings of light in it's eyes leaned out of the cell, looked directly at Ginger, and went back inside. Since no one else responded, she attempted to shrug off the vision and continued out the door. Once outside, a member of the tour asked her if she saw that thing in the cell, adding " It looked like a skull!". His description matched exactly what Ginger believed she had seen.

One employee of the local housing authority, who had jurisdiction over the old jail prior to it's sale, reported having a iron bar door close on him when he was the only one in the building. He discovered the old style pad lock, which had been rusted shut, had somehow locked itself on the latch, effectively imprisoning him.

After tearing the wood from the old windows, he managed to get enough of a signal to call his office. Believing he was joking because everyone knew the old locks were rusted shut, the guard was forced to threaten to call the police before they would send someone to assist. Finally, a locksmith was called in. The locksmith said he could break the lock, but demanded to know how he got in, also insisting that this lock had been rusted shut for years.

In October of 2006, Ginger accompanied Haunting Evidence star Patrick Burns on an investigation with several contest winners. Ginger reported that when Burns asked for sign, a cell door leaning against the wall, made of solid iron and weighing over 100 lbs, moved by itself scratching the stone wall behind it.

Other incidents include a woman on a tour getting sick, saying there was "something horrible" inside one of the cells, and a guide hearing a door slam three times after a tour. Of the near 40 employees of Bulldog Tours, only about six will do the tours of the old jail.

In the corner of one hallway sits an old style wheelchair. The guides report that the dust on the seat is disturbed, even though no one ever sits there. Shadow people are seen along with Lavinia Fisher, still in her wedding dress, who has been sighted multiple times by visitors. The office has a photo of what appears to be a woman in a wedding dress walking up a stairway inside the old prison, translucent and apparently hovering above the steps.

According to Ginger Williams, she and other guides have been touched and grabbed. One spirit, nicknamed "the pervert", seems to enjoy copping a feel on the female ghost

guides. Many of them have been scratched, and one woman on a tour, feeling as if she had been grabbed, discovered a large, red spot on her body. At one point, a door swung shut, but even though it was unlocked it refused to open for the men pushing on it. Finally, two large men pushing got it open, finding no one inside the room. However, they could see their breath in the room even though the night air was very warm.

No trip to Charleston, South Carolina would be complete without a tour of the historical and haunted old Jail. But unless you think Hell has a revolving door, forget any message to the Devil. After 200 years, Lavinia still hasn't delivered.

*Dan Terry is a published author*

*Which includes Haunted Times Magazines*

*Visit his website :: [www.spookstalker.com](http://www.spookstalker.com)*