

## Around Louisiana: Baton Rouge/Plantation Country

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### QUIRKY PLACES

#### **Hush, hush, sweet haunted**

When Kevin Kelly purchased Houmas House Plantation, he stripped it of the bland white Americanization that a former owner had imposed upon it. In the Creole tradition of its original early-19th-century owners, Kelly lavished the beautiful old place with splendid color and major renovations befitting a River Road plantation jewel. In paranormal circles, it is common knowledge that renovations on an old house cause heretofore-dormant spirits to float out of the woodwork. And it was on the curved staircase that an electrician first saw her descending — a little girl between 5 and 7 years old, with dark hair and eyes, wearing a blue dress. Through the years since Houmas House re-opened to visitors, this petite fille has been seen numerous times as a solid body apparition by staff and visitors alike.

Ghost hunter Fiona Broome and her husband were overnight guests of Kelly's. Broome was in an upstairs room that had been used as a nursery when she looked into an antique mirror. Reflected in the mirror, as though she stood behind her against a bookcase, was a little girl with dark eyes and what Broome described as dark blonde hair that hung in ringlets. The little girl seemed happy, wore a blue silk dress with a scooped neck and stood shyly concealing one of her arms. Broome turned to greet the child only to find no one there. She turned back to the mirror, and the child's reflection was still clearly in the glass, but no child stood behind her. The reflection faded. Broome described the child to her host but didn't mention that the child seemed to be hiding her arm. Kelly responded by telling her that the little girl is often seen by witnesses who describe her as having one arm that is deformed.

Broome's supernatural adventures were not finished when the reflection faded in the mirror. Late in the day, she stood on the balcony of the plantation, looking down a walkway that led to an iron gate, which was believed to be the original entrance to the grounds. The shadows were long, and the day was dying, and Broome felt her skin begin to crawl. Pacing up and down by the gate was a blackman, at least 7 feet tall, rail-thin and completely translucent. Riveted, she watched him pace until he disappeared. Again she recounted this incident to Kelly, who quickly showed her an ancient photograph of an unknown black man long gone from this world. It was the man who had paced at the gate.

Broome emphatically states that Houmas House was the most active haunting she has ever experienced.

If you really want to see something otherworldly, Broome advises, take one of the later tours, when a mist colored by tawny autumn sunsets might be drifting in from either the Mississippi River — or the other side.

LOUISIANA GROWN  
**The gentlemen oaks**

Before the Great Flood of 1927, a most venerable set of giant oak trees progressed in a stately line from the grand lawn of Houmas House Plantation. The trees reached from the house to the batture and stood gazing at the water on the banks of the Mississippi. In the 1800s, owner John Burnside dubbed them "The Gentlemen" because of their erect, proud bearing that seemed to genteelly bid all welcome. Come hell or high water, as it frequently did, The Gentlemen never lost their manners and stood by their ancestral home. The land they guarded so well had once belonged to the Houmas Indians.

Through the tragic auspices of the Flood of 1927 and the Depression that soon followed, this battalion of oak trees began to diminish in number. Levee construction began in earnest, and as the levees rose, more of The Gentlemen fell, cut down by saws.

The family graveyard, where the body of a little girl was buried, dsappeared completely, swept into the river, all because of the construction of the levees.

Hoping to profit from the demise of The Gentlemen, 16 levee laborers hatched a scheme to float the mighty trees down to New Orleans and sell them for milling. The men climbed onto the trees as though they were horses to be ridden and floated away downriver. In the river's bend near the plantation, all 16 drowned, their bodies never found.

A week later, on the morning after the workmen finished cutting down the last tree, the plantation's caretaker and his wife awakened to a horrible sight. Overnight, the last remaining eight Gentlemen had morphed from their proud beauty. They stood unrecognizable in the cool autumn air, frozen in gargoyle hideousness, all twisted into still lives conveying horror, grief and agony. The levee engineers attributed the phenomenon to construction trauma and water table change; the caretakers and Houmas Indians are certain the vengeful spirits of the 16 dead profiteers caused it when they possessed the trees and stamped them with their own ugliness.

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