

The History of Hotel Roanoke, Part 3: Phantoms in the Ballroom

Description

Article by Katherine Hunnicutt

From Moomaw's ambitious midnight ride in 1881 that put Roanoke on the map, to the glamorous hotel that survived fire and the Depression to host celebrities and society elite alike, the history of this year's VLTA Convention location is nothing short of fascinating. And when a storied history stretches well over a century, it's not surprising when the past reaches out to touch the present.

Like many other historic hotels, Hotel Roanoke has picked up a few permanent guests over the years. While neighboring establishments in the city boast darker, tragic legends, our Grand Old Lady hosts a much more genteel collection of spirits. Let's explore the eerie, unexplained, and delightfully spooky side of Roanoke's favorite landmark.

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Figure 1: Hotel Roanoke, 110 Shenandoah Avenue, Roanoke, Roanoke (Independent City), VA. date unknown. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. In the public domain.

The Woman in Red

The late-night quiet settles over the upper hallways of the Hotel Roanoke, the thick carpets muffling the sounds of the sleeping building. Under the warm, dim glow of the corridor sconces, a figure emerges from the shadows—an older woman dressed entirely in a striking, floor-length crimson gown. She moves with a slow, deliberate grace, perhaps returning to her room after a late evening gala. A night-shift employee spots her standing near a heavy wooden door, but as they step closer to offer a polite greeting, the air suddenly drops in temperature. An eerie stillness presses against the employee's chest, forcing a deep breath to push down the sudden spike of anxiety. Before they can speak, the woman simply dissolves into the paneled wall, leaving behind only the faint, echoing sound of phantom footsteps fading down the empty hall.

The legend of the Woman in Red is one of the hotel's most enduring—and quietly whispered—ghost stories. Shared primarily among locals, former employees, and the late-night staff,

this spirit is said to be an older woman who frequently vacationed at the grand resort in the early 1900s. According to local lore and online comment threads, she passed away peacefully in her sleep in one of the guest rooms during one of her visits. Rather than moving on, her spirit found such deep comfort in the hotel's hospitality that she chose to make her stay permanent. Witnesses consistently report hearing the rustle of heavy fabric and distinct footsteps before catching a fleeting glimpse of her red dress retreating around a corner (@rodrigkn, 2019).

As you settle in for the VLTA Convention, you will no doubt enjoy all the modern comforts of the hotel, but the past is never truly forgotten. When you step off the elevator late at night and walk down the quiet, winding hallways to your room, take a glance over your shoulder—you just might catch a fleeting glimpse of crimson slipping around the corner.

The Haunted Elevators

The glow of the lobby chandeliers had been dimmed for hours when the silence of the front desk was shattered by the shrill ring of the telephone. The night clerk answered, only to hear the panicked, echoing sobs of a woman pleading for help because she was trapped inside a stalled elevator car. He immediately pulled up the console to locate her, but his blood ran cold when he traced the blinking light. The frantic call was originating from a rusted, sealed-off elevator shaft that had been completely abandoned and out of commission for years.

This terrifying legend of a phantom caller is a staple among housekeepers and midnight IT workers, with new hires sometimes even warned about it during orientation, according to former staff sharing their experiences on Reddit. This strange mechanical activity is backed by even older lore that caught the attention of the late John Reiley, known for more than fifty years as the "Ghost Buster of Roanoke". According to Haunted Roanoke by L.B. Taylor, Jr., Reiley was called in to investigate the historic property when it was closed for five years for renovations. During this time, staffers told him that one of the elevators would mysteriously start up entirely on its own every single morning and rise directly to the fifth floor (@rodrigkn, 2019; Taylor, 2013).

Whether it's the residual energy investigated by the famous "Ghost Buster" or a restless spirit forever waiting for the doors to open, you might want to think twice before riding alone to the upper floors late at night—especially if your room happens to be on the fifth floor.



Figure 2: “Saturday Night at Hotel Roanoke” (September 24, 2018). Retrieved from WikiCommons. In the public domain.

Cold Chills in the Ballroom

The grand crystal chandeliers of the ballroom dim slightly as the final notes of a waltz echo into the cavernous space. Near the heavy velvet curtains, a sudden, icy breeze sweeps across the polished dance floor, causing guests to shiver. In a shadowy corner, an elegantly dressed woman stands perfectly still, her eyes fixed on the now empty stage. As an onlooker approaches to offer her champagne, she neither turns her head nor speaks. In the blink of an eye, the space is empty, leaving only a chill where she stood.

The Grand Ballroom is considered one of the most ornate spaces in Hotel Roanoke, making it a natural epicenter for paranormal activity. Throughout history, this room served as the region’s social heartbeat, hosting everything from Miss Virginia pageants to unique cattle auctions and patriotic USO dances during World War II (Piedmont, 2020). Given the sheer volume of celebrations held within these walls, it is unsurprising that some guests might stick around for one last dance. According to Patrick McCormick’s article “The Ghosts of the Hotel Roanoke,” attendees at formal events have spotted shadowy figures moving quietly along the walls or lingering near expansive windows, disappearing completely when approached. One eerie encounter involves a couple who spotted a woman in vintage evening wear standing alone; when they walked over to introduce themselves, she vanished into thin air (McCormick, 2024).

Another common phenomenon reported in this event space is the presence of intense, unexplained cold spots. The combination of these localized chills and the recurring appearance of a vanishing woman has led many to speculate that the ballroom is home to a lingering performer or a devoted

former guest (McCormick, 2024).

Keep an eye out for sudden cold spots this convention season. If you spot an unusually dressed attendee standing quietly in the corner, say a friendly hello. Just don't be surprised if she vanishes before introducing herself.

The Woman in Black: A Roanoke Legend

The midnight air was biting as a prominent merchant hurried down a deserted Roanoke street. Sudden, almost noiseless footsteps directly behind him shattered the quiet. He quickened his pace, but his pursuer gained on him with an effortless glide. Before he could turn, a low, musical voice asked, "Where do you turn off?" Startled, he answered, only to feel a hand rest heavily upon his shoulder. He tried to shake it off, but the grip was unyielding. "You are not the first married man I have seen to his home this night," she whispered. She escorted the terrified man all the way into his front yard. As he finally reached his door and dared to glance back, the beautiful phantom masked in black had completely vanished (Taylor, 2019, ch. 1).

This chilling encounter, which includes the phantom's actual spoken words to a prominent merchant as reported in the March 18, 1902 article by the *Times*, was not an isolated incident during a brief, terrifying month. According to Haunted Roanoke, the legendary Woman in Black struck terror into the city's residents. Witnesses described a breathtakingly beautiful entity, standing nearly five feet ten inches tall in a long black raglan cloak. She wore a dark turban wrapped tightly around her face to form a perfect mask, leaving only her huge eyes visible. Materializing as if rising out of the earth, she targeted married men walking along Roanoke's streets late at night. As reported by the *Times* article, when she called a local telegraph operator and a porter by their actual names, the men sprinted home in panic. After causing similar panics in Bristol and Bluefield, the phantom vanished. Locals theorized she was a betrayed wife's restless spirit, returning to ensure wayward husbands avoided late-night temptations.

As you enjoy your evenings in downtown Roanoke, keep a close eye on the shadows. And walk briskly—you never know when the Woman in Black might decide to personally escort you back to your room.



Figure 3: “Roanoke City (Virginia) from Mill Mountain Star at Dusk” (October 27, 2011). Retrieved from WikiCommons. In the public domain.

Whether you are a skeptic or a true believer in the supernatural, the delightfully spooky history of the Hotel Roanoke adds a thrilling layer to this year’s VLTA Convention. If these stories of charming phantoms and vanishing ballroom dancers have sparked your curiosity, the adventure doesn’t have to stop at the hotel lobby! Step out on one of Roanoke’s walking ghost tours to uncover even more of downtown’s haunted heritage. Or simply keep your eyes peeled- you might just meet the infamous Woman in Black yourself.

No matter how you spend your free time during this year’s convention, don’t forget to say hello to the locals, both past and present.

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