

# ready to rent



## Their Old Haunting Grounds

Does your rental have you spooked? Don't be so quick to blame ghosts

### Roommates

Chris, Celina and Naomi thought they had found the perfect place: an inexpensive row-house in Alexandria, just outside the Beltway. "We loved it here at first," Celina says. "It's the perfect size, and we have a little backyard for the dogs, and a little deck."

But after a series of spooky events, the three longtime friends have decided to break their lease and move out after just five months.

"We aren't the type of people who believe in ghosts, and we hate moving," Chris says. "I just want to get a good night's sleep," Celina says.

The trouble started this summer, when Chris found a pan full of water in a cupboard. "It was completely full, to the brim," he recalls. His roommates were equally mystified, so they conducted some

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DANIEL FISHEL (FOR EXPRESS)

plus

Ready to Rent's listings directory makes finding a new place easy.

# Haunted Rentals

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experiments: pouring water on the countertop to see if it dribbled through, looking for leaky pipes.

“We’re all pretty logical thinkers,” Celina says. “We thought there had to be a rational explanation.”

None of their experiments, however, reproduced the odd phenomenon. Then, a week later, it happened again.

“We all kind of accused each other at first,” Celina says. “We are all big fans of scary movies.”

The three no longer watch scary movies, Naomi says, because their real life got even spookier. The roommates, who commute together to and from work, got home one afternoon to find all of their kitchen cabinets and cupboards wide open.

## nextweek

Local apartments' fitness programs are fitting the bill for many busy residents. Learn more in next week's issue of Ready to Rent.

“We thought, OK, someone is getting into our house,” Chris says.

Chris contacted the rental company, and it said it would not rekey their locks but that Chris could do it himself, at his own expense, he says. So he did.

Unfortunately, it didn't stop the spook. These days, the trio has become used to coming home to find all their cabinets ajar, and they try not to get scared when they hear banging in their house at all hours of the night. Still, they have trouble sleeping and are anxious to move out.

Experiences like theirs aren't unusual, says psychologist James Houran, editor of the academic textbook “Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives.”

“Surveys have consistently shown that, in the general population, about 10 percent of people report having seen a ghost or apparition at some point in their lives,” he says.

The visions can almost always be explained as a combination of psychological and physical phe-

# De-Haunt Your Space

Need to rid your rental of spooks? You've got many options besides moving out.

## Psychologists suggest you:

- ▶ **Move your clock radio.** Sleeping next to electronics can excite the brain's temporal lobe, causing uncanny feelings and experiences.
- ▶ **Educate yourself.** Read ghost stories — specifically the ones where investigators find mundane explanations for spooky phenomena.
- ▶ **Visit a sleep clinic.** Sleep disorders can cause people to have terrifying experiences, including hallucinations and the feeling that something evil is present.
- ▶ **Call a scientist.** If you want to find the roots of your own haunting, reach out to a local university's psychology department, says psychologist James Houran. They can put you in touch with other experts or suggest rational explanations to explore.

## Paranormal experts recommend you:

- ▶ **Tell the ghost to go away.** “Say in a loud, clear voice that this is your space and you want to be left alone,” says Jeannie Roman, a paranormal investigator based in Dumfries, Va.
- ▶ **Burn white sage.** The fragrant smoke and ash of burning sage is said to purify a space and drive away negative spirits, Roman says.
- ▶ **Sprinkle your apartment with holy water.** You can pick up water that's been blessed by a clergy member at many local churches, or tap into the protective rituals of your belief system, Roman says.
- ▶ **Take arguments outside.** Negative energy inside your home can feed a nasty spirit, Roman says. s.d.



## About Our Sources

Our sources asked us not to use their last names for fear of being sued by their landlord — a plausible scenario, says Joel Cohn, legislative director of the District of Columbia Office of the Tenant Advocate. “It's possible that renters could be successfully sued for damages if they publicize a haunting, thus making it harder for a property owner to later sell or rent the place,” he says. “But the owner would have to prove that the tenants intended to harm her business.” s.d.

nomena, he says. The people most likely to report seeing ghosts are, of course, people who believe in ghosts. They also tend to be people who have a “low tolerance for ambiguity,” Houran says. That means that, when faced with something they can't explain, their minds land on supernatural explanations.

“I'm not dismissing these experiences at all,” he says. “They are

real, and they have been experienced all over the world, across history and across different cultures.”

Many times, hauntings begin with uneven lighting or other ambiguous sensory experiences.

“Environments that give you a lot of ‘stop and go’ signals cause people to feel unsettled,” he says.

Sometimes, however, supernatural experiences point to actual physical hazards. High levels of electromagnetic energy can trigger visions of ghosts or the feeling of a spiritual presence by exciting the brain's temporal lobe, researchers have found. Getting bombarded with very low sound waves, known as infrasound, can also leave people feeling stressed and uneasy. And carbon monoxide can cause people to feel panicky and out of breath and even see flashing lights.

“If people start having weird experiences, rather than thinking of that as ghosts, they should think of it as a health concern,” Houran says. “Get your apartment checked out to make sure it's up to code.”

Sleep disorders are another common source of supernatural experiences — especially a phenomenon known as “sleep paralysis” where you become conscious before your body fully wakes up. The result is a terrifying feeling of not being able to move, sometimes accompanied by vivid hallucinations of terrifying creatures, scientists say.

Krystal Porras, founder of the Woodbridge, Va.-based group “3:33 a.m. Paranormal Research,” believes that these visions are often real.

“Here in Virginia, we are scattered with Civil War sites and Native American burial grounds, so we get a lot of haunted houses, but it's really the land that's haunted,” she says.

She and her colleagues, who perform free consultations and investigations, field about 16 phone calls a month — and renters get more than their fair share of ghosts, Porras says. The constant turnover of many people in a relatively small space is more likely to stir up supernatural activity, she says.

Though these spirits are often annoying, they are rarely out to harm you, Porras says.

“These things only have as much power over a person as you allow them to have power over you,” she says.

Chris, Celina and Naomi have tried taking both scientific and spiritual approaches to banishing their ghost. They've tried jumping on the floor to see if small tremors might explain the open cabinets, they've consulted with ghost hunters, burned sage and said prayers. Nothing worked, so the three are moving out at the end of the month.

“We are staying away from anything older-looking,” Celina says. “And anything with too many cabinets.

“A year ago if someone had told me they had ghosts in their apartment, I would have thought they were crazy,” Celina says. “But they are real, let me tell you.”

SADIE DINGFELDER (EXPRESS)

# Who Died In Your Home?

## History

In the nation's capital, where various degrees of stupid and scandalous always bookend the inspiring and historic, lots of people wish their old walls could talk.

Real estate history is a hot pursuit here, whether it means trawling Google or whirring through the microfiche archives to see your 1920 building permit.

The epicenter of this hobby? The D.C. Humanities Council's annual house history workshop (wdchumanities.org).

The sessions fill up right away with people clamoring for guidance in prowling the photo archives or the building permit database at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library downtown.

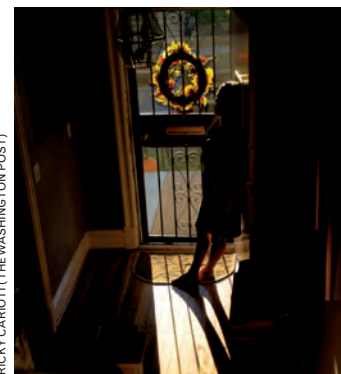
The unsentimental field guide in this pursuit is Brian Kraft, a fast-talking database guy who can help you find the permits on any building in the District.

“It's the birth certificate of the building,” he says.

Death is a popular theme in home-history research.

USA Today recently did a story on diedinhouse.com, a website that compiles public records to help you decide whether those noises you're hearing at night may actually be the guy who died in the basement.

“Yeah, that's the kind of information we do find,” says Bruce Yarnall, operations and grants manager for the city's Historic Preservation Office. “Doing historical research is like lifting up a rock.” PETULA DVORAK (THE WASHINGTON POST)



Caroline Levington attended a workshop to research her 1912 rowhouse.

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