

# Skene Manor 'ghost' lives on for some

Press-Republican

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The haunting of Skene Manor

The massive towers of Skene Manor loom over the village of Whitehall in Washington County. Some claim the stone structure is haunted by the ghost of Katharine Skene, wife of Revolutionary War hero Philip Skene. But are the claims fact or fantasy? (P-R staff photos by John Perritano)

**WHITEHALL** — This quiet Washington County village sits in the foreboding shadow of a rustic graystone structure, which some claim is occupied by unwanted visitors.

Skene Manor, which sits silently like a dark and gloomy medieval castle on Skene Mountain, has the reputation of being the village's only haunted house.

But, do ghosts and goblins rummage through the mansion-turned-restaurant wreaking havoc? Do things really go bump in the night at Skene Manor?

It depends on who's talking. Joel Murphy, the current owner of the restaurant, and his family have been living in Skene Manor for two years.

In all that time, Murphy says, he has never seen or come face-to-face with a ghost. However, he cautions, it doesn't mean they're not there.

"I can't rightly say that I've never seen any ghost," Murphy says with a slight chuckle. "Maybe she don't like me."

The "she" Murphy is referring to, is a one-time resident of the area, which, legend has it, floats through the mansion, doing whatever ghosts do.

### Ghost of Mrs. Skene

Her name is Katharine Skene, the wife of Philip Skene, British Army officer of the Revolutionary War and founder of Whitehall, originally called Skenesborough.

According to reports, Mrs. Skene's tomb is behind the bar, in the manor's taproom. The first owner of the restaurant claims he put Mrs. Skene's decomposed body in the crypt when he opened the business in the 1940s.

"Lots of people want to rip the rocks off" Skene's tomb, Murphy says.

He, however, has no intention of doing so. The grave is constructed out of garnet rock, and if the water is turned on, it can be converted into a little waterfall. A fake woman's hand, complete with red nail polish and jewelry, protrudes from the tomb, giving the restaurant's patrons a chilly welcome.

Mrs. Skene never lived in the manor. The mansion was constructed by New York State Supreme Court Justice Joseph Potter in the early to mid-1870s, more than a century after Mrs. Skene died.

Laborers were brought over from Italy to construct the three-story, granite building.

The structure, complete with mahogany panels, and Italian marble fireplaces, took three years to build.

"It was just a private home," Murphy says. "Potter had a wife. I think he built it for her. He must have been planning a very large family."

After several owners, the mansion was eventually taken over by a retired New York state trooper.

"He claims he found Mrs. Skene (in the basement of the manor), brought her upstairs and buried her in the taproom," Murphy says.

### Some are skeptical

Murphy is skeptical about this

story. He surmises the trooper was a good businessman who had a bit of Edgar Allen Poe in him, and fabricated the tale to attract attention.

The manor is a beautiful, eerie structure with stone walls and chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

There's one person in the village who doesn't believe in ghosts, at least not the one that supposedly resides in Skene Manor.

Village historian Doris Morton says Mrs. Skene's body was never found, and the supernatural yarn spun by the former restaurateur is not true.

Morton says that the original Skenesborough house where the Skenes lived, lies north of Skene Mountain. Mrs. Skene was originally from Ireland and died in the mid-1700s from asthma.

Her husband placed her corpse in a leaden coffin and buried it in his garden some distance away from the present-day Skene Manor.

In 1775, Morton says, Continental Army soldiers ransacked Skene's house and found the coffin in the garden. They opened the casket and looted the lead.

"The soldiers, of course, were guarding the house," Morton says. "One soldier ran in, all erratic, and said he saw Mrs. Skene's ghost in the garden."

Mrs. Skene's husband was a very influential man, Morton says, and the colonist wanted to diminish his reputation.

### Ghost story overplayed?

Morton is miffed over the undue attention Skene Manor receives because of its alleged ghost. She says the mansion and its reputation, overshadows historic Whitehall.

Skenesborough was the birthplace of the United States Navy, built by Benedict Arnold.

Skene Manor is on the National Register of Historic Places.



Fortress

Even from a distance, Skene Manor, atop Skene Mountain, dominates the Whitehall landscape. Stories claim Katherine Skene's leaden casket was dug up by soldiers from the Continental Army who looted the lead and re-buried her remains.

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## White-tail deer forum March 16

**TICONDEROGA** — On March 16 community leaders, hunters and representatives from the state Department of Environmental Conservation will meet at the Community Building to discuss deer problems in the Adirondack Mountains.

The 30th Annual Adirondack White Tail Deer Forum will give sportsmen, interested observers and DEC officials, a chance to exchange information and ideas to improve hunting and deer herd conditions.

Prior to 1956, little communica-

tion existed between the sportsmen and the DEC. In January 1956, Con Shaughnessy of Syracuse proposed and formed the annual deer forum.

Henry Williams, DEC commissioner, will be on hand. This year's forum will include for possible discussion: the proposed doe season in the Adirondack Mountains, DEC displays, discussion on Vermont hunters, the increasing deer herd, and an autopsy of a deer killed by dogs.

Other concerns of hunters will also be discussed.

The Ticonderoga Chamber of Commerce and the Ticonderoga Fish and Game Club, are hosting the event.

On March 15, there will be an open house at the Ticonderoga Fish and Game Club. There will be a free fish fry, a slide show, entertainment and a cash bar. The festivities begin at 8 p.m.

Registration is set for March 16 at 8 a.m. The DEC will present several topics for discussion at 8:30. A deer autopsy will be performed after lunch.

## Northern Tier happenings

### Evening retreat

**WEST CHAZY** — The Altar Rosary Society of St. Joseph's Church in West Chazy is planning an evening of recollection for women of the parish on Tuesday at the Regina Maria Retreat House in Plattsburgh. The event starts at 6:30 p.m. Dinner will be served.

### Parents' workshop

**CHAMPLAIN** — Eighth-grade students and their parents in the Northeastern Clinton Central School District have been asked to attend a Feb. 27 meeting to discuss ninth-grade course options.

At the meeting, to be conducted by the NCCS guidance department staff at 7 p.m. in the junior high lecture hall, the course options and what is required will be explained.

Next September's incoming ninth graders throughout New York state will be significantly affected by the new curriculum requirements mandated by the Regents Action Plan.

The NCCS guidance staff includes Thomas Greenwood, Diane B. Haight and Jeffery Ehrlich.

### Pulpwood sale

**BRANDON** — The Department of Environmental Conservation has 250 cords of roadside aspen pulpwood for sale, at the Deer River State Forest in the Franklin County town of Brandon.

The pulpwood will be produced continually until late summer. The material will be sold by competitive bid, deadline for which is Feb. 22. For more information contact senior forester Peter Grupe at DEC headquarters in Ray Brook, 891-1370.

### HSA meeting

**ELIZABETHTOWN** — The next local meeting of the Health Systems Agency will be Feb. 26 at 4 p.m. in the Elizabethtown Social Center. Maureen Nyilis will make a presentation on "Respite: Care Options for Families of the Frail Elderly."

Nyilis is project coordinator of the Coordinated Respite Care Project of the Capital District, which is monitored by the Foundation for Long Term Care in Albany.

The public may attend.

### Trout Unlimited

**MIDDLETOWN** — The New York State Council of Trout Unlimited will hold its 15th annual state forum March 29 and 30 at the Middletown Sheraton Inn.

Outdoor writers, fly-tyers, and conservationists will be presenting informational seminars and exhibits. Saturday's events will include a national conservation banquet and an auction.

More information is available by calling 914-986-7827 or 914-928-6465.

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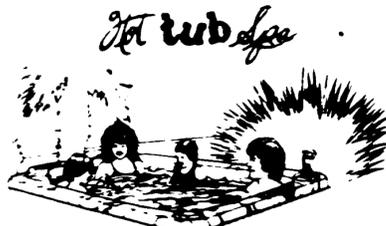
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