

# Chapter 15

## Inn at Aberdeen

3128 South State Road 2  
Valparaiso, Indiana 46385

Phone: 219-465-3753 Toll Free: 866-761-3753 Fax: 219-465-9227

Email: [inn@innataberdeen.com](mailto:inn@innataberdeen.com)

Website: <http://www.innataberdeen.com/>

## History

The Kankakee River Basin of which the inn and surrounding lands are a part has been a region respected for its bountiful harvests and rich trapping and hunting preserves for centuries. Flecks of flint stone found during the environmental assessment of the entire Village of Aberdeen point to the prior presence of Indians and trappers on these grounds. The most prevalent Indians in this region were the Potawatomi. The Indians and traders of yesteryear undoubtedly traversed the land and streams that we are on today enroute from the Kankakee River to our south towards the trading posts along the shores of Lake Michigan, Baillytown settled by Joseph Bailly (Bailly) near present day Chesterton and, of course, Fort Dearborn established in 1803 and later to become the City of Chicago.

Valparaiso was established as a town in 1835 followed in 1836 by the establishment of Center Township in which the inn resides. The exact dating of the buttressed walls of fieldstone, brick and concrete which form the foundation and support the living area in the historic portion of the inn is not known. County records confirm the existence of the home at least as early as 1856. An original photograph of the home known recently as Timberlake Farm hangs in the inn's old entry and depicts the seven members of the John Ritter family owners of the property in the early 1900s.

John came to Porter County in 1845 at the age of seven with his twenty-five year old father, Christian. He and his mother, Barbara Dowdeli Ritter, planted 150 apple trees in the area with seeds that they had transported from Erie County in New York. John later left Porter County to serve in the Grand Army of the Republic after which he had a brief fascination with the Gold Rush out west.

He returned to the area with his wife, Sarah J. Hesser Ritter, and their five children. Two children and Sarah later passed away and John remarried to Lottie M. Bradley in 1886 and they had five children, Jay, Ruth, Lyman, Harry and Maurice. Descendants of Ruth Ann Rifler Wilson live in the Valparaiso area today.

The original house as depicted in the photograph had a full porch with the main entry into what is now the Library. The north end of the home was a single story. The original back door was found as we went to cut a door for the storage room in the southwest corner of the St. Andrews Retreat Center.

A hidden ladder beneath the old entry closet floor has led some to believe that the house served as a way station for the Underground Railroad during the Civil War linking a known site in Hebron with other sites to the north. The rustic stone wall in front of the home along Indiana Route 2 still stands today with a wrought iron railing now fixed atop.

Subsequent early remodeling in the 30's and 40's added a second story on the north end (today's Dunnotar Suite), indoor plumbing (powder room and the Aberdeen Suite's bath), and the addition to the west which currently houses the Grampian Room (kitchen), office and the Innkeeper's apartment has been converted into the Alloway Suite; which is a living room/kitchenette suite with king bed and oversized Jacuzzi.

Most recently, the property was known as Timberlake Farm recalling the heavily wooded land, variety of lakes and streams, and the rich hunting area. The stable behind The Inn housed horses and offered a party room after a long day of hunting or frolicking in the woods J.M. Foster Construction Company, responsible for much of the early industrial development in northwest Indiana, owned the land during most of the 1900's until it was deeded to his daughter and her husband, Irene and Johnnie Lawson, in 1971.

The property was purchased by Benchmark, Ltd., in 1994 and subsequently by John and Linda Johnson, the Inn's proprietors, in 1995.

## Ghost stories

John and Linda started hearing the stories about strange occurrences after they bought the inn. Each of the eleven guestrooms has a diary in it for people to comment on their stay. The housekeepers read what the last guest has written and document the ghostly experiences.

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Different people in different rooms, who didn't know the pattern of the stories, all reported the same kinds of things happening.

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Sara Ritter and her daughter died of an infectious disease...no tragic or mysterious deaths.

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Guests report seeing a little girl on the stairway in the mornings. She wears an old, English dressing gown and is very kind. These stories are consistent.

One woman was in a room by herself...had the door locked, was in the bathroom, and had things set out on the desk in the room. When she came out, the desk was a mess and a piece of jewelry was missing.

She checked the doors and they were still locked She was the only one in the room. She couldn't figure it out so she stepped back in the bathroom then came out a little later. Everything had been put back in the original order and whatever piece of jewelry was missing was back where it belonged.

It sounds like the little girl was messing with her!

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A little boy, about four years old sits sat on the stairs where the little girl hangs out. His grandmother was talking to our innkeeper at the front desk and the little boy was talking to somebody and the grandmother asked who he was talking to. He said, "The little girl."

There was no little girl in the inn, which was visible anyway. The grandmother said, "There is no little girl there."

He said, "Yes, there is," as he went right back to talking to her.

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A fireplace in the Aberdeen Suite comes on by itself (even while housekeeping is in the suite).

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Jewelry and other items in guest rooms get rearranged, running noises are heard, and brief, cold drafts are felt.

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History talks of the home having been a stop on the Underground Railroad from Hebron to LaPorte and into Southwest Michigan. A trap door in the old entry closet leads to a root cellar with a crawl space under the then living room (currently the library).

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One of the innkeepers at the front desk saw an older woman and a young girl came in out of the rain and sit down in the solarium right by the front door. He assumed they were waiting on the grandfather, or father, to catch up to them.

They were sitting there talking about the house and rooms in a way that the little girl really had to have knowledge of the house really well. They had not been in the Aberdeen Suite (which is the old master bedroom) but she was describing things along the lines of somebody that had been there. She seemed quite familiar with the house

A little bit later, they got up, went outside and the innkeeper was concerned that they needed some help or something. He said he couldn't have been more than ten seconds behind them and yet when he got outside, they weren't there. No vehicles were in the parking lot and no other guests were in the inn.

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Paranormal investigations have picked up on a scared, old man down in the basement although he apparently liked one of the women in the group. They thought he might have been a slave. But they were convinced that there was a man in the basement along with a little girl.

The next time they came, they got a voice recording of the little girl saying her name was "Angel."

They asked for a sign and heard squeaking on the staircase; something that couldn't be duplicated by any other means.

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A lot of apparent evidence came from investigators. There have been many here to visit. This is one report:

## **Paranormal Investigator's Findings**

Aberdeen Suite (original home's master bedroom) produced some minor unusual EMF (Electromagnetic Field) meter readings, but no detections on film or cassette recording.

The door opened 6" on its own as we were leaving, but at no other time, as if someone was peaking at us.

Returned to room—unable to reproduce opening, door was level, stair pressure not a factor, and no air pressure causes. We left the room and the door opened again, on its own.

Old Kitchen area: EMF readings unusual.

Old Basement: high EMF readings at base of stairs. There were psychic impressions of little girl below trap door from main floor entry closet. Noted EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena) in this area, "We're here, you're beautiful," something said directly towards one of the researchers.

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### *Conclusion:*

*"After reviewing all of the evidence gathered the day of our investigation, we are considering our results to be somewhat conclusive. The EVP, minor EMF meter readings and door opening without explanation are the strongest indications of ghostly presence. I feel that there is at least one little girl ghost and at least one male presence (possibly in the basement.)"*

Thank you,  
Deborah Leigh Davis  
Author/ghostwriter  
[shewrote@comcast.net](mailto:shewrote@comcast.net)  
423-903-3130