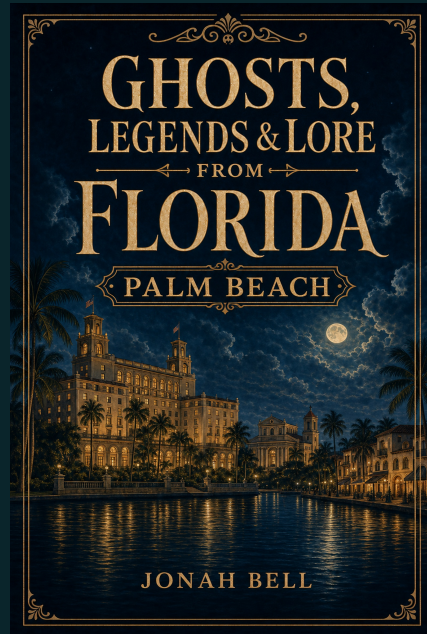


FREE READER SAMPLE



Ghosts, Legends & Lore from Florida: Palm Beach

Chapter 21: The Riddle House

One complete chapter by Jonah Bell

Copyright © 2026 Jonah Bell. All rights reserved. This promotional excerpt may be viewed and shared through its official link. It may not be reproduced, republished, or sold without permission.

Chapter 21: The Riddle House

In 1995, a yellow Folk Victorian cottage rolled through West Palm Beach in sections on flatbed trucks. Preservationists were saving a cemetery keeper's house from demolition. Within a decade, television would make its attic one of the best-known haunted rooms in South Florida.

The Riddle House now stands in Yesteryear Village at the South Florida Fairgrounds.C21.1 The village opens for the annual fair, scheduled days, and authorized nighttime tours; the Fair controls all interior access, including the attic.C21.2

A cottage that outlived its cemetery

Strip away the ghost for a moment, because the real story is good enough to stand on its own, and it is a preservation story before it is a haunting.

The house went up beginning in 1905, reportedly built by workers from Henry Flagler's hotel construction crews using leftover lumber.C21.3 It is a two-story frame house in the Folk Victorian, or Edwardian, manner, and in its bright original colors, said to include the canary yellow Flagler favored, it earned the nickname "the painted lady."C21.4 Its first job was humble: it housed the keeper or groundskeeper of a city cemetery, which is why it is sometimes called the Gatekeeper's Cottage.C21.5

Which cemetery is a genuinely unsettled question, and it is worth being honest about. As we saw in the chapter on Woodlawn Cemetery (see Chapter 18), most modern sources, including the Fair's own later publicity, tie the cottage to Woodlawn, the burial ground Flagler established in 1904 on old pineapple fields and transferred to the City of West Palm Beach in December 1914.C21.6 Woodlawn's dates line up neatly with the house's 1905 construction and its reported purchase by the city in 1914.C21.7 But the earliest source, the 1995 newspaper account written as the house was actually being moved, quotes the Fair's own historic coordinator saying the cottage served the keeper of Lakeview Cemetery, the city's first burial ground, which was later obliterated by construction of the Norton Gallery.C21.8 The contradiction has never been cleanly resolved, so treat any single answer with a little caution.

The house's most famous occupant arrived in 1920, when Karl Riddle acquired it; a photograph from that year shows him in residence.C21.9 Riddle, covered in more detail in Chapter 18, was a serious civic figure: local press called him West Palm Beach's first city manager and its first superintendent of public works, and he later served as chief engineer for the architect Addison Mizner.C21.10 He was recalled from office in 1923, by a margin later reported as five votes, and the house afterward reportedly passed to other city employees.C21.11 Riddle himself went on to plat, with his twin brother Kenyon, the subdivision that became the Town of Cloud Lake, and he lived until 1985.C21.12 His name, of course, is the one the house wears today.

After Riddle, the cottage led a wandering second life. In 1972 the artist Mary Ann Hayes bought it at auction, for a figure reported at just over twenty-one thousand dollars, and ran it as the Flagler Arts Center.C21.13 By the early 1980s Palm Beach Atlantic College owned it and used it as a dormitory, and by 1995 the house stood squarely in the path of campus expansion.C21.14 Rather than see it demolished, the college donated it to the Fair.

What happened next is the part that deserves the applause. On August 12 and 13, 1995, the house was taken apart in sections, its roof and attic split in two and its floors cut into pieces, and hauled out to Yesteryear

Village.C21.15 Professional movers had reportedly estimated the job at around fifty thousand dollars; instead, Karl Riddle's nephew, John Kenyon Riddle, who chaired the Fair's Yesteryear Village committee, organized roughly sixty volunteers to do it.C21.16 The house was reassembled and restored to its 1920s appearance, a project reportedly aided by a state historical grant of about four hundred fifty thousand dollars.C21.17 That is the Riddle House's true claim on your attention: a modest 1905 cottage, twice nearly lost, saved by a family that would not let it go.

The ghost everyone comes for

And yet. Ask around Palm Beach County, or type "Riddle House" into a search bar, and you will not hear much about volunteers and lumber. You will hear about Joseph.

The familiar modern version goes like this. Somewhere in the house's past it served as, or sat beside, a funeral parlor. During the Depression a hired man named Joseph, employed by Karl Riddle and facing financial ruin, in some tellings wrongly accused of theft, hanged himself from the attic rafters. His ghost is said to dislike men, striking, scratching, and throwing tools at them while leaving women alone, and for that reason, the story goes, the attic has been closed to visitors. During the 1995 move, the legend adds, tools vanished or flew, a worker was struck, and some men walked off the job.C21.18

It is a tidy, chilling story. It is also, as far as the documented record goes, a modern one, and this is where a good local guide has to be straight with you.

No death record, no period newspaper account, and no named victim has been found to support an attic suicide at this house.C21.19 More telling still, the ghost is missing from exactly the places you would expect to find him. The detailed 1995 coverage of the relocation is pure history: no ghost, no Joseph, no funeral parlor, no fleeing workmen.C21.20 A 2003 newspaper history column about the village's old houses likewise carries no haunting at all.C21.21 The "funeral parlor" detail, repeated everywhere, has no primary evidence behind it; the one press article usually cited for it does not actually contain the claim.C21.22 I want to be careful here, because a real, admirable, and locally distinguished family is attached to this story. The legend casts Karl Riddle as the employer of a man who died by suicide and, in some versions, invokes his personal "diary" as evidence. Keep the Riddles' actual role in view: they are the people who saved the house, not the villains of a ghost story.

How to build a legend, step by dated step

The pleasure of the Riddle House, for me, is that you can almost watch its ghost assemble itself in real time, because the tellings are dated.

The earliest version anyone has located comes not from 1905 or 1935 but from 2003. It belongs to the East Coast Hauntings Organization, or E.C.H.O., in an account credited to the parapsychologist Christine Rodriguez and published in Jeff Belanger's Encyclopedia of Haunted Places in 2005.C21.23 And here is the thing: in that first version, the hanged man has no name. He is an unnamed itinerant man. A team member reported seeing a black-suited figure with a noose at an attic window in January 2003, and a séance-style communication had the spirit claim he "took the fall" for missing Flagler money; a supposed Karl Riddle diary was said to note an itinerant man's death without details.C21.24 That diary has never been produced publicly, so it cannot be treated as documentary evidence.C21.25 The same account, curiously, claims the house stood on land once owned by the actor Joseph Jefferson, an unverified detail that may, and I offer this only as a guess, be where the ghost eventually got the name "Joseph."C21.26

Because a name is exactly what came next. In November 2008 the house was featured on Ghost Adventures, season one, episode four, on the Travel Channel.C21.27 The program is where the modern details harden into place: the name Joseph, the Depression-era employment by Karl Riddle, the theft accusation, and a set of on-camera incidents, a thrown board, a falling birdcage, presented as they always are on such shows, which is to say as television rather than as fact.C21.28 By August 2011 the Fair had launched its own monthly nighttime ghost tours of the village, explicitly citing the national interest the broadcast had stirred up.C21.29 Staff on those early tours described music-box sounds, uneasy feelings, and visions on the stairs, but notably they did not name Joseph.C21.30 And the legend kept drifting: a 2016 blog from a Palm Beach County history community, retelling the tale as folklore, added a second ghost, a gravedigger named "Buck" said to have been killed in an argument yet to keep "reporting to work" after his death, another claim with no documentation behind it.C21.31 By a 2024 Halloween newspaper feature, Joseph had been recast once more, now "an accountant who got caught fudging the books."C21.32

So watch the shape of it: an unnamed drifter in 2003, "Joseph" the wronged hired hand by 2008, an embezzling accountant by 2024. That is not a fixed piece of history slowly being uncovered. That is a legend being written, in public, one retelling at a time.

The house and the record

The documented house is a Folk Victorian cottage built in 1905 for a cemetery keeper. Karl Riddle lived there from 1920, Mary Ann Hayes bought it in 1972, Palm Beach Atlantic College acquired it later, and preservationists moved it in 1995 before television and tours enlarged its reputation. Which cemetery the keeper served remains unresolved. The funeral parlor, attic suicide, Joseph's name and theft accusation, flying tools, closed attic, diary, and gravedigger Buck belong to the unverified legend. Even the claim that the attic is off-limits "because of the activity" comes from paranormal sources rather than the Fair.C21.33

The Riddle House sits at a potent intersection: an old, handsome, rescued building, an institution willing to light it dramatically after dark, and a cable-television spotlight arriving just as ghost hunting became mass entertainment. The house is old. The traceable ghost tradition is much younger, and its dated record shows how quickly it acquired detail.

If you want to see the painted lady for yourself, buy a ticket to the Fair, a village day, or one of the official History & Haunts tours, and go in the front door like everyone else. Whether Joseph meets you in the attic, I cannot promise. What I can promise is that the volunteers who carried this house out of the wrecking ball's path in 1995 were entirely real, and that is the better story anyway.

C21.1 Location per South Florida Fair / Yesteryear Village address, 9067 Southern Boulevard, West Palm Beach, FL 33411; South Florida Fair, "History & Haunts: Ghost Tours in Yesteryear Village" (operator listing, 2024) and Kari Barnett, "Paranormal activity investigated at Yesteryear Village at South Florida Fairgrounds," Sun-Sentinel, July 27, 2011.

C21.2 Kari Barnett, Sun-Sentinel, July 27, 2011 (updated 2019); South Florida Fair, "History & Haunts: Ghost Tours in Yesteryear Village" (2024 event listing). Monthly Fair-run tours documented from August 2011 and still advertised as of 2024.

C21.3 Eliot Kleinberg, "Village A Haven For Historic Homes," The Palm Beach Post (historicpalmbeach.com repost), Feb. 5, 2003; Ron Hayes, The Palm Beach Post, Dec. 29, 1999, known through a cited secondary summary. The 1905 date is presented as local newspaper history.

C21.4 Eliot Kleinberg, The Palm Beach Post, Feb. 5, 2003.

C21.5 Fred Lowery, "Historic Riddle House Moving to Fairgrounds," Sun-Sentinel, July 24, 1995; Hayes, The Palm Beach Post, Dec. 29, 1999, known through secondary citation.

C21.6 City of West Palm Beach, "Woodlawn Cemetery" (City Clerk page); Hayes, The Palm Beach Post, Dec. 29, 1999, known through secondary citation; Kari Barnett, Sun-Sentinel, July 27, 2011; Bob Davidsson, "Digging Up Palm Beach County's Haunted History," Sept. 22, 2016. The cemetery identification is disputed.

C21.7 City of West Palm Beach, "Woodlawn Cemetery"; Hayes, The Palm Beach Post, Dec. 29, 1999, known through secondary citation, for the reported 1914 purchase and "City House" name.

C21.8 Fred Lowery, "Historic Riddle House Moving to Fairgrounds," Sun-Sentinel, July 24, 1995 (quoting the Fair's historic coordinator naming Lakeview Cemetery). The Woodlawn-versus-Lakeview conflict is genuine and unresolved.

C21.9 Eliot Kleinberg, The Palm Beach Post, Feb. 5, 2003; 1920 photograph credited to The Palm Beach Post.

C21.10 Fred Lowery, Sun-Sentinel, July 24, 1995; Eliot Kleinberg, The Palm Beach Post, Feb. 5, 2003. The "first city manager" and "first superintendent of public works" superlatives rest on these two local-press statements and have not been checked against city records. The Mizner detail appears in the 1995 article only.

C21.11 "Past Recalls Show 50-50 Split Result," The Palm Beach Post, Oct. 6, 1963, known through a cited secondary summary. The margin is attributed to that newspaper account.

C21.12 Historical Society of Palm Beach County, "Cloud Lake," Palm Beach County History Online (2009); Historical Society of Palm Beach County, "The Riddle Effigy," Palm Beach County History Online (Karl Riddle died in 1985).

C21.13 Lawrence Dame, "Old Flagler House is Now Art Studio," The Palm Beach Post, Nov. 5, 1972, known through a cited secondary summary. The auction figure is attributed to that report.

C21.14 Fred Lowery, Sun-Sentinel, July 24, 1995; Hayes, The Palm Beach Post, Dec. 29, 1999, known through secondary citation.

C21.15 Fred Lowery, Sun-Sentinel, July 24, 1995 (dates and sectioned-dismantling method).

C21.16 Fred Lowery, Sun-Sentinel, July 24, 1995; Ron Hayes, "Volunteers saved \$50,000 relocation cost," The Palm Beach Post, Dec. 29, 1999, known through a cited secondary summary.

C21.17 Hayes, The Palm Beach Post, Dec. 29, 1999, known through a cited secondary summary. The grant figure is attributed to that report.

C21.18 Composite of the modern legend as it circulates: Bob Davidsson, Origins & History of the Palm Beaches blog, Sept. 22, 2016; "Riddle House (episode)," Ghost Adventures Wiki (Fandom); Palm Beach Post Staff, "Be afraid. Be very afraid: The most haunted places around Palm Beach County," updated Oct. 31, 2024; Discover The Palm Beaches, "Legendary Haunts of The Palm Beaches" (c. 2022); "The Riddle House: A Haunted History in West Palm Beach," Paranormal Traveler, Sept. 8, 2025. Presented as legend; see notes below.

C21.19 No Palm Beach County death record, contemporaneous news account, or named decedent supporting an attic suicide was located; the claim appears only in retellings (E.C.H.O./Belanger 2005; Ghost Adventures Wiki; 2024 Post feature; Discover The Palm Beaches; Paranormal Traveler). Status: unverified, presented as legend.

- C21.20 Fred Lowery, Sun-Sentinel, July 24, 1995 (relocation coverage contains no haunting narrative).
- C21.21 Eliot Kleinberg, The Palm Beach Post, Feb. 5, 2003 (history column contains no haunting).
- C21.22 Kari Barnett, Sun-Sentinel, July 27, 2011, does not support the funeral-parlor claim attributed to it in later retellings; no primary evidence for a funeral parlor was located. Treated only as a legend element.
- C21.23 Christine Rodriguez (E.C.H.O.), "Riddle House - Yesteryear Village," in Jeff Belanger (ed.), Encyclopedia of Haunted Places (New Page Books, 2005), reprinted at Occult World. The 2005 book itself was not directly examined (its existence is confirmed via an Internet Archive record); the reprint was examined.
- C21.24 Christine Rodriguez (E.C.H.O.), reprinted at Occult World. In this earliest located version the hanged man is an unnamed itinerant man; the January 2003 attic-window sighting is credited to team member Jack Rodriguez.
- C21.25 Christine Rodriguez (E.C.H.O.), reprinted at Occult World. The purported Karl Riddle diary has not been produced publicly in any located source and is not treated here as documentary evidence.
- C21.26 Christine Rodriguez (E.C.H.O.), reprinted at Occult World (Joseph Jefferson land-ownership claim). The land claim is unverified; the suggestion that it seeded the ghost-name "Joseph" is offered only as an explicit hypothesis, not a fact.
- C21.27 "Riddle House - W. Palm Beach, FL," Ghost Adventures S1 E4, Travel Channel, first aired November 2008 (per TVmaze/Episodate listings, which give Nov. 7 or 8, 2008); the episode itself was not examined.
- C21.28 "Riddle House (episode)," Ghost Adventures Wiki (Fandom). The name "Joseph," the Depression-era employment by Karl Riddle, and the theft accusation appear in the record with the 2008 episode and later retellings; the on-camera incidents are attributed to the program as television content, not established fact.
- C21.29 Kari Barnett, Sun-Sentinel, July 27, 2011 (Fair-run monthly ghost tours began August 2011, citing interest generated by the broadcast).
- C21.30 Kari Barnett, Sun-Sentinel, July 27, 2011 (staff-reported music-box sounds, uneasy feelings, and visions at the stairs; Joseph not named).
- C21.31 Bob Davidsson, Origins & History of the Palm Beaches blog, Sept. 22, 2016 (gravedigger "Buck," told as folklore; no documentation located).
- C21.32 Palm Beach Post Staff, "Be afraid. Be very afraid: The most haunted places around Palm Beach County," updated Oct. 31, 2024 (Joseph recast as "an accountant who got caught fudging the books").
- C21.33 "The Riddle House: A Haunted History in West Palm Beach," Paranormal Traveler, Sept. 8, 2025, and related paranormal aggregators. The attic-closed-to-visitors claim comes from paranormal sources; it is not confirmed by any located statement from the Fair.

Continue exploring.

Read the complete Ghosts, Legends & Lore from Florida: Palm Beach, with more researched history, local legends, and stories of place.

[**VIEW THIS BOOK ON AMAZON**](#)

[**GHOSTSLEGENDSLORE.COM**](http://GHOSTSLEGENDSLORE.COM)