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Your Travel Guide To New Jersey's Local Legends And Best Kept Secrets





# The History, and the Mysteries of BLAIRSDEN

by Mark Moran

Old mountain top mansions with forbidding looking gates, reclusive religious sects, and a surrounding forest said to be haunted by malevolent spirits - this is the kind of stuff from which local legends are born. Places such as these tend to fuel the human imagination. Whether it's some tidbit of under acknowledged local history, or the inherent mysteries that their inaccessibility conjures, these places inspire the kind of tall tales that modern folklore is made of. Blairsdén is one such place.

New Jersey's Somerset Hills have long been the home of some of the wealthiest citizens of the country, and the world. As far back as 1870, these gently rolling hills and verdant green valleys have attracted New York City's well-to-do industrialists and financiers with names such as Roebing, Pfizer, Duke, Squibb, Dryden, and Astor. This elite enclave of newcomers built sprawling country estates in the rural towns of Bernardsville, Far Hills, Basking Ridge, Peapack and Gladstone. Modeling themselves after the English aristocracy, they gave their opulent new homes such high brow names as Boulderwood, Renemedé, Knollcrest, Cragwood, Honeyfield, Stronghold, and Hillandale. Here they would reside in Edwardian splendor, busied themselves with horse shows, fox hunts, and other such hoity pursuits. One of the grandest of all of these estates was known as Blairsdén, which was the home of wealthy investment banker Clinton Ledyard Blair, and his family.

Mr. Blair began construction of the 423-acre estate in 1898. He leveled the top of a mountain on which to build his magnificent Italian-style mansion, then carved terraces into the hillside leading down to the North Branch of the Raritan River below. Blair constructed a massive stone dam across the river, thus creating what is now known as Ravine Lake. A private bridge was built below the dam to provide access the rear gate of Blairsdén. To landscape the estate, full grown boxwood and maple trees were carted in from the



surrounding area on wagons drawn by teams of twenty-two horses. Outside the main entrance of the house, white swans glided lazily across the 300-foot long reflecting pool, which was adorned with urns and busts of Roman emperors. The architects of the mansion were the same men who designed the New York Public Library. Unlike the library though, Blairsdén could boast having twenty-six fireplaces, and a full sized swimming pool and squash court in the basement. Construction of the estate was completed in 1903, at which time C. Ledyard Blair employed

a virtual army of about seventy-five servants to see to the upkeep of the mansion and grounds.

In its heyday, between the years of 1903 and 1919, Blairsdén played host to numerous visitations from dignitaries, senators, and other such people of renown. The scenic terraces overlooking Ravine Lake were the setting for several lavish wedding receptions, given by Blair for his daughters after their marriages to other members of the area's landed gentry.

As the years passed though, C. Ledyard Blair's personal fortune dwindled. According to Barry Thomson, who is currently working on a biography of Blair, in his latter years the millionaire was forced to sell off many of his most prized possessions. These included his beloved yacht, his home in Bermuda, his private rail road car, and his elegant Fifth Avenue town house in New York City. When he died in February of 1949, his heirs decided to sell off Blairsdén and all of its contents. The mansion, and fifty acres of the land was purchased at auction in 1950 by the Sisters of St. John the Baptist for \$60,000. Here the sisters would remain cloistered away for the next half-century, allowing themselves very little contact with the outside world. They did however occasionally offer Blairsdén to wealthy Catholic women as a retreat, for a fee—of course.

Today the ornate, yet crumbling, front gate of Blairsdén is all that most people see of this once magnificent private residence. The imposing statuary fountain heads seem to scowl in disdain at passers by, trying to discourage curious visitors. The once-grand back entrance to the grounds is now hopelessly overgrown with a tangle of wild vines that look as though they have torn the heavy iron gates from their stone fixtures.

It is here, just above the long-dry ram's head fountain, that the name Blairsdén is emblazoned on the cold grey stone wall. Over the years, this abandoned looking threshold has proved just too



Blairsdens back gate.

tempting for more than a few curious trespassers too resist. Their midnight explorations have subsequently given rise to a number of fantastic stories about the mysterious mansion on the hill, and questions about just what really goes on up there. Their tall tales of crazed nuns and ghosts in the woods have lured other like-minded adventurers up that muddy cliffside path, to see for themselves just what may lay beyond those ominous and foreboding looking gates of the place called Blairsdens.

Weird N.J. reader Will Hagerty of Warren wrote to us recently with stories of his experiences at Blairsdens.

*I first learned about Blairsdens, from my friend A.J., while sitting at the Sunset Diner one night in August of 1997. He showed me some pictures from outside and inside the house (which he sneaked in to take). I was flabbergasted at the contents of the house. Chinese tapestries dating back to the 12th century, imported Italian marble floors, and the most intriguing of all, a solid gold statue standing about seven feet tall.*

*This was no ordinary house, that much I could see from the pictures, but the stories he told me were what drew me to the house that very night.*

*He told me that Blair had sold the mansion to a group of nuns, who wished to turn the house into a convent. The head nun, a practitioner of Paganism, wished to convert her fellow sisters to the Pagan ways. When they refused, they were tortured and slain by the head nun, as well as many guests who were shacking up at the nunnery for the time being (the first half of the 20th*

*century). In a final act of sacrifice, the head nun took her own life, thus beginning the present-day, phantasmic soap opera.*

*Supposedly, on the path that ranges from the closed bridge, up to the back steps of Blairsdens, there are two ghosts. The first specter is a mentally unstable man who was tortured and killed in the house. He appears at the halfway point, near two trees on either side of the path which connect about 10 feet off the ground, giving it the appearance of a gate or doorway of some sort. He serves as a devilish deterrent, trying to prevent you from reaching the second ghost. The second apparition is that of the head nun herself. If you get past the "warning" ghost, you will probably find her near the bottom of the series of terraces which lead up to the mansion. As rumor has it, she tries to lead you into the house only to torture and kill you.*

*After stopping at his house for flashlights and such, A.J. and I set off on our journey. As we were driving, he told me about a guy whom he knows who encountered the first ghost. The guy, one of those tough, "I ain't scared of anything," bodybuilder types, ran from the halfway point as fast as he could, screaming all the way. He still bears the tell-tale scars of his encounter to this day; five two-inch wide claw marks stretching from his shoulder to his lower back.*

*When we got to the old bridge that crosses the river to Blairsdens, we parked the car on the shoulder of the closed private road. I looked at the clock-1:15 a.m. We gathered our flashlights and cigarettes, and began our trek.*

*We arrived at the halfway tree and sat down on*

*a rock wall that borders the lake side of the path. As we were lighting our cigarettes, A.J. told me of another danger lurking in the woods near Blairsdens. The Peapack-Gladstone Gun Club. At the time of our visit, the house was uninhabited, except for the caretaker who stayed there on certain nights. The nuns who live there had supposedly hired a bunch of gun-toting old men from the gun club to patrol the area on horseback while they are away. A.J. told me that he had been arrested many times while searching through those thick woods. We finished our butts and continued up the path.*

*After about 10 minutes of walking, the house stood ominously before us. We walked up these stairs for what seemed like another 10 minutes, and finally reached the ground level of the house. A.J. reassured me that the caretaker, was not there that night. On his many trips up here, A.J. had learned the caretaker's schedule, and Friday nights were off-nights. We were in the clear.*

*We walked up to the house and looked in some of the windows. We walked along the house until we reached the corner, around which was the front door of the house and a giant flood light. As he was looking around the corner to check for the gun club or anyone else, I heard a jingling coming from behind the window in front of which I stood. Perhaps it was just A.J.'s keys, I thought. We looked around for a little while, sat down to enjoy a cigarette, then walked back to the car.*

*When we got to the car, A.J. climbed in without having to unlock his door. As I got in, I asked him why he didn't lock his door. He told me that he left his keys in the car, then asked me if I had*



# BLAIRSDEN NIGHTRIDER

About 10 or 11 years ago some friends and I were told a tale about a place in Far Hills, or the Peapack-Gladstone area called "Blairsdén." It was back in high school, and I have no recollection of how we heard about this place, but we had to go check it out. The story told to us was about a big old mansion up on the hill, but there were no roads to or from it. There were always lights on in the place and people lived up there. Supposedly, weird things were going on.

So late one Friday night four of us piled into the car to find this place. It was very dark, and when you come upon this place, it is very eerie. There are no street lamps in the area, but you can see the mansion way up on the hill with the lights on. We continued down the road scaring ourselves as we went along. It was a very narrow road that could fit only two cars side by side, and the river was right down the hill from one side, so it was a little too close for comfort.

There was an old bridge that took you over to the property, but it was blocked by a guardrail. The bridge was falling apart and undriveable. That was one entrance that no longer could be used. You could walk over the bridge with no problem. On the other side was a big iron gate with stone walls on either side which was once the entrance. We were all alone and scared. We took out a flashlight and slowly made our way over the bridge. There was no sound except for the water beneath our feet. When we got to the other side, we saw the gates were all grown over with vines and weeds. On either side of the iron gates were these small figurines attached to the stone walls that I believe were once little fountains. They looked like rams' heads with a small basin below it for the water. The scary thing was, that in the pitch dark, we put the flash light on to get a better look and got a pretty good scare. Someone had painted the eyes of the rams' heads red! Well that was pretty much all we needed to see and we got out of there.

We drove around trying to find another entrance and could not find one. As we drove around we found a road off to the left. It was known locally as "Jacob's Ladder." The ascending road has a series of bumps that are pretty close together. You really have to be careful coming and going on this road. We went back often just to do this because it was a lot of fun to drive to the top, and then descend down over these bumps. At just the right speed you lose your stomach as you went over them.

Anyway it certainly was an experience, and we later found out this Blairsdén place was a nunnery. We still don't know how to get up there though.

Susan D.



Blairsdén's front gate.

*heard that jingling sound up at the house. I told him that I thought it was him, but his keys were in the car the whole time. He said he thought it was me. I picked my keys up off the floor, where they had been the whole time, and showed them to him.*

*After that occurrence, I frequented the area looking for other ways to reach the house. I also asked around and searched the library for more information. I heard stories of a screaming nun running down the hill, over the bridge, and through a car; a disappearing man in a boat on the lake; and a spirit who made twin brothers get into a fist fight for no known reason. When I asked my friend's father, a chief of police in the area, about the house, he simply told me to "stay away from the house because there was weird shit going on up there."*

*I've been back to the house numerous times since then, and haven't had anymore weird encounters. However, the stories of ghosts and things keep surfacing.*

The Sisters of St. John the Baptist are currently in negotiations to sell Blairsdén. One of the per-

spective buyers is the newly formed non-profit organization known as the Blairsdén Association, who are actively seeking donations to use for the purchase of the property. According to Bill Lawton of the association, the nuns have an asking price of \$10-million. Weird N.J. spoke with Mr. Lawton recently about his efforts to buy Blairsdén, and his intentions for its future.

"We are trying to raise the money for the acquisition, and restoration of the estate," Lawton said. "The house just had its 100-year anniversary this year, the nuns really didn't have the resources to maintain it. We estimate that in addition to the purchase price, we'll need to raise another three or four million dollars to restore it to its original grandeur. We think that it's a real asset to the community though, and to the state of New Jersey. We'd like to see it open to the public in some capacity, so that everyone can appreciate it. There were some shady characters who tried to buy it for development a few years back, but that deal fell through. Selling it off to a private concern though, would be like selling Lucy the Elephant, or in this case, Lucy the white elephant. The place really has no modern ameni-

## BLAIRSDEN, AND THE LIGHTS IN THE LAKE

Another spot to explore on the mountain is Blairsdén, a huge mansion right next to Ravine Lake. While the front gate in Peapack is closed off, the back gate on the mountain is accessible on foot. The entrance is eerie in itself. The back gate is a large fountain which looks like it hasn't operated in 50 years. Where I suppose the water spewed out of is a statue of a goat's head. The mile walk up to the mansion is a muddy, scenic path.

Some people, like me, like to stop and hang out at the large water fall at the side of the path. The final stretch of the path is a long, uphill marble walkway that leads to another old fountain. The mansion itself is huge, but don't go up to it. Apparently, some anti-social nuns take care of the place. (Before I knew this and thought the place was abandoned, I always wondered who mowed the lawn.) Once again, beware, as soon as you enter the gates, you are trespassing.

One last spot is Ravine Lake itself. My brother told me about a legend where some guy went nuts and drove his car into the lake. He also said that for years afterwards, the lights from the car could still be seen at night. Either he lied to me or the battery on the car finally died because the lights cannot be seen anymore. He also told me that the lights were definitely from underwater and not just a reflection.

Erik Dresner



ties, no air conditioning, and only one thermostat to regulate the heat for the entire 62-thousand-square-foot house."

Then we asked Mr. Lawton if he had ever heard the stories of Blairsden being haunted, or of the murder-suicides of the maniac nuns who lived there.

"Yeah, I've heard them all," he scoffed, "and they're all bullshit! There used to be this one nun up there years ago though, named Sister Adolphus, I think. She was a huge burly woman, with a thick German accent. She had a loud speaker mounted on the outside of the house, and she would sit inside and look out over the grounds through the window. If she ever saw a hiker, or someone biking up the hill, she would get on the loud speaker and bellow out commands for the trespasser to leave the property. If she happened to be outside at the time of the intrusion, she would chase you back down the hill, barking at you all the way with that German accent of hers! Most of the nuns at Blairsden though were small, pious looking women."

According to C.L. Blair biographer Barry Thomson, "The nuns pretty much kept to themselves, and really didn't get involved with the community." And what about that alleged murder-suicide? "I pretty much grew up on the estate, my father bought a parcel of land from Blair. I think if anything like that ever happen, I would have heard about it, and I didn't."



A coach barrels down the back path to Blairsden with CL Blair himself at the reigns- circa 1909.



The back of Blairsden, viewed from halfway up the terraced hillside.

### Sidetripping: The King of Morocco's Garden State Oasis

Located next door to Blairsden, on a neighboring Somerset hilltop, is one of the region's most distinguished residents - King Hassan II of Morocco. His Royal Highness purchased 493-acre Peapack-Far Hills property in 1983 for \$7.5 million. The estate, built in 1906, was originally owned by Walter Graeme Ladd (a railroad baron), and his wife Kate Macy Ladd (an oil fortune heiress), who dubbed the property Natirar. Although the moniker might not sound out of place in Hassan's native tongue, it is really Raritan, spelled backwards (the north branch of the river flows through the property). The huge mansion is easily visible from the main gate of the estate, just up the hill from Peapack Road.

## BLAIRSDEN, THE HAUNTED MANSION

Ok...Well, here's the story. The mansion is off of Lake Road in Bernardsville. According to an old legend, it used to be a convent and an orphanage. There were about 25 nuns and 25 orphans that lived there. There is a waterfall about halfway down the mountain. According to the stories, one day the nuns took all the children down to the waterfall and lined them up across it. They pushed the children off the edge, one by one, and then they all jumped themselves. This was many many years ago, and as far as I know, the mansion hasn't been inhabited since then. No one has torn it down, so it just stands up there with no one taking care of it. I haven't been up to the house in about a year, but the driveway going up there is all overrun with weeds and there is a guardrail blocking the entrance to it. It's about a 15 minute walk up to the house from the bottom. I've never seen any ghosts up there, but I have gotten a very eerie feeling every time I've gone there...I never stay long. A couple of my friends who have gone up there claim to have seen a strange looking figure in the woods up by the house, and they said that they had a very weird feeling that they were being watched the whole way back down the mountain, even though they didn't see or hear anyone.

It's just a very weird place to go...especially right when it's starting to get dark out. I haven't gone far up the mountain late at night because it's pitch black and you can't see a damn thing. Anyway, that's basically the story.

Sean

## BLAIRSDEN'S DEAD NUNS

There was once an order of nuns who lived at the top of a mountain, in a place known as Blairsden. It was a huge mansion with beautiful architecture. I've seen it and it's amazing. The nuns had a vow of silence and their only contact to the outside was the Mother Superior. She would walk all the way down the trail to the gate and would meet the grocery boy to pick up their food. The trail comes from the mansion, and goes down a pathway with a cliff on one side and water on the other.

One week the Mother Superior did not show up. The grocery boy figured she didn't remember or something. The next week she also was a no-show. The grocery boy went to the sheriff and he investigated. He broke the lock on the gate and drove up the trail. He found all of the nuns' bodies ripped apart and blood everywhere. Everything was such a mess, they couldn't figure out whether it was a murder-suicide or what. They left it unsolved and locked the place up.

Because of the value of the land, it wasn't long before a celebrity moved in. This person stayed one night and refused to ever return to the mansion again. He had movers come back for his things. Since then, the lock has remained on the gate. I have seen very messed up things when I've visited.

*Carmen Malangone*