

Phil Nunn, Ghost of The Castle

By Anne Brandon Heiner

Tonight is Monday, October 8, 1969, almost time for Halloween. But this is not as much a ghost story as it is a story of one of Lexington's fascinating eccentrics.



WHEN THE haunted October moon grows dim over

Lexington and its curve no longer holds water, The Castle, the old stone museum of the Rockbridge Historical Society [in 1969], locks its doors against the chilly mist, and broods over its treasures and its memories.

Ghosts linger longest in places where they have lived, and so the thing that late passersby see in the dark is the powerful figure of Phil Nunn, looking from the shadows of his upstairs window to see if the moon is changing.¹

“When I first knew Phil, in the 1890s, he was a huge, dark, nice-looking well-built Negro with gracious manners,” said Mrs. Charles McCulloch, who was then Ruth Anderson. “I was a little girl, staying at the Letcher

Avenue home of my grandmother, the widow of Colonel William Blair, who had been a professor at VMI. Phil used to come by with his wagon from Adair's for the grocery order every morning, and he would deliver the groceries in the afternoon. We had a tall girl named Maria

working for us who was engaged to Phil, and she was always in evidence when he came by.”²

Stories of Phil Nunn's amazing strength may be read in old newspapers. Once, when he was working for Graham and Moore, wholesale grocers,

he was driving a mule and cart up the steep slope of Main Street, delivering a barrel of sugar. The mule got almost as far up as the Leyburn house [now known as the Alexander-Withrow House], and refused to go farther. Phil could never stand a lazy man or a balky mule. He tried several methods to make it move, then he stalked up to the mule muttering, “If you won't carry it, I'll carry it.” He struck the mule with his fist with such force that it fell to the ground, shouldered the barrel of sugar, and walked up the hill to deliver it.³

The Castle, which was in poor repair at the time, was rented for years by Phil and a number of other Blacks. Phil was meticulous about paying the small rent required for his part of the upstairs,⁴ and he insisted on



Phil Nunn posed for this postcard, but the date is unknown.

returning any favors. When the clerk in Mr. Paul Penick's office typed a letter for him, he came back later with a store-wrapped box. "Miss, would you accept of a box of candy?" he asked gravely.⁵

 COMPLETELY honest himself, Phil had his own quiet way of dealing with injustice. A store owner asked him one day to carry a large wardrobe from the basement up to the attic. At the end of the day, Phil came for his money, and the man said, "I can't pay you, Phil, you came on the wrong day." Phil tipped his hat and quietly went up to the attic, picked up the wardrobe, and carried it back down to the basement.⁶

He and Maria were saving toward their marriage, and he was always glad to take extra jobs. "I am a polisher of metals," he would say, and no one could make silver or brass shine like Phil. At spring cleaning time he was especially in demand, and he would lift the grandfather clocks to dust under them so carefully that they would seldom stop.⁷

All the people he worked for respected him and were fond of him, but Houston Barclay's bride, Pattie, was terrified when she came to visit the home place, and walked into a room where the brawny, six-foot-four giant was dusting. She was unsoothed by his gentle roar, "Rest yourself, Miss."

Phil and Maria had accumulated a comfortable little nest egg, and then something went wrong between them. Maria went to Pittsburgh, got tuberculosis, and died,⁸ and Phil was never the same. He had been friendly and happy

with everyone, but now he seemed to feel that his old red rooster, who slept each night at the foot of his bed, was his only true friend.

Now he began to hoard his money for the joy of hoarding, saving every penny and nickel and dime. He got a dollar a day for his work at cleaning, and since he could not count well, he would put two quarters in each cheek, and then he would know he had his money. Some of the people began to think he was not quite right in his mind, but occasionally, housewives complained that Phil was not as simple as people thought.

"How much do I owe you, Phil?" they would ask.

"Well, I came at one. One, two, three, four, five. That makes five hours."

"You don't mean five, you mean four, don't you?"

"No, ma'm. One, two, three, four, five."

And the helpless housewife would give him the money for five hours.⁹

 hil had almost no living expense, because he got a good dinner wherever he worked, and people would give him clothes. But he had great trouble finding shoes for his enormous feet, although students and cadets would bring him presents of big shoes when they returned to Lexington every year. Then his feet were frozen in an accident, so that shoes of any kind became intolerable.

Anne Brandon McCorkle Heiner (1906–95), later Anne Knox, was editor of Volume 7 of the *Rockbridge Historical Society Proceedings*. Ghost stories were a specialty of hers.

So he cut some long boards, and nailed strips of carpet to them to put his feet through, and wrapped rags around the carpet strips and tied them to his ankles to hold them on.

And the clop-shuffle, clop-shuffle of his plank shoes passing down the dirt streets, always walking in the middle, and tipping his hat as he passed each of the houses where he worked, became a nostalgic part of Lexington to generation after generation, as familiar as the maples on the Washington and Lee University campus in the fall, or the brave music that leads the marching Virginia Military Institute cadets and leaps after itself and hangs suspended in its own echoes over the town.

OME CADETS and students began to call him "Old Dixie,"¹⁰ but his other white friends disliked this effort to change his name, because in Lexington, things must stay as they are and never change, whether they are good things or bad, or queer things or only funny.

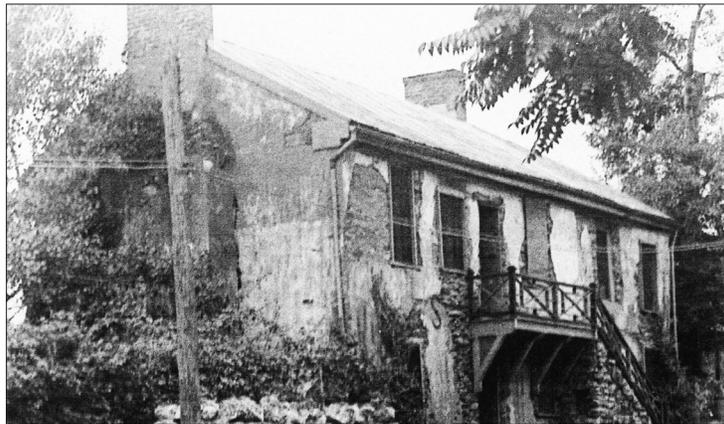
Phil had taken his place among the eccentrics of a town that had *many* beloved eccentrics.

Mr. Hale Houston had bought The Castle and he found that the dollar a month that Phil paid was not enough to cover its part of the taxes, so he tried to raise the rent to two dollars.

"Mr. Waddell said I just have to pay one dollar a month," Phil answered.

"But Mr. Waddell has been dead for years," Mr. Houston protested. Phil's only answer was "Mr. Waddell said I just have to pay a dollar a month."¹¹

Little by little, the money came in. Phil hid it in his room at The Castle, but the other tenants would find and steal it. He selected new hiding places, his mattress, an old trunk, looking over his shoulder to be sure that no one was watching. But somehow some of it always disappeared.¹²



The Castle, approximately as it looked in Phil Nunn's day.

Finally, he got a lock for his door, and changed his money into dollar bills, pried out a board in the wall, and hid it there.

But the money was greasy and dirty from his loving handling. The rats ate it.

In desperation, poor Phil got a big burlap bag, which he hid somewhere, and he would insist on being paid in silver dollars, or quarters which he changed into silver dollars.

WHEN LOVE CAME to Phil for the second time. It must have been on his mind when he was polishing brass at the Barclays, where one of the daughters, had become engaged.¹³

"Miss, I hear you're going to be married," Phil said. And wistfully, "I don't know nothin' about it, but I hear it's very pleasant." And soon he was making new plans to get married.

His intended was not like Maria, however, and she knew about the hoard of silver coins. Yet even she could not persuade him to tell her where he hid the burlap bag.

Now this high-flying girl was not satisfied to get married to a wealthy man in

her old clothes. She gave him an ultimatum: no trousseau, no wedding.

The coins had all been going one way, into the bag, where they joined the shining, swelling pool of lovely silver that gleamed like the tea services he polished in the old brick homes. Now, however, Phil had to drain the pool, bring them out to harsh daylight, put them from his careful hands into hers. He tried to make her see how much better the money would be if it were put away for their future. But he could not persuade her, and Phil was in love. So he reluctantly gave her the money, and she left town to buy clothes.

She never came back.

"I looked out of the window," he told little Edmonia Leech, "and the moon was changing. And right then, I knowed she was never coming back."¹⁴

He was still a hard worker, but he never got over his greedy, faithless sweetheart.

Now the money bag swelled and became heavy, and Phil could dig his great hands again into the coolness of the silver quarters, slipping through his fingers like round, silver butter-fish, gleaming in the night. And only the sly

moon, grinning in at his upstairs window, was allowed to watch Phil playing with his secret hoard.

But Phil became restless, and even the delight and wonder of the contents of the burlap bag could not satisfy him.

He knew he was getting old, and he had never been anywhere farther than Buena Vista. He decided he would like to take a trip.



WHE STACKED his lovely coins neatly in cardboard rolls that spools of thread had come in, and one fine sunny day he hobbled up the steps of the train in his plank shoes, and went to Baltimore, to visit his sister, Emma-Margaret, and he walked up and down the streets holding tightly to the burlap bag on his shoulder, for he had been afraid to leave it in The Castle.¹⁵

Some children and older people followed him and pointed their fingers at his plank shoes, and laughed, but Phil took off his hat and bowed with grave dignity to each of them like a true Virginian, as his mother had taught him to do long ago, because he knew they were poor white trash, or Negroes who hadn't been taught any better by their mothers.

Then a policeman in a fine blue coat with brass buttons, who had been walking along twirling his billy and humming an Irish tune, saw the crowd and got curious, and (being a smallish man himself, hardly over six feet) looked up at Phil and asked him what he was carrying in the burlap bag.

And when Phil, because in Lexington the police had always been his friends, proudly showed him his silver money, the Baltimore patrolman got excited and called the wagon. Phil was bundled in, bewildered, his great body curled and hunched in the dark inside.

The sergeant at the police station wouldn't believe it when Phil said he had not stolen the \$1,500 in silver dollars. And they locked away his burlap bag, and pushed him into a little cell in the first jail he had ever known, and he stayed there all night, miserable and uncomprehending, with his huge, ham-like hands clamped around the bars.

The next day they brought him out, but then there was a mix-up about Lexington, too, because there were several cities called by that name.¹⁶ Finally they reached the right Lexington police, who sent word back that Phil Nunn was one of their most respected citizens, and had earned all the silver dollars, and Mr. Stuart Moore demanded: "See that he gets home safely."

So the Baltimore newspapers wrote a witty piece about him, and the police saw that he had a good breakfast, and drove him to the station in style, and he clatter-clattered to the train in his plank shoes, raising his rusty old hat politely to the amazed people who watched him. And he clump-clumped up the steps of the train, and thudded and shuffled down the carpeted aisle to a seat, and thankfully, at last, reached home again — where he belonged.

Now Mr. Paul Penick and the Barclays and the other Big People in Lexington who were his devoted friends

were worried about him, because too many knew about the burlap bag, and they were afraid someone might do him harm. So they tried to get him to put his money in the bank.¹⁷

But some years earlier there had been a highly respected teller of one of the Lexington banks, a Sunday school teacher and a solid citizen, who had absconded, taking with him a heavy black suitcase full of the townspeople's money.

Perhaps Phil had heard about the suitcase, or perhaps he only felt more comfortable and happy with his precious hoard close to him when he went to sleep in the night. In any event, for a long time, he refused. Finally, however, he let the bank count the silver coins and keep them for him — but he made the bank let him look at them every day. Then he would come about once a week, and after a time, when the bank employees saw him coming, they would just open the vault and let him look at some money, and he would go away satisfied.¹⁸

Phil Nunn's hair became gray, but the burlap bag still collected his dollars, and in spite of arthritis he remained a good workman until he died, although it took him longer to get to the fine old Lexington homes, for he still had to take off his hat and bow graciously, slowly now, to all those whom he passed. And his black hat wore a greasy hole in front, where his great fingers took it off and put it on.



OW THE CASTLE, which was Phil's home for so many years, is perhaps the oldest dwelling in town, and it may be only the timbers cracking against the stucco-covered stones, and not Phil's plank shoes, that cause the strange sounds when one passes there late at night. The dark shadow peering out at the moon from an upstairs window may be only an illusion from the dim light. And the rustling and scurrying in the walls? Probably only hungry rats, looking for Phil Nunn's dollar bills.

NOTES

1. *The Captives of Abb's Valley, A Legend of Frontier Life By A Son of Mary Moore*, p. 80, 1921 (reprint), Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work.
2. Interview with Mrs. Charles McCulloch, June 1960.
3. *Lexington Gazette*, December 30, 1938.
4. Interview with Miss Nettie Smith, June 1960.
5. Interview with Houston Barclay, June 1960.
6. Interview with Mrs. Malcolm Campbell Sr., May 1960.
7. Mr. Barclay, June 1960.
8. Mrs. McCulloch, June 1960.
9. Mr. Barclay, June 1960.
10. Colonel and Mrs. B. D. Heflin, August 1960.
11. B. Lee Kagey, October 1969.
12. Mrs. Campbell, May 1960.
13. Mr. Barclay, June 1960.
14. Mrs. Campbell, May 1960.
15. Mrs. Campbell, May 1960.
16. Mrs. Matthew W. Paxton, 1939.
17. Mrs. Campbell, May 1960.
18. Mrs. Campbell, May 1960.