
Mrs. Soffel and the Shiloh Inn Haunting

by Diane Hines

Autumn is upon us and it is a perfect backdrop for a good old-fashioned ghost story. One of Pittsburgh's most famous is the story of Kate Soffel, the Biddle Brothers, the Allegheny County Jail, and the Shiloh Inn. The story was so popular it inspired the 1984 motion picture, *Mrs. Soffel*, starring Diane Keaton and Mel Gibson.

In 1901, Kate was married to Peter Soffel, who was then the Warden of the Allegheny County Jail. As the Warden's wife, Kate would read bible passages to the prisoners. During this time she fell in love with Edward Biddle who, along with his brother John, was sentenced to hang for murder, even though some believed them innocent of the charge.

Kate became so enamored of both brothers and so strongly believed their innocence, she wrote to the governor pleading for their release. When her plea failed, she agreed to help the brothers escape by providing them with hacksaws and a pistol. On the evening of January 30, 1902, Kate incapacitated her husband Peter with chloroform, the brothers escaped, and the trio headed north.

They travelled as far as Butler County before they were gunned down on February 2, 1903. The brothers died that night in the Butler County Jail but Kate survived her wounds and was sentenced to two years in the Western Penitentiary for aiding and abetting the brothers. She was released 19 months later and spent the rest of her days as a seamstress, living with her sister.

With such a passionate story, it's no wonder that many people believe the haunting of the (former) Allegheny County Jail, and the Shiloh Inn. Edward Urban, the Deputy Warden of the jail prior to building the new jail on Second Avenue, believes Mrs. Soffel still haunts the old jail. He has felt a cold hand on his arm and

believes it to be that of Mrs. Soffel.

But what about the Shiloh Inn? The Soffel family built the Shiloh Inn in the 1800's as their home. Peter and Kate Soffel were living there in 1901 when this story began. I paid a visit there recently to learn about the haunting.

I asked Kevin Livolsi, bartender at the Inn, if he ever saw or experienced anything unusual. A dead silence fell over the group at the bar, he paused, and then explained that, yes, he has definitely heard the footsteps on the stairs and, no, he has not gone closer to investigate. He added that when closing time arrives, he bolts for the back door. I was expecting a few laughs on this one, but instead the customers were speechless and completely absorbed by his account.

Livolsi's wife, Nicole, has had her share of experiences, too. When she first began working at the Shiloh Inn, she was finishing up her shift one evening in the first floor dining room when she felt a chilly breeze. When she looked up at the mirror above the rear fireplace she distinctly saw the image of a woman in a "white flowing dress" walking by. She has also seen the woman's image in the windows facing the street.

It is believed that Peter Soffel is the spirit traversing the staircase, constantly watching for his wife, Kate, the woman in the mirror and at the window. Patrons have told of other strange occurrences, including the sounds of doors creaking, cold breezes, and the lights brightening and dimming around midnight.

The Shiloh Inn is undergoing renovations, and is planning a re-opening in time for the holiday season, complete with its former chef and a full menu. For now, its bar remains open on Friday and Saturday evenings. If you visit the Shiloh Inn, just be prepared—and remember Mrs. Soffel's tragic tale. ▲
