

The staircase, which is entirely without center support, is 22 feet high. Its 33 steps describe two 360-degree turns. The entire structure is held together by means of wooden pegs. Not a single nail was used. The hardwood is spliced together at seven places on the inside and nine places on the outside, each piece forming a perfect curve.

For over 85 years, the staircase was in daily use. Climbing the steps today, one senses a vertical movement with each step, as if one were walking on a large coiled spring. Loretto Academy closed its doors more than a decade ago. Now in its place stands the Inn at Loretto, a splendid adobe-style hotel.

Out of respect for those who believe the staircase to be a miraculous gift, the hotel's owners have allowed the chapel of Our Lady of Light to remain and the Loretto Sisters continue to burn a light in the sanctuary. Masses are still celebrated there on special occasions.

*(excerpted from: www.lorettochapel.com)

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**Fans of made-for-TV movies might recall *The Staircase*, a film (aired by CBS in 1998) starring Barbara Hershey as Mother Magdalene, a nun whose dying wish was to see the construction of her order's chapel completed come true through the efforts of a mysterious carpenter known only as "Joad." The movie was based on the legend of the Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the site of the "mysterious staircase" referred to above.

The Loretto Academy was a school founded in Santa Fe in 1852 by the local Sisters of Loretto. In 1873 construction was begun to add a chapel to the site, a project plagued by some unfortunate incidents (including the shooting death of the main architect). As the builders were finishing up the work on the chapel, they found that the plans drawn up by the late architect had not included any means of access to the chapel's choir loft. This was when, according to Alice Bullock's book, *Loretto and the Miraculous Staircase*, the now-legendary events kicked in. **(excerpted from: www.snopes.com)

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THE STAIRCASE



*...the Sisters went to thank the mysterious carpenter,
but he was not to be found...*

The Staircase

*In 1852, at the invitation of the newly consecrated Archbishop Lamy, seven nuns of the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross left their Kentucky motherhouse and began an arduous journey to Santa Fe, New Mexico. After several months, the sisters reached Santa Fe, then a very small village inhabited chiefly by Indians and Mexicans.

In 1853, they opened their first school, an academy for girls. For the next twenty years, the sisters educated their pupils in an elegant convent structure. Then, in 1873, Archbishop Lamy suggested that a chapel be added. It was to be a small replica of the Sainte Chapelle in Paris.

Nearly five years passed before the Chapel of Our Lady of Light was completed. Only then was it brought to the attention of the mother superior that the architect, P. Mouly, had neglected to provide a means of getting to the choir loft.

The chapel is small, 25 feet by 75 feet, but it is rather tall, reaching a height of 85 feet. Main altar, statues, Stations of the Cross, stained-glass windows, and pews—all were imported from Europe and proudly installed.

But the beautiful choir loft remained unreachable. It seems that the architect had intended to connect the loft with the second-story of the convent-school, making it accessible through an outdoor ramp... a structure that was never built.

The superior, Mother Magdalene, was distressed at the thought of adding a conventional staircase since it would take up far too much space in the small chapel. Two possible solutions occurred to her: the chanters would use a ladder to go to and from the loft; a nine day novena would be made to St. Joseph the Carpenter.

On the ninth, and last day of the novena, according to legend, a gray-haired man arrived at the convent riding a donkey. With a chest of tools in one hand, he knocked at the convent door and asked to speak with the mother superior.

The man offered to build the sisters an appropriate staircase, but only on one condition: the superior—to whom he had properly introduced himself—was never to disclose his name. Mother Superior swore herself to secrecy, and the work was begun. Mother Magdalene ordered her nuns not to speak to the craftsman. Under no circumstances was he to be bothered.

The sisters, with great curiosity, watched the carpenter from a discreet distance. They later reported that he used only a saw, a T-square and a hammer—no nails. They observed the quiet workman soaking pieces of wood in the large tubes of hot water that he had requested. The carpenter worked steadily, and when he had finished, he went to the convent to report to Mother Magdalene.

With great enthusiasm, the sisters gathered in the chapel to inspect the work. In the excitement the gray-haired man was forgotten. Later, when they sought to thank him, he was not to be found. No bill was ever received, nor was he ever seen again.

Mother Magdalene was as good as her sworn word. Even on her deathbed, she refused to divulge the man's identity. The story began circulating around the quaint city of Santa Fe that St. Joseph himself had come to build the staircase for the Loretto Sisters, leaving even before they could express their thanks.

Word of the remarkable staircase got around. After a while, visitors began coming from many states to admire the spiral wonder. Architects, carpenters, tourists—both believers and unbelievers—wondered who the extraordinary craftsman had been, where he had purchased his materials and where he had gone. Every lumberyard in New Mexico was contacted, but to this very day no one has found an invoice or the name of the carpenter-genius who built the spiral staircase.

Those who investigated the story did agree on one thing: the wood used in the staircase is not native to the United States. Visitors from the Middle East have claimed that the hardwood comes from their part of the world, but no one has yet been able to identify the type of wood for certain.