

How a Maine blacksmith ended up creating the iconic gates at Stephen King's house

by **Emily Burnham**

January 24, 2023 Updated January 31, 2023



Stephen King opens the new gates to his bat-guarded Victorian home in this November 1982 photograph. Credit: Carroll Hall / BDN

Hard Telling Not Knowing each week tries to answer your burning questions about why things are the way they are in Maine — specifically about Maine culture and history, both long ago and recent, large and small, important and silly. Send your questions to eburnham@bangordailynews.com.

One of the top tourist attractions in Bangor has for decades been the former year-round home of Stephen and Tabitha King on West Broadway.

With its eye-catching red exterior, [creatively landscaped grounds](#) and two iconic wrought-iron gates embellished with bats, a three-headed dragon and spider-like motifs, it's become a pilgrimage destination for King fans from all over the world.

But few people know that the gate was designed and built by a longtime Maine resident named Terry Steel, who happened to be in the right place at the right time for Tabitha King to see his work and pluck him from obscurity.

A plaque at the house noting that Steel was the maker of the fence was stolen sometime in the 1980s, and in the ensuing years, Steel's name has become unattached from his work.

"This gate has become an iconic draw to Bangor, much photographed by people from around the world," said Steel, who is now retired and lives in Owls Head. "People assume that Mr. King had designed the gates and fences, or at least collaborated on the design. The truth is, I solely designed, built and installed the gates and fencing, with full support from the Kings, who were delighted with what I created."



Stephen King's Bangor home. Credit: Robert F. Bukaty / AP



Author Stephen King's house is seen August 28, 2019 in Bangor, Maine. Credit: Natalie Williams / BDN

In 1978, Terry Steel was 30 years old and had recently moved to Bridgton. He'd just spent two-and-a-half years apprenticed to master blacksmith Danny Hurwitz in his home state of Maryland, learning centuries-old techniques of metalcraft, including hand-hammering iron and metal joinery.

He opened a blacksmith shop, Steel Forge, that year and began doing small jobs in Maine. He also took pieces of a wrought-iron gate he'd created in Maryland to home and craft shows in Maine, to show the kind of work he was capable of doing.

It was at a show in Lovell in 1980, where the Kings have long had their summer home, that Tabitha King saw Steel's work and shortly afterward invited him to Bangor to talk about a project. Steel said he had no idea at the time that the Tabitha he spoke to on the phone was one of the famous Kings.

"I had no idea who she was until I drove up to the house just as Stephen King drove up in a red Caddy," Steel said. "They gave me full license on design, with no suggestions as to subject matter other than to have the project reflect who Stephen King is, and allowed me any time necessary to complete the project."

Over the course of two years, Steel designed and built 350 feet of fencing and two large gates, including the double gate at the front of the property. He let his imagination run wild with the design of the front gate, and utilized some of the unique skills his teacher, Hurwitz, had taught him, like hot-carving creature heads.

"I thought about how Mr. King was considered the master of inducing adrenaline rushes through fear, and what were good symbols of that fearful aspect," Steel recalled. "I thought much of spiders, webs encountered in the dark in the woods, and bats, goat heads and dragons. A three-headed dragon appeared in my mind fully formed, much like the three-headed dog Cerberus who guards the gates of Hell."

Interestingly, some of the design elements created by Steel would end up presaging things in future King books, such as the spider demon Mordred Deschain in the last two books of the Dark Tower series, both published in 2004, and the dragon killed by one of the protagonists in his 1984 novel, "The Eyes of the Dragon."

Steel and a crew of workers finished the gates on-site at the King house in 1982, and installation was complete by the end of that year. While people would regularly stop and watch them work during the creation of the fence and gates, Steel didn't realize what a draw it would become until years later.

There are three landmarks you always take a visitor to Bangor to see: the Paul Bunyan statue, the Standpipe and Stephen King's house.

In September 2010, a woman crashed her car into the gate, causing major damage to the iconic structure. Bangor metalworker Leaman Allen of Allenfarm Fence quickly repaired the gate, and had it back to its original form by the end of that year.

The Kings now spend their winters in Florida and their summers in western Maine, and the Bangor house has been transformed into the home of their charitable foundation, his archive and a writer's retreat.

It's the highlight of stops on SK Tours, the guided tour of King-related landmarks around Bangor that for the past 14 years has been run by the Tinker family, who previously operated the King-themed Bett's Bookstore.

Steel went on to design and build iron gates for large churches in Washington, D.C., and Dallas, Texas, as well as for the Church of the Redeemer in Sorrento, and outside of One City Center in downtown Portland. The King house gates, completed a little more than 40 years ago, are still his largest and most well-known creation.



A steel spider, the focal point of the custom-made gate from Stephen King's West Broadway home, 2019. Credit: Aislinn Sarnacki / BDN