

Reflections from the Past

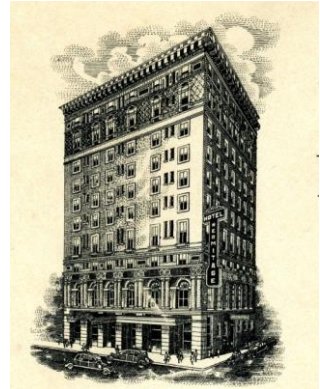
The Hermitage Hotel – Historical Quarterly

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Preservationists and Leaders

What would Nashville be like today without the Ryman Auditorium, the vintage buildings of Lower Broadway and Second Avenue, without Union Station and without The Hermitage Hotel? These places give a considerable amount of heart and soul to Nashville. In the 1970s, however, they were on the verge of urban renewal, making way for “progress.”

Capable leaders with vision and respect took action, thankfully, and they were difference-makers. Mayor Richard Fulton and his wife Sandra (pictured here) were in the lead.



Retired architect Donald Cowan remembers the situation this way. *“When Dick Fulton was mayor he called and asked privately whether to have the Hermitage Hotel torn down or not. The mayor had been under a great deal of pressure to have the hotel torn down. I went to look at the hotel and recommended that it was worth saving for architectural reasons. While it was quite deteriorated, it had potential and was worth saving. The advice was taken.”* The hotel was extremely well designed and built, but had suffered in the '60s –'70s from reduced maintenance and the passage of time.

Preservationists had already been at work. The hotel was successfully named to the National Register of Historic places in 1975 due to the expertise of Metro Historical Commission, the Tennessee Historical Commission and others. This was in recognition of the hotel’s masterful Beaux Arts architecture, the hotel’s legacy as a political headquarters, and for the cherished ties to so many important guest experiences and events such as presidential visits and the Jackson Day Ball.



Janus, one of the mythological figures in the lobby’s painted glass ceiling, was completely covered by residue from decades of cigar and cigarette smoke in the lobby. He looks to the past, present and future, an appropriate symbol.

May Dean Eberling, Executive Director of the Metro Historical Commission, outlined logical reasons why the Hermitage Hotel was worth keeping and offered ways to revitalize it. She stated that the hotel offers an alternative for those who prefer marble & wood to chrome & plastic.

Eberling was energetic in working with the mayor. *“We at the Metropolitan Historical Commission felt we had to do something. In 1977 while discussing the possibilities in the mayor’s office, he picked up the phone.. and told ‘codes’ go to the hotel and enforce all codes violations immediately.”* According to Fulton’s son Richard, who knows firsthand, the mayor also called the former owner in Chicago (1956-1979) and said, *“You’re either going to fix up this hotel to be what it ought to be, or sell it.”*



The Hermitage Hotel, the place of so many memorable times, closed its doors, stacked the ballroom chairs, and went silent and dark, awaiting an uncertain fate.



One possibility, and one that very nearly came to fruition, was a conversion to an insurance company headquarters. A Wendy’s franchisee even had their eye on some street level space.

Historic Nashville, Inc., with Cherrie Hall as Executive Director, took a strong position for saving the hotel. A 1979 press release emphasized the hotel deserves to be kept, restored, and treasured. With the efforts of volunteers, a “Save the Hermitage” slide show was put together and presented at various civic and social gatherings across Nashville.

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The collective efforts were successful!

Enjoying a happy moment, pictured here in 1981 are the new manager, Dennis Morgan, Director of Sales, Dorothy Baumgartner, with Cherrie Hall, and May Dean Eberling.

Photo credits: the Fultons – Metro Nashville Archives; Janus image - courtesy of Jerry Atmip; hotel images on pages 2 3 - Nashville Public Library, Special Collections; page 4 wedding group - courtesy of Divineimages.net

Class and Elegance Again!

The state legislature helped by allowing special financing for central city business districts, and the federal government was innovative nationwide with an Investment Tax Credit. After several starts and stops the hotel was acquired by Brock Hotel Corp., based in Kansas, who decided on a full renovation. The new hotel would be a Park Suite brand – each room with a parlor and a sleeping room. In fact three styles of rooms were offered: traditional, contemporary, and oriental ! The grand opening occurred on March 6, 1981. Mayor Fulton tossed a set of hotel keys to the wind, affixed to ballons, with a card that offered a complimentary stay. It floated down in Kentucky.


Making the restoration possible was a diverse and talented group of contractors led by Gresham, Smith and Partners, architects. Interior design was handled by Ms. Jerry Law, who has recently donated her Hermitage files to the hotel archives.

The Hermitage - a Park Suites Hotel had a glorious run. Former concierge Mary B. Johnson recalls the great popularity of the hotel in the early to mid 80's, including many country music greats. She reports *“Louise Mandrell was a publicity agent of sorts and all kinds of social events took place here. Some celebrity guests of those times included: Roy Rogers, Barbara Walters, Tom Wopat (Dukes of Hazzard), Boy George, Motley Crue, Red Skelton, Clint Eastwood, Dolly Parton, Linda Ronstadt, Cybill Shepherd, Barbara Eden (I Dream of Jeannie), and many senators, of course.”*

This photo, taken in 1987, shows celebrated pianist Myrna Rose entertaining near the Veranda, where a cocktail lounge was opened. Just think of the decades that have since transpired and all the hotel guests and wonderful events!

Former attorney and author Jack Norman, Sr. expressed his exuberance and appreciation of The Hermitage Hotel after it re-opened with these words, as reprinted here from his 1984 book, “The Nashville I Knew.”

“The old Hermitage Hotel reaches out from the past to cling on to the present, but she has never lost her dignity and pride. Her experience records much of the history of Nashville and Tennessee. Her spacious rooms accommodated presidents, generals, heroes, dignitaries and the famous. Her ballroom resounded to the music of Francis Craig, other



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great bands and the gaiety of the community. Governors, senators, congressmen, mayors, and other political leaders have been named in her smoke-filled rooms. The spacious old lobby has echoed the hearty laughs of Franklin Roosevelt, the quiet language of Cordell Hull, the sharp voice of Ed Crump, the velvet tongue of Joe Byrnes, the quiet tones of Hilary Howse, the stentorian voice of Douglas MacArthur, and many other greats.

Her rooms could tell some interesting stories. Once a young baritone singer, anxious to graduate into an operatic career, was staying in one while competing in the regional finals of a nationwide contest in the War Memorial Building, sponsored by a radio company to choose operatic candidates. He lost and in disgust decided to study law instead. Thomas E. Dewey became a U.S. district attorney and later the governor of New York and a Republican candidate for the United States presidency.

A great part of the organized charities of Nashville was determined in her meeting rooms. She was a beautiful garden for the social flower of yesterday – until they faded. She was a gallery for the gallants of another day. She closed her doors and went into mourning. But then she arose and refused to surrender to the passage of time. She refused to give up her throne of a queen. She went back to the old trunks, dressed up and decided to turn to the cocktail, gourmet, and sophisticated new world.”



Cheers! May the future be as glorious as the past!
Let us be reminded to toast people with vision and courage who take decisive actions.

The Hermitage Hotel today is involved with its legacy of preservation by hosting a program to fund the Land Trust for Tennessee. Nearly one million dollars has so far been raised. Learn more about the Land Trust and its good works at: www.landtrusttn.org



Do you have some special memories of The Hermitage Hotel ?

To share your own “n ews” please drop by and see Tom Vickstrom, telephone 615-345-7123 or e-mail archives@thehermitagehotel.com
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