

“Where Did Y’all Stay?:

(a virtual tour of a few iconic [and some best forgotten!] hotels of the American South)”

The answer is: “a local newspaper, a railroad depot (preferably L&N), and a good local hotel.”

The question is: “Name three things essential to the success of any town or city in early Twentieth Century southern America”.

Now Paul Fourshee will verify the fact that I am addicted to newspapers and Mr. Turner will attest that I have been known to drop whatever I am doing and (like him!) race outside to watch a train rumble by. It is, however, the third of my fascinations on which I propose to focus this evening. Not the modern day, cookie cutter chain hotels which line the interstate, but those with distinct, unique, and fascinating stories, each one a true “character” in its own right. And so that is why I have decided to call my paper this evening “Where Did Y’all Stay?” as I share a few interesting stories about some great southern hotels...some of which still stand; some of which are but a pleasant memory.

We sit this evening in the shadow of just such a character. I need not remind this organization to which we pledge our fidelity that it had its origin there in April of 1902. The Hotel Latham, built in 1894, and destroyed by fire in 1940, lives on in our community’s history and lore thanks in no small part to the efforts of our county historian, the director of our local museum, and former *Kentucky New Era* writers and editors. Nothing I might say could add to that remarkable piece of history’s legendary status.

Hotels dotted the late 19th and early 20th Century landscapes as much as ants dot a picnic. In its heyday as the “Strawberry Capital

of the World”, Pembroke boasted no less than three hotels, all within walking distance of the L&N depot. By the 1960’s, two of those hotels were private homes; the third, the Bell Hotel, located on Jackson Street near the railroad and originally constructed as a hotel for African Americans, was, by the 1960’s, a boarding house for elderly African Americans with its rickety front porch nearly hidden by an untended spirea hedge and one bare lightbulb hanging in a dark foyer behind the rusted screen door, burning day and night. In the early 1960’s, it was the home of Communist spies; Mafia dons; werewolves; vampires; murderers; and a host of supernatural creatures. We rode bicycles past it daily...slowly...on the opposite side of the street. Stephen King would have been impressed.

Our neighboring counties, too, have a rich history of hotels. In Trigg County we still find the beautiful Canton Hotel, now a private residence, dating from 1799, when the town, known as Boyd’s Landing, was a bustling, busy port on the Cumberland River. According to legend, it played host to many celebrities, including the Swedish nightingale, Jenny Lind.

Todd County boasts the Jefferson Davis Hotel, originally built as the Elkton Hotel and extensively remodeled in 1929. While it no longer serves as a hotel, its beautiful staircase is still visible in a pleasant gift shop. Although it would be impossible to prove, and no doubt, the author would have denied it, I have always believed that the Jefferson Davis Hotel served as the model for the hotel, a very important setting, in Robert Penn Warren’s first novel, 1939’s **Nightrider**. Mr. Warren’s description is just too point-on, although he would probably have said that he had a Clarksville hotel in mind when he wrote the book.

Speaking of Clarksville, upon crossing the state line into Montgomery County, one soon comes to the Queen City of Clarksville and the home of the Royal York Hotel. For anyone who ever shopped at M. L. Cross or Bowler's Department Store or has any connection to "old" Clarksville, the prime real estate would be at the corner of Madison and Third Streets, the location of the six-story, yellow brick Royal York Hotel, built in 1947, that played host to the families of numerous servicemen stationed at nearby Camp and later Fort Campbell. Today it is the scene of luxury condominiums within walking distance of Austin Peay State University.

Traveling further south, one soon comes to Nashville, the Athens of the South, which has played host to many fascinating hotels. For the sake of brevity, we will limit our visit to two. The beautiful Hermitage Hotel which, after several incarnations, is once again an elegant downtown hotel that sits proudly at 231 Sixth Avenue, a stone's throw from the Tennessee state capitol building. The Hermitage, named, of course, for President Andrew Jackson's estate near Nashville, opened in September of 1910. It rapidly became a cultural center for the city. Built in the Beaux-arts style of architecture, it is the only remaining beaux-arts commercial building in Tennessee and one of the few in the south. When it opened in 1910, it boasted rooms that were "fireproof, noise proof and dust proof, at \$2.00 and up." It included every modern convenience, including a telephone and circulating ice water in all of the guest rooms. The lobby boasted a profusion of ornamental plaster and a painted glass ceiling. From the street entrance, a grand staircase led to the lobby and the main dining room (the Grand ballroom today). The hotel's Oak Bar and Capitol Grille retain their vaulted ceilings and rich wood paneling. According to my Nashville cousins, half a generation older and light years ahead

of me in sophistication, the perfect 1950's Saturday included tickets to a Vanderbilt home football game, dinner at Ireland's or Jimmy Kelley's, and drinks way into the night in the Oak Bar. When you visit the Hermitage, be sure to visit the black and green marble men's room in the basement...but be careful. Now that the hotel is on the historic register, the men's room is available for viewing by ladies. If you are modest, you might want to use one of the stalls rather than the six-foot long urinals against the walls!

The Hermitage was the scene of much debate 100 years ago as Tennessee became the final state necessary to insure passage of the 19th amendment granting the right to vote to women. Both opponents and supporters of the amendment held headquarters at the Hermitage.

A few blocks away from the Hermitage stood the equally famous historic Maxwell House Hotel. Constructed in large part by slave labor, the Maxwell House was built by Colonel John Overton, Jr., and named for his wife Harriet Maxwell Overon. Construction had begun in 1859, and when Nashville was occupied by Union troops in 1862 and remained occupied until the war's end, the unfinished hotel was used as a barracks, prison, and hospital. In September of 1863, several Confederate prisoners were killed when a staircase collapsed. Their ghosts, it was said, haunted the facility after it opened officially in 1869. It cost \$500,000 and would be Nashville's largest hotel.

Seven U.S. presidents stayed at the Maxwell House; Nathan Bedford Forrest was inducted into the Ku Klux Klan in room 10 at the Maxwell House in 1866; it was President Theodore Roosevelt who, while a guest at the Maxwell House, proclaimed the dining room's coffee "good to the last drop". It would become the coffee's official slogan...still in use today.

The Maxwell House became the victim of a tragic fire on December 26, 1961...and I got to see the remains the very next night as my Tennessee native father insisted that we drive by for a look after a visit to another Nashville tradition...businessman Fred Harvey's Christmas gift to the city of Nashville...the larger-than-life Nativity Scene regularly displayed at the Parthenon in Centennial Park from 1953 until 1967.

Leaving Nashville and heading west, one soon comes to the Buff City of Memphis...and I can suggest two amazing hotels. The first is hardly historic or artistic. It is a renovated Ramada Inn that invokes the spirit of Memphis' most famous resident. The Heartbreak Hotel features shag carpeting, genuine naugahyde furniture, and console color televisions that show only Elvis movies. Cheesy? The very epitome of the word. Tacky? Gaudy? You guessed it. The address? Wait for it...down at the end of Lonely Street, of course.

If your taste runs more toward class and dignity, then nothing can compare to the Memphis icon: the Peabody. The quessential grand southern hotel, it sits proudly at 149 Union Avenue...but it didn't always. The majestic Peabody you see today was built 1925; the original Peabody was built a block away in 1869 at the corner of Main and Monroe Streets and named for philanthropist George Peabody. It boasted 75 rooms, each with a private bathroom, and several elegant public rooms. It was built by Robert Campbell Brinkley who gave it to his daughter Anna Overton Brinkley and her husband Robert Snowden as a wedding gift. It played host to such luminaries as former Confederate president Jefferson Davis who lived there when he worked as president of a local insurance company.

When the original Peabody closed, construction began immediately on the present structure.

Yes, what about the ducks? It is true that every day at exactly 11:00 a.m., five Mallard ducks (one drake and four hens) proudly parade from the hotel elevator which brings them from their climate-controlled penthouse atop the hotel, through the beautiful lobby, and to a large fountain where they frolic and play until 5:00 p.m., when they are returned to their penthouse, to the delight of hundreds of tourists and locals alike. It is believed that the first ducks were placed in the fountain as a joke by some hunters back in the 1930's. Legends abound, but don't worry about facts. Just enjoy the ducks. I know that the rooms are small and that the walls are thin, but...it is the Peabody!

One of my personal favorite city hotels is in Atlanta. Although I never set foot in it, I regularly saw its roof line two, four, or even six times every year from the backseat of a Chevy BelAir as my parents and I made our way to Florida. The Atlantan Hotel. Every time we passed it, my mother said, "That is the colored hotel. When colored people travel, they have to plan their trips very carefully because many hotels and restaurants won't let them come inside. I think that is terrible." I am so proud that she thought it was terrible...and that she passed that sense of injustice and unfairness to me.

Tempting as it is to head next to Louisville and visit that city's amazing historic hotels where incredible stories abound (the Seelbach's secret speakeasy and connection to Al Capone; Scott Fitzgerald's passing out regularly in the bar and it serving as an inspiration for *The Great Gatsby*;) the Galt House where Union

General Jefferson C. Davis shot and killed General William “Bull” Nelson in September of 1862, and President Trump addressed the Amvets in 2019) or the Brown Hotel which gave us one of the Commonwealth’s most famous signature dishes, I want to urge you that as you travel Highway 41 from Chicago, whose Blackstone Hotel was the scene of Warren Harding’s agreement to accept the Republican nomination for president in 1920, to the incredible art deco hotels on Collins Avenue in Miami, resist the urge to stay in a “safe” “well-known” chain hotel and take a chance on a locally owned facility. At the worst, you will have a great story to tell!