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# A Careful Update of Nashville's Hermitage Hotel Keeps its Beaux-Arts Grandeur Intact

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It was the summer of 1920. Carrie Chapman Catt was staying at Nashville's Hermitage Hotel, just a block south of the Tennessee State Capitol. Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and founder of the League of Women Voters, holed up at the 1910 hotel not because of the Beaux-Arts building's celebrated brick and polychrome terra-cotta exterior. It was the property's proximity to the statehouse, in part, that brought her there.

For political reasons, Catt and others believed Tennessee was the most likely state to cast the crucial vote that would lead to the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which provided that United States citizens may not be denied the right to vote on account of their sex. (Of

course, for many women of color, state laws and other loopholes continued to make voting impossible until enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.)

She arrived in July, carrying light luggage, and checked into a suite. Catt stayed for six weeks, ready to oversee the culmination of her life's work, explains Tom Vickstrom, The Hermitage Hotel's director of finance and its in-house historian.



Nick McGinn

Classical terra-cotta exterior details herald the building's age and prominence.

But Catt wasn't the only one who figured out that being within shouting distance of the state capitol was a good thing. The hotel also became headquarters for Tennessee's anti-suffrage forces, led by Josephine Pearson. Pearson and her cohorts took over the mezzanine, where they had eyes and ears on Catt's suffragists down in the lobby and veranda (referred to as the "loggia" a century ago). Because of the vigorous legislative debates that took place on its marble floors, the hotel was nicknamed "the Third House."

"One can imagine looking out over the railing of the mezzanine and seeing the activity of the War of the Roses," says Vickstrom, using the nickname for the battle over the vote.

When the amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920, after Tennessee's deciding vote, Catt received congratulatory telegrams from across the country at the hotel.

“The Hermitage Hotel is really a character in the story of suffrage. It served a bigger purpose than a venue,” explains Carole Bucy, the county historian and a professor at Volunteer State Community College. Bucy has spent considerable time researching the city and state’s connection to the women’s suffrage movement, particularly leading up to the 2020 centennial of ratification. “I cannot think of another hotel in Tennessee that has the history it has.”

Nick McGinn

Nick McGinn

For the recent renovation work, design firm ForrestPerkins specified light wall colors that draw attention to the hotel’s intricate plaster detailing.

Extra light enters the veranda through arched transoms and sidelights. The sky painting and hanging light fixtures were later additions to the original vaulted ceiling.

**M**y husband and I, we are really not owners of the hotel, but we are stewards of it,” says Molly Hardie. “The way we look at it, it is not just a business for us. It is a passion and a stewardship.” Hardie and her husband, Robert, had been partial owners of the hotel through a family business until 2017, when they became the sole owners. In 2020, they began renovating and restoring the Hermitage Hotel for the next century, while taking steps to tell the story of its first century.

Over the course of the past 112 years, the hotel has been renovated and restored several times, including after it fell into disrepair and temporarily closed in the 1970s. At the time, a group of local preservationists (the founders of the nonprofit Historic Nashville) mounted a “Save the Hermitage” campaign, working with Mayor Richard Fulton. Eventually a buyer sensitively rehabilitated the hotel using [federal historic tax credits](#) [Link: /historic-tax-credits], reopening it to great fanfare in 1981.

A \$20 million renovation completed in 2003 by design firm ForrestPerkins brought the hotel into the modern era. Throughout these and other changes, the building’s main

details by J.E.R. Carpenter, believed to be the first native Tennessean to be formally trained in architecture, have remained intact. Carpenter studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and that Beaux-Arts influence plays out in the hotel's grand public spaces, arched windows and doors, and incorporation of ornamentation and murals.

Nick McGinn

## Hermitage Glass Ceiling

The lobby's showstopping painted glass ceiling.

The Hardies and the hotel's managing director, Dee Patel, had been considering an update when the coronavirus pandemic started. They made the decision to keep the hotel open and began renovation, closing the lower-level bar and restaurant and temporarily reconfiguring to serve guests in the veranda and lobby. The veranda's 16-foot ceilings, painted in the 2000s with a faux sky, were a bonus given the increased emphasis on air circulation at the height of the pandemic.

The centerpiece of the hotel's lobby is an original painted-glass ceiling, hovering 30 feet above the marble floor. Its recessed panels feature creatures from mythology and the hotel's double "H" logo. Guests were able to watch artists and painters on scaffolding as they cleaned and restored the ceiling in the summer of 2020. A team from ForrestPerkins, which continued its long association with the hotel by overseeing the recent renovation work (except for the restaurant and retail spaces), lightened the overall color palette of the walls and furnishings. This move made the lobby's decorative details, including the ceiling, stand out.

"The lighter space really accentuated the Beaux-Arts masterpiece in a way that I hadn't seen it prior," Patel says. "It almost felt like it was brought to life in a different way. You could see the architecture so much more than you could before."

Nick McGinn

While most of Drusie & Darr restaurant on the lower level is new, the space still has its original vaulted ceilings

Historically, the main level's flooring comprised three marbles—Tennessee Pink, Tennessee Gray, and Tennessee Chocolate (also called Tennessee Cedar). Much of it is still there, but for places where it needed repairing or replacing, the hotel found a woman-owned quarry in Friendsville, Tennessee, that sells marble with similar coloration. The hotel scooped up extra marble in the same colors for any future repairs.

The main ballroom, adjacent to the lobby, is lined with Circassian walnut paneling. When it was installed in 1910, it was one of the most expensive and sought-after woods available. As of press time, Forrest Perkins was lining up conservators to restore the paneling, as well as the original chandelier canopies.

The hotel's team decided to keep tea service on the veranda permanently and add a small bar in the lobby. Now the space buzzes with activity. People look up at the painted glass, the veranda's faux sky, and the ornamental plaster detailing throughout the main level. They gaze out the window to the north to see how close the hotel is to the Greek Revival-style Tennessee State Capitol, and picture how easy it was to reach people in power during the War of the Roses.

"Every time I go into the hotel I just imagine everyone in a tailspin about what was going to happen [with the suffrage vote]," Bucy says.

With the centennial in mind, Patel and her team applied for National Historic Landmark status in 2018, knowing the process can take five years or more. Prior to The Hermitage Hotel, the most recent Nashville building to receive the accolade was

## Historic Hotels of America

The Hermitage Hotel is a member of Historic Hotels of America, a program of the National Trust. When

the Ryman Auditorium, a former home of the Grand Ole Opry, in 2001. “We were determined to get this status in August 2020,” says Patel. “We knew we would eventually get it, but our goal was to get it in the year [of] the centennial. We rallied as many people as we could ... we got the attention of both [Tennessee] senators.” The designation was officially announced on August 18, 2020.

While the suffrage history spurred the National Park Service to grant the hotel National Historic Landmark status, it isn't the only significant history that took place on the site. Songwriter Francis Craig played piano there six days a week starting in 1925 and wrote the music for the song “Near You.” (The lyricist, Kermit Goell, may have penned the song's words on a Hermitage menu.) That song went on to become Nashville's first hit record in 1947, playing a key part in the city's evolution into “Music City.”

During the Civil Rights Movement, many of Nashville's influential sit-ins happened within a few blocks of the hotel. The sit-ins helped push The Hermitage Hotel to begin allowing

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Black guests by 1963, and the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964.

**A**s part of the renovation, the Hardies decided to overhaul the lower-level kitchen and restaurant that serve the entire hotel. (They also added a new cafe, The Pink Hermit, on the main level.) The couple had worked with renowned chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten in the past and asked him to open a restaurant in Nashville.

New York interior designer Thomas Juul-Hansen had collaborated with Vongerichten on other projects, so the team brought him in to redesign the hotel's restaurants and retail space. Much of the work in the kitchen and the main restaurant (now called Drusie & Darr, named after the children of the hotel's midcentury general manager, Dick Hall) entailed modernization, but Juul-Hansen also kept his eye on the past.

"We kept as [many] of the original aspects of the building as we could find," he says. "The original building still has a presence in the space—it has a historic feel."

He knocked out a wall separating the bar from the restaurant because "the energy of the two rooms need to feed off each other" and commissioned a polished brass screen with an updated version of the double "H" logo. The bar area's original ornamental plaster ceiling and the restaurant's vaulted ceilings were both retained and repaired.

For decades the bar featured a small cubby window connecting bartenders to the hallway. As legend has it, this is where women would historically order drinks and be served. Juul-Hansen left the window in place, making it a design element in the hallway.

Nick McGinn

 Hermitage Men's Room

The much-admired Art Deco men's room.

Perhaps the most beloved—and definitely the most Instagrammed—spot in the hotel was the 1930s lower-level men's restroom, which sparkles with Art Deco green-and-black tile and a full retro shoeshine set-up. For decades men and women alike have popped their

heads in for a look and a photo. Patel and Hardie wanted the women's restroom to be a destination, too, particularly because of the hotel's significance in women's history. Juul-Hansen designed a pink marble women's room that is now the toast of Instagram.

He credits the Hardies for valuing the integrity of the building. "They treat this building as their firstborn child, almost," he says. "It's really pleasant to see that kind of respect."

Certainly, the independent ownership of the hotel helped make the renovation possible. "You have more flexibility. It is not as easy to make changes under a corporate umbrella. This allows us autonomy in a way you don't always get to see," Patel says. "I commend our owners because it is not easy and it is very expensive."

Business realities fueled the project as well. Nashville's recent growth has increased the number of new hotels in town, including several luxury properties. The Joseph and the W Nashville have both opened since 2020, and a Four Seasons is slated to open this year, so the 122-room hotel has stiff competition.

ForrestPerkins founder and interior designer Deborah Lloyd Forrest, who oversaw the 2003 renovation, isn't concerned. "Even though this hotel is historic and there is so much beautiful detail, it is also approachable," she says. "In a way, that is gratifying, to go into a historic place and not have it feel like a museum."

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Her ForrestPerkins colleague Toby Bishop, who is leading the current renovation work, marvels at the original architecture. "Every time I visit, I see something new in the design."

Margaret Littman writes about the people and the places of the South from Nashville.



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