The History of Hotel Roanoke, Part 2: The Grand Old Lady on the Hill

Description

Article by Katherine Hunnicutt,

Welcome to the second installment of this 3-part series. Read part one below:

The History of Hotel Roanoke, Part 1: From Big Lick to Roanoke



Figure 1: â??Hotel Roanoke 1910â?•. Virginia, Bourbonism to Boyd, 1870-1925 (1968). Retrieved from WikiCommons. In the public domain.

The late afternoon sun in November of 1989 threw the Tudor-revival peaks of Hotel Roanoke into silhouette, casting the sprawling hotel in a harsh, golden light. Inside the Crystal Ballroom, the chandeliers twinkled softly over six hundred place settings, each sporting a heavy souvenir snifter emblazoned with the hotelâ??s seal. The occasion: Hotel Roanokeâ??s Closing Banquet. Doreen Fishwick stood at the threshold, pressing a hand against the knot in her gut. It had lived there since the July announcement, a gnawing ache that only deepened as she balanced the daily bustle of routine check-outs with the reality of canceling conventions scheduled years into the â??90s. She had meticulously overseen every detail of this final, â??hot ticketâ?• event, ensuring the scent of traditional peanut soup and the refined melodies of the Bruce Swartz Quintet would mask the underlying sorrow of a 107-year legacy being dismantled piece by piece. As the first guests in black tie and fashionable gowns began to arrive, she felt the heavy weight of the hotelâ??s history pressing against her. All in attendance were smiling and courteous; all in attendance knew this was the end of the legacy of The Grand Old Lady on the Hillâ?¦

Yet, that strong and reliable iron pulse of â??The Ladyâ?• was far from stilled. She was already finding her way through into her next era.

Though her exact thoughts are unknown, Mrs. Fishwickâ??s true feelings about that final soiree- and the departure of the last guests the next morning- are not difficult to imagine. The Hotel Roanoke officially closed on November 30, 1989. The century of service had worn down the Grand Old Lady and the financial strain of keeping up with the times was undeniable in the account books. While a restoration project was already underway, more repairs were popping up as the decade chugged on, carrying an insurmountable price tag. The hotel simply could not afford the estimated $35 million required to replace the heating and cooling systems alongside other necessary repairs. To compound the problem, further investments from Norfolk Southern were not forthcoming after the 1982 Norfolk and Western merger with Southern Railway. Hotel Roanoke was now on her own. And she wasnâ??t going to survive into the next millennium without a new investor (Piedmont, 2020).

Yet, as history has already proven, Hotel Roanoke was a survivor. She had weathered catastrophes in the past and she would face this storm, too, with her back straight and her head held high.

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The Early Years

To truly understand Hotel Roanoke, one must first understand the rapid development of the city itself. As explored in the article â??**The History of Hotel Roanoke, Part 1: From Big Lick to Roanoke**,â?• the city was once merely the newly incorporated town of Big Lick before Norfolk and Western brought the railroad junction to the quiet valley in 1881 and changed its name and destiny forever. The hotel was always a vital part of Norfolk and Westernâ??s master plan. Specifically, she was a part of the N&W President Frederick Kimballâ??s vision for the railroadâ??s new headquarters. Recognizing that the small town could not accommodate the demands the railroad would soon place on it, Kimball ordered construction to begin immediately. Quite suddenly the city saw subdivisions of homes, offices, mechanicsâ?? shops and factories spring up. Soon Roanoke had everything a new city would need to support a major railroad junction and the booming population that came with it. Between 1881 and 1883, Roanokeâ??s population grew from 700 to 5,000, and Hotel Roanoke stood as its crowning glory, overlooking the beating heart of the N&W junction (Workers, 1942).



Figure 2: â??The scenic attractions and summer resorts along the railways of the Virginia, Tennessee & Georgia Air Line: the Shenandoah Velley RR., the Norfolk & Western RR., and the East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia RR.â?• c. 1883. Retrieved from The Library of Congress. In the public domain.

Designed by George T. Pearson, the original hotel was a stunning Queen Anne style building. The first phase was a simple, three-story rectangle with a basement and measured 177 feet by 73 feet. She held 34 guest rooms. An annex attached as an L-shaped wing was quickly added, bringing the total number of guest rooms to 69. The total investment was $60,000 (Piedmont, 2020), which is roughly equal to $2,000,000 of purchasing power today.

Although the hotel began accepting guests in October, the official grand opening was reserved for Christmas Day 1882. A lavish feast marked the opening of the grandest building Roanoke had ever seen. The menu featured dishes showcasing the height of French cuisine including Filet de Boeuf piquÃ© aux champignons, Diamondback Terrapin Ã la St. Cloud and Petit PÃ¢tÃ© of Oyster. These options stood out not only for the refined French culinary techniques required, but because they featured difficult-to-source coastal ingredients such as lobster, oyster, and terrapin. Additionally, the menu boasted exotic treats like bananas, figs, and Spanish Malaga grapes. This level of luxury had previously been reserved for high-end establishments in major cities like Washington, D.C. or New York City. Yet, thanks to the speed of the railroad, these luxuries were effortlessly transported into the western hills of Virginia via the magic of the iron rails. With that splendid dinner, Hotel Roanoke solidified her image as the standard-bearer of elegance and hospitality- a status she still enjoys today (Piedmont, 2020).

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The Evolution of an Icon

The elegance of that Grand Old Lady could not protect her from disaster. In July 1898, tragedy struck when a major kitchen fire broke out and spread at alarming speed through the timber-frame building. A photograph taken from the opposite side of the railroad tracks captures both the smoke billowing from the roof and the horde of spectators that gathered on the lawn to watch the sober scene unfold. Fortunately, as reported in the November 30, 1936 article in the *Roanoke Times*, most of the furniture and carpets were heroically saved by hundreds of men employed by the Roanoke Machine Works, who rushed into the blaze when the fire department declared the structure was a total loss (Piedmont, 2020).



Figure 3: â??Davis 16.201 Hotel Roanoke Fireâ?• George C. Davis Photographic Records. c. July 1898. Retrieved from Roanoke Public Librariesâ?? Virginia Room. Reprinted with permission.

Despite the bleak appearance of the smoke-filled skies, there were no injuries and much of the hotel was ultimately spared from the flames. Shuttered only briefly for repairs, the resilient landmark reopened her doors in January 1899 (Piedmont, 2020).

Taking a cue from John Moomawâ??s bold action and Frederick Kimballâ??s visionary leadership, Hotel Roanoke never wavered in her commitment to evolve alongside the changing times. In 1916, a new three-story wing was constructed, adding seventy-two guest rooms; by 1931 a sixty-car garage proved that the hotel was already anticipating the demands of the automobile age. The 1930s brought an influx of modern luxuries to the guest rooms, including electric fans, movable telephones, running ice-cold water, and automatic lighting. The most notable transformation of the decade, however, was a monumental $1,000,000 renovation that granted Hotel Roanoke the iconic, sprawling Tudor-style entrance she is famous for today. (Piedmont, 2020).

Through the mid-20th century, the Grand Old Lady continually rose to the occasion by allowing the WWII pilots training in Roanoke to use the Pine Room as an Officerâ??s Club and hosted exciting and

patriotic USO dances within her ballroom. She even immortalized the ultimate comfort food of the time: Peanut Soup. In the golden decades that followed WWII, she graciously played host to the Miss Virginia beauty pageant, a unique cattle auction in the ballroom, numerous balls, banquets and events, and soon conventions that quickly became a prized source of revenue (Piedmont, 2020).

Naturally, Hotel Roanoke was considered a must-see destination for the upper crust of society. Her guest ledgers boasted U.S. presidents including Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush. Renowned innovators like Henry Ford and Thomas Edison walked her corridors, while legendary musicians, entertainers, and authors all enjoyed a stop at the Grand Old Ladyâ??from Aerosmith and Louis Armstrong to Jerry Seinfeld, Kevin Hart, Cary Grant, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Most notably, in 1964 she welcomed gospel singer Mahalia Jackson as the hotelâ??s first Black guest (Berrier; Nair; Piedmont, 2020).



Figure 4: â??Hotel Roanoke, 110 Shenandoah Avenue, Roanoke, Roanoke (Independent City), VAâ?•. date unknown. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. In the public domain.

May She Awaken

Despite the historic glory of Hotel Roanoke, time eventually took its toll on the Grand Old Lady. The world was changing rapidly around her: The City of Roanoke was desperate for a modern conference center, Norfolk Southern had established a new corporate headquarters, and the hotel required deeply complex, multimillion-dollar renovations that her dwindling revenues simply could not support. Yet, the luck of the aging hotel shone through once more as her stars began to align.

A series of providential connections began with Roanoke City Manager Robert Herbert, who commissioned the Trade Center Task Force in 1985, which in turn hired a law firm to conduct a formal feasibility study. Concurrently, Dominion Bankshares was conducting an independent study of its own. By pure happenstance, David Caudillâ??the vice chairman of Dominion Banksharesâ??happened to be a Virginia Tech alumnus. Just as John Moomaw and Big Lickâ??s â??movers and shakersâ?• organized talks that led to Norfolk and Westernâ??s big move back in 1881, Caudill began regular, informal conversations with Herbert and Economic Development Director Brian Wishneff. Through these visionary talks, a swift strategy was devised to carry Hotel Roanoke safely into the future (Piedmont, 2020).

To kick off the plan, Norfolk Southern generously gifted the historic hotel property to the Virginia Tech Foundation in 1989. At that fateful closing banquet, Mrs. Fishwick stepped forward to offer the final, unforgettable toast: â??To her glorious pastâ??may she sleep well, and *may she awaken* with all the charm of today to face a bright and prosperous 21st Century.â?• As the final chords of â??Auld Lang Syneâ?• faded through The Grand Old Lady on the Hill, the doors were locked, and the physical contents of the building were sold off by National Content Liquidators. And the process to bring her back to life began. A powerful coalition of institutionsâ??including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the City of Roanoke, the Virginia Tech Foundation, Doubletree Hotels Corporation, and the grassroots â??Renew Roanokeâ?• campaignâ??successfully secured an initial $27.5 million financing package. By the time the dust settled, the monumental project total reached $43 million. (Piedmont, 2020).

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On April 29th, 1995, Hotel Roanoke and the Conference Center officially open for business (Piedmont, 2020). The brilliant architectural blend of a state-of-the-art conference center and the design of a bygone era is immediately apparent; the designers masterfully honored what the Grand Old Lady on the Hill once was, while carving out spaces for who she would become. Today she is managed as part of the Curio Collection by Hilton. Hotel Roanoke boasts 329 guest rooms, five distinct restaurants, a luxury spa, and a sprawling 63,000-square-foot conference facility. It proudly plays host to a wide variety of events ranging from elegant modern weddings to our very own 2026 Virginia Land Title Associationâ??s Annual Convention (The Hotel Roanoke).



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Figure 5: Hotel Roanoke with Historical Marker. Photograph taken and provided by the author Katherine Hunnicutt

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As you make your way into the city for this yearâ??s convention, keep your eyes open for living hints at Roanokeâ??s vibrant history. You will undoubtedly notice road or business names featuring â??Big Lickâ?• or â??Trout,â?• directly honoring the townâ??s origins. You can easily stop by historical markers such as the Frederick J. Kimball Memorial Fountain located just a short distance from the Roanoke City Market off Campbell Avenue or explore the nearby Virginia Museum of Transportation to see the legacy of the Norfolk and Western Railway up-close.

If staying within the hotel premises themselves is more your pace, take a stroll across the â??Market Street Walkwayâ?• skywalk, which crosses over the active railroad tracks and toward Roanoke City Market. But for those with a sturdier constitution, stay tuned for our next installment, â??The History of Hotel Roanoke, Part 3: Phantoms in the Ballroomâ?• where we will dive into the ghostly sightings and unexplained happenings that still linger within the grand halls of The Grand Old Lady on the Hill.

In the meantime, you can experience Hotel Roanokeâ??s iconic flavors right at home with the recipes below:

Hotel Roanoke Peanut Soup
Developed by Chef Fred Brown in 1940
10 Servings

- Â¼ pound butter
- 1 small onion, diced

- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 3 Tbsp flour
- 2 quarts chicken broth
- 1 pint peanut butter
- 1/3 tsp celery salt
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 Tbsp lemon juice
- Â½ cup ground peanuts

Melt butter in pot and add diced onion and celery. SautÃ© for 5 minutes. Add flour and mix well. Add hot chicken broth and cook for half hour. Remove from stove, strain and add peanut butter, celery salt, salt and lemon juice. Top with ground peanuts before serving (Piedmont, Appendix B).

Hotel Roanoke Spoonbread
10 Servings

- 1 Â½ cups cornmeal
- 1 1/3 tsp salt
- 1 tsp sugar
- 1 Â½ cups boiling water
- 1/8 pound butter
- 5 eggs
- 2 cups milk
- 1 tsp baking powder

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Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Mix cornmeal, salt and sugar and scald with boiling water. Add melted butter. Beat together eggs and milk. Combine the two mixtures and add baking powder. Pour into baking pan and bake for 30 â?? 40 minutes (Piedmont, Appendix B).

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