

Nobody Asked Me, But... No. 185: Hotel History: The Peabody (1869)

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by Stanley Turkel, CMHS

1. The Peabody Hotel (1869), Memphis, Tennessee (464 rooms)

Following the Civil War, Memphis began the process of rebuilding. In 1869, Colonel Robert C. Brinkley opened a 75-room hotel which contained private baths, ballroom, saloon and lobby. Brinkley planned to name the hotel after himself but when he learned that his dear friend, philanthropist George Peabody, had died, he christened it The Peabody. Its lobby was soon filled with Memphis business and society leaders as well as plantation owners and riverboat gamblers. Presidents Andrew Johnson and William McKinley, Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee, Nathan Bedford Forrest and Jubal Early were guests. Jefferson Davis, the former president of the Confederacy, lived there in 1870 when he was president of a Memphis-based insurance company. After 57 years, the original Peabody was demolished to make way for a department store. It was replaced in 1926 by a new 12-story Peabody with elegant public rooms, ornate hand-painted beamed ceilings and duplex townhouse suites. It was built on the site of the Fransioli Hotel and was designed by the famous Chicago architect Walter W. Ahlschlager. He also designed the Roxy Theatre and the Beacon Hotel and Theater in New York; the Sheridan Plaza and Sovereign Hotels in Chicago; the Carew Tower in Cincinnati, the Medinah Athletic Club in Chicago, etc.

In 1935, historian David Cohn wrote:

The Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg. The Peabody is the Paris Ritz, the Cairo Shepheard's, the London Savoy of this section. If you stand near its fountain in the middle of the lobby, where ducks waddle and turtles drowse, ultimately you will see everybody who is anybody in the Delta.

In 1932, general manager Frank Schutt and friend Chip Barwick returned from a hunting trip and decided to let their live duck decoys take a swim in the hotel's lobby fountain. This led to the creation of the March of the Peabody Ducks, a cherished Memphis tradition and an extraordinary public relations benefit to the Peabody. The world-famous March takes place daily at 11AM and 5PM with great fanfare. The guests love the idea and, since then, five Mallard ducks (one drake and four hens) have played in the fountain every day. Over the years, the Peabody Ducks have gained celebrity status with television appearances on the Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson, the Oprah Winfrey Show and Sesame Street. The custom of keeping ducks in the lobby fountain may date back even further than the 1930s. A pre-1915 postcard shows ducks playing in the fountain.

In 1940, bellman Edward Pembroke volunteered to care for the ducks. Pembroke was given the position of "Duckmaster" and served in that position until 1991. As a former circus animal trainer, he taught the ducks to march into the hotel lobby, which started the famous Peabody Duck March. Every day at 11AM, the Peabody Ducks are escorted from their penthouse home, on the Plantation Roof, to the lobby via elevator. The ducks, accompanied by the King Cotton March by John Philip Sousa, then proceed across a red carpet to the hotel fountain, made of a solid block of Italian travertine marble. The ducks are then ceremoniously led back to their penthouse at 5 PM.

In the 1950s, the Peabody suffered as a casualty of the declining fortunes of downtown Memphis. The Sheraton Corporation tried to revive the hotel in 1968 as the Sheraton-Peabody Hotel, the same year that Martin Luther King Jr. was shot to death while standing on the balcony of a small motel less than a mile south of the Peabody. His assassination and the subsequent riots accelerated the flight of white families and businesses. The hotel struggled to stay open for another seven years before it declared bankruptcy and closed in 1975. The property was bought at a foreclosure sale by the Belz family who spent upwards of \$25 million to renovate and restore the hotel. The grand reopening of the Peabody in 1981 was credited as the inspiration for the downtown revitalization of Memphis that followed. The Peabody's success has been the catalyst in the redevelopment of other downtown properties including two nearby hotels.

The Skyway Room on the Peabody roof was refurbished and, with the adjoining open-air Plantation Roof, are the scene of pop and rock concerts. In the 1930s and 40s, Benny Goodman, Harry James, the Andrews Sisters and Tommy Dorsey performed here. The Peabody was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977 and is a member of Historic Hotels of America.

*excerpted from "Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels East of the Mississippi" AuthorHouse 2011

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About Stanley Turkel



Stanley Turkel was designated as the 2014 and the 2015` Historian of the Year by Historic Hotels of America, the official program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This award is presented to an individual for making a unique contribution in the research and presentation of hotel history and

whose work has encouraged a wide discussion and a greater understanding and enthusiasm for American History.

Turkel is a well-known consultant in the hotel industry. He operates his hotel consulting practice serving as an expert witness in hotel-related cases, providing asset management and hotel franchising consultation. He is certified as a Master Hotel Supplier Emeritus by the Educational Institute of the American Hotel and Lodging Association.

Stanley Turkel is one of the most widely-published authors in the hospitality field. More than 325 articles on various hotel subjects have been posted in hotel magazines and on the Hotel-Online, BlueMauMau, HotelNewsResource and eTurboNews websites. Two of his hotel books have been promoted, distributed and sold by the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute ("Great American Hoteliers: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry" and "Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels East of the Mississippi"). A third hotel book ("Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels in New York") was called "passionate and informative" by the *New York Times*. His fourth hotel book was described by the *New York Times*: "Nostalgia for the City's caravansaries will be kindled by Stanley Turkel's... fact-filled... "Hotel Mavens: Lucius M. Boomer, George C. Boldt and Oscar of the Waldorf". In his fifth hotel book, "Great American Hoteliers Volume 2: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry", Lawrence P. Horwitz, Executive Director, Historic Hotels of America writes in the Foreword:

"The author, Stanley Turkel is a great story teller.... This book is about risk takers, dreamers, inventors, entrepreneurs, innovators, visionaries, leaders and motivators. This is a collection of stories about hotel pioneers with a passion for inventing new ways to create demand for their product."

All of these books can be ordered from the publisher (AuthorHouse) by visiting www.stanleyturkel.com and clicking on the book title.

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