

TIMELESS

APPEAL



BEAUMONT
INN, FAMOUS
FOR ITS
HOSPITALITY
AND
CLASSIC
SOUTHERN
CUISINE,
CELEBRATES
A CENTURY

By Patti Nickell
Photos by Kirk Schlea





TIMELESS APPEAL



The Beaumont Inn's architecture and setting add to its Southern mystique while the service embodies Southern hospitality.

It could be straight from the pages of a William Faulkner novel. All the requisites are there: a stately white-columned mansion surrounded by equally stately magnolia and oak trees; a wide front porch perfect for watching lightning bugs, accompanied by a symphony of nocturnal sounds, illuminate the summer sky with their faint glow.

You don't have to go to Mississippi's fictional Yoknapatawpha County to find such a place. You have only to drive to Harrodsburg.

This pastoral scene comes courtesy of Beaumont Inn, lauded by Southern Living magazine as one of the South's Top 20 Charming Inns. This year it is celebrating 100 years of providing hospitality to guests.

Guests such as Ken Dennis. A retired history teacher from Louisville, he first started coming to Beaumont Inn in the 1950s when his family would drive over for Sunday lunch.

"The inn was really special in those days," said Dennis. "It was like taking a step back in time — from the pictures on the wall to the white-coated servers in the dining room."



Helen and Chuck Dedman run the inn with their son Dixon. Chuck is a descendant of the original innkeeper.



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Legalization of alcohol sales in restaurants enabled the Beaumont Inn to capitalize on its proximity to the Bourbon Trail, of which it is now a sponsor. Dixon Dedman often leads bourbon tastings in the inn's Owl Tavern. He has introduced some 100 bourbons — many of them rare — to the tavern's bourbon list.

While some of the pictures have disappeared and the servers have shucked the starched white coats, the inn retains an aura that keeps drawing him back.

"I still come twice a year and have been an overnight guest some 35 times," said Dennis. "It is just so much a part of my history."

A part of his history and that of Harrodsburg itself — a town that doesn't take the word lightly. The city is the site of Fort Harrod, Kentucky's first permanent settlement — built in 1774, a year before Daniel Boone established Fort Boonesborough.

And Mercer County is also home to Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, founded in 1805 and today the largest restored Shaker community in the United States.

A compelling history

While not as old as Fort Harrod or Shaker Village, Beaumont Inn has a history just as compelling and certainly more varied. In 1845 the building opened as the Greenville Institute, where privileged young ladies were taught skills ranging from needlepoint and playing the pianoforte to engaging in conversation designed more to showing off their good breeding than their informed opinions.

In 1855 the Greenville Institute gave way to Daughters College under the direction of John Augustus Williams, a former president of the University of Kentucky, and finally in 1895, to Beaumont College, run



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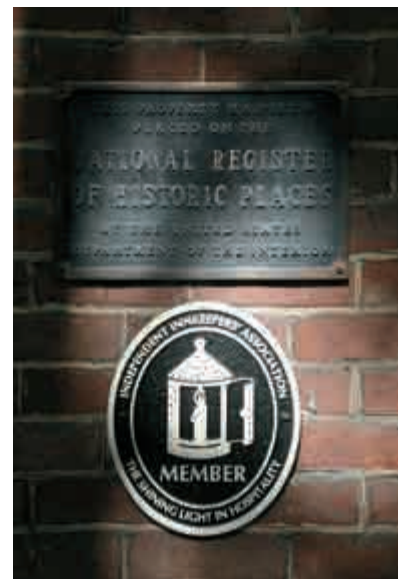
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TIMELESS APPEAL



Top, comfortable rockers on the porch beckon visitors from their guestrooms, above, to soak in the ambience of this National Register of Historic Places site.



by Col. Thomas Smith, a veteran of the Confederate army.

Toward the end of Smith's tenure is where our story begins. In 1917 Annie Bell Goddard, a former student at the college who had obviously learned the basics of economics as well as the basics of good deportment, purchased the school with the idea of converting it to a country inn. In 1919 academics gave way to hospitality, and the Beaumont Inn opened its doors.

A century later it remains in the family, with Annie's great-grandson, Chuck Dedman, his wife, Helen, and son Dixon operating the 31-room inn.

It wasn't all smooth sailing for the Dedman family as Chuck points out.

"The inn survived two world wars, the Depression, and the arrival of the interstate," he said with a wry smile.

What the inn almost didn't survive was the inability of its guests to enjoy — in the heart of bourbon country — anything resembling bourbon.

"As recently as the early part of this decade, the inn's future was not looking good," said Chuck. "We were losing business to Frankfort and Lexington as a result of not being able to offer alcohol."

Helen added that "it was like a bank not offering an ATM."

All that changed in 2003 when after three failed attempts in eight years, the city of Harrodsburg finally passed a law allowing the sale of alcohol in restaurants — albeit by a meager 17 votes.

The inn officially served the first legal drink in

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Diners can count on quintessential Southern cuisine, which has earned the inn a James Beard Foundation's America's Classic Award.

Harrodsburg since Prohibition — a Maker's Mark and Diet Coke — in March 2004

The passage proved both a blessing and a curse for the Dedmans. While Chuck said they had to go so far as to take the voicemail machine off their phone because of the vitriolic messages they received from some zealous members of the community, Helen has a more positive take.

"People who fought us tooth and nail to keep liquor out of the inn were the first in line when we opened the tavern," she said.

The Bourbon Trail boon

The tavern he refers to is the Old Owl Tavern, fashioned from a garage next to the inn, and one of those people first in line was Art Freeman, a retired banker and current mayor of Harrodsburg who has been a friend of the Dedmans for 50 years.

"I told Chuck if he ever succeeded in getting a license for alcohol, I'd be his best customer," said Freeman with a laugh, adding that, "Chuck's told me I've kept my word."



The yellow-legged fried chicken with house-seasoned green beans and corn pudding is a favorite.

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Customers such as Freeman, who comes in for dinner several times a week, have done much to restore the inn's fortunes. But two other things have had even greater impacts: the popularity of the Bourbon Trail and the addition of the Dedmans' son Dixon to the family business.

When they saw the impact made by Bourbon Trail visitors taking the detour to the inn from nearby distilleries Wild Turkey and Four Roses, the Dedmans moved quickly to take advantage of it.

"We started first by aggressively promoting it," said Chuck, "and then we became a participating sponsor of the trail."



*"The inn survived two
world wars, the Depression,
and the arrival of the
interstate."*

—owner **Chuck Dedman**



Many of the original Bourbon Trail visitors have become regulars, joining the 40 percent who Chuck says are repeat guests, "some going back four or five generations."

The Owl Tavern proved so popular that the Dedmans opened a companion bar/grill, the Owl's Nest, above the tavern.

The bourbon component has been enhanced by Dixon's more active role in the family business since graduating from Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, in 2003. An admitted lover of Kentucky's native spirit, he has introduced some 100 bourbons — many of them rare — to the tavern's bourbon list.

In addition, he helps guests refine their palates by conducting bourbon tastings on a regular basis (on this day, he had had four separate tastings offering guests such rare bourbons as George T. Stagg, Pappy Van Winkle, and the inn's own Old Owl Bourbon, which sells for \$175 a bottle).

"We used to hold the tastings in the guest lounge," said Dixon, "but they have become so popular that we have converted what was once part of the gift shop into a tasting room."



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Photo: Taylor Gilkey

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Guest rooms span the inn's three buildings and have undergone renovations and refurbishments with visitors' comfort in mind.

While the inn enjoys newfound popularity with Bourbon Trail visitors, it has retained the characteristics that make it a favorite with repeat guests. Accommodations in the three buildings — the main inn, Greystone House, and Goddard Hall — have been renovated and refurbished to include new technology (Dimplex electric fireplaces) and luxurious touches (two-person whirlpool baths). A fourth building, the Bell Cottage, now houses a spa.

While the Owl Tavern and upstairs Owl's Nest have become trendy hangouts for both Harrodsburg residents and visitors alike, the inn's dining room, with a menu deeply rooted in Kentucky food traditions, has its own devotees who wouldn't dream of eating any place else.

A recipient of the 2015 James Beard Foundation's America's Classic Award (the first in Kentucky to be so honored), the restaurant serves food straight from the Southern canon. As one reviewer noted: an "emphasis on battered-fried and gravy-coated, slow-baked, and long-stewed."

Pride of place goes to the Classic Beaumont Dinner, a combination of the inn's famous yellow-legged fried

chicken and 2-year-old Kentucky cured country ham (brought to maturation in their own aging house), accompanied by house-seasoned green beans and the inn's corn pudding. If there's room left for dessert, the General Robert E. Lee orange-lemon cake is a must.

Speaking of the general, while he has become persona non grata in much of the South, Beaumont Inn remains unapologetic about displaying its collection of Lee memorabilia, which came courtesy of Annie Goddard's father-in-law, who admired Lee for his gentlemanly demeanor and statesmanship prior to the Civil War rather than his wartime exploits.

Less controversial are some of the inn's other furnishings such as the original cherry bookcases lining the walls of the room across from the front desk. The bookcases are filled with tomes once used by students and teachers at the school.

The double parlors boast crystal chandeliers and mantel mirrors rescued from the original Galt House in Louisville following its demolition. Two of the inn's most noteworthy pieces are the gold-plated Cleopatra clock in the central hall and the sturdy wooden chair once used by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.





The historic marker chronicles the Beaumont Inn's many early incarnations.

The former was sent to the U.S. by France as part of the French Exposition at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, and the latter was used by Roosevelt when he visited Harrodsburg in 1934 to dedicate the George Rogers Clark Monument at Old Fort Harrod.

In addition to bourbon aficionados, visitors in search of accommodations other than chain hotels and who are seeking a place steeped in regional history, have come to appreciate Beaumont Inn's charms.

"We were fortunate to be included in Norman Simpson's book 'Country Inns and Backroads' back in the 1970s," said Chuck. "That book had a tremendous impact on

our niche of the market, and early on we capitalized on the fact that as Kentucky's oldest family-owned hotel, we offered a special experience."

After 100 years Beaumont Inn is still offering that special experience. Lawrence Watts, who has been an inn employee for 33 years, puts its timeless appeal in perspective.

Watts, who has seen many changes over his more than three decades doing everything from garden maintenance to kitchen operations, says, "wallpaper and furnishings may change and the menu changes seasonally, but the one thing that will never change is the Southern charm." **KM**

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