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Bear State of Mind

104-Year-Old Building Finds New Life as Hot Springs Boutique Hotel

By Sara Dacus

Historic downtown Hot Springs has a new jewel in her crown.

The Waters, a new 62-room boutique hotel across from Bathhouse Row, opened in the renovated Thompson Building. The Waters, which has quickly become a favorite retreat in Spa City, retains many features of the original historical building while providing a modern experience.

George R. Mann, the principal architect of the Arkansas state capitol, designed the Thompson Building. The construction, with its façade of terra cotta Corinthian columns, was completed in 1913. The building originally housed doctors' offices. During this time, visitors were coming to Hot Springs from around the country to experience what were thought to be healing properties of the thermal waters across the street. Many people would "take the waters" three times a day and then visit the doctor to determine their progress.

In the years that followed, the Thompson Building was home to a hotel and apartments, and then only the ground floor was occupied. The remaining floors were in disrepair.

Bob Kempkes and Anthony Taylor, partners in the Taylor Kempkes Architects firm, purchased the building in June 2014 with Robert Zunick, who is an investment adviser at Wells Fargo. Kempkes and Taylor previously renovated the Mountain Valley Water building, Quapaw Bathhouse, Superior Bathhouse, a post office downtown and Hot Springs Depot. The \$8 million Thompson Building project began in October 2015.

To preserve the structure, original marble, brick, doors, glass and room numbering were incorporated into the redesign. Much of the original lobby and hallways are intact.

The owners signed a franchise agreement with Choice Hotels to be a part of the company's Ascend Hotel Collection, and the Waters welcomed its first guests in February 2017.

Chris Wolcott, the hotel's general manager, said, "It was great to get open for most of the 2017 Oaklawn race meet. We enjoyed weekends full of racing fans. Now, we've transitioned into the summer season, and we've gotten a great reception from out-of-town guests and locals on staycations."

The Avenue, the bar and restaurant on the ground floor of The Waters, is named for the Central Avenue address. Chef Casey Copeland, formerly of SO Restaurant in Little Rock, presents southern-inspired artisanal cuisine. The small plates and shareables are intended to provide patrons with an intimate experience in a space that features photographs of Central Avenue throughout the ages.

The Waters partners with neighbor Quapaw Baths and Spa to offer packages and discounts to hotel guests. Another attraction, The Ohio Club, is next door. This bar is said to be the oldest in Arkansas.

Another unique feature at The Waters is the rooftop tower gardens. Two honeybee hives pollinate towers of lettuce, tomatoes and other crops that are being added to The Avenue's offerings as they are ready. In the future these gardens will be neighbors to a rooftop bar overlooking Central Avenue.

To book a stay at The Waters, call 501.321.0001