



The Era of the Grand Hotels and Boarding Houses

By Rich Mathews

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April 14th, 1908 was a sad day. At 2:30 in the morning, a fire broke out at the Kenilworth Inn. By the end of the day, the only things left standing were a few stone arches and turrets.

The inn, towering over Biltmore Village on a knoll in Kenilworth, competed with the Battery Park Hotel to be Asheville's most elegant resort during the early years of the city's first boom period, 1880–95.

Though this was a great loss, there was one silver lining for the guests who were displaced by the fire. Judging from a quick perusal of the



The First Kenilworth Inn



Remnants of Inn After Fire





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1907–08 city directory, there were plenty of other hotels, boarding houses and sanitariums in Asheville, so they probably were able to find other lodging relatively easily. The directory’s listings included 103 boardinghouses, 20 hotels and 8 sanitariums — quite a selection for a town of just about 18,000 at the time.

Asheville’s history of hospitality goes back more than a century. When the railroad finally made it up the mountains from Old Fort to the east in October 1880, and up the Saluda Grade from South Carolina in 1886, the city was transformed. Grand hotels like the Battery Park and Kenilworth were built. Boarding houses proliferated. Sanitariums lured those seeking respite from tuberculosis.

For a brief period in the 1890s, there was even a newspaper chronicling the comings and goings at the hotels, the Asheville News & Hotel Reporter. *“Col. And Mrs. E. B. Parson, of New York, are at the Battery Park and will re-*





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main during the season. Col. Parsons was on General Sheridan's staff during the late unpleasantness, and he will find a warm welcome in Asheville."

However, even with all of the city's new-found popularity, concern existed about the financial viability of the Kenilworth Inn. According to a memo from Charles McNamee to George Vanderbilt, one of the inn's investors, "*The Southerners are all poor and will pay very little for board. The money comes in when the wealthy northern people come herein the winter. It would, therefore, seem to be for the Kenilworth Inn but one short season each year.*"



**The Margo Terrace
Today BellSouth Parking Lot**





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Today, it's sad to say that when you gaze upon a parking lot in central Asheville, the odds are you are looking at the ghosts of the old hotels and boarding houses. BellSouth's parking lot across from the Chamber of Commerce is where the Margo Terrace once sat. The parking lot on Biltmore Avenue across from Blue Moon Bakery? ...the Swannanoa Hotel was located there.

The parking lots on Haywood Street next to the Basilica of St. Lawrence?... that's where the Avonmore, the Ninety-Nine, the Virginian, and Oak Cottage once sat. The Renaissance Hotel and its front and rear parking lots?...the site of



Swannanoa Hotel
Today Parking Lot On Biltmore & Aston





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the Belmont, the Elton, the Alabama and a handful of others.

Except for the Grove Park Inn and the Manor (converted to apartments in 1994), all of the grand hotels are gone. The sanitariums that served people with “pulmonary phthisis” evolved into hospitals, became apartments, or were demolished to make room for highways (Biggs Sanitarium) or apartments (Ambler Heights in East Asheville).

Few boardinghouses remain. Were it not for the Thomas Wolfe House Museum, we would lose all memory of what boarding house living was like.



The Belmont
Today parking Lot For Renaissance Hotel





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The Second Kenilworth Inn

But, what of the old Kenilworth Inn property? Five-and-a-half years after the fire, in December 1913, a phoenix slowly rose from the





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ashes as construction began on a new Kenilworth Inn. Judging from old Sanborn Insurance Company maps, part of the new building was erected on the footprint of the main wing of the original hotel. However, before it was able to open for business, the military negotiated to lease it or use as a military hospital from 1917 through 1922. It finally opened as a hotel in 1923.

When the owners hosted a formal opening on April 4, 1923, they indicated that they intended to vigorously lure visitors. *“A personal tour of Florida will be taken by representatives of the Kenilworth Inn, to acquaint Floridians with the new hostelry.”*

Seven years later, two doctors named Griffin converted it to a sanitarium and renamed it Appalachian Hall, the name of the private hospital they had been operating for more than ten years on South French Broad Avenue where, today, the YWCA sits. It operated as a psychiatric hospital until it closed in the late 1990s. Today it lives on, like the Manor, as apartments.





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Rich Mathews is currently writing a book on the grand hotels and boarding houses in Asheville. In 1991, he and his wife, Jane, published the award-winning book about Albemarle Park, The Manor & Cottages.





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