

Rising Again

Neglected and empty for 50 years, The Fitzpatrick Hotel is the latest restoration success story in historic Washington, Georgia.

By Erika Kotite • Photography by Chris Little



Still grand despite its 50-year neglect, the 1898 Fitzpatrick Hotel was purchased in 2002 by Jim Carter and Mike and Christy Todd.



Using the famous tower as inspiration, the hotel logo proudly decorates the main entry glass door.

In post-Civil War Georgia, Federal troops and Reconstruction made it difficult for citizens to get their livelihoods back. So brothers John and Thomas Fitzpatrick left their birthplace of Washington for greener pastures in the 1870s and built a successful mercantile business in South Carolina.

Home called them back in the 1890s when their father's business burned to the ground. Thinking big, the Fitzpatrick brothers decided that what the growing town of Washington needed was a fine hotel built on the site, with plenty of room on the ground floor for retail businesses. They approved plans for a Queen Anne-style building with Romanesque influences—three stories tall and sporting a tower, spire and bay windows. Three storefronts and a handsome lobby were on the first floor with hotel rooms and a large dining room on the upper floors. For the first 14 years, the Fitzpatrick family resided in the second floor suite of rooms.

The town welcomed the Fitzpatricks with open arms. “Our people are very

The first floor of the restored hotel hosts retail businesses just like it did in the early days. All of the masonry, granite and tin detail on the exterior had to be washed, repaired or replaced; but most of it is original.



much gratified that [John Fitzpatrick] has made up his mind to add such an ornament to our town and will always show a high appreciation," gushed the *Washington Chronicle* in 1899.

Times were good for the Fitzpatricks—the stores thrived and the hotel, with a phone system built by the family and electricity from their own plant, was considered the best place to stay in Wilkes County. John died in 1907; in 1911, Thomas died without leaving a will. The hotel was ultimately sold outside the family in 1914. It remained in operation until 1952, when it was shuttered and abandoned.

A Buried Treasure

Jim Carter first laid eyes on the empty building in 1965, as a college student. "I thought it was one of the most appealing buildings I had ever seen," Carter says. Although he did not have a professional background in architecture, Carter recognized the uniqueness and quaint grandeur of the place. The style was a deliberate throwback to about ten years before it was built, as Queen Anne was already waning on the fashion scale. But the Fitzpatrick brothers understood the importance of maintaining a sense of solidity and permanence in a town that had seen devastation and ruin in its recent past. "It expressed the sort of romanticism these middle-aged gentlemen wanted after the great fire," Carter explains.

Even in its neglected state, the building was a beauty with its wealth of masonry, stone and stained glass detail. Built primarily of brick with local granite used as hood and key ornamentation over the second-story windows, the hotel also had a wonderful feminine side. Fancy tin overlays with embossed dentil molding and classical motifs wrapped around the tower and front bays. Darker stained tin "shingles" cover the slanted rooflines over the windows. In the sunlight, these unique metal surfaces gleamed. Over many windows, local artisans created stained glass windows in rich, earthy tones typical of the 1870s and 1880s.

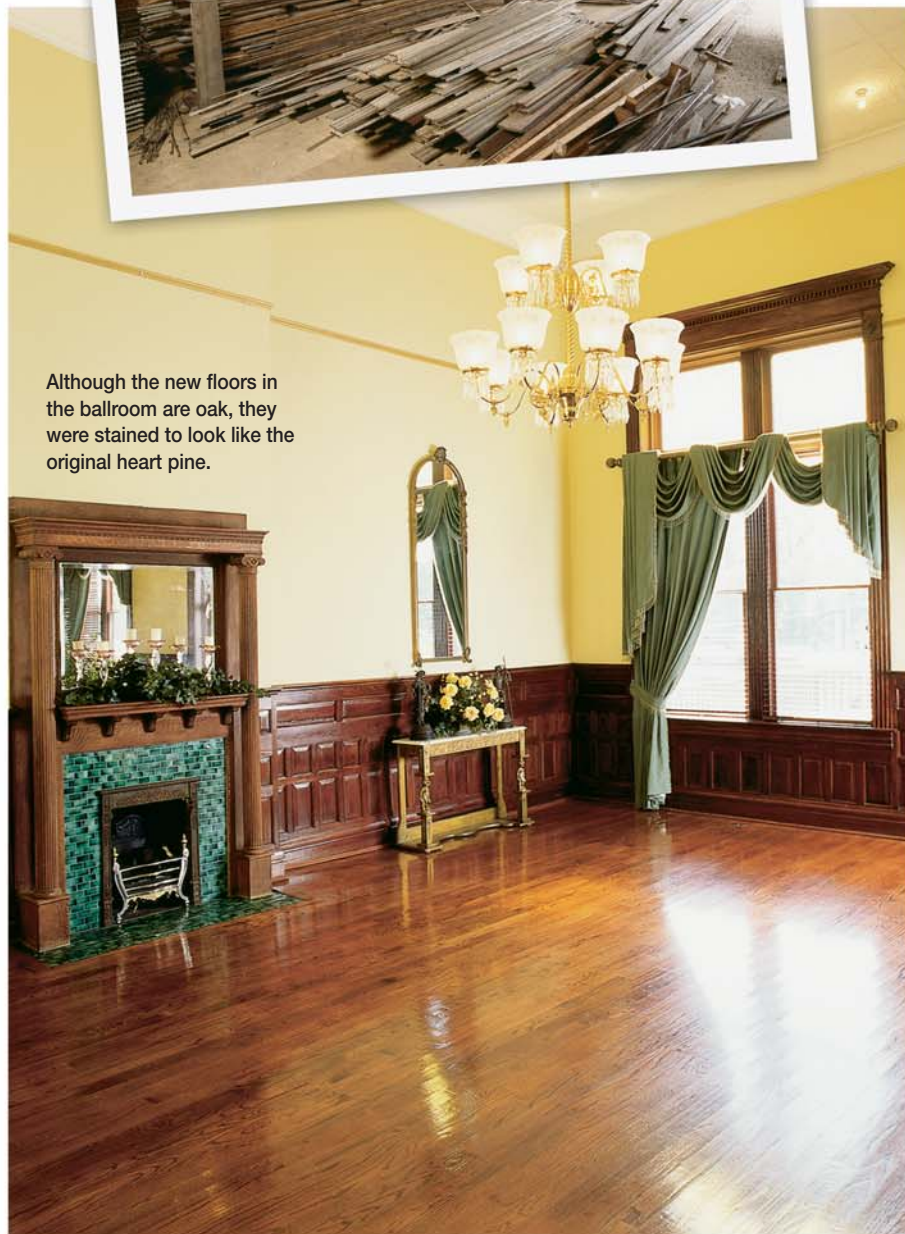
A few attempts had been made to restore and develop the property but

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Located in the back of the hotel, the ballroom retained a great deal of water damage and much of the plaster had been destroyed. Mike repaired and replaced most of it himself.



Although the new floors in the ballroom are oak, they were stained to look like the original heart pine.



the city had suddenly run out of options. A real estate agent friend encouraged Carter to take a look. "There is a warm presence in this building," Carter says. "It is not quiet—it has an aura."

Carter found it easy to imagine the life and vibrancy the hotel had enjoyed so many years before and was able to convince his colleagues, Mike and Christy Todd, to be his partners in buying and restoring it.

Long Road Ahead

The Todds had experience restoring homes before but even they were daunted by the prospect Carter placed before them. "There was a tree growing through the back," Christy recalls. "Someone had tried to pour concrete on the second-floor porch and it had caved in. A skylight was leaking so there was grass growing on the floor; there was lots of mold and water damage everywhere."

They were not too thrilled with the idea at first, but the three had dinner across the street, and the Todds looked around. "The town was very attractive—it had new sidewalks, streetlights

Right: In true Southern style, the Fitzpatrick Hotel lobby had a separate ladies' entrance that came in directly from the street on a raised landing. The main entrance leads directly to the front desk. All the downstairs and the main stairway floors are carpeted in a floral pattern chosen by Carter after an extensive search.



Left: All of the stairway parts were removed, stripped, refinished and reinstalled throughout the hotel.

and upscale amenities like the restaurant we were in,” Christy says. “So we decided this might be a good thing and became partners with Jim.”

The city sold the property for the price they paid for it in the early 1990s. Mike ended up quitting his job in order to handle all the work involved in the restoration. Their goal was to get it open in 18 months.

Mike stripped all of the woodwork, removed and repaired damaged plaster and re-did the windows. All of the windows had to be rebuilt, either in portions or entirely. They kept the original frames whenever possible and hired a professional molder/planer to create replications on the spot.

The grand second-floor ballroom was in very rough shape, since it was located in the back of the building where much of the water damage had occurred. The heart-pine floors could not be saved, nor could much of the original plaster; however, the ornate tin

ceilings were in better condition than they expected, and they found an artisan at Brian Greer’s Tin Ceilings in Petersburg, Ontario, who could replicate the patterns.

Meanwhile, Carter was busy researching interior paint, carpet, lighting and furnishings for the space. A stickler for authenticity, Carter studied the rooms carefully and decided that the third-floor rooms directly over the suite where the Fitzpatricks resided were much grander than the rest and likely reserved for favored guests. He figured that these rooms would have been furnished with pieces from the family itself, dating back to perhaps the 1840s. He was also able to furnish the second-floor bedroom with original Fitzpatrick furniture, including an Eastlake-style high headboard bed and a chest of drawers. Sprinkled throughout the hotel are other pieces of Fitzpatrick family furniture, which were sold back to him by the great-grand-

daughter and great-grandson of Thomas Fitzpatrick.

The smaller rooms contain reproduction beds, but all of the rooms are furnished with antiques from 1910 or earlier. “We ask our guests if they are



Left: Many of the hotel’s original elements, including the spectacular tiled fireplace in the second floor tower room, were still there when Carter and the Todds began their restoration.



The Fitzpatrick Hotel has 17 guestrooms, many with antique furniture and equipped with private bathrooms. Original heart pine floors glisten throughout.



Period wall colors, furniture and a reproduction light fixture and ceiling fan complete the coveted tower guestroom.

The Fitzpatrick's opening was a huge event for the town of Washington.



Above: The second floor suite is the Fitzpatrick's restored parlor, which can be closed off from the landing with the original pocket doors.

Left: This room served as the Fitzpatrick parlor and was never intended for use as a guestroom. Now it's a grand suite and the bedroom is off to the right.

comfortable with antiques," says Carter. All eight of the original claw-foot bathtubs were in the building. They purchased one more antique tub, resurfaced them and installed them in bathrooms that are all unique, except for the fact that they all have modern conveniences.

Carter found evidence of original wall color in all but three rooms, mostly by removing later bathroom additions and revealing an unfaded patch of color beneath. Even the wood stain colors are closely matched to the original. Carter spied a patch of baseboard behind a door

that had never been exposed to UV light. Mike took it to a local furniture company and they created a stain to match.

Using one remaining gas/electric light fixture as a model, Mike had it reproduced for all of the guestrooms. The gentleman who reproduced them

happened to have four-arm and six-arm fixtures for the larger rooms that complemented the others perfectly.

Open for Business

Sure enough, in June 2004, about 22 months after the purchase, the proudly

restored Fitzpatrick Hotel, its name glittering in golden paint on the front lobby door, was ready to receive its first guests in 52 years.

Featuring 17 rooms, a conference room, ballroom, catering kitchen, retail storefronts and a full-service gourmet restaurant called Watchmaker's, the Fitzpatrick's opening was a huge event for the town of Washington once again. And just like before, the city showed its appreciation for getting one of its most valuable businesses back. "The town publicizes us any chance they get," Christy says. The chamber of

commerce invited travel writers to try it out, and the mayor has gone out of his way to encourage companies to house their clients there.

The results have been excellent—since day one, there have been advance bookings, with two weddings last year and a steady occupancy rate. The partners are still working hard, running the front desk on nights and weekends, but they are encouraged by the response to their hard work. "It's a 'Sleeping Beauty' story," says Carter. "The prince is kissing her and she's waking up, and that's where we are right now." ❁