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# Romanesque Revival

Occasionally, a renovation uncovers a forgotten old hotel

BY JACK NEELY

If you find yourself ambling on North Gay, as I do when I park free under the highway, you may be in for a start.

The familiar building many of us grew up with known as Regas Restaurant suddenly sports, on its side, a Romanesque apparition in stone. Odd striated limestone pillars—from the street they could pass for old wood—stand on a base of rough-hewn stone, all topped by a marble arch. These aren't droll additions; they've been there all along, and once framed the main entrance to a major building that in the 1890s was one of the most impressive structures on the north side of the railroad yards. This architectural fossil is catching the afternoon sun for the first time in almost half a century. Thanks to Knoxville Leadership Foundation, the nonprofit that is renovating the building as a hub for other nonprofits, we can now see the entrance to the old Watauga Hotel.

Since the Nixon administration, Regas has looked like a modern building, an oblong two-story with "rustic" wooden stylings of a sort that were trendy in the early '70s, with a big parking lot.

Call it the Regas Building, and I won't argue. Nobody was ever there longer. But when the Regases first moved their Astor Cafe there in 1924, they occupied a small part of a much-larger building that had been there for more than 30 years. Over the next few decades, Regas got much bigger and the building got much smaller. What we've known as the old Regas is just the first two floors of a five-story building known a century ago as the Watauga.

Its history is complicated. Built in the early 1890s, the brick-and-stone edifice was first known as the Caswell & Harris Buildings, listed as if they were two structures with the same address. Caswell was surely William Caswell, the Confederate veteran and real-estate developer who later established a professional baseball field by his name. Harris was likely Dr. Madison Harris, who during the building's early years kept his dental office on the building's second floor. It also housed the McAllen Business College and, up on the fifth floor, an Odd Fellows lodge. Caswell apparently didn't mind hosting a Union veterans' fraternity, W.P. Sanders Camp No. 3, in his building.

It was a mixed-purpose residential, commercial, and office building, with several medical professionals, but its balance seemed to shift with each year.

The Cherokee name Watauga had first appeared in connection with that building in the late 1890s. The Watauga River is a tributary of the Holston, 100 miles to the northeast. The word is well-known in history for the Watauga Association of the 1770s, a proto-government that was a sort of great-uncle of the State of Tennessee. The state centennial celebrations of 1896-97 stirred up old heroic stories.

It evolved into a hotel by degrees, with hotel amenities emerging almost independently. By 1905, the Watauga Dining Room was on the second floor. By 1908, it had a barber shop and pool room and a drugstore. Soon it even had a little post office.

It was a block for amenities, anyway, to serve the hundreds of

railroad passengers who swarmed these sidewalks daily, looking for a shave or a meal or a clean shirt or a Coca-Cola or a game of pool. Also on the block was Patrick Harrigan's Saloon and Rooney Confectioners. This was on the edge of the neighborhood then still known as Irish Town. The intersection of North Gay and Depot was one of our busiest places, with both locals and passengers who were afoot in Knoxville only for a frantic hour or two. It was a big-city part of town.

By 1911, the building was advertising as the Watauga Hotel. It may have felt a prod in that direction by its enormous new neighbor, the Hotel Atkin, across the alley, on Depot Street. For a decade or two, the Atkin was Knoxville's biggest and most luxurious hotel. A classical string quartet played nightly in the lobby.

The Watauga was a more practical place, offering short and long-term deals for guests and residents. Former alderman Charlton Karns was the proprietor of the building. If that name rings a bell, he was later Knoxville city manager, a longtime resident of the recently embattled Howard House on Broadway. Karns tried to raise the profile of the Watauga Dining Room and its "25-cent meals." (That was cheap, a century ago, but not dirt cheap.)

It was one of four sizeable hotels near North Gay or on Depot, serving the Southern station. There was a lot of demand for hotels, as long as there were dozens of passenger trains stopping there daily, bound for New York or Birmingham or Washington or New Orleans.

Among the Watauga's long-term residents was the severely eccentric attorney John R. Neal, who lived at the Watauga for almost 20 years in the 1930s and '40s—when the estranged UT prof, and Scopes trial defense attorney, was establishing his own idiosyncratic School of Law, and working hard to promote an unprecedented legal entity called TVA. And then, when it didn't turn out exactly as he pictured it, becoming one of its chief critics. His rare visitors reported the bachelor lived among piles of law and history books and magazines, scurrying through them like a very intelligent rat in a warren of wisdom.

The railroad-station hotel business declined rapidly after World War II. One thing this neighborhood was famous for besides hotels was automobile dealerships. A lot of folks bought cars and stopped riding the train. The hotels were left beached. Three old hotels, including the grand Atkin, became flat parking lots. In 1963, the city condemned the Watauga. The Regases responded by razing the three upper floors. Nobody protested much. In 1963, there was more wonder in the engineering marvel of accomplishing that without even closing the restaurant than regret at the loss of a run-down building.

The Knoxville Leadership Foundation is preserving what they can. A couple of interior arches on the second floor may frame the lobby of the old hotel. "In the history of this building, we're just a blip," says president Chris Martin. "It's our time to hold the torch. It's not going to be long, so let's do it well." ♦

