

A Castle On A Hill

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In 1927 the Pine Hills Hotel was one of the most stunning architectural edifices in the Harrison and Hancock county area. Like a castle on a hill, it majestically overshadowed virtually every other building throughout the region during its 55 years of existence. The grandiose hotel, a stellar example of Romanesque style, was built of the finest quality steel, concrete block, and stone materials available. Almost no expense was spared during the construction of what some have referred to as a veritable palace. The money behind the venture, approximately \$1.5 million dollars, came from New Orleans and Northern bank investors. Perhaps the investors envisioned, if not a quick profit, certainly a sound return based on both the climate and beauty of the area. The real clincher, in the words of Gulf Coast historian Dan Ellis in his book *Pass Christian: Images of America* (2001), was "that it was located along the route that the first automobile traffic would have to travel on the northern shores of the Bay of St. Louis."

By September 1, 1926, the hotel at Pine-Hills-on-the-Bay was more than half finished and was already becoming the most popular destination for Sunday drives not only by locals but also by motorists from as far away as New Orleans who just wanted to "have a look." Standing majestically at the head of the Bay of St. Louis, it overlooked the hotel yacht club, the fishing pier, and the beautiful Mexican blue waters of the gulf.

From the height of this rise, a person or persons could have and likely did witness on December 14, 1814, the last naval engagement of the War of 1812. It was during the military buildup to the decisive Battle of New Orleans that a gutsy American lieutenant named Thomas Catsby Jones, the commander of a flotilla of five gunboats, hid inside the shallow waters of the Bay of St. Louis (misnamed in naval history as the Bay of Pass Christian). When British Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane's 45-ship fleet sailed past on its way from Pensacola to New Orleans, Jones, in the words of editor En Douglass in *Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State* (1938), "waylaid the invaders." Details of the battle are murky at best; however, as Douglass noted, Jones' mission was successful, but at a dear cost. During the skirmish, which apparently lasted a few minutes less than a full hour, Jones lost all of his gunboats--some sunk and the others captured--while sustaining 80 casualties. The British did win this fight but lost 300 of their men, most to wounds, in doing so. They also lost precious time. It may be remembered by history buffs that it was Sir Cochrane who two months to the day earlier sailed his warships into Baltimore harbor to bombard Fort McHenry. This attack was witnessed by Francis Scott Key, who recorded the failed British assault in the form of lyrics--"And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air."--in his immortal song, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

The historic setting and the magnificent view it offers have always been worth the drive. The large, sloping-to-the-sea hill was said by an earlier Pass Christian historian, John H. Lang, in his *History of Harrison County, Mississippi* (1936), "to have a higher elevation than any near the salt water between Pensacola and Corpus Christi, Texas." Apparently the old name for this site was "Shelly," so-named for a large mound of clam shells which tradition says were deposited there by Indians in ancient times. Located on the north

shore of the Bay of St. Louis, between the mouths of the Wolf and Jourdan rivers, this scenic overlook had been cleared of all underbrush by 1926, and the newly established St. Augustine lawn was handsomely manicured all the way to the beach.

During the Christmas holidays that year, Pine Hills formally opened to a receptive and impressed public. By January, tourists from all over the nation filled each of the 186 "artistically furnished" rooms. Advertised as being designed for comfortable living," it surely must have been so, as all the furnishings--some \$200,000 worth--were purchased from the prestigious Albert Pick and Company of New York. The majority of the tourists were from New Orleans and smaller cities and towns to the west. With no bridge to span the bay, all automobile traffic driving east across the newly completed Lake Pontchartrain Bridge was routed along the "Old Spanish Trail," U.S. Highway 90, to the city of Bay St. Louis, then north around the top of the bay to the towns of Kiln and DeLisle. From there, the road turned south to Pass Christian, where it continued due east again. This famous highway, which actually follows portions of the old Spanish Trail, connects the cities of St. Augustine, Florida, and San Diego, California. Construction of this roadway began in 1915, and to this day along this route, the only visible vistas of seawater are along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi.

Pine Hills' management eagerly captured the public's attention with an assortment of professionally printed brochures that highlighted their beautifully decorated guest rooms; however, it was the luxurious lounge that caught the interest of most visitors. A literal feast for the eyes, some called it, but to many the real treat was neither the scenery nor the accommodations--it was the food. Genuine "Creole and Southern plantation" dishes were prepared by renowned chefs. A hint about the atmosphere and service may be gleaned from a hotel mail-out, which referred to the Pine Hills' restaurant as "spacious, dignified dining." Numerous other amenities were also promoted via brochures: convention halls, recreation rooms, elevators, tennis and handball courts, an artesian well, a small boat marina, and a long fishing pier.

The intentionally extravagant hotel was the focal point of the Pine-Hills-on-the-Bay development. Set at the apex of the hill that dominated 62 acres and facing 1,500 feet of bay-front land, the hotel was touted as the hub, the keystone, upon which an even grander tourist destination complex would evolve. But this was not to be. After less than two years into the speculative venture, two disastrous events occurred from which the hotel's management never recovered. The first, like a dagger to the heart, was the completion in late 1927 of a wooden two-lane bridge across the Bay of St. Louis. The two-mile long erector set-style bridge made it possible for motorists to drive directly from Bay St. Louis to Pass Christian in only a matter of minutes. Tourists roared past the spectacular lodgings of Pine Hills, often without even realizing it, to spend their time and money at other hotels along the coast. In fact, many vacationers found their way to Pine Hills' sister hotel, the also new-- and even larger--Edgewater Gulf Hotel, located between Gulfport and Biloxi on the current site of the Edgewater Mall. The nail in the coffin, however, was the stock market crash in New York on Thursday, October 24, 1929. The collapse of Wall Street plunged America and the world into a catastrophic economic depression that lasted until the early 1950s.

The new bridge adversely affected Pine Hills' business virtually overnight. In an effort to put a new face on the problem, management came up with a clever idea. They changed the identity of the hotel and began a new campaign to target a different type of clientele. They added several new amenities: an 18-hole golf course, a rustic golf lodge built of pine logs that was equipped "with steel lockers and shower baths for women as well as men," a Club Kennels house complete with some of the "best bird dogs in the South," and a stable which housed fine horses upon which guests could ride for miles on well-groomed bridle paths "over hilltops overlooking the water, and into shady recesses of primeval forests." By redirecting their focus, they successfully attracted an entirely new type of tourist. During the spring of 1928, management officially changed the name of the hotel to Pine Hills Club and began new advertising in an attempt to project their opulent facility as a "year-round recreation and vacation center providing all the sports of land and water." The change from being a grand hotel with absolutely splendid furnishings to a niche upper-scale sports club proved to be a good move. Had it not been for the stock market crash, the club likely would have enjoyed a long business life.

After the depression caused what was once the pride of the bay to suddenly fail, the entire property became the possession of some bonding interests. It stood idle and vacant for years. Briefly during World War II, the government leased it to house soldiers, but what was seen by some as a sign of life ended after only six months. It wasn't until nine years after the war ended, in 1954, that a ray of hope began to shine. A Catholic order purchased and renovated the structure to house a seminary for the training of priests of the Oblate Fathers. The site was renamed Our Lady of the Snows Scholasticate, and the once-luxurious hotel was for almost 15 years reincarnated as a religious sanctuary. But in 1968, the order consolidated its various campuses by moving to a new home at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. The hotel was shuttered once more.

In late 1986 and early 1987, against the hopes and wishes of those who remembered the former queen of hotels in her glory days and others who wished they could, the seven-story landmark of the bay was dismantled. Except for the brick-pillared entranceway that can still be seen alongside the Kiln-DeLisle Road, the once-regal Pine Hills Hotel, the triumph of an earlier era, is today only a faded memory.

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