



MIDDLETON TAVERN

NOT ONLY HISTORIC TO ANNAPOLIS, BUT ALSO TO AMERICA

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

There's a great scene near the end of "Raiders of the Lost Ark" where Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) threatens to blow up the Ark of the Covenant with a rocket launcher if the Nazis don't release his girlfriend, Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen). His rival, French archaeologist Rene Belloq (Paul Freeman) calls his bluff. In daring Jones to blow the Ark "back to God," Belloq says, "We are just passing through history," then points to the Ark and adds, "But this . . . this IS history!"

I have passed through the Middleton Tavern in Annapolis on a couple of occasions over the years. And passing through this historic establishment is indeed like passing through history. And that is because it is indeed history. Established in 1750 by Horatio Middleton, it is among the oldest continuously operating taverns in the United States. Famous customers? George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin all frequented the place, as did members of the Continental Congress after meeting in the State House to do such things as ratify the Treaty of Paris or accept the resignation of General Washington's commission.

The Tavern was an important watering hole for early travelers using the ferries to cross the Chesapeake Bay. So even back then, it was all about location, location, location. Christina Nokes, the Tavern's Corporate Secretary (she is basically there every day helping cur-

rent owner Jerry Hardesty run the place), pointed out, "It was not just a tavern and inn founded in the 18th century, it was also the landing for the ferry to Rock Hall owned by Samuel Middleton. It was the ferry that carried our Founding Fathers on their trips to and from Philadelphia. That's why George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin stayed here. Their comings and goings are registered in the local papers and their personal diaries."

Everyone associated with the Tavern has their favorite factoid assigned to the place. Nokes is no different. "When Benjamin Franklin delivered a lecture at Middleton Tavern," she said, "he left his overcoat for which he advertised in the local paper! We don't know if it was returned or not. Also, when President, George Washington was on the ferry coming from



Rock Hall when the ferry hit a sandbar at Greenbury Point. George wrote bitterly in his diary about having to spend the night in a cramped bunk, resting his head on his boots, waiting for the tide to free him." He

indeed would have been much more comfy at the Tavern.

Given its long history, it's no surprise that the Middleton Tavern has been the subject of ghost sightings and rumors of the supernatural. "Not just rumors!" Nokes said. "Our resident ghost, Roland, has appeared and otherwise made his presence known by pulling pranks in the upstairs kitchen for years.

He turns on faucets, spills coffee, rearranges silver, and flickers lights. Some have refused to go upstairs alone. Roland does not seem to have a malicious bone in his spectral body, but he does delight in making his presence known when it is quiet



Christina Nokes
Corporate Secretary
Middleton Tavern



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upstairs!”

Over the decades, the Tavern has also been the meeting site of the Maryland Jockey Club and the Free Masons. Boasting Georgian style architecture, the three-story brick structure is one of the state capital’s most eye-catching landmarks. Inside, the walls are decorated with antique naval uniforms, Civil War muskets, and more trinkets from history. Hardesty is indeed the current owner, having purchased it in 1968. Much remodeling, restoring, and renovating have happened on his watch, but the Middleton Tavern still retains its historic appeal and elegance.

And, to boot, the food and drinks are good. The crab cakes are especially yummy, as is the stuffed flounder and Salmon Oscar. The

Tavern also boasts an excellent drinks menu. According to Nokes, “we have some drink specials with special recipes, such as our signature specialty, the Oyster Shooter, which was devised by Jerry Hardesty. Since he introduced it in the ‘70s, the concept has been copied by other seafood restaurants. But no one has the secret sauce Jerry devised that goes with a freshly shucked oyster and pony beer that we sell by the thousands every year. We also serve specialized drinks in the winter for fireside drinking and the Maryland Orange Crush with fresh squeezed orange year-round.”

The Middleton Tavern has survived the decades, the centuries even. It’s lasted through the formation of the country; the Civil War; the Great Depression; World War II; and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. So how did the Tavern survive the health crisis and is now thriving post-pandemic? “We had a huge advantage with our sidewalk cafe,” replied Nokes, which allowed us outside dining long before others created outdoor dining. We also capitalized on our popular piano bar by having our pianist play outdoors during the warm months, which benefited all the restaurants in Market Space that assemble tables outside.”

Looking ahead, Nokes is optimistic the Middletown Tavern will survive this decade and for decades to come. She concluded, “Our biggest problem now, which we share with the industry, is finding help to keep up with our return to full service. With the season now underway -- an early St. Patrick’s was certainly a boon -- we are optimistic as long as we can staff to keep up with returning customers.”

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