

America's Oldest Tavern Was Already Old In 1776

By Brian McKim

The White Horse Tavern has stood at the corner of Farewell and Marlborough Streets in Newport, Rhode Island, for 340 years and, according to Conde Nast Traveler, it can survive another 340 years with a few minor tweaks.

The Traveler piece suggests that the “oldest bar in America” might want to ditch the souvenir T-shirts and baseball caps, get rid of some clutter and emphasize its small-batch rum and bourbon to stand out among the eye-popping number of dining and drinking choices afforded visitors to the ancient port town.

The venerable New England pub has, for nearly three-and-a-half centuries, served food and drink to the inhabitants of Newport and to visitors

It has served as a meeting place for colonists, soldiers, mercenaries, pirates and sailors.

Its “massive beams, rickety stairwells, and an omnipresent aroma of burning wood from dark, deep hearths” were at one time owned by the Preservation Society of Newport, which restored the building in 1952.

After some sprucing-up, the building reverted once again to private ownership and remains popular.

The two-story building was converted into a tavern in 1673 and has survived turbulent times, revolution and an economic downturn or two.

The White Horse's first owner was a pirate, William Mayes Sr., It was sold to its current owners in 2014 for \$866,000. For a quarter-century it was owned by O.L. Pitts, a Texas banker and yachtsman noted for backing America's Cup winner “Courageous,” owned by media mogul Ted Turner.

In modern times, “America's First Resort” is primarily a tourist destination offering visitors stately mansions, acclaimed folk and jazz festivals and yachting history.

1673 Newport was a harsh, cold, crude place, lacking modern conveniences.

The White Horse was “a regular haunt for colonists, British soldiers, Hessian mercenaries, pirates, sailors, Founding Fathers and all manner of early American folk,” says the tavern’s website.

Several ghosts are believed to inhabit the building, spirits who “die unexpectedly” or are “not buried properly,” according to local legend.

“It has been reported that all of the staff have had experiences with the spirits in the White Horse Tavern, as well as some patrons over the years,” according to HauntedHouses.com, which tracks such “manifestations.”