

The Willcox Inn

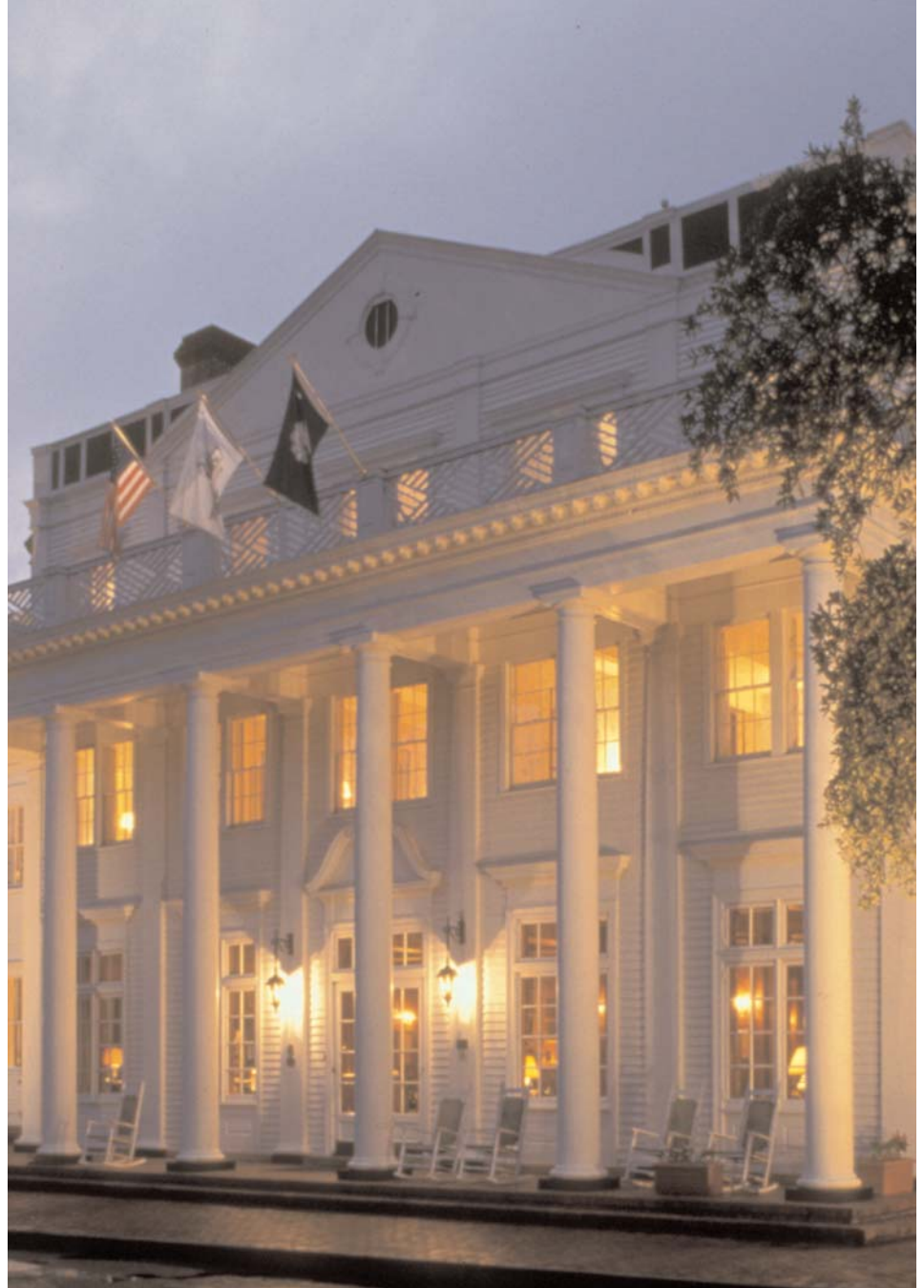
By
Gwen Thurmond

At the turn of the 20th century, the town of Aiken had established itself as the “Queen of Winter Resorts.” Decades earlier wealthy northerners had discovered the town’s climate suitable for such sports as horse racing, fox hunting and polo, and they flocked here in droves.

In 1898 at the height of the town’s reign, Englishman Frederick Willcox and his Swedish-born wife, known for her cooking (especially pastries), were already operating a catering business from their home at the corner of Colleton Avenue and Chesterfield Street. One of the town’s prominent colonists, Mrs. Louise Hitchcock, persuaded Willcox to expand his business into a hostelry, bringing a blend of old-world charm to Aiken.

For more than 60 years the famed inn served as home to America’s elite, and the list of who’s who read like a page from the international political, social and business register. From the 1900s to the 1950s, such notables as Mrs. John Jacob Astor, Harold Vanderbilt, the Duke and Duchess of Winsor, the Averill Harrimans, the Mellons and Elizabeth Arden were guests at the inn. According to legend, a guest might be turned away because there were “no rooms” when in truth, the doorman had already sized him up by his shoes. If they were not made in England by Peel or Maxwell, the doorman allegedly would shake his head “no” to the registrar. Another legend has it that Franklin Delano Roosevelt would have his private train car pull up to the rear of the Willcox, where he would stay for visits with a “special friend.”

Upon their retirement, the Willcoxes’ son, Albert S., managed the property,



expanding it the entire block of Colleton from Newberry to Chesterfield streets. Additions included two wings, a ballroom that later was converted into a lobby, two upper floors and a columned entrance which set an elegant tone for the hotel’s arrivals. In keeping with the winter colony social season, the hotel opened from October to May.

The inn closed sometime in the late 1950s and in 1982 was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Following some 28 years of neglect, disrepair and city condemnation of the property, the inn was restored to its former glory and reopened with a gala celebration.

Today the Willcox Inn welcomes visitors with or without English-made shoes. Guests can relax in the inn’s Polo Pub, enjoy a gourmet meal in its upscale Pheasant Room, and retire to a bedroom or suite decorated with original doors, molding and an old claw-foot tub, preserved from the original structure.

The charm and elegance of the inn’s earlier days have been recaptured, and the tradition of the Willcox Inn continues into yet another century.

The Willcox Inn
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