

Marshall's Return

Following a transformation, an iconic hotel sign returns to the city skyline.

BY KAREN SHUGART



Scott Elmquist

Dark for more than 20 years, the historic Hotel John Marshall was recently retrofitted with new, energy efficient bulbs.

Before its decline, the Hotel John Marshall played host to all sorts of important events. Ronald Reagan spoke there. Douglas Wilder, once a waiter at the hotel, celebrated his successful bid to become lieutenant governor — then the nation's highest-ranking black elected official — there. Many more weddings, receptions and black-tie events called the hotel home.

Now, the building at Fifth and Franklin streets is coming back as a mixed-use apartment building, and with it, its sign that served as a downtown landmark for decades.

“The sign has always been this important symbol of downtown,” says Bill Martin, director of the Valentine Richmond History Center. “And the history of the hotel really parallels the changes in the city since it was built in 1929.”

Reflecting those changes, the sign that reappeared on the city skyline May 20 takes into account modern environmental concerns. Frank Quigley, the business development and project manager for Holiday Signs, says the new landmark replaces the 3,100 75-watt incandescent bulbs with energy-efficient lighting. It should use about 30 percent of the energy it used before, and the LED lights should last 10 to 15 years.

Quigley says Holiday Signs took pains to give the lights the look of old-style bulbs. “The font on the letters was handwritten, so we had to go up and measure each curve, every angle to completely match and make each letter identical and put it in the exact same position that it was before,” he says.

In its heyday, the Hotel John Marshall was more expensive than the Jefferson or the now-defunct Richmond Hotel — \$3 a night; the latter two charged \$2. Its luster shined for decades, Martin says. “Any visiting politician, any music group, if they were coming to Richmond during much of the 20th century and staying at a hotel they were very likely to stay at this hotel.”

By the late 1980s, newer hostelries in downtown, such as the Omni and the Marriott, left the Hotel John Marshall struggling for business. Around that time, the sign darkened. It was viewed as an eyesore in the 1990s, Martin says, and in 1999 the building’s then-owner was told that he couldn’t reopen the structure because the sign wasn’t allowed under existing zoning.

The building, rechristened the Residences at the John Marshall, is now expected to open to tenants in the fall. Dominion Realty Partners is overseeing the renovations.

“The relighting of the lights really reminds us of the important events that are part of the life of the city,” Martin says.