

History of St. James Hotel



As the only surviving antebellum riverfront hotel in the South, St. James Hotel has witnessed much of the dramatic history that has played out in the city of Selma, AL. St James was built in 1837 and flourished from pre-Civil War through the post-Civil War & Reconstruction period. The hotel was originally named the Brantley Hotel after Brigadier General John Brantley, who headed the stock consortium that financed the construction. The hotel was built adjacent to the Alabama River docks in Selma. It provided lodging and meals for the merchants who traded in cotton and other commodities. It appears to have had many owners over the years.

Before the Civil War, the hotel was renamed the Troupe House. Before the Civil War, Dr. James Gee owned the hotel. Gee had inherited a slave by the name of Benjamin Sterling Turner from his brother. Mr. Turner was educated and had shown a talent for management, so Gee made him manager of the hotel. Benjamin S. Turner went on to become the mayor of Selma and was the first African American to serve in the U.S. Congress.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861 Gee left to fight, thus leaving Turner in charge of the hotel, Selma became a major manufacturing and distribution center for the Confederacy. In 1865 the City of Selma fell, and the hotel was taken over by the invading Union troops. The troops made the hotel their headquarters, thus sparing it. In a standard practice of the war, they torched much of the rest of the town. Many say they spared the hotel out of respect for Benjamin Sterling Turner who ran the hotel during their occupation of the property. Note that the Battle of Selma is said to be one of the only – if not the only, battle that Nathan Bedford Forrest lost.

After the war the city of Selma was rebuilt and prospered. In 1871, Captain Tom Smith bought the hotel and changed its name to the Saint James Hotel. The hotel did well during this period. In 1885 a bridge across the Alabama River was

constructed just south of the hotel. While the original bridge is long gone, the bridge keeper's cottage still stands adjacent to the hotel.

In the 1880's it is rumored that the illustrious James brothers (Frank & Jesse) frequented the hotel. There are many fascinating stories regarding their time at St. James and modern-day guests report ghost sightings believed to be Jesse James and his mistress Lucinda, and even James' dog!

In the late 1890's the hotel had fallen into disrepair and closed. The property was used for many businesses throughout the next 100 or so years. Old guest rooms became offices or were used for storage. The ground floor was gutted and turned into a feed store and later a tire recapping factory. The hotel's rear wings were torn down and the courtyard removed to make way for storage.

During the 1960's once again the city of Selma was home to another kind of battle – the Civil Rights Movement. The hotel property is located just one block from the iconic Edmund Pettus Bridge which became the epicenter of the Civil Rights Movement with the fateful Bloody Sunday event that took place in March of 1965. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Had temporary residence in Selma during the planning of the march that eventually led to the passing of the Voting Rights Act later that year in August 1965. The city of Selma is rich with the history of the Civil Rights Movement bringing visitors from around the globe to its doorstep year-round.

In 1997 through a public/private partnership the St. James was renovated and reopened, but was eventually closed in the mid 2000's. Most recently the hotel was purchased by Rhaglan Properties out of Birmingham, AL, and restored. St. James Hotel reopened in January 2021 under the Hilton flag as St. James Hotel Selma, Tapestry Collection by Hilton. The hotel has 55 guest rooms with a mix of double-queen and king guest rooms and two suites. Many rooms overlook the Alabama River where guests can enjoy the views from a shared balcony across the rear of the hotel. The hotel's bar & restaurant, Sterling at St. James Hotel (named in honor of Benjamin Sterling Turner) is popular among guests and locals alike serving up fresh fare with a touch of Southern flair as menus celebrate the flavors of the Blackbelt Region of Alabama, which has most recently received designation as a National Heritage area.