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Alabama hotel reopens to 19th century grandeur

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By [Verna Gates](#)

MOBILE, Ala.(Reuters Life!) - An Alabama hotel dating back to 1852 and rated a masterpiece of 19th century French architecture in the deep south has opened its doors for the first time since it was abandoned over 30 years ago.

It took five years and \$25 million to renovate the RSA Battle House Hotel in downtown Mobile that was once a gathering place for high society and a stopover for American luminaries and statesmen such as Woodrow Wilson and Babe Ruth.

The hotel was closed in the 1970s as the downtown area slumped and was then battered so badly by water damage that it was almost beyond repair, said project manager Ron Blount.

Five tropical storms and hurricanes impeded the five-year rebuilding process and Hurricane Katrina, which devastated Mobile along with much of the Gulf Coast in August 2005, added a full year to the effort, he said.

Today the renovation represents a faithful recreation of the original hotel, done in the Beaux Arts style, with a 5,600 square lobby featuring a dome and stained glass windows, according to Daniel Koch of Smith Dalia Architects.

"It's breathtaking, like walking into a cathedral," said David Bronner of the lobby, which features portraits of early rulers of the old port, such as Ferdinand V, Louis XIV, George III, and George Washington.

Bronner, chief executive of pension fund administrator Retirement Systems of Alabama that financed the rebuilding process, said the hotel wasn't always like that.

When Blount first surveyed the dilapidated building, he said he told the owner it needed a priest to give it the last rites more than a construction crew.

Three-quarters of the plaster was in ruins and crews had to make molds of the remaining features to make replicas.

Reconstruction restored the original arches and a whispering gallery.

It also uncovered some odd finds including a secret closet door that led to a speakeasy, a hidden bar where drinkers used to go during prohibition in the 1930s to escape the law.

Builders also found a skylight that had been hidden by three ceilings. Almost all its stained glass had been packed up and stored in a guest room.

Famous guests included Presidents Andrew Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt -- residents who would have been pleased by the distinctly local decorative elements such as Spanish moss and live oak woven into the French architecture.

The elaborate eight-story exterior features a series of balconies suited to viewing the Mardi Gras parades, which kick off the Easter season. Mobile claims the oldest Mardi Gras celebration, older than its famous rival down the coast in New Orleans.

Renovation of the hotel might just prove good for the city. A local saying runs: "As goes the Battle House, so goes Mobile."

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