

*Bonnie Pontin*  
*The John Wesley Inn*

Text by Susan Tischler



There many things which distinguish Cape May from other seaside towns, but chief among them are the extraordinary collection of Victorian homes which line the streets, and the B&B industry which resulted. Just strolling the streets and looking at the gingerbread-laced houses makes us wonder who are these innkeepers who take guests into their homes, introducing them to the past while worrying about today's amenities. This issue, we pay a visit to the John Wesley Inn.

Innkeeper Bonnie Pontin and her husband Lance purchased the John Wesley Inn on March 17, 2005. The John Wesley Bed and Breakfast Inn can be found at 30 Gurney Street in the primary Historic District. It is a Carpenter Gothic structure and one of the original eight Stockton Row Cottages built in 1869 as part of the grand Stockton hotel complex. The hotel was demolished in 1911, but the cottages remain as a reminder of that elegant time. Bonnie is the innkeeper. Lance is National Sales Accounts Manager for Snap-On Corporation – a job which requires him to travel extensively. The first question that comes to mind when talking to Bonnie as we sit in her parlor, with a baby grand piano tucked in a corner near the window and a fireplace at the center, lit to take the chill off an early spring afternoon, is why she gave up her job as a schoolteacher in Arkansas to be an innkeeper in Cape May? “I always wanted to live at the ocean and the Jersey

Shore,” she explained. “I’m from New Jersey, born and raised, and I was wondering how could I live at the ocean and earn a living so I reviewed my options. I love old houses. I love socializing and it seemed like a good fit. And when I looked around at what shore communities I could and would want to be a part of, I looked at Spring Lake, Sea Girt, Bay Head and Cape May. Cape May had more of what I wanted in a community. It has the small town feel. It has flowers in the summer and the spring and it’s more of a year-round community. It was more to my liking than the other communities, however nice they are.” Bonnie still feels the same, even in a post-2008 economy. Which brings to mind the upkeep of a 144 year-old house. “It is a full time job,” said Bonnie. “It is an old house and it requires constant attention. My husband is a perfectionist and I think the house reflects that.” When asked if they had to invest a lot of



maintenance into the house when they first purchased it, Bonnie, with some pride, said no. “We bought an A-1 property. This place was gutted in 1988, completely restored to the period. We just wanted the best available and we feel we got it. The John Wesley is one of the best examples of true restoration in Cape May.” Pride in offering her guests the best is also reflected in the dining room, which always shows a great attention to detail, from the seasonal flowers which she purchases from Kate’s Flower Shop in West Cape May, to the linens – red, white and blue is de rigeur for Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day – to the china and crystal she uses every morning when serving breakfast. A sit-down breakfast is served every morning at 8:30 and again at 9:30. On this particular morning Bonnie cooked up a batch of blueberry pancakes served with a side peppered bacon and homemade blueberry syrup across the top. Refreshments are served in the afternoon – hot tea in the winter, iced tea and lemonade in the summer months. In addition, a plate of cookies or cakes, whatever they have made that day, can be found on the server for guests to help themselves. One of the changes the Pontins made was to procure a hot food license so they could to serve hot food. “In the B&B community in Cape May,” explained Bonnie, “there’s continental breakfast and there’s full-scale, sit-down

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breakfast, which we offer. There's two different licensures and once you provide hot food, you're subject to health inspection. That was probably our biggest change. We also put in flat screen TVs in every room because there were no TVs at the John Wesley when we bought it." Another change was the wet bar Lance built on the third floor sunroom which provides guests with extra

amenities like ice, a refrigerator and a sitting area to entertain. The furnishings are clearly period and we wondered if they came with house. "I'd been collecting antiques for many years," said Bonnie, "and just about everything in the house, I bought. Now when we purchased the house, the former owners provided a list of items which were for sale and if we thought it was something we could use, we bought it." The dining room table, for example, she bought from the previous owners. "I had my own dining room set," she said, "but it just wasn't in sync. Mostly the width of table is what makes it perfect for the room." For Bonnie, the comfort of her guests is paramount. Her choice in the dining table was also a choice regarding the social interaction of her guests. "For instance," she said, "this morning when I came into the dining room at breakfast, I noticed the group toward the kitchen were chatting pretty well, but not the group at the opposite end of the table. So

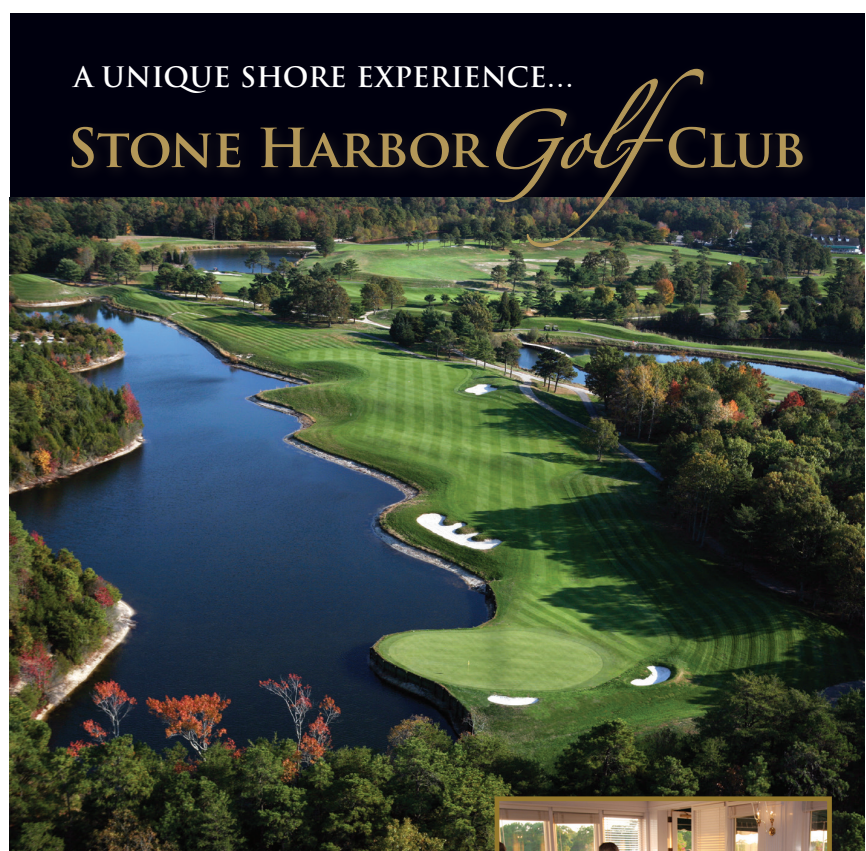
I made a point of sitting down there and helping move the conversation along. We want people to feel comfortable." Those curious about the John Wesley inn, which, by the way, has known only six owners over its 144-year history, can get a peek at what it looks like inside when the Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts and Humanities offers their seasonal historic house tours as well as the Lamplighter and Candlelight tours in December. As many as 2,500 people walk through the downstairs area of the B&B during the three-hour tour. Bonnie dresses in period costume and greets each and every guest during the walk-through.

Is it difficult living with strangers, we asked? "It was very difficult in the beginning," she said. "It's a seven bedroom house and I rent out six. Now, with my husband traveling most of the time, it's actually a comfort to have people in the house. I have learned to live with it, and it has been a bit of a serendipitous treat for me."

Being an innkeeper seems to be a 24-7 kind of occupation and we were wondering – what is first thing she thinks about when she wakes up in the morning? "My first thought," she said, "is getting that coffee out by 7:30 a.m."

And the last thing she thinks of before she goes to sleep? "I actually run through the menu for the morning in my head. It's not all that unlike teaching where the last thing you think about is, 'Okay, what's the morning looking like.' The startling moment is, 'Oh God, there's not enough juice. Oh my, there's not enough strawberries.' You try to avoid those moments at all cost."

Despite those "Oh God" moments, Bonnie Pontin loves what she does. Or as she puts it, "I do have a passion for it. I love this old house and just love this whole experience." 🍷



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