

THE NEW IN OLD TOWN

The Old Dominion Boat Club will have a say in the matter. According to Hamer, it has a parking lot that currently blocks access to the waterfront. The city would like the club to consider reconfiguring the lot to allow full public access. Meantime, more public hearings will be held. “We have good answers to [community] questions,” insists Hamer, “but there is concern.”

This year the city is promoting its own “uncommon” Civil War experience. The events will include a “living history” demonstration in Market Square and a “spies and scouts” family festival in the Carlyle House—both on May 21. Alexandria holds the distinction of being the longest occupied territory during the war, and the former Marshall House, now the Monaco Hotel, was where the first Union officer was killed, on May 24, 1861. Colonel Elmer Ellsworth spotted a Confederate flag flying from the roof of the inn, marched in with some troops and pulled it down. That did not please James W. Jackson, the owner of the Marshall House and an ardent secessionist. He pulled out a shotgun and shot Ellsworth, and then one of the men in Ellsworth’s party shot and killed Jackson.

Today, there is a plaque at the Monaco noting the incident. I failed to notice it, perhaps because I was too keen to chow at the hotel’s Jackson 20 restaurant, which is well known for its pork—there’s a sizeable bronze pig perched in the center of the dining room. There I tasted oysters Rockefeller before digging into a few barbequed pork ribs, and pork stew with sweet potatoes. The meal was every bit as good as it was hearty.

During my trip I also ate two brunches in two charmingly old buildings. My spinach-and-cheese omelet soufflé at Two Nineteen Restaurant was so light it practically floated away from the plate. Two Nineteen is located in a shambling Victorian-style house built in 1890 and restored in the 1970s by owner Clifford Cline. Today it’s a New Orleans-style French-Creole restaurant with some classic wrinkles—solid brass wall sconces, period millwork, marble fireplace mantels and Hungarian crystal chandeliers. My other brunch was at the Columbia Firehouse, which occupies a capacious building built on South St. Asaph Street in 1883 for the Columbia Steam Engine Fire Company. Opened as a brasserie two years ago, the Firehouse has a charming atrium, patio and barroom so redolent of old-world saloon (brass railings, stained glass and dark wood) that I rued not having a pocket watch when I entered. The restaurant’s “cookies and confections” dessert special is said to be popular. I instead tasted the Firehouse’s passion fruit crème brûlée with toasted coconut and coconut lime sorbet—“all homemade,” said Powell. And all good.

That sweet treat was a fine way to wrap up a trip to one of Virginia’s best neighborhoods, but before leaving I noticed a few new multi-space parking meters on lower King Street that the city had just installed. They are solar-powered and accept credit cards, which got me to thinking that while Old Town is synonymous with historic charm, it also changes more than you think.