

By Ann Wilmer

Small Market Meetings

Where else could you have morning coffee where Albert Einstein once ate breakfast and carved his name in a mellow wooden booth, or mingle with your colleagues where Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer used to chat over afternoon tea?

Only at the Nassau Inn in Princeton, N.J., a town between New York and Philadelphia steeped in history, tradition and geniuses.

The red door signals inn's welcome

In the center of this college town of 13,000, the inn's 203 rooms and 10,000 feet of flexible meeting space sprawl across Palmer Square. For 73 years, the shake-shingled inn with the bright-red door has housed and fed college students and, after it was purchased by a private partnership in the 1980s, visitors to the historic town.

About 45 percent of the inn's meeting business is corporate, with an emphasis on pharmaceuticals and education, according to Mariela Blanco, director of sales. Ideal meeting size is 125 to 150.

"Because it's privately owned, we have flexibility to gauge what clients want and be creative with our meeting packages," she said.

Along with a lengthy presence in Princeton, the inn has the modern touches: a fitness center, audio-visual services, a business center and wireless Internet access, free in public spaces. The food service goes beyond its restaurant and standard banquets and receptions.

Catering can mean a pizza party

At the inn, "full" catering service "includes setting people up in a comfortable style, like in a living room, for a pizza party. It doesn't have to be big-deal costly," said Jim Byrnes, food and beverage director.

The inn's meeting space is clustered in two areas.

Steps from the main lobby on the lower level is a staging area for the two largest meeting spaces. The Senior Room, decorated with images of Venice, can host receptions for 130 or banquets for 80. Doors open onto a terrace.

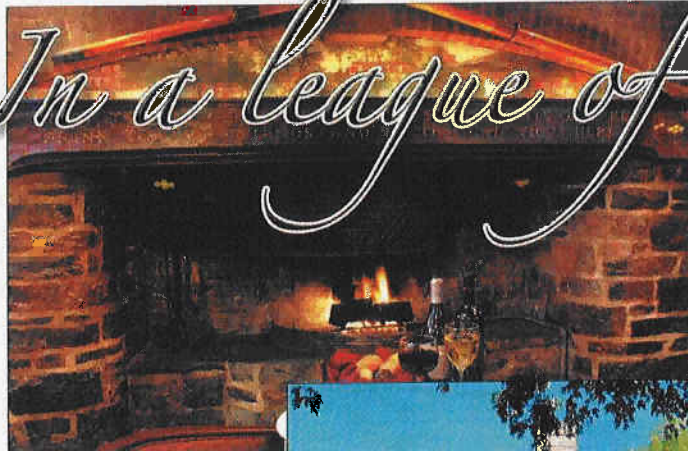


Courtesy Nassau Inn

The largest mural ever painted by Norman Rockwell hangs behind the bar in the Nassau Inn. True to Princeton's Revolutionary War ties, it portrays Yankee Doodle riding through the Redcoats.

A Site To Be Seen

In a league of its own



Courtesy Nassau Inn

The inn's largest venue, a 2,800-square-foot ballroom, has floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides.

Former lobby is still gathering place

What was once the inn's lobby on the main floor remains the heart of the inn, an elegant, clubby great room with a fireplace and red leather chairs arranged in congenial groupings.

The old check-in desk is now used as a bar for private receptions.

An old stone bench from the original 1756 Nassau Tavern, torn down when this inn was built in 1936, adds a touch of the past to the room. A painting of a stagecoach over the fireplace remembers what the inn once was, as do historical photos in hallways and guest rooms.

Fanning out from this great room are 11 varied meeting and event spaces. The 1,000-square-foot Palmer Room, with wide plank floors and striking windows, used to be a fine-dining restaurant; an adjoining room can be used for a break-out session or entertainment at a banquet.

The bright Albert Einstein room, about the same size, looks out on a green. Other breakouts or small meeting spaces include a cozy library for 16 with bookish wallpaper and a boardroom for 10.

One suite, named for actor Christopher Reeve, who stayed there while being treated at Princeton Hospital after his riding accident, accommodates meetings of eight or fewer.

In the next several years, meeting planners



Courtesy Nassau Inn

will have more choices as the inn embarks on a major expansion.

The inn is already knee-deep in preparations for a three-phase expansion or "rejuvenation," as general manager Lori Rabon terms it.

The first two phases are scheduled for 2011. A six-story addition will double the size of the ballroom and add four floors of guest rooms (40 new rooms) and more meeting space.

During Phase 3, to be completed by May 2013 if all goes according to plan, the inn's older guestrooms will be gutted and enlarged. A dining patio and shops are also in the plans.

The rooms added during the expansion will be offset by the loss of 32 guest rooms during the enlargement of cur-

No inn is closer to New Jersey's Princeton University, geographically or historically, than the Nassau Inn, left and below. The university owned the inn until the 1980s and housed students there; today it is a popular meeting destination that allows attendees to easily partake of the joys of an Ivy League town.

rent guest rooms. In the end, the inn will grow by eight guest rooms.

Tradition won't be lost

The rejuvenation and expansion will give the well-worn inn a needed boost, but its style will undoubtedly remain as it is today, tasteful, understated and gracious. In Princeton, tradition and genius trump bling.

Each year, the town celebrates Albert Einstein's birthday on March 14 (or 3-14); the digits in his birth date are also

the first three digits in the value of pi (3.14...). The celebration begins at 1:59 in the afternoon, the next three numbers in the value of pi.

And although Archimedes discovered this mathematical constant, surely Einstein used it when he lived in Princeton from 1933 until his death in 1955.

Even as it changes, the inn will hold on to its history. One of the places that heritage is most apparent is in its restaurant, the Yankee Doodle Tap Room.

Back when the university owned the inn, the tap room was a drinking club for men. Einstein was among its patrons; the evidence is his name, "Dr. Einstein," carved in a heavy wood table

A quick look at the Nassau Inn

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What's new: A three-phase expansion is planned, beginning in 2011. A dining patio, more meeting space and guest rooms will be added.

Rooms: The inn has 203 guest rooms, including 27 parlor and specialty suites.

Meeting space: The inn's 10,000 square feet of meeting space includes a 2,800-square-foot ballroom, two meeting

rooms of about 1,000 square feet each in size and 11 other meeting spaces.

Amenities: The inn has a restaurant, a fitness center and a business center. Its location in the town square puts it within walking distance of restaurants, shops and the Princeton campus across the street.

Location: The inn is one hour from airports in Newark, N.J., and Philadelphia and 90 minutes from Kennedy International in New York. Shuttle service is available. Amtrak has train service to Princeton Junction; the "Dinky," a small train, takes visitors the rest of the way into Princeton.

with the names of other regulars.

Another enduring feature hangs behind the bar: a 13-foot mural of Yankee Doodle riding through a bevy of laughing Redcoats. It is the largest mural ever painted by Norman Rockwell.

The Tap Room's Wall of Fame displays young, fresh-faced photos of well-known Princeton graduates such as Charlie Gibson, Ralph Nader and James Stewart. Only two women, Brooke Shields and Michelle Obama, grace the wall; women were not admitted to Princeton until 1969. Obama is the first African American in the photo gallery.



Courtesy Nassau Inn
Like many regulars, Albert Einstein carved his name in a table in the inn's bar.

With the inn in the center of this safe, walkable town, there is no dearth of eating options, including nearby restaurants that have private rooms for groups.

One of Einstein's favorite restaurants, Leheires, does private dinners for groups of 15 to 80. Mediterra, recently renovated, has a private dining room for 35.

Ethnic restaurants specializing in everything from sushi to Indian to Lebanese are nearby, and staff often speak the language as well in this inter-

national town.

For the Nassau Inn, Princeton's only "downtown" hotel, location is everything.

The Princeton University campus is just across the street with its chapel (the third-largest collegiate chapel in the world) and an art museum known for its Far East collection.

Nassau Hall was the nation's capital for four months when the Congress of the Confederation convened there in 1783.

The McCarter Theater, where *Our Town* was first performed in 1938, will arrange preshow or postshow theater events that include receptions for 175 or dinners for 80 in its stunning facility.

Morven Museum and Gardens, once the magnificent home of Robert Wood Johnson and five New Jersey governors, will host an event for groups that become a corporate sponsor.

Being in the thick of things in a thriving university town is "one reason people like to come here," said the inn's Blanco. "There's so much so close. Planners don't have to worry about after hours. People are glad to get out and around."



Courtesy Nassau Inn

The inn's 10,000 square feet of meeting space is varied and includes a small board room.

Company adds pizzazz to Princeton

Planners who want to add pizzazz to a meeting in Princeton should call Mimi Omiecinski, an energetic Nashville transplant who has fallen in love with Princeton.

Her Princeton Tour Company offers walking, biking and audio tours. Omiecinski also does pub crawls and ghost tours and will help planners organize just about anything they want to do, an easy task for a friendly woman who seems to know everyone in town.

The Adventures section of her Web site, www.princeton-tourcompany.com, is just the beginning for meeting groups that want to infuse work with a little playfulness.

Among Omiecinski's inventive ideas is a motivational picnic in Genius Country, the public woods behind one of the world's most respected think tanks, the Institute for Advanced Studies.

Or groups can try bonding by flying kites on the Princeton Battlefield where George Washington and his troops won one of the fiercest battles of the American Revolution in 1777.

Another idea is an Amazing Race, Princeton style, where people vie to find Aaron Burr's grave or the scene of the nation's last train heist. (It was in 1963, when several Princeton students on horseback held up the Dinky, a little train that runs between Princeton and Princeton Junction, stole girls from the train; and rode off to listen to Bo Diddley, who was performing on campus that night.)

During tours of Albert Einstein's favorite haunts, Omiecinski can also share stories of the great eccentric who made Princeton his home.

"He usually wore a black sweater and walked with his hands clasped behind his back like this," Mimi said, mimicking him. "He hated wool socks; people remember seeing

him pull them off and throw them down. Later, he also eschewed belts, and that got a little problematic. And he had a tendency to get lost."

Another Princeton personality who made an impact on the wider world was Paul Robeson, best known as an actor but also an all-American and professional athlete, writer, multilingual orator, lawyer and concert singer.

An African American, Robeson was an activist for social justice during the Jim Crow era of pre-civil-rights America. Robeson understood racial injustice: He was refused admission to his hometown's famous school because of his race. He won a four-year

scholarship to Rutgers and graduated at the top of his class.

Princeton honors him with the Paul Robeson Center for the Arts, located in the former YMCA for the town's black community. Holding an off-site event in this Michael Graves-designed facility would add another historical dimension to a meeting in Princeton.

(609) 902-3637
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By Henry Vega courtesy of Princeton Tour Co.

Team members builds during a competition arranged by the Princeton Tour Co.

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By Henry Vega courtesy of Princeton Tour Co.

A team-building scavenger hunt ends at the Paul Robeson Center.



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