

EDWARD D. PEMBROKE
THE FIRST PEABODY DUCK MASTER
1909 – 1991
AN AMERICAN HOTEL INDUSTRY ORIGINAL

This story deserves a “Once upon a time” opening. Edward D. Pembroke was the creator of the now world-famous March of The Peabody Ducks and was the first-ever Peabody Duck Master. He choreographed and trained North American Mallard ducks to march on a red carpet and into the magnificent travertine marble fountain in the lobby of The Peabody Memphis, “The South’s Grand Hotel,” to the music of John Philip Sousa’s King Cotton March. The title bestowed on Pembroke was “Peabody Duck Master,” and with the Peabody Ducks he marched into the hearts and history of Memphis and into the annals of the American hotel industry. What is the story of the Peabody Ducks? Why is there a Duck Master? Is there really a Royal Peabody Duck Palace?

Once upon a time, a little nine-year-old boy named Edward D. Pembroke, a native of Reading, Pennsylvania, carried out every child’s dream. He upped and ran away to the circus. “It was either an exciting life on the road with the circus, or violin lessons at home,” he would later gleefully tell incredulous guests at The Peabody Memphis.

Pembroke loved to tell people about his time with the circus. He worked for \$4.28 a week delivering the mail. He also provided another vital service. “About half of the circus people couldn’t read or write, both black and white, so, I did that for them,” he said. He stayed with the circus for 13 years, performing jobs of all sorts. He might have stayed longer, but a bad train wreck left him too injured to travel. When he recovered, he drifted here and there. When asked where and what he did as a drifter, he would just smile that wonderful, enigmatic smile of his that left everyone wishing he would tell, but knowing he never would.

After 13 years with the circus, and some more years driving the bus for Count Basie’s Band, Pembroke arrived in Memphis in the late 1930s where he quickly made friends with the “founder of the blues,” W.C. Handy and other Beale Street performers. Finally, in 1940, Pembroke crossed the threshold of The Peabody Memphis. Thus began a 50-year love affair with a beautiful, Southern belle, The Peabody Memphis, and five North American Mallards, The Peabody Ducks.

So, how did this grand historic hotel happen to have resident ducks? In the early 1930s, the hotel’s general manager and a friend went on a duck hunting excursion into neighboring Arkansas. The hotel’s chef packed them a sumptuous luncheon, and a bottle of Tennessee sippin’ whiskey. On the way, the driver stopped off at a duck farm to pick up some live decoy ducks, a practice that was within the law in those days. On reaching the lakeside for the hunt, the friends decided first to relax and enjoy some of the food chef had packed for them. They had a little sip of whiskey. More food, another sip of whiskey followed. They smoked a cigar, ate some more, chatted about this and that, and had another sip or two of whiskey. No duck hunting was done that day and the two men returned to the hotel feeling ever so sleepy, and more than a little tipsy.

Back at the hotel as they were unloading the car, they noticed the basket containing the live decoy ducks: they had forgotten to return them to the duck farm. They decided to place the ducks in the lobby fountain, just for the night. Next morning, when the general manager came through the lobby, he saw to his horror, crowds of people around the fountain. He approached, apologized profusely and told his guests he'd have the ducks removed immediately. There were cries of protest and indignation. Much to his surprise, guests loved the idea of having live ducks in the lobby fountain. So, the ducks became resident VIPs, Very Important Poultry, and quickly became known as "The Peabody Ducks." Some nine years later, Edward Pembroke and The Peabody Ducks met for the first time.

"The ducks were already here when I arrived at The Peabody" he explained, "but they didn't have the march. That started with me." Pembroke, drawing on all he had learned at the circus, saw an opportunity to create something absolutely unique in the hotel industry. He trained the ducks to march to John Philip Sousa's *King Cotton March*. He created a scenario in which he would lead the ducks from their Royal Duck Palace every morning at 11am, ride down in the elevator to the lobby fountain. He even laid out a red carpet to protect the ducks' delicate webbed feet. Promptly at 5pm, the march would be reversed back up to the Royal Duck Palace. And, he designed a Peabody Duck Master uniform. The Peabody Ducks and Pembroke quickly became legendary celebrities, and appeared on many national and international TV shows, including Johnny Carson, and Good Morning America, and attracted media attention to Memphis from all over the world.

When the Belz family purchased The Peabody Memphis in 1975, they began a process that would lead not only to the total renovation of "The South's Grand Hotel," but also to the rejuvenation of the moribund downtown Memphis. The Belz family contacted Memphis artist Elinor Conrad Hawkins, who had previously designed the hotel's lobby ceiling skylights and murals, and commissioned her to design a Royal Peabody Duck Palace. She took to the project like a duck to water!

First, Hawkins did extensive research on North American Mallard ducks, learning everything she could from the curator of birds at the Memphis Zoo and from the Memphis Public Library. Then she gave her imagination free flight. The fabulous result – a fairyland bird palace with banners flying, original murals of trees and waterfowl.

She designed the palace with a cupola at each end draped with beige, teal and green canopies. Under one cupola was a custom designed ornate fountain, and under the other, seasonal potted plants. From Pembroke, Hawkins learned that ducks' feet are sensitive to concrete, so the floor was covered with indoor/outdoor carpeting.

When her research revealed that ducks like to huddle together inside protective cover to sleep and roost, she designed the Royal Bed Chamber, topped by a golden crown from which spread purple drapes, decorated with a gold-leaf crown motif. Being a romantic,

Hawkins once confided that “there is a hint of Camelot about the Royal Peabody Duck Place.”

The palace duck fountain was created to provide the Peabody Ducks the most splashy playground-cum-residence. The six-foot diameter fountain constantly circulating fresh water was designed by Jack and Eva Grauer of Memphis just prior to the hotel’s reopening in 1981 under Belz family ownership. The theme was that of a little boy feeding ducks. The Grauers had previously designed and repaired several of the hotel’s interior fountains. The Royal Peabody Duck Palace was formally opened in 1985 and endures to this day. Pembroke summed it up this way: “It’s even more than it’s ‘quacked’ up to be!”

Having answered most of the usual tourist questions, one other question remained. “Mr. Pembroke, didn’t you ever want to change jobs after being here for close to five decades?” His reply, “The ducks are important to The Peabody and I’m proud to be the one to see after them. I never saw any reason to change jobs.” Looking into those twinkling eyes, one clearly saw the magical Pembroke pride and joy, and realized how fortunate The Peabody Memphis was to have such a treasure. Over half a century, many Peabody Duck Masters have come and gone, but the name of Edward D. Pembroke will be remembered and revered forever. Today, a picture of Duck Master Pembroke has pride of place in the lobby of The Peabody Memphis.

Meanwhile, The Peabody Ducks have spread their wings, and have marched into the hearts and minds of the people of Orlando, Florida and Little Rock, Arkansas. This truly unique tradition is known and loved all over the nation and around the world. No matter where a Peabody flag is raised in the future, The Peabody Ducks will perform their twice daily march from their Royal Duck Palace into their ornate Peabody Duck Fountain, escorted by their Duck Master following the tradition established so long ago by Edward D. Pembroke, the first-ever Peabody Duck Master.

Now, that’s an American hotel industry original!

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