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WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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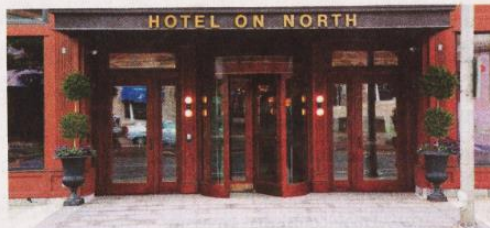
Pittsfield's positive charge

By Jaci Conry
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PITTSFIELD — My grandparents were born here. They met and married here, then raised my father and his siblings a few miles from where they'd grown up themselves. Later in life, my grandparents traveled extensively, but Pittsfield was always home. They lived their whole lives here, and considered their lives full.

Trips to Pittsfield, the largest city in the Berkshires, were highlights of my childhood. During the early 1980s, I'd walk along North Street, the downtown hub, with my grandmother. She'd point out landmarks, filling me with tales of the city's glory days. We would stop at the red wagon in front of First National Agricultural Bank for a greasy brown paper bag of popcorn and she'd remem-

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The new boutique hotel that salutes the city's long history.

Back to life in the Berkshires

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ber that the same wagon had sold popcorn by horse-drawn carriage when she was a girl.

In front of a long-shuttered venue, my grandmother often reminisced about a glitzy New Year's Eve party there in the 1930s. I'd seen a photo of the night, my grandfather in a tuxedo, my grandmother, dazzling in a drapery white dress. I was mesmerized by the 19th- and early-20th-century stone buildings that presided over downtown. Stately and detailed, the structures spoke of importance and fine craftsmanship. There was glamour to the architecture, a mystique that hinted at a bygone era.

My grandparents were proud to live in Pittsfield; they'd come of age during the city's heyday. But by the 1980s, the city was on a downward spiral. Pittsfield was incorporated in 1761 in a primarily agricultural area. By the early 1800s it was a center of woolen manufacturing and when the railroad arrived during the second half of the 19th century, Pittsfield evolved into a bustling metropolis.

In 1890, William Stanley Jr. put Pittsfield on the map when he developed the first electric transformer at his Stanley Electric Manufacturing Co. A decade later, General Electric acquired the company and opened three manufacturing facilities in town, employing more than 15,000 workers for 70-plus years. North Street was lined with banks, department stores, and specialty shops, all



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of which stayed open late on Thursdays, the day GE employees were paid.

In the late 1970s, GE began shutting down its operations in Pittsfield and over the next 10 years, the city lost its luster. The population plummeted, the once-thriving downtown became a dim stretch of vacant storefronts, and no one was coming to visit. My last visit was in 2003, and I found it to be dreary, depressing, and sad. I couldn't wait to leave.

While many unsuccessful attempts to revitalize downtown Pittsfield have been made over the last two decades, word has spread that momentum is finally taking hold, that the city is gearing up to be a Berkshires destination. This fall, I ventured back to see for myself.

An integral component in the resurgence is the fact that there is finally an appealing downtown hotel. With both a hip aesthetic and a time-honored feel, **Hotel on North** (297 North St., 413-358-4741, hotelonnorth.com) is what residents have wanted for years, say owners David and Laurie Tierney. A while back the Tierneys — David runs Pittsfield-based construction company David J. Tierney Jr. Inc. — partnered with Main Street Hospitality Group, which owns notable

Dottie's Coffee Lounge aims for hipness and greatness: coffee and food.

Berkshire hotels including Stockbridge's The Red Lion Inn and North Adams's Porches Inn at Mass MoCA, to bring a boutique hotel to downtown Pittsfield. After years searching for the right spot, in 2014 they acquired two National Historic Register brick buildings that housed Besse-Clarke department store from 1909 through the early 1990s.

The 45-guest rooms are spacious with high ceilings. Luxe bedding and marble clad bathrooms are paired with the structure's wide plank floors, exposed brick walls, and antique furnishings found at the Brimfield Antiques Fair. Lounge-like common areas are decked in jewel tones with plush contemporary seating and early-20th-century tables acquired from an old mill.

With long windows overlooking downtown, the hotel restaurant, **Eat on North**, features an oyster bar and cuisine inspired by various cultures. Dinner menu offerings include rotisserie duck with Korean barbecue glaze; chicken and waffles; and Scottish salmon. The breakfast fare reflects a

similar inventive influence (red quinoa oatmeal; maitake mushroom hash).

If you're looking for a more casual place to enjoy your morning joe, head to **Dottie's Coffee Lounge** (444 North St., www.dottiescoffee.com, 413-443-1792). With hard worn tables, mismatched chairs, and a blackboard that covers an entire wall with the coffee selections, it's a favorite hangout of hipster families, students, and old-timers alike. Don't let the laid-back atmosphere fool you, the food is thoughtfully conceived and unbelievably delicious. I had the best egg, cheese, and bacon sandwich on a homemade scallion biscuit I've ever tasted. As my husband said, "That's a sandwich worth getting fat over."

The buildings that captivated me as a child still strike me — a seasoned design writer — with awe. From **Park Square**, the 1.5-acre oval public green in the heart of downtown, you can view some of the city's best architectural specimens: the white marble courthouse, built in 1868; the Victorian Gothic-style Registry of Deeds; St. Stephens Church, with its Louis Comfort Tiffany windows; and the elegant columned former First Agricultural National Bank that cost a whopping \$250,000 to build in 1909.

A large part of Pittsfield's allure is the now-thriving arts scene, which the city has put great effort into. Downtown's state-designated Upstreet Cultural District includes the Tony-award winning **Barrington Stage Company** (30 Union St., barringtonstageco.org, 413-236-8888). Housed in a 1912 vaudeville theater, the company draws more than 50,000 visitors annually to see musicals, cabaret, classics, and new work.

Another place to see live performances is the **Colonial The-**

atre (111 South St., berkshiretheatregroup.org, 413-448-8084), which hosted Sara Bernhardt, John Barrymore, and other legends in the early 1900s. It shuttered in the 1950s, but after it was made a National Historic Treasure, the community invested millions to refurbish the theatre. Today, the interior's ornate, Gilded-Age glamour has been meticulously restored and the Berkshire Theatre Group hosts headliners who have included James Taylor, Arlo Guthrie, and The Eagles. Opening in December, "A Christmas Carol" kicks off the city's holiday festivities.

The 1903 **Berkshire Museum** (39 South St., berkshiremuseum.org, 413-443-7171) was opened by Zenas Crane, an owner of Crane & Co., the venerable paper manufacturer. Crane was entranced by the collections of the Smithsonian, The Museum of Natural History, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His concept was to blend the best attributes of their revered collections in his museum. Today, the museum exhibits remain diverse. A 10-foot-high stegosaurus outside the museum advertises the dinosaur gallery. Inside, visitors find paintings from the Hudson River School, the writing desk of Nathaniel Hawthorne, an ancient gallery featuring an Egyptian mummy, and a 30-tank aquarium. A National Geographic exhibit showcasing photographs of the American West runs through January.

Next door is a gem of a shop, **Museum Facsimiles Outlet Store** (31 South St., 413-499-1818) where the highlights include baby gifts, small leather goods, and wall decor. The array of beautiful frames, prints, and letterpress greeting cards are made in Ken Green's factory down the road. Most impressive are the enlarged book spines of authentic editions of classics in beautiful frames. I went home with "Emma" for my daughter, whose name is also a Jane Austen heroine's.

It used to be that downtown Pittsfield had scant few restau-

rants and none of them were memorable. The offerings have expanded immensely and there are now nearly 20 restaurants in a quarter of a mile. One of the standouts is **District Kitchen & Bar** (40 West St., district.kitchen, 413-442-0303), a new gastro-pub. With exposed copper pipes that run along the ceiling, steel chairs, and deep grey walls the decor feels both industrial and enveloping. If your appetite is small, there's a fantastic a goat-cheese BLT with cucumber; if you're in the mood for something more substantial go for the garlic and herb marinated strip steak. The Cuban-style corn on the cob is a must.

There's a rustic, chic vibe at **Methuselah Bar and Lounge** (391 North St., www.methuselabrandlounge.com, 413-344-4991) where the communal table is popular, but there are also nooks with private no-tops. The menu comprises cheese and charcuterie; small plates (the roasted butternut squash tacos are amazing); salads; and hearty, eclectic sandwiches. There's a lively bar scene often accented by music from a talented guitarist.

Pittsfield is equidistant between North Adams and Great Barrington, the northern Berkshires and the southern. So it's a perfect home base for travelers looking to explore the entire region. With weekend rates as low as \$179 a night at Hotel on North, it's significantly less expensive to stay in Pittsfield than in the higher profile towns.

On the way out of town I noticed, with the glee of a child, that the popcorn wagon is still there. Now owned by **Berkshire Bank** (99 North St.), it's operated by participants in a Goodwill program that teaches business enterprise skills. As we drove away, I felt happy to have seen that the legacy of my grandparents' beloved city is being preserved and that Pittsfield is evolving, poised to endure for a long time.

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