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## FOOD, FIRE, FLOOD HALL'S HISTORY AS DISTINCTIVE AS ITS SPECIALTIES

*Sharon Thompson, Herald-Leader Staff Writer*

Fires, floods and the shooting of an owner haven't dampened the spirit of the Kentucky River's most famous watering hole. Since 1783, when Capt. John Holder established Holder's Station, a tavern at the site now known as Hall's on the River, the bend on the Kentucky, just a mile or so north of the original Fort Boonesborough, has forged a history that touches four centuries and is as colorful as the stained-glass wagon wheel that decorates the restaurant's tavern ceiling. Boonesborough was a thriving shipping port in the 18th century, and Holder was captain of the militia at Fort Boonesborough. He gained lasting fame for his rescue of Jemima Boone (Daniel's second daughter) and the Calloway girls (Elizabeth and Fanny) after they were captured by a band of Shawnee Indians in 1776. He married Fanny.

"Holder was an entrepreneur who ran mills off Lower Howards Creek," said Jerry Raisor, curator for Fort Boonesborough State Park's Kentucky River Museum. At that time, there was a boatyard at Lower Howards Creek, where Holder built flatboats. He owned most of the valley and is buried, with Fanny, atop the bluff where Hall's stands.

The tavern stood near where Hall's is today. Long before it was named Hall's, the restaurant had its beginnings as Johnny **Allman's**.

### Fires and floods

The late Johnny Allman, who was a captain with the Kentucky Highway Patrol, opened his first restaurant in the late '30s on the bank of the Kentucky. The restaurant was flooded many times ("We don't even count the times," said **Allman's** son, John) and burned down twice.

Allman always rebuilt.

In the 1940s, Allman moved the restaurant across the road where Hall's now stands. He sold it (legend says he lost it in a card game) in 1950 to Karl Johnson, who kept the name and asked Johnny Allman not to open a river restaurant for five years.

Allman moved his son and wife, Ruth, to Florida for a couple of years. He returned to Kentucky when IBM was under

construction in Lexington and opened a restaurant near the plant on North Broadway, where Buffalo & Dad's now does business.

Allman stayed away from the river as long as he could, said his son, but it drew him back, and he built another restaurant, Johnny **Allman's** Fisherman's Inn, at the location of his original restaurant when the five-year commitment to stay away was up.

At his first restaurant, Allman is credited with developing the type of river restaurant in the area that we know today. **Allman's** cousin Joe, who had cooked in Arizona, came up with the fried banana peppers and beer cheese that are considered important traditions of the river restaurants.

Both restaurants were popular, and most customers would pick the first one that had a table available.

In 1978, Allman leased out his building and restaurant and retired. The building burned down some time after that, and Allman didn't rebuild.

#### Blood in the bar

Johnson kept his restaurant until his death in July 1965. He was shot in the bar "over a gambling debt," said Karl Crase, one of Hall's current owners. George and Gertrude Hall bought the restaurant shortly after Johnson's death. Two months later, the building burned down and the Hall's rebuilt on the same site.

The Halls' son, Steve, began running the restaurant in 1970, after a stint in the Marine Corps. He continued the tradition that the Hall family inherited from **Allman's**, serving beer cheese and banana peppers, fried catfish and sirloin steaks.

Steve Hall bought the business from his family in 1981 and opened Hall's on Main in Lexington in 1983. He joined forces with John Peterman to market Hall's beer cheese. They sold the rights to the name but kept the original recipe, which is a guarded secret and has been made only at the restaurant by Hall's employee Jean Bell for more than 30 years.

#### High spirits, high water

Hall's remained a popular spot for students, who would drive the country roads to whoop and holler away from Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond and the University of Kentucky in Lexington.

They came faithfully every weekend, unless there was a flood.

And big floods came nearly every spring.

One of the worst was in 1978. It caused \$130,000 in damage, none of it insured. (High-water marks are posted on the dining-room wall.)

The flood of 1984 was especially bad, but for reasons beyond the floodwaters. On the same day water was coming in the basement, Steve Hall underwent medical tests that revealed a brain tumor. He died in 1988, and Hall's on Main closed shortly afterward.

After Steve Hall's death, his wife, Joan, sold the restaurant to a group of investors, including Dr. James Crase of Somerset. The restaurant now is run by Crase's son, Karl, and general manager David Sidwell.

Sidwell, 38, has worked at Hall's since he was 14.

"It was either farm work or restaurant work," he said. "The restaurant was a lot simpler than tobacco or hay."

It was the Hall family that turned the establishment into the popular eating spot it is today, Sidwell said. Celebrities and socialites have eaten there, and almost all the regular customers have a story to tell.

There's the time heavyweight fighter Gerry Cooney came to Hall's for dinner. It was shortly after Cooney was knocked out by George Foreman in 1990. When Cooney was introduced to Wade Parks, who was manning the oyster bar, Parks said: "I didn't recognize you standing up."

'It was the spot'

Johnny Allman was perhaps as much of a celebrity in his day as anyone. He was friendly and enjoyed being with people, and that's why he enjoyed the restaurant business, said his son. Longtime customer James Howard of Lexington remembers him as "a great big guy with white hair."

"I've been around the place my entire life. When I was growing up I used to go with my parents," he said. Later, Howard lived in a house on nearby Combs Ferry Road with other law students.

"I remember he (Allman) had the best T-bone steak," Howard said. "In the '60s, it was \$2.75, and beer was 35 cents.

"It was the spot. The food was always good, but the atmosphere was the thing. Being able to get out of town and drive there was fun. You could be loud and rowdy, and if you spilled a drink it didn't matter."

Lasting legacy

While Hall's has become less known for its rowdiness and more for its romance -- 13 couples were engaged over Valentine's

Day dinner at Hall's in 1998, Sidwell said -- its popularity hasn't waned.

Floods, fires, food and friendships have been business as usual, all taken in stride.

"I remember sitting at Hall's one afternoon looking out the window and watching Johnny **Allman's** burn," said Ed Mastrean, a longtime patron from Winchester.

He also remembers helping pull furniture out of Hall's during one flood.

"Tables and chairs were moved by johnboats to higher ground," he said. "It seemed like an annual event. They had everything down like clockwork.

"And they were back in business the next day."

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\* Highlights and other high-water marks

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Time line

- \* 1783: Capt. John Holder establishes Holder's Tavern at Lower Howard's Creek on the Kentucky River.
- \* Late 1930s: Johnny Allman opens **Allman's** Restaurant.
- \* Early to mid-'40s: Restaurant burns and floods many times. Allman rebuilds across the road.
- \* 1950: Karl Johnson acquires **Allman's**.
- \* 1955: Allman opens Fisherman's Inn on his original restaurant site.
- \* 1965: Johnson is shot and killed in his restaurant's bar.
- \* 1965: George and Gertrude Hall buy Johnson's restaurant and rename it Hall's on the River.
- \* 1978: Allman retires and leases out Fisherman's Inn. It later burns.

- \* 1981: Steve Hall buys the restaurant from his family.
- \* 1983: Hall opens Hall's on Main in Lexington, and he and John Peterman market Hall's beer cheese.
- \* 1988: Steve Hall dies. Hall's on Main closes.
- \* 1989: A group of investors buys Hall's on the River.

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