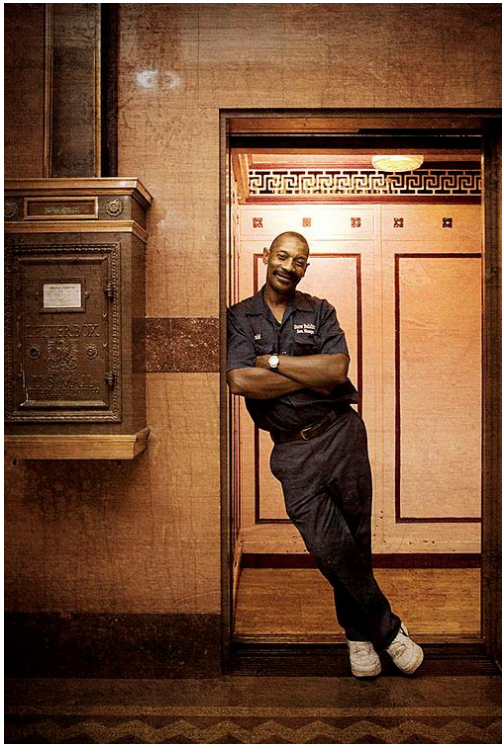


Rise to the Occasion

Things are looking up (and down) for the last elevator operator in the state.

By Jane Paige; photo by Scott Dingman



Ronald Chester's "office" is about the size of a large doormat. A small chair sits in one corner across from a crisscrossed metal screen. Although tiny and sparse, his workspace displays solid brass fixtures on walls accented with ornate trim. Every day, Chester operates the antique elevator in downtown Durham's historic Snow Building. While delivering folks to the correct floor, he also is taking them on a trip back in time.

Can I get a lift?

The 1929 Otis elevator and Chester both are one of a kind. In a state with about 25,000 elevators, this is the only one still run by a full-time operator. Once commonplace in government buildings and expensive hotels across the state, elevator operators have been replaced with computer-driven lifts. Gone are the days of personal greetings, hand-operated gears, and jolting stops except in the Snow Building. "To my knowledge, the Snow Building elevator is the last one we have from Manteo to Murphy that is full-time

operator driven," says Jonathan Brooks, chief of the state's elevator bureau. "In this part of the country, these elevators are few and far between." Chester doesn't think of his job as making history every day. He just wants to get people where they want to go in the six-story office building.

Actually, Chester inherited the job as the elevator operator about two years ago. Willie Cherry, who became a legend while manning the lift for more than 20 years, retired due to poor health. Chester, who also worked for the building's owners, took over the post. Wearing a uniform with his name embroidered on the shirt, Chester works the building and its occupants the way a maître d' oversees a fancy restaurant. Tenants are greeted by name, lunch times are remembered, and unfamiliar guests are eyed suspiciously. "My primary job is to run the elevator," says Chester, closing the heavy metal door and cage-like screen. "But, I also keep up with all the tenants, make sure the building is clean, and keep an eye on the lobby."

A small portable fan helps cool the elevator in the summer. Chester has been known to hook up a television inside the space. During Chester's lunch hour, guests must climb the building's steps. "This job never gets boring for me," he says. "You would be amazed how many people ride this elevator every day, and there is always something to do." Chester, 51, moved to Durham from New Jersey about 10 years ago. His wife, Katrina, wanted a slower pace of life, and her sister had attended college in Durham. The couple now are glad to call the Bull City home.

In addition to operating the elevator, Chester also helps establish a sense of community in the building, according to Allen Wilcox, the editor of a scientific journal who has been a tenant for about three years. First-time visitors always mention the driver-operated elevator. "If I want to know about anything in the building, I just go push the elevator button and ask Ron," says Wilcox. "He knows everything that goes on here and who is coming and going. It gives me a good sense of security."

The Historic Preservation Society of Durham has its offices on the second floor of the historic building. Society officials say visitors are intrigued with the elevator and the building itself. "I think the Snow Building is one of the coolest buildings in the entire city," says John Compton, executive director of the historical society. "The entire architecture of the building is very appealing, and having the only person-operated elevator left in the state gives it even greater charm."

Up and running

Located at 331 West Main Street in downtown Durham, the Snow Building was constructed in 1933 and is named for businessman Horace North Snow. A telegraph operator during the Civil War, Snow came to Durham as the secretary for Julian Carr, who became one of the state's manufacturing leaders. Snow later operated several Durham businesses. The building is considered one of the most vivid examples of Art Deco style in the state, featuring stylized pilasters that rise to a spiky roofline. The entranceway is flanked by elaborate metal grillwork. Andy Widmark, owner of Mark Properties, saved the historic building from its own demise about 15 years ago. Then in 1997, he sold the renovated structure to two area developers, David Buschman and David Pierce. "Replacing the tiny elevator during the renovation would have been extremely costly," says Widmark. "Keeping the operator-run elevator was the best decision financially and historically."

"A real classic"

The elevator itself is a mechanical work of art. When visitors push the button on the floor to call the elevator, a bell sounds from deep in the shaft. Inside the elevator, a brass panel with numbers indicates the building's floors. At the sound of the bell, a tiny white sign appears beside the correct number of the floor so Chester knows where to get his passenger. A brass joystick "drives" the elevator. A turn to the left sends it up, while a right turn takes it down. Chester has to "jog" the control to get the elevator close to the landing point on each floor. Experience and just the right touch on the throttle bring the floors exactly even. The elevator does not contain an inner door because the landing has to be visible for proper positioning of the cab. After stopping at the landing, Chester reaches over and pulls an attached lever to first open the metal grill door and then the solid door.

While Chester operates the elevator every day, Russ Santhouse keeps it running. As a mechanic with Southern Elevator Company, Santhouse has serviced the Snow Building elevator each month for almost 15 years. Similar to a doctor who still makes house calls, he knows how to baby this special patient. “The elevator has its original equipment, and most of its parts cannot be purchased today,” Santhouse says. “When a part broke recently, it had to be custom-made in a machine shop.”

Of the 75 elevators Santhouse services in the Triangle area, the Snow Building’s is the oldest. Today’s younger mechanics who service computer-driven lifts are often baffled by the inner workings of the 75-year-old elevator. “While it may sound trite, they sure don’t build ’em like they used to,” Santhouse says. “I would call the Snow Building elevator a real classic.”

Jane Paige writes from her home in Durham.

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