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Hotel owners buy Hermitage Farm

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Historic Hermitage Farm in Goshen has been sold to the owners of the eclectic 21c Museum Hotels, Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson.

Churchill Downs Inc. board chairman Carl Pollard sold the 700-acre farm to Brown and Wilson for an undisclosed price, but Pollard will continue to live there and to operate his Thoroughbred breeding operation in a lease-back arrangement at least through 2013, according to a news release on the sale.

"We want to ensure the property remains pastoral but also continues to be regarded as a site for world-class equine operations," Wilson said.

Hermitage Farm has been the home to more than 200 stakes winners, including 1953 Kentucky Derby winner Dark Star and 1983 English 2,000 Guineas winner Lomond. Irish champion Woodman and Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner Is It True also were born there.

So was Seattle Dancer, famous as the yearling who sold for a world-record \$13.1 million in July 1985 at Keeneland. The half-brother to Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew was bred in partnership by Warner Jones, who sold Hermitage in 1995 to Pollard.

"I'll be 75 when this lease expires, so this arrangement is the perfect way for me to continue to protect the farm and employees, and yet free my children of the responsibility of managing such an operation," said Pollard, who has been chairman of Churchill Downs' board since 2001.

Since 2003, Brown, Wilson and partners have owned 180 mostly unimproved acres that they have leased back to Pollard.

"Laura Lee and I are thrilled to have the opportunity to become part of Hermitage Farm's great history," Wilson said in a statement. "It has long been a dream of ours that Hermitage Farm remain the same beautiful open green space that it is today. We've been working for the last few months to create this unique agreement with Carl and are confident it will have long-reaching benefits for the community. We plan to honor the farm's remarkable tradition far into the future and intend to place the property in an environmental-conservation easement."

Brown and Wilson said they plan to hold an "exhaustive planning session" on Monday and Tuesday with architects and equine industry leaders about how to "chart the proper future course for Hermitage."

That meeting will include David Mohny, a former dean of the University of Kentucky's College of Design; Michael Rotondi, a Los Angeles architect; Randall Arendt, an author and easement consultant; Duke Stump, principal and chief architect of the Northstar Manifesto in Boston; Torrance Watkins, an international event rider and course designer; Simon Roseman, a course designer for the World Equestrian Games; and Jerry Van Eyck, founder of landscape architecture and urban design practice MELK in New York.

In addition to owning hotels adorned with original artwork and colorful penguins, husband-and-wife Wilson and Brown are entrepreneurs and philanthropists. They own the 21c Museum Hotels in Louisville, Cincinnati and Austin, Texas, and the Kentucky Bison Co.

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