

Treasured FINDS

By Patsi B. Trollinger | Photos by Lee P. Thomas

In the days when Kentucky was young and untamed, winter travelers knew they could count on shelter and warmth in Shelbyville. Today Bluegrass country is less hazardous, yet people still flock to this small town for respite late in the year. They come in search of Wakefield-Searce Galleries, where in November and December a sense of magic takes hold. Here visitors find solace and the holiday frenzies melt away.

At this world-class antique and silver shop, even the employees feel a sense of wonder late in the year. Visual design coordinator Patti Wilson has worked at Wakefield-Searce for more than two decades. She continues to take delight in the way holiday shoppers respond to the beauty of the place. "People stop in the front door and gasp. Every time I hear that sound, it makes me smile."

Even the extra hours of preparatory work have a charming side effect. "When we're here at dusk, the lights of all the trees give the place an amazing glow."

The serene elegance awaiting holiday visitors belies a Herculean effort required by the entire staff, including Pat Burnett, president of Wakefield-Searce Galleries Inc. "We begin rearranging furniture in August each year," he says, "preparing for the addition of holiday decorations and new merchandise."

Burnett's eyes twinkle as he describes their work. "We always have a 20-foot Christmas tree in the main showroom, which has to be anchored to the ceiling. That makes it necessary to remove and store our crystal



Shoppers delight in the decorated trees.

*Wakefield-Searce Galleries an Inviting
Holiday Destination*

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A twinkling 20-foot Christmas tree towers above the main showroom; above right, Pat Burnett, president of Wakefield-Scearce Galleries, and his grandson Matthew

chandelier. We've been through the process so many times, it's almost like a ritual."

For visitors, the beauty of that first tree serves as a visual appetizer — a grand one, but just a taste of what turns out to be a feast of Christmas cheer. Additional trees appear in every subsequent gallery, and each tree is decorated with a different theme.

Wilson acknowledges that it is an incredible challenge for the staff to come up with new themes and an all-new line of accessories and ornaments every year. "There was a tree with butterflies one year and a tree with musical notes," she recalls. "We



try not to repeat themes, and we go out of our way to look for themes that connect with new trends in decorating and fashion design."

Even without the faintest hint of holiday décor, Wakefield-Scearce makes a strong impression. The massive brick structure began as a stately-yet-modest home in the early 1800s. Additions became necessary after an enterprising young educator established a school for girls on the site. Julia Ann Hieronymus Tevis dared to go beyond the limited curriculum typically offered for girls of that era. She insisted on teaching science, and somewhat to her surprise, the school thrived. From the opening of Science Hill School in 1825 until its closure in 1939, the place enjoyed a national reputation for excellence.

The spacious rooms and long hallways of the school fell into disrepair during years the building functioned as a boarding house. Fortuitously, two Kentuckians, Mark Wakefield of Louisville and Mark J. Scearce of Shelbyville, loved the historic property and saw the potential to establish a thriving business. Their partnership began in the late 1940s with a limited antique auction held on the front lawn. In the intervening years Wakefield-Scearce grew to become a distinctive destination for shoppers interested in exceptional antiques, gifts, and decorating accessories. Additionally, it is the longtime supplier of julep cups and trophies to Keeneland.

Wakefield eventually sold his interest in the business to Scearce, whose relatives, son-in-law Pat Burnett, niece Judy Scearce, and grandson Matthew Burnett, continue to be involved.

It was the late Mark Scearce who came up with the idea for one of the most popular features at Wakefield-Scearce. A jeweler admired for his good taste, he set out to recreate a type of traditional English retail space. The result was a stunning series of silver vaults that came to occupy what used to be the school basement. The vaults now overflow with the very best of English antique silver. Exquisite cake baskets are displayed against a backdrop of whitewashed stone walls. Gleaming teapots in a dozen different styles dangle casually from sturdy wooden supports. The total effect is charming.

Each gallery at Wakefield-Scearce has a personality of its own. High above the silver vaults, on a landing just over the

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main floor, customers enjoy a cozy boutique filled with items including frames, trays, and botanicals.

Above and below the landing, visitors wind through rooms that celebrate varied themes, styles, and periods. On the first floor, the cozy Hare and Hound Gallery invites customers to enjoy a taste of English country living. Upstairs, a series of bedrooms and sitting rooms bespeak dozens of possible ways to combine furnishings, art, and accessories.

A sense of harmony pervades every corner of Wakefield-Searce. As Patti Wilson explains: "We give thought to even



English antique silver fills one of Wakefield-Searce's many vaults; above, visual design coordinator Patti Wilson and staff begin yearly holiday preparations in August.

the tiniest details, balancing fashion and elegance with an atmosphere that is welcoming and friendly. We want Wakefield-Searce customers to experience a look that can be achieved at home. I knew it was working the day a customer looked at one particular gallery and said, with enthusiasm, that she would feel right at home having every detail in her front hallway."

The variety of pieces, ranging from small silver frames to sturdy mahogany beds, appeals to shoppers who browse through the main shop. A cluster of smaller independent shops is also located on the premises. Arrayed around an indoor courtyard, these businesses offer items including linens, fine apparel for men and women, and Christmas decorations.

Many visitors cross the courtyard to have lunch at the Science Hill Inn. The eclectic lunch menu has drawn rave reviews from patrons including the likes of Julia Child. The late chef traveled to Louisville in 2000 for a special event and inquired about the best place to sample fried chicken in Kentucky. Her tipster suggested Science Hill, and the queen of culinary delights insisted that her host drive her to Shelbyville. Child was not disappointed with her lunch. She pronounced Science Hill's fried chicken to be "the best I've ever eaten."

That kind of ringing endorsement is typical at almost any point within the walls of Shelbyville's most notable business. Ralph Steinhauser, a Louisville architect and businessman, has shopped the Wakefield-Searce Galleries with his wife, Karen, for nearly 20 years. Each trip leaves him with a renewed sense of surprise that such a gem of a place exists in a small Kentucky town. "For those of us who know and love English antiques," Steinhauser says, "it seems unbelievable that Wakefield-Searce so readily offers exceptional antiques and impeccable customer service."

The sheer range of items offered in the galleries also has been a source of delight for the Steinhausers. The antique mahogany desk that sits in Ralph's library is typical of the large pieces he and Karen have purchased. More recently they took pleasure in something much smaller — an antique cellaret. The official description of the piece, which also may be called a wine cooler, hints at the details of craftsmanship: English flame mahogany sarcophagus-shaped cellaret with domed top standing on lotus bun feet. Ralph says simply:

"We begin rearranging furniture in August each year, preparing for the addition of holiday decorations and new merchandise."

— Pat Burnett, president of Wakefield-Searce

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"The piece is gorgeous."

Outstanding face-to-face customer service has been part of the Wakefield-Scearce tradition from the very beginning. Today the business is extending its sense of identity into cyberspace. As Wilson explains, "We like the idea of marrying tradition with technology, and we're working hard to make sure that our Web site represents the essence of the place. Even on the Internet, the beauty of Wakefield-Scearce needs to be evident and so does our commitment to customer service."

Wilson describes the experience of a recent Chicago-based customer, a woman intent on purchasing an antique drum table with a leather top. An online search led the woman to a photo displayed on the Wakefield-Scearce Web site. "Based on the photo and description," Wilson says, "the customer realized that we had exactly what she wanted. She called for more details, liked the service we offered on the phone, and decided to fly down. She spent a day here, purchased the table, and had it shipped home."

Out-of-state customers are not unusual. Neither is the long-

DIRECTIONSTOWAKEFIELD-SCEARCE

Wakefield-Scearce is located five minutes from I-64 at the Shelbyville exit 32.

Driving time from major metropolitan areas:

Louisville – 30 minutes

Lexington – 45 minutes

Cincinnati – 90 minutes (south on I-71 or I-75 to Lexington, then I-64 to Shelbyville)

HOURS AND PRODUCT LISTINGS

The Galleries are open Monday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m. EST. A partial listing of products is available online at: <http://www.wakefield-scearce.com>

Phone: (502) 633-4382

Email: info@wakefieldscearce.com

THE DINING ROOM AT THE SCIENCE HILL INN

Serving lunch 11:30 a.m.–1:30 p.m. six days a week (closed every Monday and on selected holidays). Reservations recommended.

Phone: (502) 633-2825 during hours of operation. Catering available.

term loyalty of Kentuckians such as the Steinhausers of Louisville. Ralph says that after several years of traditional shopping visits to Wakefield-Scearce, he discovered yet another level of service offered to long-time customers: appointments for private

showings of the massive inventory of antiques held in a warehouse separate from the public showrooms. The quality so evident in the public galleries, says Steinhauser, is matched by a startling degree of quantity.

Antiques are a powerful attraction for many visitors to Wakefield-Scearce. The classic food at the Science Hill Inn draws others. For Greg Caudill of Danville, the desire to return year after year is rooted in something less tangible: holiday nostalgia.

Caudill's treks began long ago in a less-than-auspicious way when, as he says, his mother announced that she intended to take her son on a holiday outing to Shelbyville. Now a bank president with three kids of his own, Caudill says ruefully, "I was a typical high school boy, and my mother practically dragged me there kicking and screaming. But when we stepped in the door, I realized the place was amazing. I've been back nearly every year since."

This year his trip will take on a new dimension. Caudill's daughter recently got engaged, and it seems logical to immerse the prospective son-in-law in a family tradition. Should the young man need persuading, Caudill's ready: "Here's the way I explain it — if I'm not in the holiday spirit before I go, Wakefield-Scearce always gets me there." 🐾



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