

Nobody Asked Me, But...No. 176: Hotel History: The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York City; My Five Published Hotel Books

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By Stanley Turkel, CMHS

Hotel History: The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel

On March 7, 2017 the Landmarks Preservation Commission voted to protect the interior Art Deco details of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel whose exterior is already landmarked. In 2015, China's Anbang Insurance Group bought the Waldorf Astoria for nearly \$2 billion from Hilton Worldwide Holdings Inc. Anbang has just closed the hotel for a complete makeover involving conversion of hundreds of guestrooms into privately-owned condominiums.

In my book "Hotel Mavens: Lucius M. Boomer, George C. Boldt and Oscar of the Waldorf" (AuthorHouse 2014), I tell the fascinating story of the construction of the new Waldorf-Astoria from 1929-1931, the hoteliers who created it, the singular design and the remarkable guest list.

On December 20, 1928, the Boomer-duPont Properties Corporation announced that the original Waldorf-Astoria (designed by Henry J. Hardenbergh) on Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Fourth Street would be demolished. They sold the hotel to real estate developers for \$13.5 million to construct the Empire State Building and Boomer was able to obtain the rights to the name Waldorf-Astoria for the payment of one dollar. The new Waldorf-Astoria was to be built on an entire block leased from the New York Central Railroad between Park and Lexington Avenues between Forty-ninth and Fiftieth Streets.

Even before the original Waldorf-Astoria closed down for demolition, Lucius Boomer asked the famous architectural firm of Schultze & Weaver to begin planning a new, larger Waldorf-Astoria. Their hotel designs included the Los Angeles Biltmore Hotel, the Atlanta Biltmore Hotel and the Coral Gables Biltmore Hotel for John McEntee Bowman. The firm also designed the Breakers Hotel in

Palm Beach and the Miami Nautilus Hotel. In addition, they designed several noted landmark hotels in New York, including the Park Lane Hotel, the Lexington Hotel, the Pierre Hotel and the Sherry-Netherland Hotel. Schultze & Weaver's lead architect Lloyd Morgan (1892-1970) designed the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel which, upon its completion in 1931, was the world's largest, with 2,200 rooms. Viewing Morgan's classic illustrations some eighty-eight years later, one can only gasp with admiration for Morgan's genius.

The site was directly over New York Central Railroad tracks which presented special engineering and construction problems since the hotel had to rest on steel columns located between the railroad tracks. Furthermore, the placement of the columns had to be done without interrupting the train schedules. It was a complicated structure with the hotel cushioned by steel pads and vibration-absorbing spaces between the sidewalk and the building.

Because the Waldorf was opening during the Great Depression, President Herbert Hoover thought the opening might prove an inspiration to those who had lost confidence in their country's economy. "The erection of this great structure," he said in his speech, "has been a contribution to the maintenance of employment, and an exhibition of courage and confidence to the whole nation."

The coup was a sensational one for Lucius Boomer since previous presidents had spoken only at the dedication of mammoth new dams, at national memorials, at the opening of new land-grant universities, but never within memory at the opening of so commercial a venture as a hotel. Later Boomer was to repay the favor to his old friend and fishing companion. On President Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration night, when Herbert Hoover left the White House after four rugged years, he asked the Boomers to have a quiet dinner with him in New York at the Waldorf Towers.

There were five hundred guests in the hotel's two thousand rooms that first night. Elsewhere in the city, Norma Shearer and Clark Gable were the stars of *A Free Soul*, in its second smash week at the Capitol. Ann Harding was appearing in the movie *Devotion* with Leslie Howard. Eddie Dowling, Ginger Rogers, Ray Dooley, and the Albertina Rasch Girls were on the stage of the new Broadway Theater at 53rd Street. *Grand Hotel* was the play at the National. *George White's Scandals of 1931* at the Apollo featured Rudy Vallee, Ethel Merman, Willie and Eugene Howard, and Ray Bolger. New York City Mayor Walker's dog, an Irish setter named "Chauncey Olcott," was missing from its home in Far Rockaway. David Sarnoff was celebrating twenty-five years at CBS. Katharine Cornell decided to suspend *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* so she could take a six weeks' rest. The Greenwich Savings Bank was offering 4 per cent interest and Brill Brothers had complete chauffeur's outfits for \$169. You could get a fall suit at John David's for \$36.50 and tune in to the Rudy Vallee Orchestra and Eddie Cantor over WEAJ at eight PM. Philadelphia was playing St. Louis in the World Series, Roxy was being given a lunch in Berlin before traveling on to Russia to sign up talent. Will Rogers was the most humorous American and Premier Laval of France was sailing for America. The Berkshire Hotel at 21 East 52nd Street, was advertising "Rents adapted to current conditions."

That was the world of New York when the second Waldorf-Astoria opened on Park Avenue on the 1st of October, 1931. By the 4th of July, 1932, the Waldorf had sixteen hundred people on its payroll, but in its two thousand rooms there were just two hundred and sixty guests.

Although not nearly as tall as the Chrysler Building or the Empire State Building, the new Waldorf-Astoria shared an unmistakable profile on New York City's skyline. Facing Park and Lexington Avenues are two twenty-story slabs. In between is a forty-two story tower on top of which are two turrets enclosing elevator machinery, fans and water tank rooms.

The main entrance foyer on Park Avenue is flanked by two raised terraces and beyond, two meeting rooms: the Sert Room and the Empire Room. Proceeding easterly past a bank of elevators, visitors

cross Peacock Alley (a corridor-lounge named after the famous passageway in the original Waldorf-Astoria). Beyond is the windowless main lobby in the center of the building. It contains the usual hotel functions (front desk, concierge, cashier, bell station) as well as a restaurant and a beautiful antique clock from the original Waldorf-Astoria.

The new Waldorf-Astoria was a vast undertaking by many men and nearly as many corporations. Construction funds totaling forty million dollars were provided by a consortium of banks and railroads, including Hayden, Stone & Company; Hallgarten & Company; Kisser, Kinnicutt & Company, and the New York Central and New York, New Haven and Hartford railroads. The construction firm of Thompson and Starrett was hired to build the structure. Schultze & Weaver had to pay special attention to the location of back-of-the-house facilities. They had little choice since the hotel had only a small basement area, situated as it was over the New York Central railroad tracks. Still, less than two years later, on October 1, 1931, the new Waldorf-Astoria Hotel was opened to the public.

Describing the hotel was a little like attempting to portray the wonders of Hoover Dam or the Golden Gate Bridge—an exercise in ooh-and-ah statistics: The hotel extended 200 feet along Park and Lexington Avenues and 405 feet along Forty-ninth and Fiftieth Streets. Three thousand cubic feet of granite were utilized in its construction, as were 27,100 tons of steel; 76,700 barrels of cement; 1,000,000 square feet of metal lathing and furring; 2,695,000 square feet of terra cotta and gypsum blocks; 11,000,000 bricks; and 300 imported mantels of marble. The tracks of the Penn Central Railroad ran beneath the hotel, which was cushioned from vibrations by an elaborate steel carriage. From its sidewalk entrances to the top of its twin towers, the hotel soared 625 feet into the air. With just under two thousand rooms, it was the largest hotel in the United States, if not in the world.

Oscar of the Waldorf (maître d' hotel Oscar Tschirky) was on hand for the opening with his smile as broad as ever. Those who remembered the old Waldorf-Astoria were as pleased to see him as anyone in the new hotel. Its walls were paneled with French burl walnut inlaid with ebony, its pilasters faced with French rouge marble and topped with capitals and cornices of nickel bronze. Along the walls of Peacock Alley at intervals rested maple vitrines fronted with glass in which leading New York merchants displayed their wares. It was a handsome corridor which captured the spirit, though it did not duplicate the appearance of the fabled promenade in the original Waldorf. But it bore the same name, Peacock Alley, and that fact was enough to warm the hearts of nostalgics.

Even during the bleak years of the Depression, the Waldorf was widely acclaimed as the world's greatest hotel. Top-name entertainers appeared regularly in its Empire Room including Eddy Duchin, Paul Draper, Frank Sinatra, Xavier Cugat, Edith Piaf, Benny Goodman, Eartha Kitt, Harry Bellafonte, Lena Horne, Tony Bennett, Peggy Lee, Liberace, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and many, many more. Important balls and banquets were held in its ballroom. One of the remarkable features of the hotel was a private railroad siding beneath the building where guests in private cars could come directly to the hotel via the New York Central tracks.

In a Waldorf-Astoria advertisement in 1946 which is reproduced in Lucius Boomer's authoritative book *Hotel Management*, (Harper & Brothers, Publishers, New York, 1938), the following words appear under a Waldorf- Astoria photograph:

"The Waldorf-Astoria is definitely something more than a hotel. For more than forty years, the great figures of the earth have chosen the Waldorf-Astoria as the one hotel compatible with their political dignity, their economic importance, or their artistic fame."

The Waldorf Towers with its own private entrance and elevator lobby on Fiftieth Street was exclusively for long-term tenants. Hundreds of notables, ranging from European kings to Indian

maharajas, bedded down in its luxurious tower suites. President Hoover, after his departure from the White House, made his home in the Waldorf, as did General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, publishers Henry Luce and William Randolph Hearst, Jr., song writer Cole Porter, Elizabeth Taylor, Bob Hope, the Sultan of Brunei, and many more. The Towers have 115 suites and 90 rooms on the 28th to 42nd floors.

A plaque in the Presidential Suite reads:

The Waldorf- Astoria Presidential Suite.

A few of the famous occupants:

Every President of the United States since 1931

Queen Elizabeth II, England

King Hussein, Jordan

King Saud, Saudi Arabia

General Charles de Gaulle, France

Chairman Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet Union

Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, Israel

Prime Minister Menachen Begin, Israel

Premier Giulio Andreotti, Italy

President Valery Giscard D'estang, France

Emperor and Empress Hirohito, Japan

King Juan Carlos I, Spain

President Nicolai Ceausescu, Romania

King Olav V, Norway

King Faisal, Saudi Arabia

In the summer of 1949, a writer named Thomas Ewing Dabney readied for publication a book-length biography of hotelier Conrad Hilton. The book traces the story of Hilton's rise from obscurity in New Mexico, his entry into the hotel business in Cisco, Texas, and his celebrated purchases of Chicago's Palmer House and New York's Plaza Hotel. The book, titled "*The Man Who Bought the Plaza*", was finished and in the hands of printers when the publishers suddenly ordered work to halt. Title pages were destroyed, dust jackets discarded, and the author was called in to revise the text. Conrad Hilton was a good subject for a biography but, as Dabney had learned, he had just become the owner of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Hastily updated, the book was released to book stores in 1950 under a new title— "*The Man Who Bought the Waldorf: The Life of Conrad N. Hilton*".

Dabney wrote, " In the mind of some venerable ladies and gentlemen, the sale of the Plaza Hotel in New York several years ago could only be associated with the fall of the Bastille, the decapitation of Charles the First, and the fourth inaugural of Roosevelt. It was regarded as a disaster comparable with the San Francisco earthquake or the Johnstown flood."

Why had Hilton, who had already won hotel fame and earned enough money to live on comfortably for several lifetimes, decide to buy the Waldorf? It was a famous property with a lustrous history, a vast "city within a city" with nearly unlimited revenue-producing possibilities. It was a handsome structure that could profitably be operated in conjunction with Hilton's growing chain of large hotels in other cities. All these reasons, and more, were summed up in a single phrase scrawled by the ambitious hotelier across a photograph of the Waldorf-Astoria: "The greatest of them all." Because it was the greatest, Hilton was determined to own it. On October 12, 1949, the Waldorf became a Hilton hotel.

Visiting kings and queens made it a regular stop on visits to New York, as did presidents of the United States. The United States Ambassador to the United Nations maintained a suite in the hotel, as did ambassadors from more than thirty other nations. One day in the early 1960s, ex-President Eisenhower was in the Grand Ballroom for a banquet while President John F. Kennedy was attending a fund-raising dinner in the Empire Room. Six astronauts were checking in. Francis Cardinal Spellman attended a lunch honoring General Mark Clark, while future Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon wandered about in the halls. With five American presidents and a former King of England in the building, it was not a typical day for the Waldorf, but it was not so far out the ordinary as to cause any great consternation for the hotel's staff.

The Waldorf was the "unofficial Palace" of New York, a citadel of luxury, a center of power and wealth, and a living museum of Manhattan history. There are notes here and there that recall the old Waldorf on Fifth Avenue— portraits of hotel luminaries, including a handsome canvas of Oscar of the Waldorf, at whose death in 1950 all Waldorf flags were lowered to half-staff; the reconstructed Peacock Alley; a magnificent clock saved from the old hotel that has nine feet of bronze adorned with a miniature replica of the Statue of Liberty, four spread-winged eagles, a series of sports scenes, and the likenesses of Queen Victoria, George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Benjamin Harrison.

But the grand tradition that lives in the building recalls the past even better than these relics— memories of the Astors, echoes of "Diamond Jim" Brady, "Bet-a- Million" Gates, and the Bradley Martin Ball; recollections of T. Coleman duPont, Douglas MacArthur and most of all, Lucius Boomer. When night descends on New York and an air of respectful silence creeps through the great lobbies and corridors, the palace inn breathes deeply—but the ghosts of Peacock Alley do not sleep, maybe because more than 66 years later, the Waldorf-Astoria has a new owner while, for the time being, it is still managed by the Hilton Corporation.

My Five Published Hotel Books

- *Great American Hoteliers: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry* (2009)

During the thirty years prior to the Civil War, Americans built hotels larger and more ostentatious than any in the rest of the world. These hotels were inextricably intertwined with American culture and customs but were accessible to average citizens. Stephen Rushmore writes in the Foreword: "Drawing from more than 40 years of industry experience including managing some of the largest New York City

hotels, Turkel captures the spirit of each of these pioneers and relates their achievements to important lessons that we can learn from.”

- [Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels in New York](#) (2011)

These thirty-two featured hotels have defied the passage of time for a variety of reasons, many explicable, some beyond explanation, all miraculous. Bjorn Hanson, Ph.D. writes in the Foreword: “Stanley Turkel is unique in his passion about the history of the United States lodging industry; he pursues and shares this passion by compiling information about great hoteliers and hotels for articles, updates for his clients, and this, the second of his two hotel books.”

- [Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels East of the Mississippi](#) (2013)

All the eighty-six hotels featured in this book have unique and singular stories describing their creation, survival and revival. The book contains eighty-six antique postcard illustrations and a Foreword by Joseph McInerney, President and CEO Emeritus of the American Hotel & Lodging Association: “Stanley Turkel is one of the best writers I know at capturing our history – the “old” – and infusing it with new life and relevance.”

- [Hotel Mavens: Lucius M. Boomer, George C. Boldt and Oscar of the Waldorf](#) (2014)

Hotel Mavens tells the interesting stories of the following pioneers and the hotels they built and operated:

- *Lucius Boomer, one of the most famous hoteliers of his time, was Chairman of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel Corporation.*
- *George C. Boldt who was the genius of the original Waldorf-Astoria. It was said of him that he made innkeeping a profession and, more than any man, was the creator of the modern American hotel.*
- *Oscar of the Waldorf was the superstar of his time and one of the stalwarts who managed both the original and the current Waldorf-Astoria.*

Sam Roberts in the [New York Times](#) wrote:

"Nostalgia for the city's caravansaries will be kindled by Stanley Turkel's

- [Hotel Mavens: Lucius M. Boomer, George C. Boldt and Oscar of the Waldorf](#)”.

The fact-filled book by Mr. Turkel, an industry consultant, explains, among other things, the history of the hyphen (recently excised) in the name of the Waldorf Astoria, which inspired a mid-block street and even a song.”

- [Great American Hoteliers Volume 2: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry](#) (2016)

Lawrence P. Horwitz, Executive Director, Historic Hotels of America, writes in the Foreword: "This book is an excellent history book with insights into seventeen of the great innovators and visionaries of the hotel industry and their inspirational stories."

These important and largely unknown biographies include Stewart William Bainum, Curtis Leroy Carlson, Cecil Burke Day, Louis Jacob Dinkler, Eugene Chase Eppley, Roy C. Kelley, Arnold S. Kirkeby, Julius Manger, Robert R. Meyer, Albert Pick, Jr., Jay Pritzker, Harris Rosen, Ian Schrager, Vernon B. Stouffer, William Cornelius Van Horne, Robert E. Woolley and Stephen Allen Wynn.

All of these books can be ordered from AuthorHouse by visiting www.stanleyturkel.com and clicking on the book's title.

Attorneys Take Note:

For the past twenty-four years I have served as an expert witness in more than 40 hotel-related cases.

My extensive hotel operating experience is beneficial in cases involving:

- hurricane damage and/or business interruption cases
- slip and fall accidents
- wrongful deaths
- fire and carbon monoxide injuries
- franchisee/franchisor disputes
- management contract disputes

Don't hesitate to call me on [917-628-8549](tel:917-628-8549) to discuss any hotel-related litigation support assignments.

About Stanley Turkel, CMHS

Stanley Turkel was designated as the 2014 and the 2015` Historian of the Year by Historic Hotels of America, the official program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This award is presented to an individual for making a unique contribution in the research and presentation of hotel history and whose work has encouraged a wide discussion and a greater understanding and enthusiasm for American History.

Turkel is a well-known consultant in the hotel industry. He operates his hotel consulting practice serving as an expert witness in hotel-related cases, providing asset management and hotel franchising consultation. He is certified as a Master Hotel Supplier Emeritus by the Educational Institute of the American Hotel and Lodging Association.

Stanley Turkel is one of the most widely-published authors in the hospitality field. More than 325 articles on various hotel subjects have been posted in hotel magazines and on the Hotel-Online,

BlueMauMau, HotelNewsResource and eTurboNews websites. Two of his hotel books have been promoted, distributed and sold by the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute (“Great American Hoteliers: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry” and “Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels East of the Mississippi”). A third hotel book (“Built To Last: 100+ Year-Old Hotels in New York”) was called "passionate and informative" by the *New York Times*. His fourth hotel book was described by the *New York Times*: “Nostalgia for the City’s caravansaries will be kindled by Stanley Turkel’s... fact-filled... “Hotel Mavens: Lucius M. Boomer, George C. Boldt and Oscar of the Waldorf”. In his fifth hotel book, “Great American Hoteliers Volume 2: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry”, Lawrence P. Horwitz, Executive Director, Historic Hotels of America writes in the Foreword:

“The author, Stanley Turkel is a great story teller.... This book is about risk takers, dreamers, inventors, entrepreneurs, innovators, visionaries, leaders and motivators. This is a collection of stories about hotel pioneers with a passion for inventing new ways to create demand for their product.”

All of these books can be ordered from the publisher (AuthorHouse) by visiting www.stanleyturkel.com and clicking on the book title.

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