HISTORIC CHICAGO HOTELS
1871-1951

BRIAN ROBERTS
PALMER HOUSE HOTEL

The best located hotel in Chicago—
THE PALMER HOUSE

The 1940s.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1870, the major cities (in order) were New York, Chicago, Brooklyn and St. Louis, but in 1871 Chicago was devastated by the Great Fire. The first major hotel to reopen was the second Palmer House in 1873. Chicago went on to build the first "skyscraper" and to develop the steel-framed structure. The main USA is 40 times the area of the UK and 2900 miles wide. Before air travel the train journey took 4 days. and in the beginning had neither restaurant nor sleeping coaches. These factors affected the types of American hotels: luxury, commercial, middle-class, resort and “railroad”. Many were the skyscrapers of their day having over a 1000 guest rooms. Hotels were, and still are, the buildings with the greatest range of engineering services. From about 1917, the cost of these engineering services was recognised: passenger and service elevators were grouped together requiring only a single bank of machinery. Bathrooms were built back-to-back sharing a common plumbing shaft. Air conditioning came later. But information is not easy to find. Many hotels have been demolished, others rebuilt, enlarged or renamed. Today the USA has some 54,200 hotels with 5 million guest rooms. Three of the most famous classic hotels in the United States are in Chicago: The Palmer House, the Drake and the Stevens. (The Palmer House and the Stevens were destined to be part of the Hilton Hotels Group). A fourth hotel, the Peninsula opened in 2001, widely viewed as the country's best hotel, being part of the Group, which opened the famous namesake in Hong Kong in 1928.
PALMER HOUSE HOTEL

The first Palmer House of 1871.

The second Palmer House of 1873.
Advertisement announcing the opening of the second Palmer House.
The Ladies' Entrance for unescorted female guests in 1903.
A Palmer House Dinner Menu from 1884.
The Empire Room of the third Palmer House which opened in 1925.

The Empire Room, with a capacity for 250 guests, in 1954.
The main Lobby.
The Palmer House Lobby.
Two views of the formal Dining Room called The Victorian.
The famous Lobby ceiling, with 21 individual paintings, dates from 1926.
The third and current Palmer House of 1927, with 24 floors. It had 2268 guest bedrooms all with their own baths.
At work on the third Palmer House.
Some of the 1200 "Back of the House" employees at the front desk with the status of each guest room on cards in a rack system (long before computers).

The hotel telephone switchboards in late 1950s with 17 operators handling 6 million calls a year.
The Grand Hall of the second Palmer House.

The 85 ft bar of the second Palmer House, a legendary drinking establishment before prohibition.
The Red Lacquer Ballroom referred to as "one of Chicago's architectural jewels."
The Tiffany golden Peacock doors.
Opening was in 1920, on the shores of Lake Michigan.
The 14 floor, H-shaped Drake, opened with 800 bedrooms.

Lake Michigan's Oak Street Beach in the 1920s in front of The Drake (right).
THE DRAKE HOTEL

A hotel luggage label (top) and an early postcard.
The hotel in the 1940s with The Drake Towers apartment building (left) and the Palmolive skyscraper behind.
The Gold Coast Room of 1941 with its "turquoise and coral and gold leaf tracery" restored, with new air conditioning, in 1982.
The Gold Coast Room once the main dining room, becoming the Silver Forest Room in summer.

The Annual Banquet of the American Society For Steel Treating in 1926
The Drake’s Camellia House opened in 1941.
THE DRAKE HOTEL

The Dining Room at Avenue One, successor to the Camellia House.
THE DRAKE HOTEL

The Avenue One cocktail lounge, closed in 1982 becoming The Drake Room.
The Lobby of The Drake in 1998.
THE DRAKE HOTEL

One of The Drake's luxury suites looking out on Lake Michigan and the North Shore.

Princess Diana arriving at The Drake in June 1996.
The Gold Coast Room of 1933, restored 1981-87.
The renovated Palm Court.
Under construction in 1925. The column being transported 77 ft long, weighing about 80 tons.
Construction continued through 1926. Hotel (top picture) is the Drake Brothers Blackstone
THE STEVENS HOTEL

3,000 ROOMS  The World's Greatest Hotel  3,000 BATHS
Michigan Boulevard, 7th Street to 8th Street, Chicago

THE Stevens Hotel will occupy the entire block on Michigan Avenue between 7th and 8th Streets—402 feet on Michigan Avenue, 173 feet on 7th Street and 8th Street.

Site covers 80,000 square feet. Building 25 stories above ground, 4 below, enclosing 20,000,000 cubic feet. 3000 outside rooms, each with private bath. Largest and finest banquet hall in the world with seating capacity for 4000 guests. Many other banquet and meeting rooms of various sizes.

Exhibition room for conventions containing over 35,000 square feet.

Across the alley, and connected with the main structure by bridges, will be a 12 story service Building fronting on Wabash Avenue.

The Stevens Hotel is being built, is owned and will be operated by the owners of Hotel LaSalle.

1927, 25 floors, 3000 outside rooms each with private bath, banquet hall for 4000 guests.
THE LARGEST HOTEL IN THE WORLD.
The main Dining Room, later (under Hilton) the Boulevard Room.
The Normandie Lounge, with furniture from the French luxury liner, damaged by fire in 1942.
THE STEVENS HOTEL

To Our Guests

THE STEVENS WILL BY ORDER OF THE FEDERAL COURT BE TAKEN OVER COMPLETELY BY THE ARMY ON AUGUST 1. THIS MEANS THAT ALL OCCUPANTS OF THE HOTEL WILL BE REQUIRED TO SEEK HOUSING ELSEWHERE AS OF MIDNIGHT OF JULY 31 OR BEFORE.

WE ARE INFINITELY GRATEFUL TO YOU FOR THE COMPLIMENT YOU HAVE PAID US IN OCCUPYING OUR FACILITIES, AND IT IS WITH REGRET THAT WE CONTEMPLATE THE INCONVENIENCE TO YOU.

HOWEVER, THE WAR EFFORT MUST BE SUPPORTED AND WE ARE TAKING OUR PLACE ALONGSIDE OF THOSE WHO HAVE DEFINITELY APPROPRIATED THEIR PROPERTIES TO THE GOVERNMENT.

WE EXPECT THAT WE WILL BE SEEKING YOUR PATRONAGE WHEN THE ARMY USAGE OF THE HOTEL HAS CEASED AT WHICH TIME WITH THE ASSOCIATIONS AND EXPERIENCES WE HAVE ENJOYED WITH YOU, WE WILL BE ABLE TO DO A BIGGER AND BETTER JOB.

YOURS VERY TRULY,

THE STEVENS HOTEL

J. A. JONES, GENERAL MANAGER

JULY 13, 1942.

CHICAGO REGRETFULLY SAYS...

"So Long Soldier....Good Luck!"

There is a bit of a bungle in our throat as we bid Godspeed to the officers, men and women of Chicago Schools, Army Air Forces Training Command.

Thirty Classes have graduated in the short period of a year. Many of the artillery graduates who went forth in haste, have already made the supreme sacrifice in the unending service to our country. In a way, they had the stuff of which YOU are made. I hope you will take a bit of satisfaction in the fact that it takes so little. You've done a splendid job and we're fully proud of you. We hope that you have enjoyed your stay with us as much as we've enjoyed having you as our guests.

The Stevens and the Congress hotels are honorably discharged from military service and return to civilian use. It would be only fitting and proper, however, that you remember to return guests, these institutions to permitted a service that on their antenomy in recognition of the part they played in this nation's war effort.

For all of you who have received ROM, substantial, instrument, or meteorological training in Chicago Schools, AMTC, it is our prayer that wherever you go or whatever you do, you may in absolute sincerity, be grateful to our country for the training and the sacrifices it made in the war so that YOU may be able to serve your country in the knowledge that you have fulfilled your obligation to God and Country, and that YOU have played a vital part in making this a better world in which to live.

We, the untrained and all citizens of this great city, without exception, know full well that when the last bullet falls on the German stage or the last message ignoring the last cold puts that will bring World War Three, America's mission will still ring, "Well done, soldier, well done!"

Back the Attack

JULY 1942
A "mini-musical" on ice in the Boulevard supper club, after installation of rink and refrigeration.
Program for the "Ice Follies", which began in 1948 and ran for 21 years.
The Great Hall dates to the 1950s.
Diagram from the 1950s illustrating "A Hotel is a Machine for living in" with the main engineering services located in the 4 basements.
A Dinner in Honour of Queen Elizabeth II in July 1959.
The Conrad Hilton and Michigan Avenue in the late 1960s.

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See also on the internet:
university of illinois/chicago architecture imagebase
encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/603 (Hotels)