

## A Rich History

In 1871, the Great Fire ravaged Chicago. While devastating, it launched a building boom that pushed architectural experimentation and advancement that put Chicago at the forefront of progress. The Rookery was one of the resulting masterpieces of commercial architecture.

Prior to the Great Fire, this site was known as the “reservoir lot,” housing the water works for the south side of the Loop. The structure had a large central water tank of solid masonry that survived the conflagration. This structure was converted to Chicago’s first public library. The top of the tank was made into a skylight, and bookshelves lined the round walls. City Hall also occupied this site.

In 1885, City Hall moved from here to a new site, and wealthy Boston brothers Peter and Shepherd Brooks leased a city-owned lot on the southeast corner of Adams and LaSalle Streets. With Chicagoan Owen Aldis, they formed the Central Safety Deposit Company and hired architects Burnham & Root to design a prestigious office building. The completed building – The Rookery – was revolutionary in several respects. Its architecture was unique and much more ornate than had been seen to date in commercial buildings. The Rookery successfully implemented many new and breakthrough building technologies - including metal framing, elevators, fireproofing, electrical lighting, and plate glass - that established the commercial acceptance of the modern skyscraper. At 11 stories tall, The Rookery was one of the earliest examples of metal framing with masonry walls on such a large scale. Today, it is considered the oldest standing high-rise in Chicago.

Moorish, Romanesque Commercial, Indian, Venetian, Arabian, Islamic, Byzantine: all of these words have been used to describe the Rookery’s exterior motifs. Some critics have said that the mix of styles lacks unity, but others felt that the repeating patterns were an interpretation of American culture, reflecting a spirit of conquest.

## Burnham & Root’s Work at The Rookery

Daniel Hudson Burnham and John Wellborn Root had met in 1872 when both men were employed as draftsmen at Carter, Drake and Wright. Burnham was a notable visionary and convincing salesperson, and Root was the master artisan and innovative engineer. While opposites in many ways, they formed a successful partnership that was only twelve years old when given The Rookery commission. By this time, however, the pair had played a defining role in Chicago’s commercial architecture with the Montauk Block, Rialto, Commerce, Phenix, and Art Institute buildings.

Perhaps impressed by their own achievements at The Rookery, Burnham & Root moved their offices to the eleventh floor of the building. The famous facilities included a library, gymnasium, baths, large drafting room, and commanding views of the city they were helping transform.

Many grand ideas and groundbreaking designs began in their offices at The Rookery. In one such meeting, Burnham predicted that the gathering would be “memorable in the annals of architecture” as the men met to discuss the preliminary building plans for the spectacular White City of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition.

## Wright’s Work at The Rookery

When Wright was commissioned to work at The Rookery in 1905, the light court’s elaborate ironwork and ornament had gone out of fashion. A full-blown Prairie Style scheme would have overwhelmed the space. To strike a balance, Wright removed much of the iron and terra cotta detailing on the central staircase, balconies, and walls, replacing it with strong geometric patterns based on the railings of Root’s

riel stairs. He encased the iron columns in white marble that was gilded and incised with Root's Arabic motif found in the LaSalle entrance. The fanciful electroliers that once flanked the central staircase were removed, and Wright added bronze chandeliers with prismatic glass that still hang there today.

In the lobbies, Wright covered nearly every inch with incised and gilded marble, removing or hiding the original decorative panels and railings. The incising was copied from Root's original work and was likely inspired by Owen Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament*, a source Root also used. The staircases were squared-off and simplified, and Wright added geometric urns to the Adams Street entrance.

Wright replaced the elevator grills with an open geometric cage that reflected his personal style. He made few changes to the building's exterior except to add a canopy that projected from the LaSalle Street entry arches. Today, you can still see the bronze fixtures that once secured the canopy to the building.

## **Drummond's Work at The Rookery**

As the United States entered into the Great Depression, the preference was to upgrade older structures, as money was not available for new construction. In 1931, The Rookery's owners selected William Drummond to renovate the lobby and some of the interior office spaces.

A former employee of Burnham and Wright (during the 1905 remodeling), architect William Drummond had suffered through the slow period of World War I. The boom of the 1920s had brought him steady residential and commercial projects, but the Depression had again slowed progress. After winning The Rookery commission, Drummond laid out a plan to modernize the building and bring in an Art Deco aesthetic.

To increase rentable floor space, Drummond removed the double stairways and divided the lobby into separate floors. As the new office space now extended to the arched entrances, those windows under the arch were painted over. Following Wright's example, he covered any exposed surface with marble, gilded and incised with stylistic bird motifs.

Drummond made a few changes to the light court. Because of the major lobby renovations, he added a staircase that started at the second floor and protruded into the light court. He laid Tennessee marble over the original mosaic flooring and encased some of the mezzanine storefronts in plaster. In subsequent years the skylight was tarred over and painted many times which transformed the light-filled space to an illuminated cave.

Drummond enclosed the elevators with solid bronze doors and marble - due to changes in fire code. Here, the Art Deco aesthetic played out in the realistic birds and flora and fauna etched into the doors, designed by Annette Byrne.

## **Baldwin Development / McClier Architects**

In 1988, L. Thomas Baldwin III purchased The Rookery and set out to completely restore the landmark. He hired restoration architects at McClier with the goal of preserving the building's intrinsic and historic grandeur while also adapting it to modern day technologies and office amenities, thus making it attractive to the most discerning tenants. The restoration combined the original architecture of John Root and Frank Lloyd Wright and added a 12th floor to the top of the building.

A major decision for the team was determining the era to which The Rookery would be restored. Returning to Root's original design would have required a great deal of conjecture. There was good forensic and photographic evidence to restore much of Wright's work. The architects selected a hybrid approach with input from the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. The hybrid approach allowed McClier to regain the spatial relationships of Root's design while replacing Wright's extant finishes.

The light court had undergone extensive change in prior decades. Maintenance trumped natural light aesthetics, and the skylight was covered with waterproofing and paint. Most of the previously translucent surfaces, like the windows, were also painted over. Vinyl and asphalt tile covered the glass block mezzanine walkway, and marble slabs hid the original mosaic floor. These changes transformed the space, robbing it of its airy, fanciful atmosphere that once made the Rookery unique.

McClier restored the court's glass ceiling, protecting it and the light well by installing a new skylight at roof level. When the architects removed Drummond's staircase, they discovered Root's original ironwork encased in the marble columns and left one open for visitors to compare. They also uncovered original mosaic floor fragments, from which they extrapolated a new overall design.

The lobbies were challenging because of the considerable loss of original work and the desire to recreate the space as faithfully as possible. The lobbies were re-opened and reconstructed to the Wright-era appearance, combining Root's volume with Wright's staircase. To achieve this, the architectural team projected and enlarged old photographs and consulted the same pattern books that Root and Wright would have used. Traveling to Carrara, Italy, they selected matching marble and brought it back to the United States for hand finishing and gilding.

*"Complete at last, Chicago's restored Rookery Building sets the standard against which all future commercial renovations must be judged."* Robert Bruegmann, "Preservation's Touchstone"