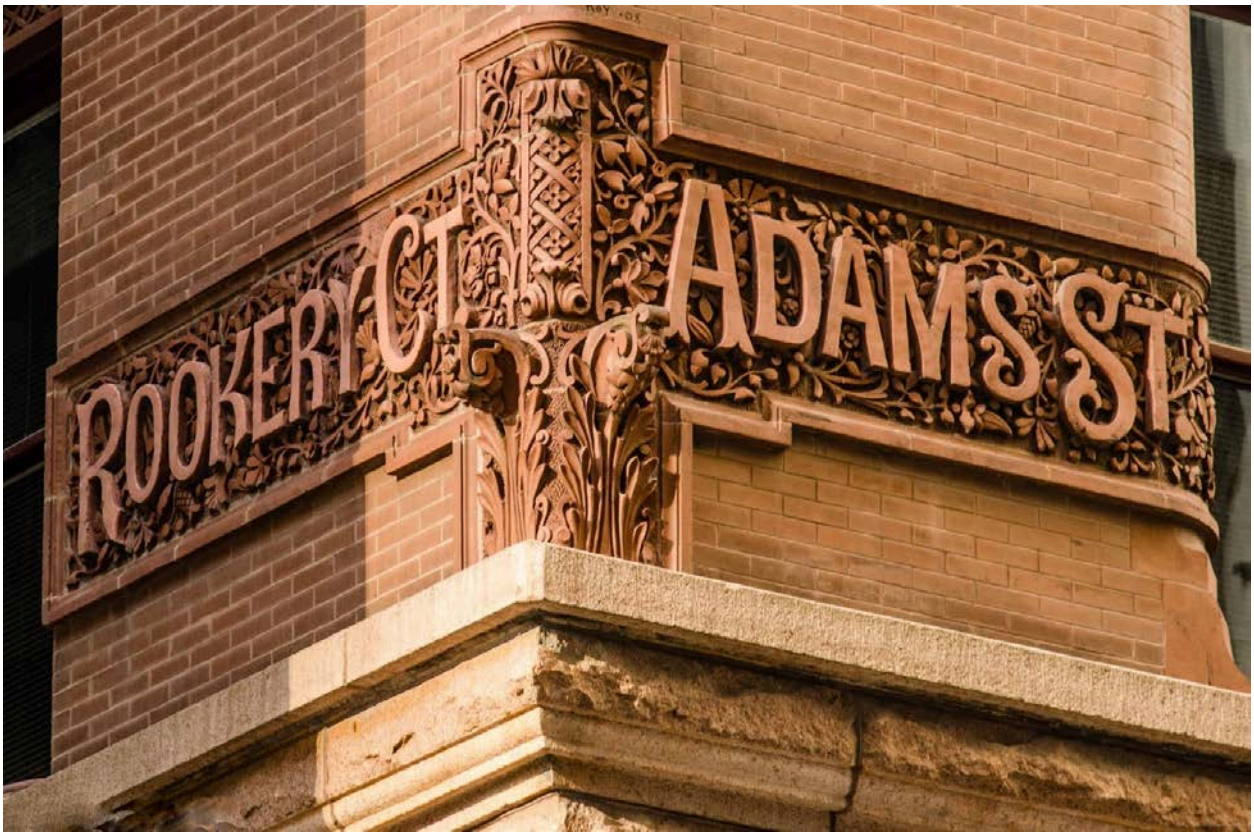
Living History of Illinois and Chicago®
Living History of Illinois and Chicago® – Facebook Group.
Living History of Illinois and Chicago Digital Library
Living History of Illinois Gazette - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.
Illinois History Store® – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

The Rookery Building, Chicago, IL

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.

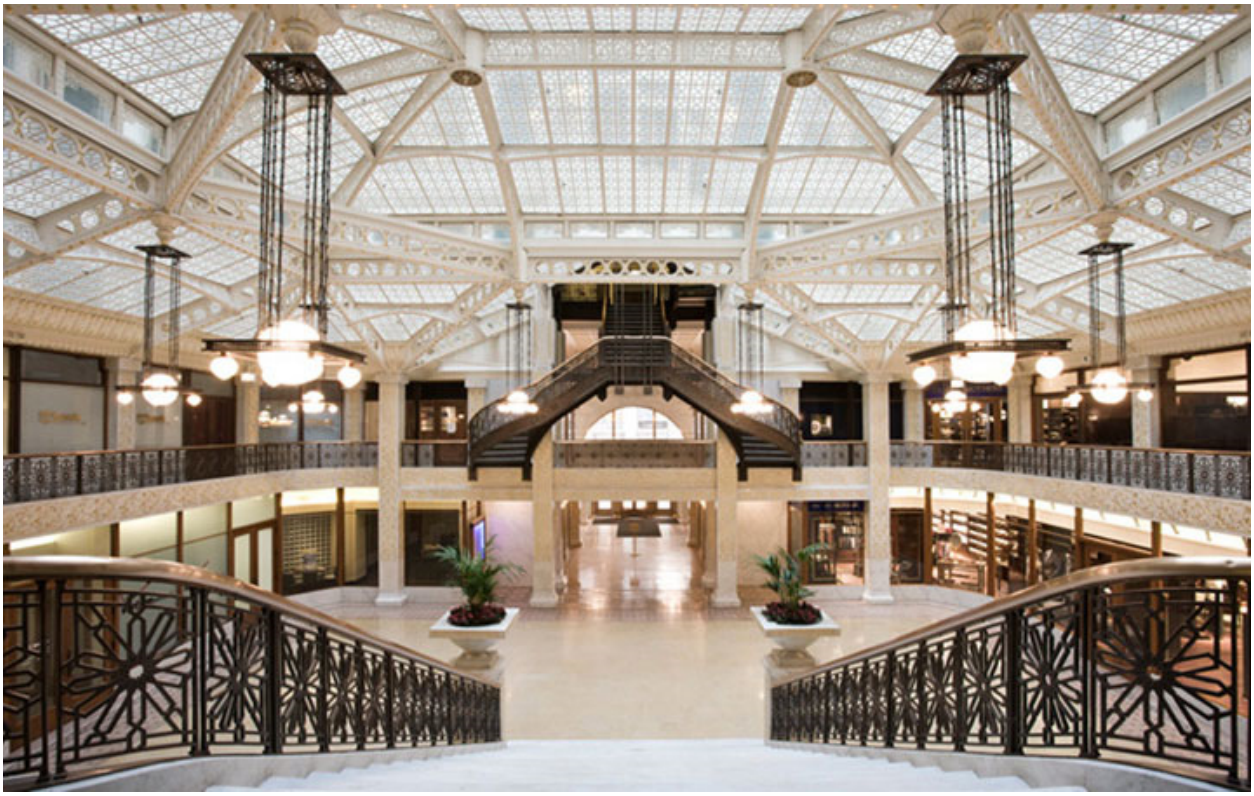
Its architecture was unique and much more ornate than had been seen to date in commercial buildings. The Rookery successfully implemented many new and breakthrough building technologies - including metal framing, elevators, fireproofing, electrical lighting, and plate glass - that established the commercial 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 these words have been used to describe the Rookery's exterior motifs. Some critics said that the mix of styles lacked unity, but others felt that the repeating patterns were an interpretation of American culture, reflecting a spirit of conquest.

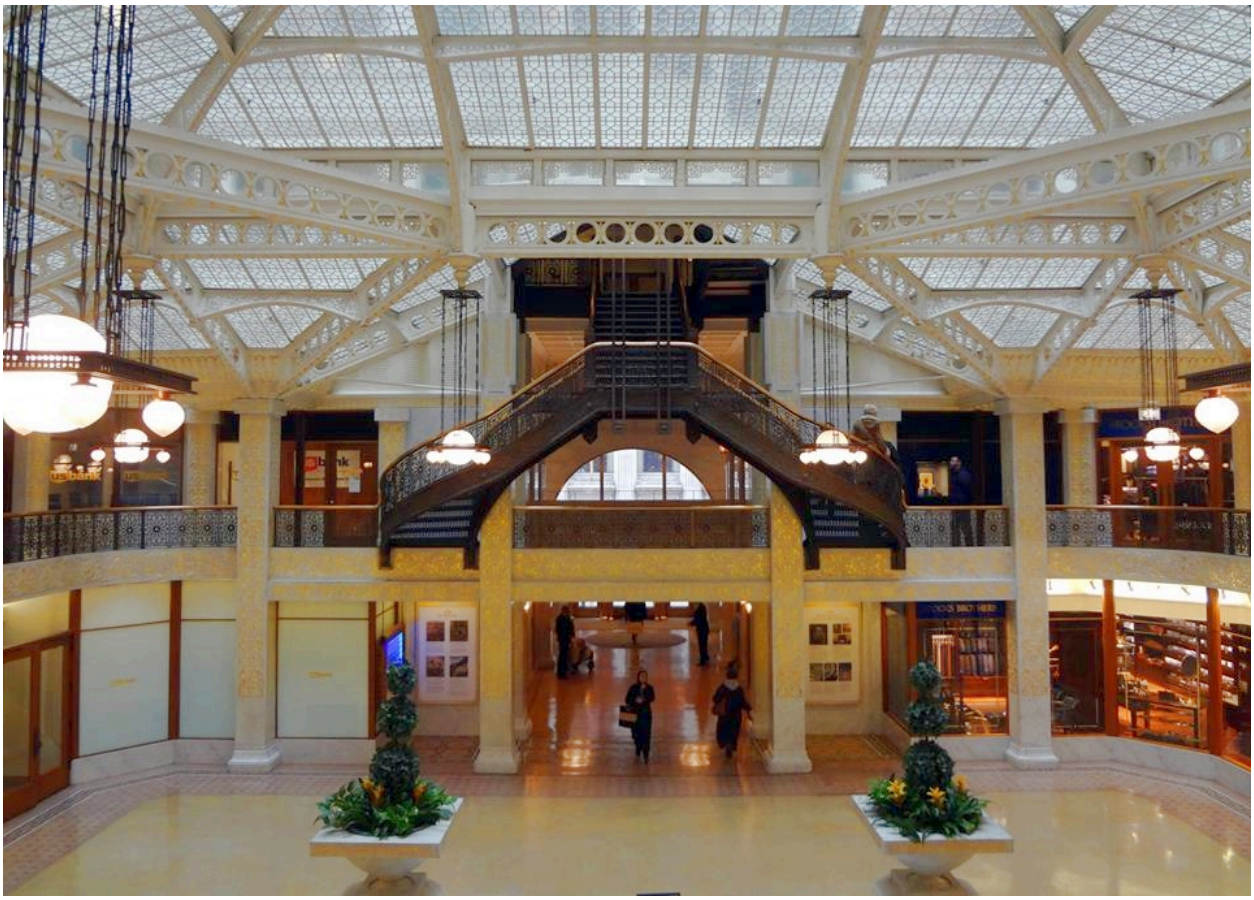
DANIEL HUDSON BURNHAM & JOHN WELLBORN ROOT'S WORK AT THE ROOKERY

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.



FRANK LLOYD 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 oriel 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.

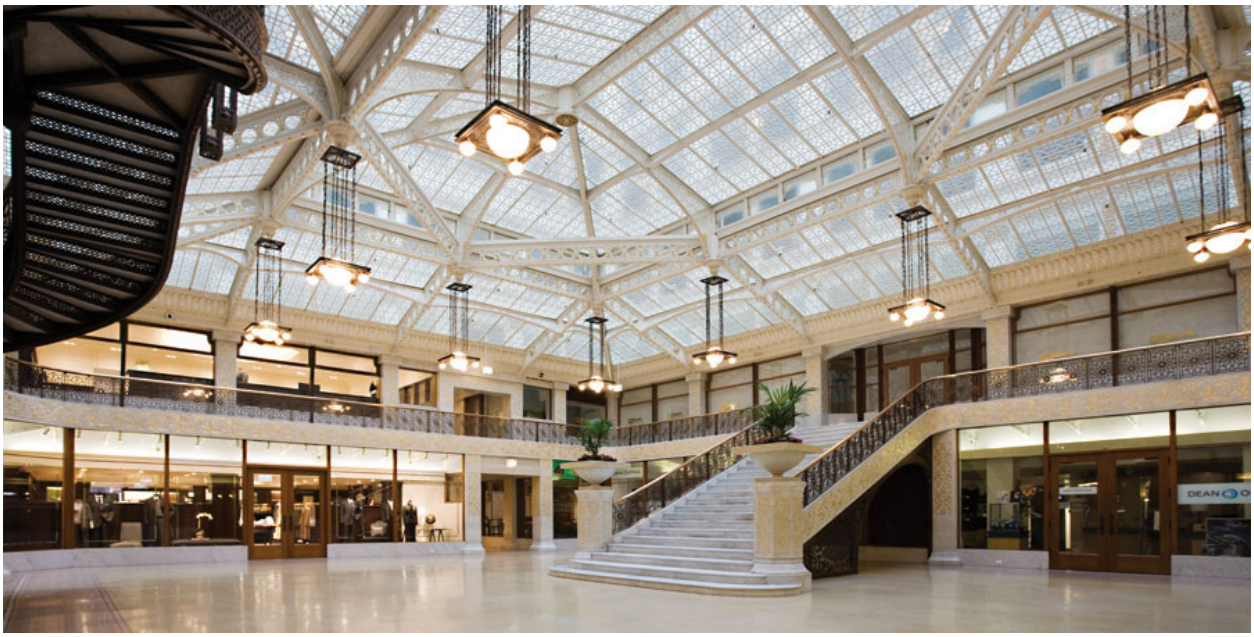
In the lobbies, Wright covered nearly every inch with incised and gilded marble, removing or hiding the original decorative panels and railings. The incising was copied from Root's original work and was likely inspired by Owen Jones' The Grammar of Ornament, a source Root also used. The staircases were 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.

WILLIAM 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.

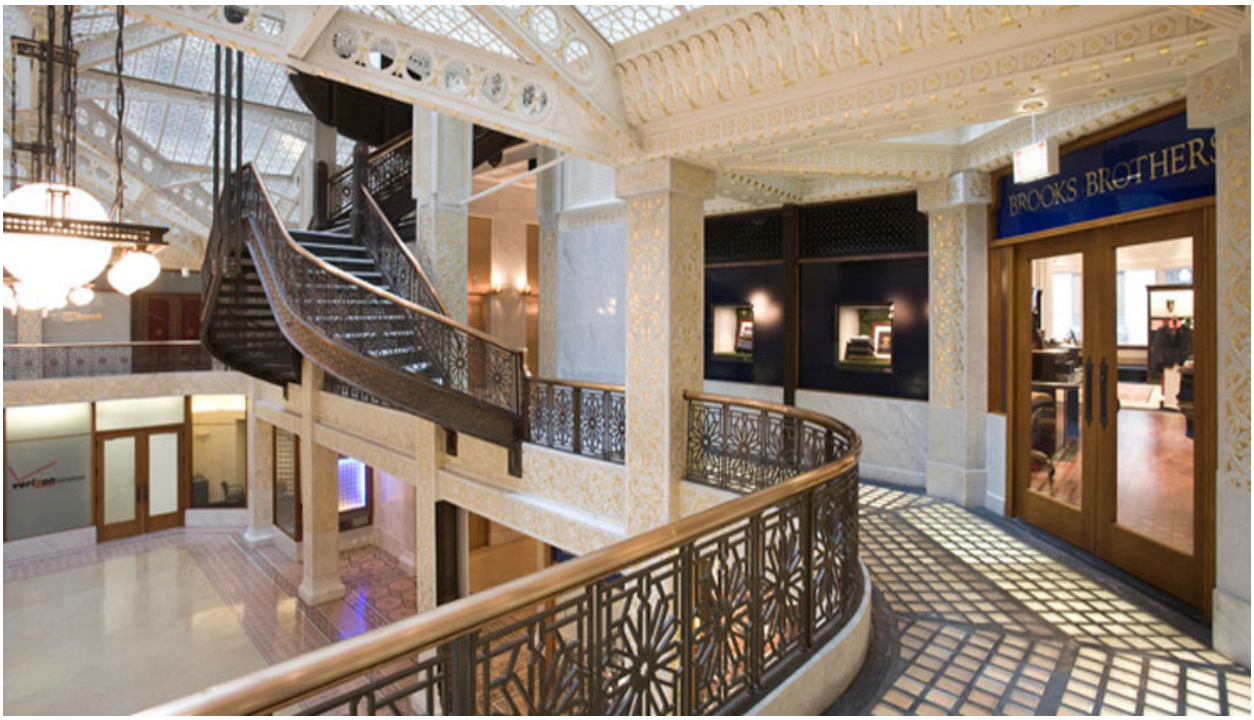


A former employee of Burnham and Wright (during the 1905 remodeling), architect William Drummond had suffered through the slow period of World War I. The boom of the 1920s had brought him steady residential and commercial projects, but the Depression had again slowed progress. After winning The Rookery 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—probably 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.

ORIGINS OF THE NAME ROOKERY

There are several stories about how the Rookery got its name. Some say it was called this because of the ramshackle appearance of the hastily built City Hall that occupied this site until 1885. Others claim the name originated with the crows that lived in the previous structure's walls, paralleling the politicians who roosted there each day. It is also said that an adjacent fire station attracted scores of pigeons to the site to feed on the horses' oats. Whatever the case, newspaper articles and first-hand accounts apply the word "rookery" when referring to the site of the post-fire City Hall. Unfortunately, people continued to call the new Burnham & Root masterpiece by the same name, which did not please the invested parties.

Owen Aldis wrote to Peter Brooks, “I do not like the name which has been given to the Central Safety Deposit Company building, ‘the Rookery’ any more than you do, but it seems utterly impossible to give any name to it by which it will be called except that. We always speak of it, and many of our contracts are signed under the name of the ‘Central Building’, but no human being in Chicago knows of any other name for it, or will repeat any other name than ‘The Rookery Building’, or ‘The Rookery’ or usually call it simply the ‘Rookery’. It is to a certain extent historical, but I don’t like the name and think that the best plan will be to have the Street numbers on the Adams and LaSalle Street doors and whoever doesn’t not like the name can simply put the street number on their letterhead.”

Perhaps Root had the last laugh. He designed open-mouthed crows – or rooks – on the building exterior that are reminiscent of the squawking corrupt city officials that once crowded about City Hall.

ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

A SOLID FOUNDATION

The Rookery was an engineering marvel at its inception, and architect John Wellborn Root’s brilliance is exemplified in the foundation and structure. Root developed a means for dispersing the vertical weight of the structural columns onto a horizontal plane that “floated” on Chicago’s soggy soil. Specifically, he devised a “grillage foundation”—iron rails laid in a crisscross pattern and encased in concrete that supported the building’s immense weight.

The steel frame skyscraper had not yet been perfected. Thus Root designed a hybrid structure: masonry exterior walls and steel and iron interior supports. The light court is a system of iron beams and channels that are independent of the exterior walls. Root even took into consideration that the masonry walls would settle at a different rate than the steel portions.

THE LIGHT COURT

In the Chicago of the 1880s, getting sufficient light to read and work by was no easy task. Coal smoke and air pollution cast a haze across the city's sky. The Rookery's light fixtures were originally equipped for both gas and electricity, and that was a time when electricity had just begun to compete against gas lamps for lighting. But electricity was still very expensive and unreliable, and neither produced enough ambient light to be effective or efficient.

Therefore, access to natural light and air ventilation was critical to a building's success. Burnham & Root achieved this by carefully organizing the Rookery's façade. At the base, round granite columns allowed for large expanses of glass windows, and the lower floors were nearly continuous curtain-walls of glass. These elements meant that light could be captured even where surrounding buildings cast their shadows. Inside, the central well provided light to offices, and the court below ensured lower interior levels were well-lit.

At the bottom of the central light well is one of The Rookery's most impressive feature—the light court. The building's heavy façade supported the massive weight of the masonry exterior walls, but the light court was a stark contrast: a wrought and cast iron frame that created the airy, bird-cage-like feel. The mezzanine floor was comprised of glass blocks that transferred light to the lower level. Elaborate, hand-laid mosaic tile covered the main floor.

In 1992, a skylight was installed at roof level to protect the light court's ceiling and the light well.

THE ORIEL STAIRCASE

Architect John Root designed an iron staircase that winds down from floor 12 to 2 and projects into the light well. The intricate, repeating patterns and the spiraling nature of the steps is both overwhelming and awe-inspiring.

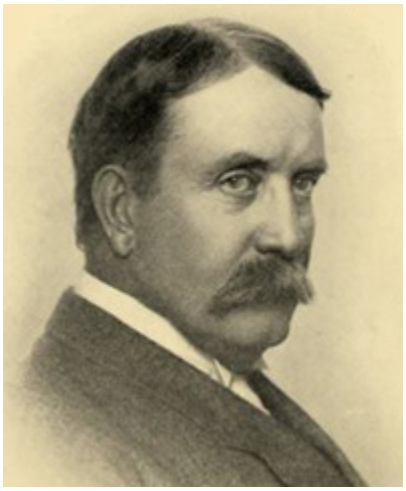
THE BUILDING ENTRANCES

The Rookery's entries are impressive portals. On the exterior, the heavy stone arches convey an idea of American strength and stability—perfect for the financial district. Inside, the open, two-story lobbies are finished with white Carrara marble that covered the walls and ceilings. In the LaSalle Street lobby, a marble balustrade leads visitors to the balcony where incised Arabic motifs dance across the arch. In the Adams Street lobby, the balustrade was originally cast iron and similar in appearance to the ironwork of the light court.

THE ARCHITECTS

DANIEL HUDSON BURNHAM

Burnham was born September 4, 1846 in New York and was raised in Chicago, Illinois. He was an architect and urban planner with a bold and persuasive personality. He was the Director of Works for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago that played a defining role in promoting Western innovation and industrialization. He also created the Plan of Chicago of 1909, which is one of the most notable and significant documents in the history of urban planning. Besides The Rookery, his more notable building designs include The Flatiron Building in New York City and Union Station in Washington DC, and The Reliance Building and The Monadnock Building in Chicago. Burnham died in 1912.



DANIEL HUDSON BURNHAM

JOHN WELLBORN ROOT

JOHN WELLBORN ROOT

Root was born January 10, 1850 in Lumpkin, Georgia and was raised in Atlanta. When Atlanta fell during the American Civil War, he fled to Liverpool, United Kingdom. He eventually returned to study and receive his degree from New York University. He was one of the founders of the Chicago School style of architecture.

Before The Rookery, Root was designing tall buildings with a blank slate because no one had defined exactly what they should look like. In The Rookery, he created a weighty substantial base and emphasized the verticality by allocating more delicate details toward the top. Building investor Peter Brooks and Root himself were concerned about the ornamentation. Both appreciated and encouraged simplicity in architecture, and Brooks wrote that a “building throughout is to be for use and not for ornament.” Perhaps both men accepted this contradiction because of the desire to have The Rookery make a notable impression in the heart of the financial district.

Root died of pneumonia in 1891 at the young age of 41.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

Frank Lloyd Wright was born June 8, 1867. He was an American architect, interior designer, writer, educator, and philosopher who designed more than 1,000 projects, of which more than 500 resulted in completed works.

Wright promoted organic architecture (exemplified by Fallingwater), originated the Prairie School of architecture (exemplified by the Robie House), and developed the concept of the Usonian home. His work includes original and innovative examples of many different building types, including offices, churches, schools, hotels, houses and museums. Wright also often designed many of the interior elements of his buildings, such as the furniture and stained glass.

Wright authored twenty books and numerous articles and was a popular lecturer in the United States and in Europe. Already well-known during his lifetime, Wright was recognized in 1991 by the American Institute of Architects as “the greatest American architect of all time.” Wright died in 1959.

WILLIAM DRUMMOND

William Drummond was born in 1876 in Newark, New Jersey. The Drummond family relocated to the west side of Chicago in 1886. Drummond was admitted to the University Of Illinois School Of Architecture in 1899. However, financial difficulties forced Drummond to leave the school after one year. Thereafter, Drummond began working in Chicago in the firm of Louis Sullivan. Several months later he went to work for Frank Lloyd Wright. Drummond would serve as the chief draftsman for several well-known commissions of Wright's. Upon parting ways with Wright, Drummond entered private practice. He died in 1946.

WILLIAM DRUMMOND

Source: The Rookery Building