

ROOKERY BUILDING
209 South LaSalle Street
Chicago, Illinois

Date of Construction: 1886-1888

Architects: Daniel H. Burnham and John Wellborn Root b. 1850
d. 1891

Landmark Site: Lots 33 to 39, 44 to 50, and east 50 feet of Lots 40 to 43 in Block 116 in School Section Addition to Chicago, in Section 16, Township 39 North, Range 14, East of the Third Principal Meridian.

John Wellborn Root: If a building reflects the man who creates it then John Wellborn Root's architecture was bold, artistic, inventive and intelligent.

Just like he was.

Born in Georgia, John Root was by no means the model child. He was lazy and had a powerful yen for playing practical jokes. But he also showed signs of tremendous artistic and musical talent.

By the time he was two, it's said he could play the violin without discord. At seven he was drawing family portraits.

Determined that his son should become an architect, Mr. Root sent John to study in England when he was 14. Precocious but not studious, he took special courses in music and architectural drawing, and proved to be one of the school's best athletes.

After three or four years, Root returned to America and took up engineering at the College of the City of New York. He graduated at the top of his class.

For a long time he dreamed of studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. But his father's fortune had been lost, and with it John's dream. So he stayed in New York and apprenticed himself without salary to the office of James Renwick, a Gothic revival architect. A year later he took a paying job as draftsman in the office of a Mr. Snook.

Somewhere along the line P.B. Wight had seen his sketches. Impressed with Root's work he offered him a job in Chicago. Since the city had just suffered through the terrible fire of 1871, the rebuilding promised tremendous opportunity. Root accepted.

Shortly after arriving in the bold and brawny Chicago, Root met another of Wight's young draftsmen, Daniel H. Burnham. They became friends immediately and Root started working with Burnham at night on outside commissions.

By the spring of 1873 the two had barely enough work to warrant a partnership, but they formed one just the same. In recalling the struggles of their early days in the small Washington Street office Burnham wrote:

Root came at night and afterwards for half of each day. We found it difficult to keep enough cash on hand to pay the office expenses and his board. Then Root came permanently, giving all day and half the night to our drawing. I took my turn outside and worked half or all day for other architects in order to make our financial ends meet. . .

The panic of 1873 came and most of the little plants we had hoped to see blossom were blasted. We bought no clothing. . .

Office rent was twenty dollars a month. . . Paper we bought a few yards at a time, just enough by the most economical handling to lay out the immediate plan and an elevation or two. Then with a couple pencils, a piece of rubber, a few boards, two stools, and a dozen thumb tacks we did business. Between us we had a full color-box and one stick of India-ink. We did all our work ourselves.

The down and out days of their early years can hardly be compared to the successful times that were soon to come. In all of Chicago and American architecture, the name of Burnham and Root would be one of the most respected.

John Root's biographer, Harriet Monroe, spoke of the famous partnership this way:

During the twenty years it was never interrupted by a single moment of harshness or suspicion, and the work of each man became constantly more necessary to the other. To it both brought important qualities. Root, as we know, had his gift for architectural design - that happy union of invention and facility which made him afterwards an original force in his profession. But genius avails little without persistence and opportunity, and Mr. Burnham was the influence he needed at this time. Root, as we have seen, lacked personal ambition. . . Mr. Burnham, on the contrary, resolved from the first that the new firm should lead the profession, and never flinched from his purpose through the years of waiting. He was always noting or making opportunities, evolving large projects, which the younger man smiled at, but - fulfilled. He had initiative, strength of will, and a certain splendor of enthusiasm which captured men and held them, while his partner was amply content to sit in the inner office, aloof from the boresome talkers, and do his work.

Work he did: capably, swiftly, professionally. Miss Monroe records:

He drew with incredible rapidity, never in a tentative, fumbling way, as though searching for an idea, but boldly, as though he were sketching a completed edifice. He had the rare power of seeing the finished building with his mind's eye before he put pencil to paper. . . A word, a hint, a sudden thought, would send a great structure shooting upward in his imagination, and a rush of swift exact strokes on brown paper would make it a reality.

It was as much in construction as in design that Root proved his inventive genius. The mathematics of his profession interested him as deeply as its art. As an engineer, he was always venturesome, because a thing had never been done before was not reason, in his mind, why it could not be done safely, provided the figures authorized the experiment.

When rebuked for spending so much of his time on structural details, Root replied simply: "But I rather like to make them stand up."

John Wellborn Root was known as "a man of genius and accomplishments, of generous impulse, of quick invention, of inexhaustible zeal." But his capacity for greatness was cut short by pneumonia. He died January 15, 1891 just five days after he had turned 41.

John Root stands with Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright as one of the great designers and philosophers of the Chicago School. Both architects admired and respected him, especially the sentimental Sullivan.

Referring to himself as "Louis", Sullivan's autobiography says this of Root: "Louis saw the man of power, recognized him, had faith in him, and took joy in him as a prospective and real stimulant in rivalry, as a mind with which it would be well worth while to clash wits in the promotion of an essentially common cause. . . John Root had it in him to be great. . . Louis missed him sadly."

The Era and Work of Burnham and Root: As disastrous as the Chicago Fire seemed at the time, it later proved to be more of a blessing in disguise.

But Burnham and Root, along with the other designers, built more than buildings. They built a reputation. For themselves as great architects. For Chicago as the birthplace of the skyscraper and modern architecture.

The Rookery: From 1872 to 1884 the southeast corner of LaSalle and Adams was the location of a watertank and the temporary city hall and Public Library. Half the pigeons in Chicago seemed to take a fancy to these structures and used them as a roosting place. Consequently the area became popularly known as "The Rookery".

When the Central Safety Deposit Company decided to redevelop the site in 1885, the owners in a moment of practical and humorous good sense kept the slang name. And it isn't beyond reason that this idea was actually a product of John Root's irrepressible sense of deviltry.

Whimsical as the name may be, the building itself is impressive.

Faced in brown brick with a massive polished granite colonnade at the base, The Rookery rises eleven stories, fronting 180 feet along LaSalle and 170 feet along Adams.

According to Harriet Monroe, the colonnade is more than a design fancy of the architect:

One of the most troublesome requirements was the necessity for open shop-fronts at the base of these buildings, the point where a massive expression of structure is an artistic necessity. Root met this by various devices, in the Rookery by mounting the building upon heavy granite columns and piers behind which the large windows are recessed. . .

Visually, the facade is divided into six parts. An ornamental string course or projection separates each section. The sequence of stories breaks 2-2-3-3-1 with a highly decorative parapet and four corner pinnacles at the very top.

The first two stories are rough-hewn granite. And there is a huge arched entry cut into the middle of the LaSalle Street side, a smaller arched entrance at the northeast end of the Adams side.

Both entries are distinguished by the special window groupings, 8th floor balconies and rich ornamentation inscribed above the arches. But the LaSalle Street entrance is more elaborate by far.

Here pinnacles rise from the 8th floor and extend considerably above the parapet. The 10th floor windows nestle under an ornate arch, and a profusion of three-dimensional ornamentation caps the windows at the top floor.

The philosophy behind the grandeur is again explained by Miss Monroe:

The entrances of these buildings are always large and generous, never mere holes in the wall. Here, with a suggestion of hospitality, comes a demand for grace of decoration, for greater delicacy and charm. Accordingly these wide portals usually invite the wayfarer by a wealth of happy ornament, spontaneously conceived and fittingly in place. . .

Since the Adams entrance is not centered along the facade, there is a matching section but without the archway at the northwest end of this side.

All the brick piers have rounded edges to help soften their appearance. The exquisite ornamentation, contrasting to the smooth expanses of brick and delicately etched into brown terra cotta, is said to be of East Indian design "as translated by Root's fervid and fanciful pencil."

Like Louis Sullivan, John Root was a master at conceiving and executing decorative effects, and in The Rookery he capitalized on a great diversity of shapes, textures and materials. Often ornament as rich as this tends to detract from the basic form of a building. But here the many details form a true architectural ornament, definitely subordinated to the main structure.

For the most part, windows are grouped in two's and arched at the 7th and 10th floors. The only exceptions are the windows over the entrances. Along LaSalle they are grouped in four's, along Adams in three's.

Since The Rookery is approximately as tall as it is wide, there is no overriding horizontal or vertical emphasis to the structure itself. The massive brick piers do produce a strong vertical thrust, and a powerful horizontal line is created by the decorative spandrel beams above and below each window. But when working together these forces neutralize each other.

In plan The Rookery is a hollow square embracing an interior court. Because of this layout all offices are naturally lighted, facing either the streets or the lightwell of the court. This floor plan set a precedent which architects would follow for years.

It was John Root who organized the urban commercial building as we know it today.

Two completely different construction methods are put to work in The Rookery. Along the main elevations of LaSalle and Adams and above the second story of the alley and Quincy, the building is standard brick and granite masonry, with the walls carrying the entire load.

But along the rest of the building the load is supported by an iron frame. According to historian Carl Condit:

On the periphery of the court, however, and at the first two stories along Quincy Street and the alley, the wall load is carried on a series of cast iron columns joined by wrought iron spandrel beams - in short, true skeletal construction. . .

By extending the spandrel beams a few inches beyond the outer edge of the columns along these elevations, the architects were able to open the walls at the second story into continuous windows divided by extremely narrow iron mullions. This marked one of the early uses of the so-called ribbon window.

Skeleton construction was barely beginning to be used when The Rookery went up. So this building is an important transitional structure, bridging the gap between the centuries old masonry and the new frame techniques.

Because The Rookery is basically a masonry building, it faced the problem of all big stone structures: the need for foundations large enough to provide support but not so big that they filled the basement and part of the first floor.

John Root came up with a solution to this dilemma: the grillage foundation.

In his Montauk Building of 1881 he experimented by laying iron rails in a crisscross pattern and then encasing them in concrete to prevent rust.

When it came time to lay the foundations for The Rookery, four years later, he took the process a step further. Instead of using rails alone, he combined layers of rail with layers of structural beams and then poured the concrete.

This grillage not only reduced the volume of the footings but it produced a foundation significantly sturdier and less expensive. What's more, this system allowed the construction crews to work over the winter. Instead of hauling in derricks to place immense foundation stones, the work proceeded quietly and quickly under a special heated shed, an innovation for the time and the industry.

The city had grown rapidly before 1871. And now that it was leveled, the men responsible for that initial development were determined to move ahead on an even greater scale.

Chicago had become the transportation center of the United States, the financial and industrial center of the Midwest. The city wasn't about to relinquish those titles, which meant rebuilding had to begin and go fast.

There were few professional architects in Chicago then. Yet somehow a group of inventive young men converged on the city to explore the opportunities: Burnham & Root, Louis Sullivan, Dankmar Adler, William LeBaron Jenney, Martin Roche, William Holabird.

As Carl Condit explains it, they

faced the challenge with rare boldness and imagination. They met all the utilitarian requirements of the big office building by introducing a bewildering number of innovations in structure and mechanical facilities. . .

They developed structural devices and methods of construction that constantly increased the speed and efficiency of the building process. . .

They designed buildings to be erected in unbroken ranks. . . story on story, block after block . . . The architects nevertheless avoided the deadening monotony of profile and detail (such as we now have in our blocks of glass curtain walls).

These young designers produced for the first time the steel skeleton, floating and caisson foundations, the Chicago window, an original style of ornamentation. Taken together this revolutionary work became known as the Chicago School.

According to an article in a 1915 issue of *Architectural Record*:

Burnham and Root contributed enormously in the planning and in the architecture of many large and important commercial buildings, the erection of which type of building went forward in Chicago with a greater rapidity between the years of 1882 and 1892 than has ever been known in the world's history. It was during this period that tall buildings of ten and twenty stories had their first development, taxing the engineering skill and architectural ability of the architect to the utmost. But Burnham and Root were always complete masters of the situation in all its manifold details.

John Root designed 44 major buildings in Chicago alone, 25 in other cities across the United States. Office buildings, hotels, churches, apartment buildings, schools, railway stations - he tried his hand at them all. He designed 120 private residences. And up until his untimely death, he served as design consultant for the World's Columbian Exposition.

Burnham and Root deserve credit for some of Chicago's most famous buildings and for the structural innovations incorporated in them.

The Montauk Block, 1881. The Insurance Exchange Building, 1884. The Rialto, 1884. The Rand McNally, 1888. The Great Northern Hotel, 1890. The Monadnock Block, 1890. The Ashland Block, 1891. The Masonic Temple, 1891. The Woman's Temple, 1891.

Harriet Monroe aptly sums up Burnham and Root's professional achievements:

The work accomplished by the firm during its existence is, numerically, of almost unprecedented magnitude, and in quality always interesting and scholarly, frequently brilliant and original, very rarely commonplace or merely conventional.

Harriet Monroe wrote in 1896:

The success of this system has been proved by time: today the Rookery shows a variation of less than an inch in settlement. It opens large spaces for rental in the basements of heavy buildings, which, under the old system, would have been filled up by piers, even to the exclusion, often, of the necessary room for boilers and dynamos. But I need not dwell on its economies of space, time and money, upon its stability and fire-proof quality. Mr. Dankmar Adler, of the firm of Adler and Sullivan, took the occasion, soon after the completion of the Rookery, to express most felicitously to Root the thanks of the profession, telling him that he was "entitled to the same praise which is accorded the man who makes two blades of grass grow where one grew before."

The Rookery's interior court is perhaps the most remarkable part of the building. While the street facade instills a strong and massive impression, the court, on the other hand, presents a delicate graceful air.

Roughly seventy feet square, the outer walls are sheathed above the second floor with white glazed brick. This tile not only reduces maintenance time and costs, but also adds to the brightness of the court, since the white glaze readily allows light to bounce off it into the surrounding offices.

To break the monotony of the smooth wall surface, Root added an unbroken band of ornamental tan terra cotta which stretches around the court at the sill and lintel line of each story.

Because the court consists of skeletal construction the walls are easily opened to include large rectangular cells of glass, each window filling the entire bay. Although built in 1886, the court is clearly a reflection of the sheer glass curtain wall perfected on today's office buildings.

Down at the second floor level, a tremendous glass and iron vault hovers over an enclosed court lobby. Decorated with an intricate geometric pattern of translucent glass and black iron tracery, much of the skylight's magnificence was lost when the owners covered the outer surface with a waterproof membrane and painted the inner glass and iron a uniform grey.

On the east side of the lobby a straight but decorative run of stairs rises to a second floor mezzanine. On the west a spectacular suspended staircase rises to the second story in a double curve, where it then becomes a single cast iron flight spiraling continuously to the tenth floor. A small skylight lights this stairwell from the top, while staggered glass panes following the curve of the stairs open onto the court and provide a view and illumination. Where this spiral stair projects into the outside court it is faced in iron plate and ornately detailed.

Henry Van Brunt, one of the leaders of eastern architectural taste, praised the court this way:

The Rookery is not only a noted example of great fertility of design, but there is nothing bolder, more original, or more inspiring in modern civic architecture either here or elsewhere than its glass-covered court... One may admire the audacity of the double iron staircase which, supported by ingenious cantilevers, ramps with double curvature out into open space, meeting at a landing in the sky. . .

Originally the ironwork in the lobby was black. When Frank Lloyd Wright sympathetically remodelled the space in 1905 he removed most of Root's elaborate "Art Nouveau" ornament and replaced it with a simple geometric style. He encased the mezzanine stairs in white marble, added huge rectangular planters also of white marble, and replaced the old light standards with hanging rectangular fixtures.

All the iron ornament and wall surfaces were painted white and embellished with gilded details. Today with its lavish gold and ivory decoration the lobby provides a rich and luxurious yet perfectly disciplined effect. In all respects The Rookery court is exceptional. Seldom has an architect expressed such attention to the visual enjoyment of inner-office tenants.

Although The Rookery is privately owned, it stands on city-owned property. Its 99 year lease runs out in 1984, at which time the building will be turned over to the city.

Ownership has changed very few times over the years. The original stockholders included Daniel Burnham; Edward Waller as secretary of the Central Safety Deposit Co; the Brooks Brothers of Boston and their agent Aldis Brown (the same gentlemen who commissioned the Monadnock and Marquette Buildings.) Together they invested \$1,500,000 to see The Rookery built.

Located on a prime piece of land, The Rookery is still considered to offer some of the most prestigious office space in the city. Tenants are mostly lawyers and financial people. But at one time Burnham and Root and Frank Lloyd Wright kept offices here.

The Rookery is the lonely survivor of a cluster of buildings that formed the first LaSalle Street financial district. Some of its illustrious neighbors were The Home Insurance Building, demolished 1931. The Gaff, demolished 1921. The Old Board of Trade, demolished 1929. The Austin, demolished 1959. The Rialto, demolished 1940. The Calumet demolished 1913. The Mallers and Counselman, demolished 1920.

Praised by many as the best of this LaSalle Street group, The Rookery is an excellent example of practical yet sensitive development of a multi-story commercial structure. Only two Burnham and Root buildings remain in all of downtown Chicago: The Monadnock and The Rookery. Both are considered monuments to the art of masonry architecture. Both stand on property that is ripe for redevelopment.

"Root held," says Arthur Siegel, "that the virtues of architecture were similar to the traits of civilized people, and The Rookery can well be viewed this way. It stands there like a stronghearted and cheerful person, forceful yet friendly."

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