

Detail of the rooks carved into the LaSalle Street entrance.
(John Hern, photographer)

the ROOKERY

209 South LaSalle Street

Burnham and Root, architects

1885-1888, period of construction



The Rookery Building was designated a Chicago Landmark
by the City Council of Chicago on July 5, 1972.

From 1872 to 1884 the southeast corner of LaSalle and Adams streets was the location of a water tank and the temporary city hall and public library. As legend has it, half the pigeons in Chicago took a fancy to the structures and used them as a roosting place. Consequently, the area became popularly known as "the Rookery." When Boston financier Peter Brooks decided to redevelop the site through the Central Safety Deposit Company in 1885, he submitted a long list of potential building names, most of them derived from American Indian heritage. While early drawings were tentatively labeled Central Building, Owen Aldis, Brooks' Chicago agent and liaison, wrote in 1887 that no name but the Rookery could stand. Architect John Root, with an irrepressible sense of deviltry, presumably did little to dissuade the owner from retaining the slang designation. Heeding practical as well as humorous good sense, the building was finally and affectionately dedicated the Rookery.

Whimsical as the name may be, the building is impressive. The Rookery rises eleven stories, fronting 177 feet along LaSalle and 167 feet along Adams. The two-story base is finished in rough-hewn granite and has a massive polished red granite colonnade. Above the base, the building is faced in brown brick. Vertically, the facade is divided into six parts, an ornamental stringcourse or projection delineating each section. The sequence of stories breaks 2-2-3-3-1 with a decorative parapet and four corner pinnacles at the very top.

There is a huge arched entry in the middle of the LaSalle Street side and a smaller arched entrance at the east end of the Adams side. Since this latter entrance is not centered on the facade, a matching section minus the archway was added for visual balance to the west end of the elevation.

Although both entries are distinguished by special window groupings, eighth-floor balconies, and rich ornamentation inscribed above the arches, the LaSalle Street entrance is more elaborate by far. Elongated tourelles, or turrets, begin at the eighth floor and extend considerably above the parapet. The tenth-floor windows nestle under an ornate arch, and a profusion of three-dimensional ornament and a flag-mount cap the windows at the top floor.

Like Louis Sullivan, John Root was a master at conceiving and executing decorative effects, and in the Rookery he skillfully integrated numerous shapes, textures, and materials. Much of the exquisite ornamentation, contrasting with the smooth expanses of brick and delicately etched into brown terra cotta, is thought to be of East Indian design "as translated by Root's fervid and fanciful pencil." Even cursory attention to the lush foliate patterns or the rooks carved into the LaSalle arch would suggest that Root also took inspiration directly from the building's name.

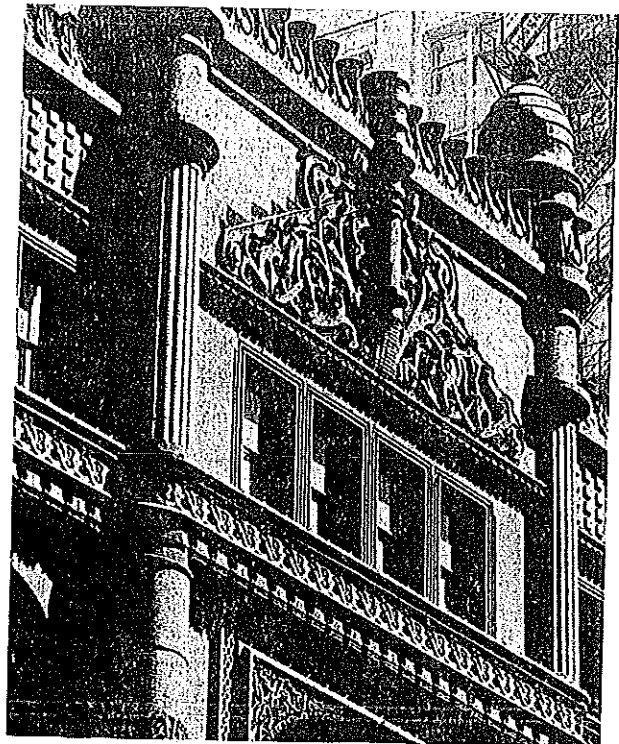
Often ornament as rich as this tends to detract from a building's basic form, but here the many details form an architectural ornament definitely subordinated to the main structure. Lavishly and diversely surfaced, the Rookery nevertheless presents a unified exterior character.

Despite the heavy stone facade, the walls are inset with considerable glass and the elevations are therefore remarkably open. Massive brick piers, edges rounded to soften their appearance, produce a strong vertical thrust and a powerful horizontal line is created by the decorative spandrel beams. Yet when combined these forces neutralize



Above: Adams (left) and LaSalle elevations.

Below: Detail of the exuberant ornamentation at the upper floors along LaSalle Street. (Richard Nickel, photographer)



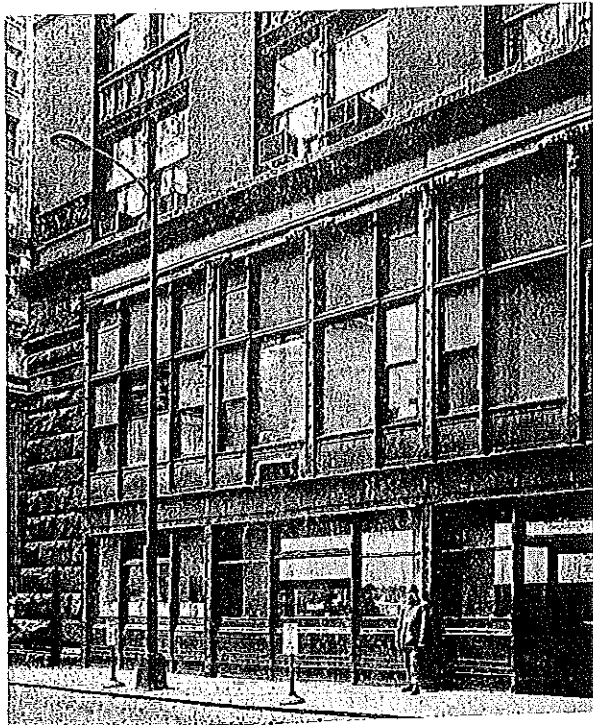
each other and the building emerges without either horizontal or vertical emphasis.

In plan the Rookery is a hollow square embracing an interior court; thus all offices are naturally lighted, facing either the street or the light well. This floor plan set a precedent which architects and developers would follow for years. As time passed, it became evident that it was John Root who organized the urban commercial building as we know it today.

Two completely different construction methods are united in the Rookery. Along the main elevations of LaSalle and Adams and above the second story of the south and east elevations, the building employs a standard masonry system with walls carrying the entire load. 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.

Ribbon windows and skeletal construction of the first two stories along Quincy Street. Note the continuous expanse of glass compared with the limited glass area in the masonry wall above. (Richard Nickel, photographer)



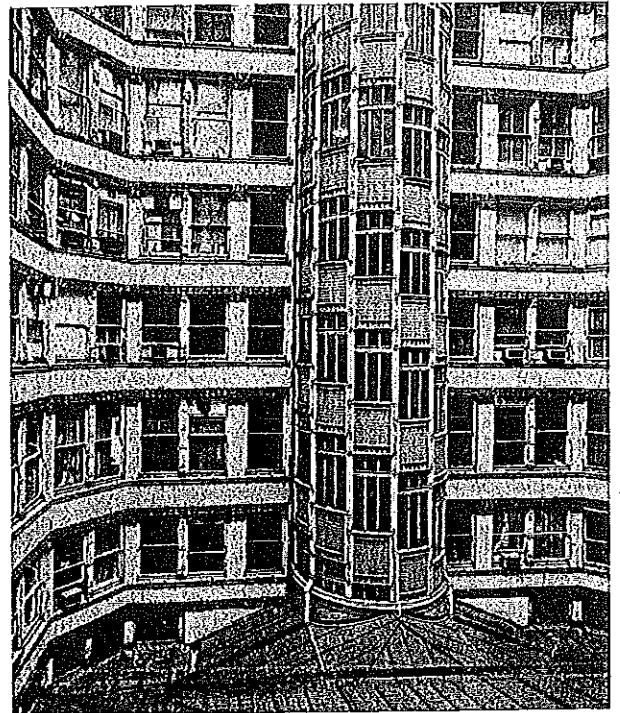
Historian Donald Hoffmann, in his book, *The Architecture of John Wellborn Root*, noted that the change in structure between the outer and inner walls was so complete that the court skeleton was set lower in expectation of greater settlement in the masonry outer piers. Skeleton construction was only beginning to be used when the Rookery went up, which makes this building an important transitional structure bridging the gap between the traditional bearing wall and the new frame techniques.

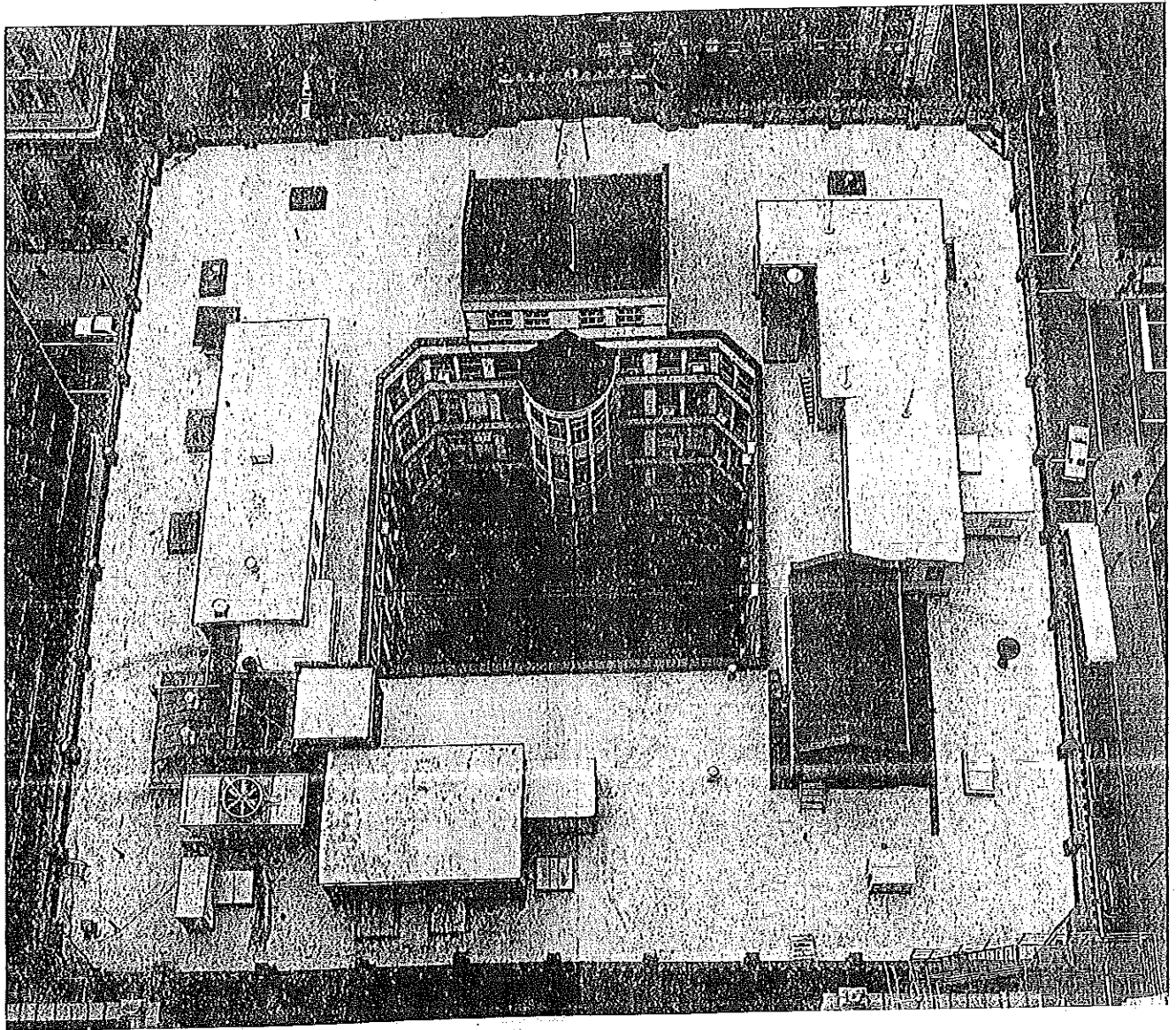
Historians agree that the Rookery's interior court is perhaps the most significant aspect of the building. While the street facade imparts a strong and massive impression, the court presents a delicate and graceful air.

The walls, which define an open square roughly seventy feet on a side, are sheathed above the second floor with white enameled brick. This tile-like finish not only reduces maintenance time and cost, but also adds to the brightness of the court since the white glaze readily allows light to bounce off it. Indeed, the basic purpose of the court was to maximize light in the inner office tiers.

Because of skeletal construction, court walls are easily opened to include large rectangular cells of glass, each window filling the entire bay, clearly a precursor of the sheer glass curtain wall and design regularity perfected in today's office buildings. To break the monotony of the smooth wall surface and to express the structural system, Root added an unbroken band of tan ornamental terra cotta, stretching around the court at the sill and lintel line of each story.

Skeletal construction made relatively unbroken window bands possible around the court. (Richard Nickel, photographer)





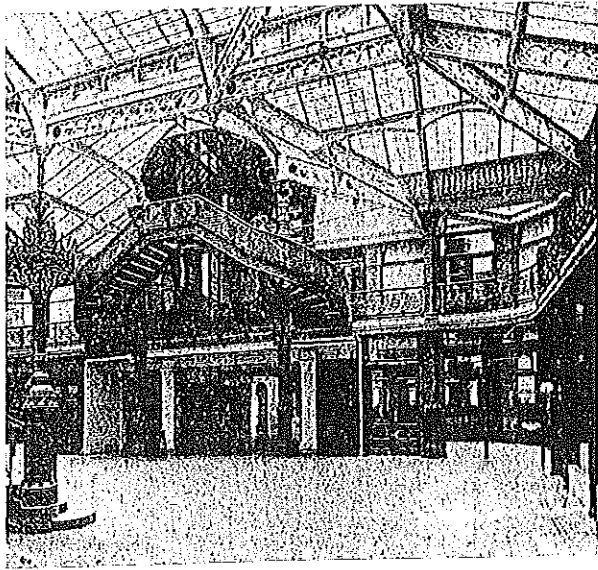
This rooftop view of the Rookery clearly illustrates the organization of office space around the interior court. The cylindrical projection houses the spiral staircase.
 (Richard Nickel, photographer)

Spanning the light court at the second floor level, a tremendous glass and iron vault forms the roof of the central interior lobby. Hoffmann suggests that the intricate geometric pattern of translucent glass and iron tracery in the skylight framing resembles countless roosts in a fantastic aviary. He goes on to recount that the entrance on LaSalle originally:

...opened to a vestibule shimmering in white marble and elegant interlaces carved against a gold ground. The space at once became active and complex. Crypt-like archways led to the safety vaults while the main stairs doubled back to the entresol [mezzanine], the balustrade bowing inward and wedging the space toward the elevators. Below this extraordinary marble bridge, the space was com-

pressed and channeled to the elevators again, thence to the court, where a grand stairway near the east wall ascended again to the entresol.

Root opened the staircase with lacy arabesques and perforated the risers. Each electrolier flowered into twenty-eight carbon filament lamps. The colors everywhere were gold and white, even across the perforated girders of the [ceiling] vault. Light was the essence. Root took the gallery back to the west wall and then exploded it into a double flight of stairs cantilevered precipitously into the space of the court....A single flight of stairs leading to the third floor rose back into the mass of the building. Still, the walls were transparent, for the elevators were sheathed in plate glass.



Skylit court lobby as designed by Root.

Above the third floor the stairs spiral continuously to a small skylight at the top of the stairwell. Staggered glass panes following the curve of the stairs open on to the exterior court to provide view and illumination. Where this spiral stair projects into the outside court, it is faced in iron plate and ornately detailed.

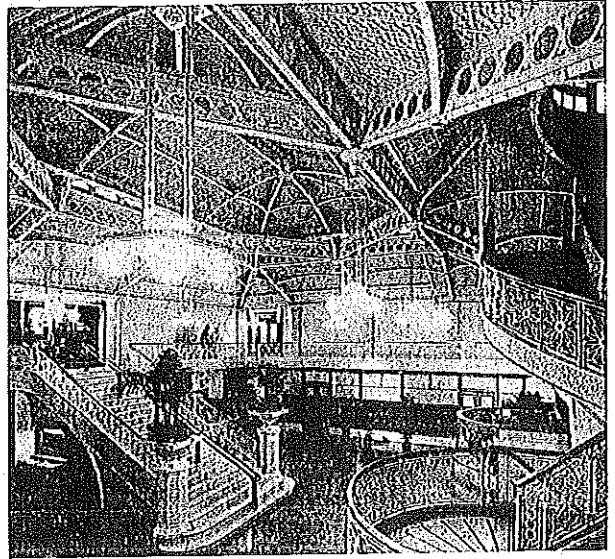
When Frank Lloyd Wright remodeled the space in 1905, he removed most of Root's elaborate ornament and substituted ironwork of simple geometric design in his own Prairie style. He encased the mezzanine stairs in white marble, added huge rectangular planters also of white marble, and replaced the light standards with hanging rectangular fixtures.

"Later," as Hoffmann points out, "the bridge at the west vestibule disappeared, the elevators were forced to surrender their transparency, and the skylight was rendered meaningless by an opaque waterproofing." Even so, the Rookery court remains exceptional in all respects, for seldom has an architect shown such attention to the enjoyment of inner-office tenants.

Because the Rookery is basically of masonry construction, it required foundations large enough to provide support but not so extensive that the footings filled the basement and part of the first floor. Root came up with a solution to this dilemma: the grillage foundation.

Previously, in his Montauk Block, 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 of the Rookery, four years later, he took the process a step further. Instead of using rails alone, he combined layers of rails 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. In addition, this system allowed construction



Lobby as remodeled by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1905.
(Richard Nickel, photographer)

crews to work through the winter. Without hauling in derricks to place immense foundation stones, work proceeded quietly and quickly under a special heated shed, an innovation for the time as well as for the industry.

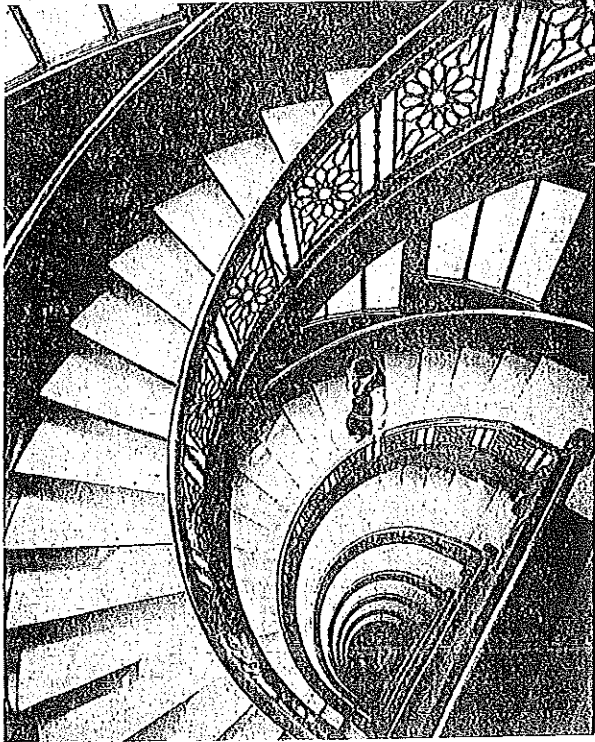
Although the Rookery is privately owned, it stands on municipally held property. The original ninety-nine year lease runs out in 1984, at which time the building will be turned over to the City of Chicago.

Ownership has changed few times over the years. The initial stockholders included the Brooks Brothers and Owen Aldis, Daniel Burnham, and Edward Waller as secretary of the Central Safety Deposit Company. (Waller was one of Frank Lloyd Wright's early clients.) Together they invested \$1,500,000 to see the Rookery built.

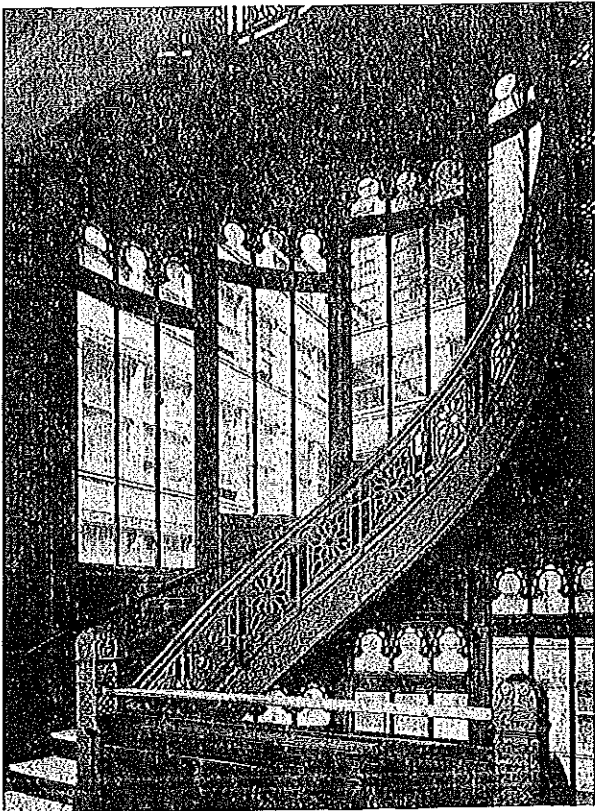
Located on a prime Loop site, the Rookery is still considered to offer some of the most prestigious office space in the city. Tenants are mostly attorneys and financial firms, but at one time Wright kept offices here and Burnham and Root themselves took a suite on the eleventh floor shortly after the building was finished in 1888.

The Rookery is the lonely survivor of a cluster of buildings that formed the first LaSalle Street financial district. Some of its illustrious neighbors included 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; and the Mallers and Counselman, demolished 1920.

Praised by many as one of Burnham and Root's best buildings, the Rookery is an excellent example of practical yet sensitive development of a multi-story commercial structure. As Hoffmann notes, "Through the constant interplay of dualities—solid and void, structure and space, stasis and kinesis, opacity and transparency, darkness and light—Root achieved a dynamic balance, a vital resolution."



Above and below: Flooded with natural light, the spiral staircase remains true to Root's original design.
(Above photograph: Richard Nickel, photographer)



The Era and Work of Burnham and Root

John Wellborn Root met Daniel H. Burnham in Chicago in 1872 while both were draftsmen with the office of Peter B. Wight. 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 commissions to warrant a partnership, yet 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 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.

The strained 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...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...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....He had initiative, strength of will, and a certain splendor of enthusiasm which captured men and held them....

John Root designed for the firm forty-four major buildings in Chicago alone, twenty-five 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 at the age of 41 in 1891, he served with Burnham as 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, 1881-82; the Rialto, 1883-86; the Insurance Exchange, 1884-85; the Rookery, 1885-88; the Rand McNally, 1888-90; the Great Northern Hotel, 1889-91; the Monadnock Block, 1889-92; the Masonic Temple, 1890-92; the Woman's Temple, 1890-92; and the Ashland Block, 1891-92.

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.

Yet Burnham and Root, along with the other early architects of the Chicago school, built more than buildings. They built a reputation, for themselves as great architects, and for Chicago as the birthplace of the skyscraper and modern architecture.

This view of the Rookery contrasts its picturesque qualities with the more severe character of later neighboring buildings which line the LaSalle Street canyon.
(Richard Nickel, photographer)

