

*The Rookery is John Root at his very best. An improvisation in tones and harmonies both delicate and strong, spontaneity of expression with profundity of thought, all fashioned with the inspiration of genius.*⁶⁰

*There is not a commercial structure in the world that compares with it [the Rookery] in size, in elegance or in convenience.*⁶¹

*Rookery \ruk-e-re\ n, pl-eries 1a: the nests or breeding place of a colony of rooks; also: a colony of such birds or mammals*⁶²

Rookery Building

Chicago

Burnham and Root, Chicago

1886

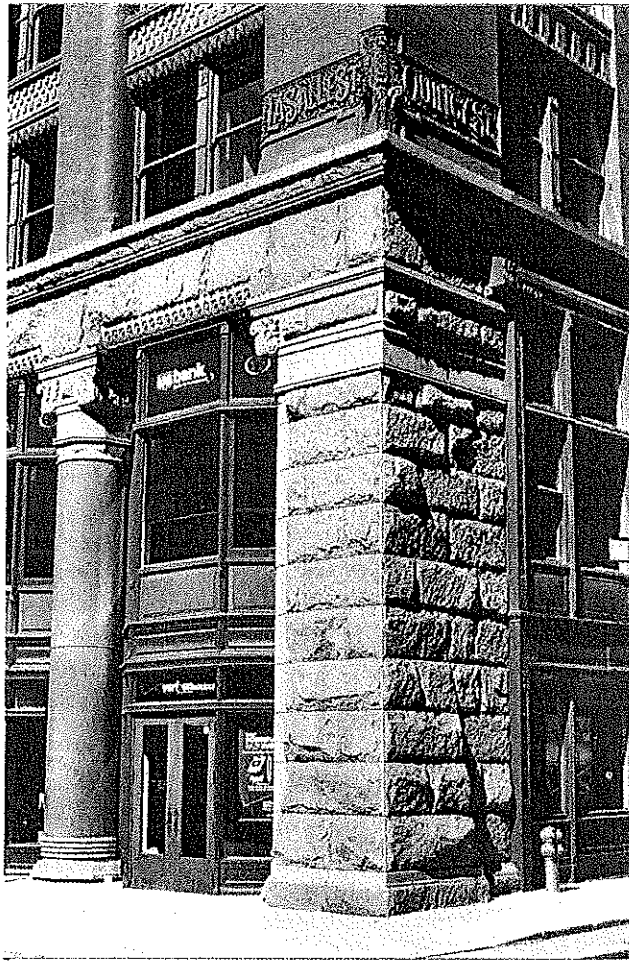
Chicago's Rookery Building is one of America's great business temples. It is a building with a dark face and darker openings, a castle with a surprise: a jewel box occupies its center and shelters its most valuable commodity – a cube of space.

After the Chicago Fire of 1871 the site of the Rookery Building was occupied by a temporary city hall, public library, and a large water tank. These structures quickly became, for some unknown reason, the roosting place-or rookery-for a "large population" of pigeons and sundry other birds and varmints. The moniker "rookery" was applied to this assemblage, and it became so ingrained in the psyche of Chicagoans that even after their destruction the name remained tethered to this parcel. Boston financier Peter Brooks (1831-1920), along with other Chicago investors, controlled the site and were accustomed to buildings being named after Indian tribes, mountains, and politicians. But being aware of the former association of this location, Brooks decided to continue in the site's "tradition" and name the development after those proverbial pigeons and their roost-the *Rookery Building*.

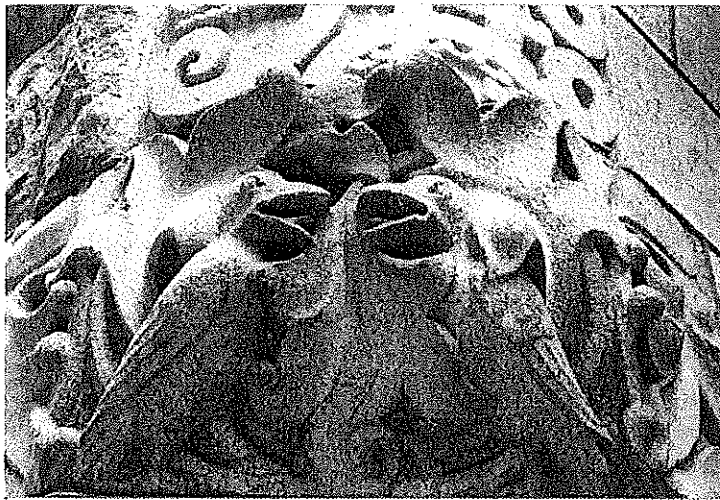
This pioneering skyscraper, borne in the mind of architect John Wellborn Root, captured the imagination of Chicago, and at its completion it was hailed as a triumph, an architectural masterpiece. And it was big, too. The Rookery measured 170 feet along Adams Street, and 180 feet on La Salle. It stood 165 feet tall and in shape it was close to a perfect cube. Construction lasted two years and it cost Brooks and his partners-a trust-\$1.5 million to build. The Rookery stood eleven stories tall-one of the highest in the city. Inside there were 600 offices staffed by a daily population of 5,000. Ten passenger elevators ferried some 22,000 people each business day. The trust was pleased-full occupancy and handsome profits. Due to its proximity to the Chicago Board of Trade and many banks, the tenant mix was heavily weighted in the lucrative professions of banking, commodity trading, real estate, and law. This was no ordinary speculative office building, the Rookery was special. Its architecture recalls the Romanesque style, that which appeared during the European tenth century. The Rookery's main façade is symmetrical and topped with tourelles-diminutive towers often found on castles. Its parapet wall is embellished with abstract foliate designs, interlocking ribbons, and swags. Roman-arched window openings mark this skyscraper's seventh and tenth floors, while a prim balcony glides out from the eighth. Brick walls with terra-cotta trimmings, all beaming a reddish tan, complete the ensemble. A rough-hewn granite arch embraces the building's main doorways, four portals that do not scream "enter here" but, instead, whisper "you have arrived."



(60) The Rookery Building remains the grand lady of LaSalle Street.



(61) A close examination of this stone pile reveals an expertly cut and positioned red granite corner – the triumph of an unnamed mason. The history of man is in these stones. Photo by author.



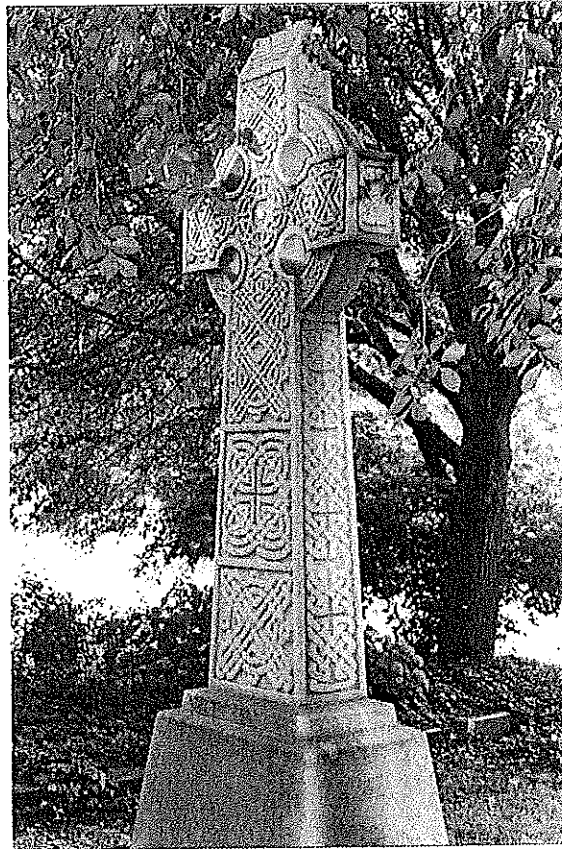
(62) Carved granite impost blocks featuring two comical birds – rooks; they are forever talking about events on the street. It was in this "bird building," on the eleventh floor's southeast corner, that Burnham and Root had their offices. Photo by author.



(63) Daniel Hudson Burnham (1846-1912). This dapper gentleman was the most prolific skyscraper designer of the nineteenth century. Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Vol. LXXXV. November, 1892, "The Designers of the Fair" p. 872.

(64) John Wellborn Root (1850-1891). Chicago Historical Society, Max Platz photographer, ICHI-30622.





(65) John Wellborn Root died in 1891 at the age of forty-one after contracting pneumonia. Colleagues Charles B. Atwood and Jules Wegman designed Root's monument, a Scottish red granite monolith featuring surfaces carved with Celtic-inspired designs. Included is a low relief carved panel depicting Root's eleven-story Phoenix Building (1886), one of the architect's particular favorites.

Root's grave, in Chicago's Graceland Cemetery, lies eight feet from the monument and is marked by a simple matching granite block adorned with a Celtic motif. The Celtic designs here echo those found so prominently displayed on Root's greatest achievement, the Rookery Building. Photo by author.

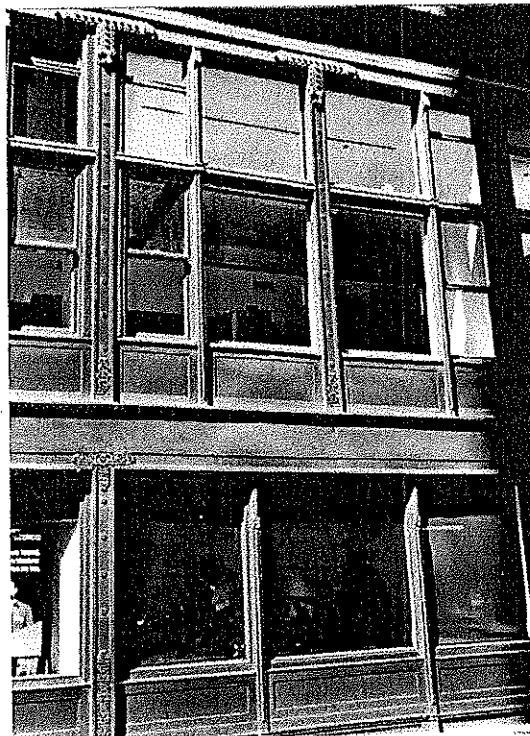
John Wellborn Root
Born A.D. 1850 Died A.D. 1891

Architect Root won over the hearts of Chicagoans with his design of the Rookery's interior, too. The entry lobby and adjacent elevator lobby were adorned with carvings of birds. The polished brass elevator doors and brass surrounds were equally treated. As one progressed further into the building the great atrium came into view. Awesome! The interior courtyard is of skeleton construction, a spider web of iron gingerly supporting an acre of glass, pure poetry, the whole of it a masterwork.⁶³ Here you will find no gratuitous trees, performance stage, fast food court, or piped-in music. No such suburban trappings here, just a tranquil space, proud, and old.

The Rookery's original 600 offices (it is doubtful there are still that many) were constructed with the finest materials. All public corridors and office hallways were wain-

scoted with the finest Italian marble and trimmed with the handsomest hardwoods. Electric lighting was provided to each tenant and the mosaic work in the offices and public areas was judged "superb."

The Rookery is supported by a grillage foundation, a waffled "screen" of steel rails anchored inside a thick mat of concrete. It is of "cage" construction having iron columns, girders, and beams that carry the structure's internal loads in tandem with some load bearing walls. The first and second floor facades along Quincy Street offer some of the finest examples of nineteenth century curtain wall construction-anywhere. All office walls above the inner court (floors four to eleven) show evidence of a full iron skeleton; glazed white brick, iron, and glass form these pioneering curtain walls. Both street facades stand by virtue of traditional masonry and bear their share of the building's weight.



(66) This section of the Rookery's alley wall, actually Quincy Street, is the architectural antithesis of the La-Salle Street façade. Some seventy-five percent of this section is glass embraced by iron trim. Photo by author.

Looking at the Rookery Building today is the equivalent of looking back in time. Although the building was recently restored, there is enough of Chicago's gritty, rough-and-tumble history visible on its face; its walls speak the truth and say, "The Rookery *is* Chicago." It *is* this city at its very best, the building as gladiator, as survivor that stood the test of time. While scores of Chicago landmarks tumbled down, the Rookery and its storied past remained. It will probably outlive countless, but lesser, buildings and more descendents of those earlier feathered friends.