



## HISTORY OF THE CONGRESS HOTEL

### Early History

The Congress Hotel was built in 1893, when Chicago featured cobbled streets, gaslights, and horse drawn carriages. The hotel was originally called the Auditorium Annex when it opened to house the throngs of visitors to the World's Columbian Exposition. Built as an annex to Louis Sullivan's remarkable Auditorium, across the street, its architecture was designed to harmonize with that hotel, office, and theater complex.

The Auditorium Annex was built by a famous hotel developer, R.H. Southgate. The first section, or north tower, was designed by Clinton Warren, with Louis Sullivan and Dankmar Adler serving as consultants. A celebrated feature of the new hotel was an underground marble passageway called "Peacock Alley" that connected the new annex with the Auditorium Hotel. Our south tower, constructed in 1902 and 1907, was designed by the renowned architectural firm of Holabird and Roche.

The south tower construction included a magnificent banquet hall; now known as the Gold Room, which would become the first hotel ballroom in America to use air-conditioning. Another ballroom, called the Florentine Room, was added to the north tower in 1909. These two famous public rooms combined with the Elizabethan Room and the Pompeian Room to host Chicago's elite social events of the day.

### Over The Years

Over the years, various owners have updated the hotel in continuous efforts to keep pace with the modern properties. Even the name has been changed. By 1908, with over 1,000 guestrooms, the hotel had an identity of its own. In order to differentiate the hotel from its predecessor, the Auditorium Hotel, the owners renamed it the Congress Hotel (derived from its location on Congress Street, across from the celebrated Congress Plaza section of Grant Park). The famous underground "Peacock Alley" was closed, in 1911, and succeeded by a promenade of the same name which now runs the length of the building lobby to the Harrison Street entrance.

The next 50 years brought a succession of owners and improvement programs to the Congress Hotel. A 1916-17 guestroom enhancement project changed the lighting scheme by substituting electrical outlets and desk lamps for hanging chandeliers. The original bathroom plumbing fixtures were replaced in a 1923-24 renovation. In the mid-1930's, the old Elizabethan room on the ground floor was transformed into a casino-style night club, with a revolving stage. Following the outbreak of World War II, the Government purchased the Congress Hotel and used it as a headquarters for U.S. Army officers. Then, in 1945, a group of Chicagoans purchased the hotel and reopened it to the public. Five years later, Pick Hotel Corporation purchased the property and embarked on a multi-million dollar remodeling, redecoration, and refurbishing program. The 1950-52 renovation involved the creation of a mural-encircled lobby, new front desk, new corridors, new third floor public rooms, new Congressional and Presidential Suites, and a new supper club called the Glass Hat. Another modernization program by Pick, in the early 1960's, included the construction of a new ballroom and the addition of escalators, which was a novelty for hotels at that time.

Even though the hotel building boom of recent years, the Congress Hotel has retained its uniqueness by blending the old with the new. In contrast with the more modern houses, its guestrooms are larger, its ceilings are higher, its bathrooms bigger, its window expanses wider. The abundant public space, large lobby, and long corridors provide a freedom of movement not present in the more constricted area of today's hotel.

### Home of Presidents

Many famous people have stayed at the Congress Hotel, including several U.S. Presidents. In fact, the Congress Hotel was once known as the "Home of Presidents" among Chicago hotels. Presidents Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Teddy Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Franklin Roosevelt all rallied their partisans to discuss campaign strategies at this hotel.

The Congress Hotel has played a prominent role in some of Chicago's most famous political conventions. Many famous interviews, caucuses, and deliberations were staged here. In 1912, former President Teddy Roosevelt's comment to the local media coined the famous "Bull Moose" nickname for his newly created Progressive Party. The Congress Hotel was back in the limelight, in 1932, as the command post for President elect Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats. During the summer 1952, a national television audience was given a first-hand impression of the Congress Hotel when the Republican Credentials Committee met in the Gold Room. And, in 1971, nearly 3,000 people packed the Great Hall when President Richard Nixon addressed the Midwest Chapters of the AARP and National Retired Teachers Association.

Viewing the property from a historical perspective will enhance any time spent at the Congress Hotel. From famous architects to Presidential Speeches, it has a colorful past. Having existed for more than a century, the hotel is considered to many to be a "Landmark of Chicago Hospitality."