

# Walking & Pocket Tour History

N e t h e r l a n d P l a z a



HISTORIC HOTELS  
of AMERICA  
NATIONAL TRUST FOR  
HISTORIC PRESERVATION



# H I S T O R Y

## *of the Netherland Plaza*

### THE BEGINNING – A CITY WITHIN A CITY

The plans for the Carew Tower and Netherland Plaza Hotel were announced in August 1929. The foundation began in January 1930 and the project was completed in January 1931. The financing came from the Emery family, which had made its fortune in processing the by-products of Cincinnati's stockyards. John Emery hired Walter W. Ahlschlager and Colonel William Starrett of Starrett Brothers, Inc. of New York for the construction. Starrett was well known as the builder of Washington D.C.'s Union Station and Lincoln Memorial, and New York City's Empire State Building (opened in May 1931) and Penn Station (1910). Ahlschlager designed the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee (1925) and the Medinah Athletic Club in Chicago (1929) which later became the Intercontinental Hotel.

The Carew Tower and Netherland Plaza Hotel were designed to be a "city within a city." The concept was new in 1929 but Emery, Ahlschlager and Cincinnati were willing to gamble that this combination of shops, department stores, offices and hotel would work, easing the life of downtown residents, workers and visitors. The practicality of such an arrangement was made apparent again in 1990 when the Belvedere Corporation invested in the re-development of the Carew Tower Shopping

Arcade and Office Tower, featuring its collection of upscale specialty shops, restaurants, a 13,000 square foot fitness center complete with lap pool, and 500,000 square feet of office space.

### FROM AN OBSTACLE TO A BLESSING

Emery's vision of the Carew Tower led him to make some bold financial moves - which ended up working in his favor. Emery had approached the bank to underwrite financing for the "city within a city" project. Because the concept was so novel, the bank did not share the vision of the multi-purpose facility and declined the loan. Emery, convinced his project would be a success, sold his stocks and securities, despite advice from his financial advisors. The plans and the financing for the Carew Tower were in place and then the stock market crashed. Had Emery left his stocks and securities tied up in the stock market, he would have lost everything. But instead, with his money going toward the building of Carew Tower, the project could continue as planned. In fact, the construction project became one of the city's largest employers, giving many men jobs during that dark era after the market's crash.



*Did you know...*

Wrecking of a building on the Carew Tower site began on August 28, 1929.

The first tier of steel was set March 1, 1930 and the project employed 1000 men continuously.

## THE NAME GAME

As the construction on the hotel came to a close, the name St. Nicholas Plaza was chosen for the property. However, shortly before the grand opening, the Cincinnati Real Estate Company (operators of the Hotel Sinton) filed an injunction to fight the new hotel's use of the name St. Nicholas. The realty company claimed that it had purchased the rights to the St. Nicholas name when the old St. Nicholas Hotel, located at Fourth & Race Streets, had closed many years before. Having invested heavily in the monogramming of linens, china, silverware and stationery, the hotel needed a new name with the same initials - and fast. While the hotel did open under the name St. Nicholas Plaza, it was quickly changed to Starrett's Netherland Plaza. The Starrett's came from the builder, the Netherland came from the thought that the hotel occupied the space between the Ohio River and the hills, and Plaza was from the original choice. The name was abbreviated to "St. NP." Eventually, the "St." was dropped and "Netherland Plaza" is the name that is now famous.

## THE HOTEL IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS

When the hotel opened in January 1931, it boasted the very latest in technology and comfort. The 800 guestrooms featured ultra-modern baths, high-speed automatic elevators and a garage that used an automated system that parked cars electronically - without anyone driving the car!

The eleven kitchens that served the hotel's dining and banquet rooms were specified, ordered and installed in only five weeks. The finest Van Range equipment was so exactly chosen that the kitchens were able to produce a ten-course meal for 1,800 guests on opening night.

The hotel opened with seven restaurants: the Frontier Room, the Restaurant Continentale, the Arcadia Tea Room, the Coffee Shop, the Rotisserie Grill, the Luncheonette, and the Pavillion Caprice. Guests that dined in the area now known as the Continental Ballroom were entertained with an ice-skating show feature since the room had a permanent rink built into the floor. The Pavillion Caprice was a "big band" nightclub that featured live entertainment in a tiered ballroom setting. (In later years, the Pavillion Caprice hosted Doris Day's professional stage debut at the age of 16!)

## THE GRAND OPENING

Opening night was truly an event to be remembered. In the Restaurant Continentale and the Hall of Mirrors, the elite of Cincinnati were invited to a formal ten course dinner for \$15. The evening continued later with an event in the Pavillion Caprice for \$10. The meals were served on black plates inlaid with silver and the menu was printed inside with each guest's name stamped thereon in silver (the plates cost the hotel \$12 each in 1931 dollars). The lavish opening and the exquisite hotel were described in great detail for the following day's papers. It was truly a historic occasion in Cincinnati.



*Automated garage system*



*Carew Tower Arcade*



*Restaurant Continentale*



*Frontier Room*

*It took...*

4 million bricks

15,000 tons of steel

30,000 barrels  
of cement for the  
foundation

*to build the  
Carew Tower &  
Netherland Plaza.*

## THROUGH THE YEARS

In January 1942 the hotel suffered a damaging fire on the fifth floor between the hotel and Carew Tower garage. Most of the damage in the hotel was due to the water used to extinguish the flames. The chandelier in the Hall of Mirrors was damaged and was later replaced with a mural that replicated the shape and colors of the original chandelier.

The Netherland Plaza did suffer a period in the 1960s when, not unlike many properties of the period, much of the art deco detail was covered in a modernization effort. Windows, plaster reliefs, marble floors, Brazilian rosewood and Oriental walnut were painted over or covered up with vinyl wall coverings, plywood and utilitarian carpet.

In 1981, the hotel closed for nearly two years to renovate. During that renovation, the hotel underwent a major face lift. The carpets were removed, exposing the grand marble; the light fixtures were all cleaned; the murals in the Palm Court had 50 years of smoke and dirt removed to reveal their original beauty and the paint that had covered the rosewood paneling was scraped off. The 800 guestrooms were modified to 624 rooms to meet the needs of the modern day business traveler. The hotel's breathtaking Art Deco was restored to its 1930s glory.

In 1985, The Netherland Plaza earned National Historic Register and National Landmark status. The hotel also won the prestigious Preservation Honor award because the restoration went far beyond the requirements of the Secretary's Standards for Rehabilitation. In 1989, the hotel became a charter member of Historic Hotels of America.

There continued to be major renovations to the hotel over the years, including substantial upgrades in 2002, 2007, 2013 & 2014. The hotel now offers all the modern conveniences and amenities that one would find in a new hotel, but with all the charm and atmosphere of one of the world's grandest hotels.

## HOW MUCH DID IT COST?

When the hotel was originally built, the price tag was \$7 million (1930 dollars). The 1981 restoration cost another \$28 million. In 1990, the Belvedere Corporation invested in the re-development of the Carew Tower Shopping Arcade and Office Tower, featuring its collection of upscale specialty shops, restaurants, a 13,000 square foot fitness center complete with lap pool, and 500,000 square feet of office space. And in 2004, \$15 million more was invested into completely renovating all of the guestrooms, as well as the addition of an executive lounge and upgrading the elevators to be some of the fastest in the city. The guestroom renovations included all new beds and bedding, bathrooms, carpet and wallpaper. The number of rooms was reduced from 624 to 561 by combining some of the smaller rooms to form Junior Suites – a parlor with French doors leading into the bedroom.

## TODAY

While the Hilton Cincinnati Netherland Plaza has been renovated to show off its 1930s grandeur, it continues to move into the future. In 2013, \$10 million was spent to update the guestrooms, restaurants, bar, lobby, business centers, internet service, fire & safety systems and high-def programming.

With the technology for guest service and behind-the-scenes operations that distinguishes the hotel as a true world-class hotel and ensures that the grand dame of 1931 will face the future with a "positive outlook" indeed.

"Cincinnati, I thought, was the most beautiful of the inland cities of the union. From the tower of its unsurpassed hotel the city spreads far and wide, its pageant of crimson, purple and gold laced by silver streams that are great rivers."

Winston  
Churchill

# F A M O U S

## *Visitors to the Netherland Plaza*

One of the most famous stories in the hotel's history occurred in the late 1930s. Winston Churchill, who was a guest at the hotel, was so taken



by the silver-leafed décor and facilities of the bathroom in his suite that he wanted it reproduced in his English country home. Phyllis Moir recorded the incident in her book, *I Was Winston Churchill's Personal Secretary*. She said that, on seeing the bath, Churchill immediately called London and had all construction on his house

stopped until he could get the bath's specifications from the hotel management. The hotel has since returned the compliment by naming the guestroom that Churchill stayed in "The Churchill Suite."

Elvis Presley stayed in the hotel often when he toured. During one stay, a breakfast chef, against his better judgment, agreed to prepare a very well-done hamburger for "The King." The chef put the burger in the deep fryer and the next thing he knew, Elvis was standing in the kitchen wanting to thank the person who made "the best hamburger he ever had."



Eleanor Roosevelt dropped in on the hotel more than a dozen times, always without warning, and always insisting that she pay her own way. As Harry Nolan, General Manager at that time, recalled, "There we would be with the President's wife on our hands and no preparations!"

Hotel staff would tell the story of Bing Crosby's delight in walking through the hotel's lobby. Former General Manager Nolan frequently talked of the day Mr. Crosby was in town and a crowd began to gather outside the hotel, eagerly hoping for a glimpse of the star. When offered an alternative escape route, Mr. Crosby replied, "When they stop recognizing me, I'm in trouble."



He then walked out into the crowd, climbing on the back of his convertible to sing a few songs before the police finally needed to clear the road.



John and Jackie Kennedy attended a function in the Hall of Mirrors in the early 1960s. While in the Hall of Mirrors on the third floor, one can observe a photograph on the right middle side of the room approximately where the couple was seated that evening.

Today, the Hilton Cincinnati Netherland Plaza still enjoys hosting its share of the dignitaries and celebrities. Many famous people, from Presidents Richard Nixon and George H. Bush to Celine Dion, The Radio City Rockettes and Natalie Portman, have made the Hilton Cincinnati their home when visiting the Queen City.

### *Did you know...*

The "Lady in Green" is the "spirit" that supposedly roams the Mezzanine level and Hall of Mirrors. She was the wife of a laborer who was killed during the construction of the hotel. His body was never found. The Lady in Green is said to spend her restless nights searching for him.

# A WALKING TOUR

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## *of the Netherland Plaza*

Three motifs that differentiate French art deco from other types of art deco are the use of floral patterns in a frieze (circle) motif - most commonly the lotus pattern, the use of nature - usually in the form of birds, and the presence of the sun. Look for these motifs throughout the hotel.

### STREET LEVEL

#### MAIN ENTRANCE/GRAND STAIRCASE

An impressive entrance, main foyer and Palm Court become all the more striking when carved of Roman-Breche marble. Look up at the handsome porte-cocheres (decorative overhang) on both the Fifth Street and Race Street entrances. An elegant floral and popular female frieze (horizontal metal work with a vine and loop design) welcomes guests above the doors at the Fifth Street entrance. Brass torches guarding the stairs suggest Egypt as represented in French Art Deco.

Looking up into the vaulted ceiling from the second landing, we catch a glimpse of a mural with the French caption, "Bienvenu aux Voyageurs" (Welcome Travelers). A compass-rose, the traveler's guide that points directly to true north, is surrounded by twenty-four gazelles which represent each hour of the day. As you look upwards, the bottom of the chandelier above the grand staircase represents the sun.

### LOBBY LEVEL

#### LOBBY

Rare Brazilian rosewood, which is no longer available for export and has been placed on the endangered plants and animals list, and Italian marble sparkle under lights diffused by pierced nickel-silver fixtures in a stylized foliage design. There is a half-acre of the beautiful rosewood in the hotel. Note the angular, geometric shape of the pillars, openings and moldings. Herons (birds) are featured in the free-flowing design on the etched Benedict metal elevator doors along with the lotus floral design and above the door a small light symbolizing the sun - *a perfect example of French art deco*. Note the symmetry on the sides of the door and the pattern of the etchings - *a perfect example of art deco*.

#### THE PALM COURT

Where the Palm Court currently resides was once the main lobby for the hotel. This great room is predominantly French Art Deco with classic Louis XV overtones exemplified in the high murals which illustrate the theme of recreation. Observe the distinct outline of the Carew Tower in the background of each mural. The railing and posts have as their central motif stylized double "S," symbolizing the French regent King Louis XV. Egyptian influences appear in the step pyramid shape impressed upon the ceiling and portals and the plant like wall sconces.

The upper section of the restaurant (in The Grille area) features murals that were added during the 1980s renovation. The murals feature other notable historic buildings from the Cincinnati area in unusual settings, staying with the theme of the Carew Tower outlines in the main area's murals.



At the far end of the Palm Court, there is a ziggurat-shaped fountain with a ram's head guarded by two large and handsome sea horses with lotus light crowns. Mythological figures were used heavily throughout the hotel. The ram, dolphins, sea horses and mermaids all represent protection and guardianship for travelers.

The fountain and sea horses were made in Cincinnati at the world renowned Rookwood Pottery studio atop picturesque Mt. Adams. The fountain and sun were favorite Art Deco motifs, representing life-giving forces, youth and freedom. A variety of Art Deco images and forms have been adopted not so much for their symbolic value as for their visual effect and dramatic impact. George Unger, who is credited with most of the interior design, was an accomplished theatre designer during the 1920s and 1930s.



*The Restaurants at Palm Court*

## MEZZANINE LEVEL

### APOLLO GALLERY

The Apollo Gallery is located on the Mezzanine level at the entrance of the Continental Ballroom. There is a good view of the "Welcome Traveler" mural in the entry. At the north end of the bar, there is an impressive composition that serves as the entry to the Continental Room. Overhead is a mural of Apollo, the sun god, and his twin sister, Artemis (Diana), a moon goddess, painted in the familiar Baroque style. Apollo's daily task was to drag the sun across the sky in his golden chariot. Diana was the lady of the forest and chief huntress. She was also the protector of women in labor and children.

### THE CONTINENTAL ROOM

Once the main dining room of the hotel, diners were entertained here by an ice-skating show. There was a small ice-rink built into the floor in the center of the room which was cooled by a freezing effect of two chemicals reacting with one another in pipes under the floor's surface.

The room boasts the original magnificent wall sconces and chandeliers. As you enter the room, the two murals on the left side of the room represent summer (left mural) and autumn (right mural) and on the right side of the room, winter (left) and spring (right). At the east and west ends of the room, imposing marble urns mark the floor elevation. Beyond are beautiful nickel-silver doors with French mirror backing. The metal is of a winding vine and lotus design. The original walls in the room were of Oriental walnut, but were damaged in an earlier renovation.

There is an amusing story regarding a party held in this room in 1940. Dan Tobin was a Cincinnati native who had moved to New York City and won a role in the stage production of "Philadelphia Story," starring Katherine Hepburn. When the production came to Cincinnati, three of Tobin's local college friends pooled their money and held a party for him in the Restaurant Continental.



They had just enough money to invite a few friends. As the party began, the table was surrounded by waiters and champagne corks began popping and glasses were filled. Tobin's three friends looked at each other in a panic wondering who had lost financial constraint and more importantly, who would pay the bill? Tobin asked a waiter who had ordered the champagne and the waiter replied, "Miss Hepburn ordered champagne for the party so long as the party lasts." Tobin saw Hepburn was at a nearby table with movie producer George Zukor. They were discussing movie rights to "The Philadelphia Story". Hepburn was later instrumental in Tobin's entry into Hollywood and the start of a successful screen career.

## THIRD FLOOR

### HALL OF MIRRORS

Ascend to the third floor to the Hall of Mirrors. George Unger, who also did the interior design of the Roxy & Beacon Theatres in New York City, designed the foyer like a theater with lower ceilings. As you enter the ballroom, the soaring ceiling is meant to invoke and accentuate an emotional response with the difference in the ceiling height from the foyer to the ballroom. Once inside, the room seems to be illuminated with colored light gathered from the warm French Fleur de Peche marble and reflected in the gold-plated mirrors. A majestic staircase backed by an enormous mirror creates a stage and temporary focal point, but still one's attention is led by the important running friezes (horizontal band near the ceiling) with garlands of flowers tinted lavender, rose and metallic.



*Hall of Mirrors - 1930s*

The jaded green grillwork and painted drapery are particularly handsome. Other fantastic French art deco touches appear in the floating Egyptian wings on the first wall and the curious swaged pilasters on the balcony level.

On the balcony, note the balustrades depicting Pan, another mythological figure. The posts of the balustrades are depictions of the corn stalk design found throughout the hotel.

The mural in the ceiling was painted to resemble the original chandelier which was damaged in a 1942 fire. When the hotel was renovated in the 1980s, the Historical Society said the hotel could not put a replica or another period chandelier in its place. Thus, the mural was created.

On the right side of the room, there is a photograph of John and Jackie Kennedy. The Kennedys attended a function in the ballroom and the photograph is placed in the approximate location where both were seated.

### JULEP ROOM

Located off of the foyer of the Hall of Mirrors and near the elevators is the Julep Room. Currently used for small gatherings and meetings, the room was originally the wedding chapel of the hotel. Later the Julep Room became one of the many bars in the hotel. The room originally boasted walnut paneling and a wonderful

### *Did you know...*

The wall lighting in the Netherland Plaza was considered groundbreaking because light bulbs were not visible through the silver & nickel sconces.



pipe organ, the only one of its kind in an American hotel. The nickel silver art deco pieces still line the “portals” in the room.

## FOURTH FLOOR

Take the stairs located on either side of the entrance to the Hall of Mirrors to the fourth floor. Along the way, note the charming metal work on the railings and posts and the swan medallion above the door to the Hall of Mirror’s balcony. The murals that are on the walls were completed in 1984. Tom Bacher, one of Cincinnati’s best known artists, was commissioned to create the murals which feature luminescent paints that retain light and glow when the lights are dimmed. As a nod to the owners, Bacher painted the words “thank you” on the Coliseum’s billboard.

The chandelier in the foyer at the top of the stairs represents the largest example of the sun in the hotel.

## PAVILLION CAPRICE

The Pavillion Caprice’s three-tiered setting was originally the hotel’s nightclub. The room even boasts Doris Day’s first professional appearance at the age of 16.

The room is designed to look like the nightclub of the ocean liner, the SS Leviathan. Similarities include curvilinear metal railings, musical notes in the carpet (at least in 1931), certain indirect lighting effect and tables on two levels flanking the long sides of the room. On pedestals along the walls are beautiful bronze “sunburst” lights. These lights were designed to give the illusion of sights seen through the porthole of a vessel at sea. Glass slides with painted images would go behind them and would project an image in the portals. The images would even rotate and revolve to create movement. Ideas like these were the reasons that the hotel was known as one of the most technologically advanced buildings in the world. Note the chandelier, which was designed to appear as if it is suspended from “nothingness.”

## HALL OF NATIONS

Off the fourth floor foyer is the Hall of Nations, originally known as the Corridor of Periods. The hall features 10 individual meeting/banquet rooms, originally private dining rooms. Each has a doorway framed in a different architectural style with handcrafted work showing incredible detail. Salon A is Greek Revival; Salon B is Georgian; Salon C is Neoclassical; Salon D is a Graeco-Roman; Salon E is Georgian-Federal transitional; Salon F is Italian Renaissance; Salon G is Baroque; Salon H is Romanesque Revival with Norman Romanesque influence; Salon I (both doors) is Romanesque and Renaissance; Salon M is an Art Deco invention with a vaguely Neoclassical flavor; the Business Center is Empire; and the Rookwood is Greek Revival.



*Julep Room-  
Wedding Chapel, 1930s*



*Pavillion Caprice  
1930s*

## *Did you know...*

When the hotel opened, the parking garage was collision proof. The garage was automated so that no one had to drive or park the car - it was all done electronically.

# T H A T

*was then*



*Lobby Level & Registration - 1930s*



*Hall of Mirrors - 1970s*



*Guestroom - 1950s*



*Exterior of Carew Tower - 1930s*



*Lobby/Lounge - 1930s*

T H I S

*is now*



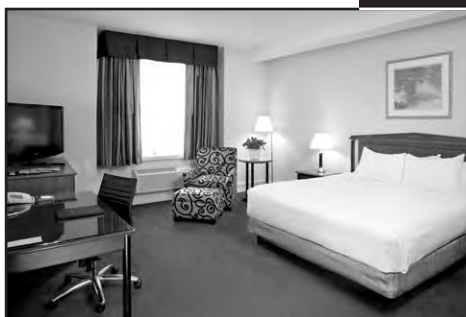
*Hall of Mirrors*



*Lobby*



*Exterior of Carew Tower*



*Guestroom*



*The Restaurants at Palm Court*

# ORCHIDS

AT PALM COURT



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