



# The Seelbach Hilton

## Louisville

### *History*

Representing immigrant brothers Louis and Otto Seelbach's version of the American dream, Louisville's Grand Hotel was built in 1905. The hotel is an example of the lavish turn-of-the century Beaux-Arts Baroque architectural style. It is a melange of Louis XVI, Spanish and English Renaissance which has fascinated a multitude of people throughout the years. Names of celebrities and dignitaries fill the guest registry. Presidents' William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton have been guests at The Seelbach.

W.J. Dodd of Louisville and F.M. Andrews of Dayton, Ohio designed the Seelbach. The richly decorated lobby combined marbles from Italy, Vermont and Switzerland along with mahogany and bronze in the classic Renaissance style including a vaulted dome of 800 glass panes. Arthur Thomas, the most famous Indian painter in the world, was commissioned to decorate the lobby with huge mural paintings of pioneer scenes from Kentucky history.

In 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald immortalized the hotel in his novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald referred to The Seelbach when his characters, Tom Buchanan and Daisy, were married in Louisville.

The Rathskeller, the only room of its kind in the world, is a work of art crafted entirely of Rookwood Pottery. The ceramic tiles are from the famous Rookwood Pottery Company of Cincinnati that operated from 1881 to WWII. Rookwood pelicans, a leather ceiling painted with the zodiac and scenes of Rhineland splendor surround you in this Medieval-looking room.

The Oakroom, with hand-carved oak colonnades and glittering chandeliers, was originally a gentleman's billiard parlor designed in the Venetian Renaissance style. Located on the Mezzanine level, it underwent a half a million-dollar restoration in 1996 and now serves, as Kentucky's only 5 Diamond restaurant.

Louis Seelbach died in 1925, and in 1929 Otto Seelbach retired, and died 4 years later. The Seelbach Hotel Company disbanded with his retirement and the last Seelbach left the hotels' management. Subsequent owners remodeled the hotel, and until 1968 the hotel turned a profit. By July, loss of revenue forced The Seelbach to close.

In 1978, new owners H.G. Whittenberg, Jr., construction magnate and Roger Davis, actor, began renovations with financial backing from Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. The cost was more than \$28 million. Finally in April 1982, The Seelbach reopened. In April 1984, Metropolitan gained control of the hotel, buying out Whittenberg and Davis. The hotel has been managed by National Hotels Corporation, a subsidiary of Radisson Hotels, and was also managed by Doubletree Hotels.

In April 1990, The Seelbach was sold to Medallion Hotels, Inc. of New York, which added the 18,500 sq. ft. 5.6 million-dollar conference center in 1995. Meristar Hotels and Resorts purchased The Seelbach in 1998, began a seven million-dollar restoration process of all guestrooms and placed it under the Hilton flag.

## The Lobby

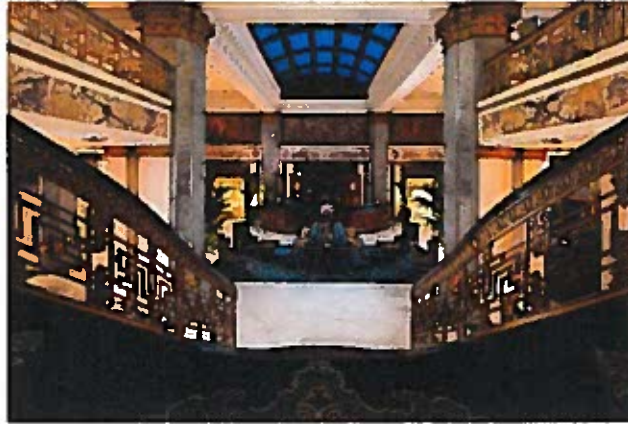


The lobby looks today much as it did to the 25,000 people that filed through the hotel on opening day back in 1905, thanks entirely to Mr. Roger Davis. Mr. Davis peeled away 16 coats of paint, 6 layers of wallpaper and over 40 years of changes and additions, to return the lobby to its original resplendent grandeur.

The Seelbach brothers spared no expense in decorating their grand hotel, and the lobby is a perfect example. They selected the finest marbles from all over the world. Importing the green and white marble for the walls from Italy and the rose marble from Switzerland. The massive gray columns were covered in the finest Vermont marble and banded in French bronze. They had the entire grill work and railings fabricated in France and capped with West Indian mahogany. In keeping with this fine craftsmanship, Mr. Davis removed the terrazzo floor, which had replaced the original marble floor in the 1950s, and replaced it with a snow white Alabama marble.

If you stand in the lobby and look up one sees the beautiful skylight with its 800 individual panes of beveled glass. Because Mr. Davis was unable to reopen the skylight; he purchased and hung the 2 massive, five tiered bronze and crystal chandeliers, which originally hung in The Phoenix hotel in Lexington. (Ironically, this hotel was run for many years by the third Seelbach brother, Charles.) Surrounding the top of the lobby are the beautiful murals by Arthur Thomas depicting scenes from Kentucky's history.

## The Murals



The murals, which crown the lobby, were commissioned by the Seelbach brothers during the original construction of the hotel in 1905. They were executed by Arthur Thomas, considered one of the leading western artists of the day.

Unfortunately these paintings were hidden from view for nearly 20 years. In the early 1960's in an attempt to modernize the lobby the murals were covered over and the ceiling dropped. In the late 1970s, an investor purchased the hotel and rediscovered the murals. Mr. Thomas' works were very popular at this time and in an attempt to make a little money he tried to remove the small mural in the southwest corner. The only thing he succeeded in doing was completely destroying the mural that was there.

In the early 1980s when Roger Davis began his restoration of the hotel, he had the murals painstakingly uncovered and cleaned. Because no image of the destroyed original existed, he commissioned California artist paint a mirror image of the panel above the bell stand to replace the one, which was destroyed.

The murals depict scenes from Kentucky and the region during their early days. The main panel above the desk is that of Col. Henderson convening the first Kentucky State Legislature. The two panels flanking this depict Daniel Boone's experiences in Kentucky. The mural to the right of the main panel shows him being captured by the Native Americans of Kentucky. The mural to the left of the main panel depicts him telling stories around the campfire. The two main panels on the north and south walls depict the contributions of George Rogers Clark to the region. The main panel on the right above the bar entrance shows General Clark fording the Wabash River in his attack on the British Fort at Vincennes, which claimed the Northwest Territory for the United States. This territory later became the states of Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin. The main panel on the south wall shows him signing a treaty with the Native Americans of Kentucky. The small panels on the north wall, above the entrance to the Old Seelbach Bar, depict Kentucky products tobacco and bourbon. Those on the south wall, near the bell stand, originally showed Kentucky's early inhabitants. The Cherokee brave above the bell stand is an original and the replica of this replaced the destroyed original of a pioneer.

## The Grand Ballroom



The Grand Ballroom, immortalized by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* as the wedding locale of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, was added to the hotel during the 1907 addition and served as the hotel's original ballroom. Because the ballroom had undergone many renovations, it was not until the 1982 restoration that it took on its current appearance. Mr. Davis redesigned the 4900 square foot ballroom in the Beaux-Arts style, with marble pilasters, crystal chandeliers and palladium windows to keep it in line with the original architecture of the building, and to create a feeling of elegance. The main focal piece of the West Ballroom is an eighteenth century mantelpiece, which was salvaged from a private home in Philadelphia.

In the ballroom foyer, Mr. Davis coffered the ceiling and left it at its original height in order to enhance the handpainted stained glass windows. These windows, originally in the Henry Watterson Hotel, which stood in the parking lot directly across Muhammad Ali from the Medallion Ballroom doors, depict those that have governed the city and state. The central window displays the Coat of Arms of King Louis XVI of France for whom the city was named in thanks for his help during the American Revolution. The seal to the left is an old seal of the City of Louisville, where the one on the right is that of The Commonwealth of Kentucky.

In 1999, the Ballroom and foyer underwent a \$700,000 restoration. This included a complete restoration and repainting of all the ornate plaster and millwork. New custom made draperies were hung and specially designed carpeting laid, made by the Axminster Carpet Company in London. The restrooms were upgraded and redecorated, along with all the approaching hallways. After this extensive restoration, The Grand Ballroom is again setting the standard of elegance as Louisville's oldest hotel ballroom.

## The Rathskeller



This reproduction of an authentic German Rathskeller is the only surviving complete Rookwood pottery room in the world. This room modeled after the social halls of Germany found in the cellars of the Rathaus or city hall, hence its name, was added to the hotel during the addition of 1907 at a cost of \$80,000.

All the tile work was made by hand at the famed Rookwood Pottery of Cincinnati. The designs on each tile are drawn by hand and fired. Then each color is added and fired again; requiring an additional firing for each color. The final product is the beautiful and durable tiles that adorn this room.

The designs on the walls depict the walled cities common in the Rhein region of Germany where the Seelbach brothers were born. The pelicans which adorn the columns around the room are a sign of good luck; thus surrounding guests in this room with good luck. The ceilings in the back of the room by the bar are made of fine tooled leather painted in a heraldic design with the twelve signs of the zodiac.

The open medallions in the ceiling and side walls of the room were for its heating and cooling system. When the room opened in 1907, the hotel used 40 tons of steam power to air condition the room. This allowed the Seelbach brothers to claim that they could keep the room 10 degrees cooler than it was outside at all times and that it was replaced with fresh air every 5 minutes.

The clock in the foyer as you enter the Rathskeller cost \$10,000 and was a gift to the hotel by the President of The Seelbach Realty Company which built and owned the hotel until 1929. The Clock was designed by long term Rookwood designer John Delaney Wareham. It depicts three different methods of telling time; the clock face, which continues the Zodiac theme from the Rathskeller ceiling is flanked by two medieval women, one holding a sundial and one an hourglass.

This room considered THE nightspot in Louisville attracted a young army officer during World War I by the name of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Considered one of the greatest American authors of the twentieth century, he later included the Seelbach Hotel in his book, *The Great Gatsby*.

## *Tale of the Lady in Blue*

On a cold winter day in 1987, a hotel Chef was preparing waffles and omelets in the Oakroom Ante room for Sunday Brunch. He looked out toward the number three elevator and to his surprise, he saw a lady with long dark hair wearing a long blue chiffon dress walk into the elevator. The doors were still closed. He reported what he observed to security. Within minutes of his report, a housekeeper from the second floor reported seeing the same lady. In both reports the doors to the elevator were never open.

A trip to the local library produced a newspaper article from 1936 where a lady working at the Starks building came across the street to the Seelbach Hotel to meet her husband. He, unfortunately, was killed on his way to the hotel. She was so upset she plunged to her death in the number three elevator shaft wearing a long blue chiffon dress. She also had long dark hair.

The lady in blue has not been seen since.

***May She Rest In Peace.***



**LOUISVILLE'S GRAND HOTEL**

