

Seelbach Hotel  
500 S. Fourth Street  
Louisville  
Jefferson County  
Kentucky

HABS No. KY-148

HABS,  
KY,  
56-LOUVI  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Architectural and Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20243

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SEELBACH HOTEL

HABS No. KY-148

Location: 500 S. Fourth Street, Louisville, Jefferson County, Kentucky.  
 USGS New Albany, Indiana-Kentucky Quadrangle, Universal  
 Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 16/608680/4234180

Present Owner: Gotham Hotels, Limited.

Present Use: Being restored.

Significance: Built from 1903 to 1907, the neo-classical hotel includes a Rathskeller, one of only two known ensembles of the famous Rookwood pottery on a large scale. The Rathskeller was patterned after a German rathskeller.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The major portion of the hotel was begun in November 1903 and opened May 1, 1905. A large addition to the hotel was planned in late 1905, begun in 1906, and opened December 31, 1907. Included with the work of the addition was the construction of the Rathskeller.
2. Architect: Architect of the original portion of the hotel was Frank M. Andrews, a noted designer of hotels in New York, Washington, Cincinnati, and elsewhere. The addition was designed by Andrews in collaboration with McDonald and Dodd, local architects. Paul Moosmiller of New Albany assisted in the design, especially with the interior details.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Seelbach Hotel is located at the southwest corner of South Fourth and Walnut Streets on lot 65 of Block 13-E in the city of Louisville. The following references to the title of this lot are found in the Jefferson County, Kentucky Deed Books.

1903 Deed, May 25, 1903, recorded in Deed Book 589, page 386. John Coleman and Susan Coleman, Spalding Coleman and Eliza R. Coleman, Katherine Clare Coleman, Thomas F. Coleman, Elizabeth Coleman, Nanno Coleman, and Margaret Elizabeth Du Pont Coleman sold the original lot for the hotel to Louis Seelbach for \$250,000.

1903 Deed, May 25, 1903, recorded in Deed Book 590, page 386. Louis Seelbach and Marie H. Seelbach conveyed the lot to the Seelbach Realty Company.

- 1908 Deed, January 31, 1908, recorded in Deed Book 672, page 517.  
Dumesnil Brothers Company sold a lot at the rear of the hotel to  
Louis Seelbach
- 1908 Deed, January 31, 1908, recorded Deed Book 674, page 268.  
Henrietta Ormsby sold a lot at the rear of the hotel to Louis  
Seelbach.
- 1911 Deed, November 23, 1911, recorded in Deed Book 750, page 628.  
Louis Seelbach and Marie H. Seelbach conveyed the above two lots  
to The Seelbach Realty Company.
- 1926 Deed, February 27, 1926, recorded in Deed Book 1194, page 588.  
Seelbach Realty Company conveyed the property of the hotel and  
its lots to J.L. Smyser and C.C. Stoll, trustees.
- 1926 Deed, February 27, 1926, recorded in Deed Book 1196, page 531.  
J.L. Smyser and C.C. Stoll, trustees, sold the hotel to Liebling  
Realty Company.
- 1929 Deed, May 16, 1929, recorded in Deed Book 1386, page 609.  
Liebling Realty Company sold the hotel to Adolph Reutlinger.
- 1929 Deed, November 1, 1929, recorded in Deed Book 1427, page 193.  
Adolph Reutlinger and Mary F. Reutlinger sold the hotel to The  
Seelbach, Inc.
- 1956 Deed, May 31, 1956, recorded in Deed Book 3397, page 269. The  
Seelbach, Inc. sold the hotel to Eppley Hotels Company.
- 1956 Deed, May 31, 1956, recorded in Deed Book 3397, page 268. Eppley  
Hotels Company sold the hotel to Eugene C. Eppley Foundation, Inc.
- 1956 Deed, May 31, 1956, recorded in Deed Book 3397, page 266. Eugene  
C. Eppley Foundation, Inc. sold the hotel to  
Sheraton-Midcontinent Corp.
- 1968 Deed, November 30, 1968, recorded in Deed Book 4665, page 113.  
Midco Hotels Corp. sold the hotel to Gotham Hotels, Ltd., for  
\$2,563,200.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers:

H. Probst (New York).....general contractor  
Bowling Green White Stone Company.....limestone  
Columbian Marble Quarrying Company  
(Rutland, Vermont).....marble  
Grainger and Company (Louisville).....iron

Jos. McWilliams and Company (Louisville)  
.....mechanical and electrical equipment  
Stirling Consolidated Boiler Company.....boilers  
M.C. Vandiver (Atlanta, Georgia)...steam heating and plumbing  
Horn and Brannen Manufacturing Company (Philadelphia)  
.....fixtures  
Monahan Brothers (Chicago).....plaster  
J.N. Struck and Brother (Louisville)  
.....doors, mantels, and interior trim  
American Compressed Air Supplying Company (Milwaukee)  
.....cleaning apparatus  
Bridgeford and Company (Louisville).....cooking ranges  
National Fireproofing Company  
.....clay tile and metal fireproofing  
Belknap Hardware and Manufacturing Company (Louisville)  
.....hardware

The Rookwood Pottery Company of Cincinnati supplied the tile and pottery for the walls and floor of the Rathskeller at a cost of \$40,000. Rookwood also executed a large drinking fountain, the largest single piece of pottery ever fired up to that time, for the main lobby of the hotel in 1905, and a large Gothic clock case for the vestibule of the Rathskeller.

The once famous Rookwood Pottery was established in 1881 at Cincinnati. Intended to emulate the achievements of foreign art potteries displayed at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, Rookwood attained amazingly high standards of quality in hand-decorated pottery almost until its demise after the Second World War. Rookwood also created whole ensembles of tile-decorated rooms.

5. Original plans and construction: No original plans are known to exist. From Louisville Today, published in 1912, comes the following account: "The Rathskeller is the most famed feature of this hotel andd deservedly so. Its walls are made of the famous Rookwood tile and pottery, and were built at a cost of \$40,000 for the walls alone. It is a true reproduction of the famous drinking hall of one of the old castles on the Rhine. It is one of the most quaintly beautiful Rathskellers in this country, and really one of the sights of Louisville."
6. Alterations and additions: The Rathskeller itself remains basically unaltered. However, the original Flemish oak furniture which was designed for this room has since been removed and later furniture was added. Lighting was changed in the 1920s to the present fixtures.

- B. Historical Context: The Rathskeller has been the scene of numerous banquets and fetes held by and for various individuals and groups. Long a popular banquet room, it is now being restored.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The ten-story, flat-roofed neo-classical hotel has rusticated walls at the first and second floors and brick walls at all other floors. The main (east) entrance is highlighted by three elaborate balconies at the second floor. Light-color quoins accentuate the building against the dark-color brick walls. Large windows of arched and double types are in the rusticated wall area only, while the rest of the floors, except the tenth floor, have simple rectangular openings of one-over-one sash windows. All latter windows have light-color lintels and keystones. The tenth floor is lined with triple windows, and between these windows is the festoon motif. In addition to the balconies at the main entrance, simpler balconies on the second and ninth floors give more character to the building. The heavy cornice between the ninth and tenth floors is denticulated and is supported by paired brackets.

The interior possesses rich works that are of far greater significance than that of the exterior. The lobby is executed in the grand manner, and includes polychrome ceilings with various pattern motif, marble columns with Corinthian capitals and an open-well stairway with a continuous railing whose design is reminiscent of Oriental style. A mezzanine likewise in the grand manner is atop the lobby. The elaborate woodwork in the walls and columns in the Billiard Room and in the mantelpieces in the hotel rooms is noteworthy. The Rathskeller, located in the basement, is dominated by impressive vaulted ceilings that rest on columns bearing the famous Rookwood ceramic pelican figurines. Its walls are faced with tile which was also manufactured by Rookwood and are accentuated with Gothic elements.

## PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

### A. Early Views:

A view of elevation of wall is in Greater Louisville, Illustrated, published in 1908 by National Publishing Company, Louisville.

A view of the hotel is in Louisville Today, published in 1918 by Sam McDowell Anderson.

### B. Bibliography:

#### 1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, County Clerk's Office, Jefferson County Courthouse, Louisville, Kentucky.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Louisville Today, published by Sam McDowell Anderson, 1912, booklet.

The Seelbach, Louisville, Kentucky, 1905, Louisville, booklet.

Newspaper clippings:

"'The Seelbach' Opens in Welcome to Thousands," Courier-Journal, May 1, 1905.

"Hotel A Magnificent Creation in Construction and Furnishings," Courier-Journal, May 1, 1905.

"Crush at New Hotel Doors," Louisville Times, May 1, 1905.

"Seelbach Stockholders Get Theirs First," Louisville Times, May 1, 1905.

"Seelbach's is Opened," The Evening Post, May 2, 1905.

"Louisville's Million-Dollar Hotel Opened Yesterday," Louisville Herald, May 2, 1905.

"Seelbach Opens, Big Crowd Out," Louisville Herald, May 2, 1905.

"Louisville's New Hostelry, 'The Seelbach,'" Courier-Journal, May 7, 1905.

"Decide to Build," Courier-Journal, October 25, 1905.

"Local Architects Selected to Plan Addition to the Seelbach," Courier-Journal, October 29, 1905.

"Banquet to the Seelbachs at the Seelbach," The Evening Post, December 31, 1907.

"Rathskeller Makes Its Debut," Louisville Times, December 31, 1907.

"Some of Louisville's Modern and Up-to-Date Hotels Which House Thousands," Courier-Journal, March 25, 1913.

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Spring 1981

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Preservation Alliance of Louisville and Jefferson County, Inc. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1974 at the HABS Field Office in Louisville by Prof. John Haggard, (Syracuse University), Project Supervisor; David Arbogast (Columbia University), Project Historian; Mary Oehrlein, Project Foreman; Bayer Lee (City College of New York), Architect; and Mary M. Herd (University of Tennessee) and Charles Raith (University of Cincinnati), student assistant architects. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written descriptive data in the spring of 1981, for transmittal to the Library of Congress. HABS staff photographer Jack E. Boucher took the photographs of the structures in 1979.