

# Baltimore Hotel

11th and Baltimore  
completed 1899; demolished 1939

by Donna Francis

Architect Henry Van Brunt once called the Baltimore Hotel “the grand hotel for three decades at the heart of the city, both physically and sentimentally.” Located on Baltimore between 11th and 12th Streets, the Baltimore was *the* hotel of choice for the local elite and for visiting dignitaries, including several United States presidents.

Entrepreneur Bernard Corrigan commissioned architect Louis Curtiss to design the hotel on property owned by the estate of street car magnate Thomas Corrigan. Built by the Ewins-Dean Hotel Company (previous operator of the Savoy Hotel) and Taylor & Winn Construction, the hotel was constructed of brick, terra cotta, and Portland cement. Curtiss intended to make the structure fireproof by eliminating all wood and other combustible material. The brick bearing walls were 48 inches thick at the bottom with iron posts on the interior supporting concrete floors, made from cement shipped as ballast on ships from Germany. Over time, the hotel had several additions: two stories were added in 1901; it was extended to the south in 1904; and, in 1908, a 12-story addition was constructed at 12th and Baltimore, bringing the total number of rooms to 550.

When it opened in the spring of 1899, the six-storied, 160-room hotel was considered one of the most magnificent hotels in the West—on a par with the Palmer House in Chicago and the Brown Palace in Denver. In fact, when the 1900 Democratic National Convention was held in Kansas City, the Baltimore Hotel was the largest hotel in the United States outside of New York City, with the exception of the Palmer House. The hotel belonged to an era when luxury was measured by space, marble, and extravagant plush. Curtiss planned the building as a showcase for not only Kansas City, but for the entire Midwest as well. While the exterior was traditional Italian Renaissance style, the interior was pure Roman Empire opulence with detail executed under a classical Greek influence. The main lobby on 11th Street consisted entirely



of marble and onyx, with marble columns topped with gilt capitals supporting a balcony. Ceilings were sculpted with elaborate design, and the interior color scheme was green, ivory, and deep green. The hotel crest, adapted from the coat of arms of Lord Baltimore, was omnipresent.

The hotel boasted large, elegantly furnished guestrooms. While the smallest room was 14 x 16 feet, most rooms exceeded 25 x 30 feet in size. Much thought was given to creating light and airy rooms, and all the guestrooms had windows. But it was the public rooms that attracted the most attention: a bar and billiard room, with four billiard tables reading and writing rooms; a barbershop; a separate ladies' entrance and waiting room; the immense marbled lobby; and four dining rooms. Curtiss had travelled to Europe to obtain ideas for the design of the hotel and brought back a huge marble fountain that stood in the center of the Pompeian dining room (the fountain was later moved to Wenonga Road in Mission Hills, Kansas). The dining room itself seated 700, and was outfitted in red, green, green onyx, and gold leaf. It was air-conditioned in 1915, making the Baltimore the first hotel in Kansas City with such a luxury. The Renaissance Room, a marble dining room on the 12<sup>th</sup> Street side of the hotel, had massive two-story pillars of lightly-colored Italian marble and a vaulted mosaic ceiling. Live chamber music was played every evening as dinner was served, and the dinners were created under the direction of some of the country's most celebrated chefs, including Adrian Delvaux, former head chef at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City.

The Baltimore Hotel was popular with the theater crowd and after-theater parties. A ten-foot wide tunnel was constructed under the intersection of 11<sup>th</sup> and Baltimore, between the hotel and the Willis Wood Theater, also designed by Curtiss. The tunnel was conceived by K. J. Dean, president of the Baltimore Hotel at the time the theater was being built. Many difficulties were encountered during the three-month construction, completed at a cost of \$20,000—almost double the original estimate. The white tunnel, known as "Highball Alley," led from the theater to the "men only" Heidelberg Room, a bar fashioned after the drinking halls of Germany. Gentlemen went here during intermissions for drinks. Ladies were not admitted, as it was considered highly inappropriate for women to be seen drinking in public, but during bad weather they were allowed to pass briefly through the tunnel and bar to the hotel, where horse-drawn carriages were standing by. The tunnel was also famous as an avenue of escape for newly married couples attempting to avoid their pursuers throwing rice

and shoes. After a fire destroyed the Willis Wood Theater in 1917, the tunnel was walled up.

In 1914, the hotel underwent a \$400,000 remodeling. The Egyptian and Pompeian Rooms were combined to create a larger dining room that seated 800 and included a stage for entertainment. At this time every guestroom was refurbished, decorated, and air-conditioned at a cost of \$30,000. The Baltimore merged with the Muehlebach hotel five years later, and in 1928 Barney Allis took over management of both.

Four years later, Corrigan Realty took over the management of the Baltimore. The Renaissance Room was remodeled to include a 730-square foot dance floor and new, two-story high burgundy drapes. But these efforts to keep the hotel palatable to a new generation of consumers were in vain. After passing through a succession of management, the hotel had become too costly to operate, and could not compete for preeminence with the new Meuhlebach Hotel. Perhaps the criticism of a *Kansas City Star* writer who called the hotel a “nightmare of perverse and useless extravagance” had a ring of truth.

The doors to the Baltimore’s opulence--nightmarish or not--were closed on August 6, 1938. Later that year, a drawn-out court battle ended with the decision to raze the hotel, and it was demolished in 1939. The subsequently vacant lot was used as a parking lot for a number of years. Later, with the advent of urban renewal, it was reclaimed and is now the site of City Center Square. Van Brunt’s metaphorical heart now beats a different kind of rhythm for a different kind of city.

## Sources

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