

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
Sept.15, 1987; Designation List 191  
LP-1547

ALGONQUIN HOTEL, 59-61 West 44th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1902; architect Goldwin Starrett.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1260, Lot 7.

On September 17, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Algonquin Hotel and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing was continued to November 12, 1985 (Item No. 3), December 10, 1985 (Item No. 2), and March 11, 1986 (Item No. 2). All hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. Three witnesses representing the owner spoke in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

##### Summary

The Algonquin Hotel, which opened its doors in 1902, has played host to generations of famous men and women from the literary and theatrical worlds. Most often associated with the legendary Round Table -- the group of critics and humorists who convened almost daily in the 1920s for luncheons spiced with quotable conversation and repartee -- the hotel has also been frequented by countless others in the acting and writing professions. The particular cultural character of the Algonquin was nurtured by its devoted and congenial proprietor, Frank Case. "I was determined to get the Arts, especially the Theater," Case later reminisced, and beginning with such illustrious guests as John and Ethel Barrymore, Douglas Fairbanks, Booth Tarkington and Sinclair Lewis, he proceeded to become 'boniface' to not only the stars, but to aspiring young artists as well. <sup>1</sup>

The hotel is a representative example of an architectural mode highly popular in the early years of the century, a Beaux-Arts inspired design, with continuous projecting metal bay windows and neo-Renaissance detail. Designed by architect Goldwin Starrett, it complements the other fine buildings on this West 44th Street block, among them the New York Yacht Club (1899) and the Harvard Club (1894), both designated New York City Landmarks.

## The Architect

Goldwin Starrett (1874-1918) was one of five brothers, all active in the construction and architectural fields. Born in Lawrence, Kansas, his family later moved to Chicago. Starrett attended the engineering school of the University of Michigan, and then entered the architectural offices of D. H. Burnham & Co., as had his two older brothers, Theodore and Paul. In 1898, Goldwin entered the New York offices of the George A. Fuller Construction Co., joining his brother Paul. In 1901, along with Theodore, and his other brothers, Ralph and William A., he formed the Thompson Starrett Construction Company. It was as a partner in this firm that he designed the Algonquin for Albert Foster of the Puritan Realty Company.

Goldwin then became associated with the E. B. Ellis Granite Company which had its quarries in Vermont. In 1907, he formed an architectural practice with Ernest Alan Van Vleck (1875-1956), in which he was joined by his brother William A. in 1913.

In the construction business Goldwin was associated with many important buildings, among them Union Station in Washington, D.C. and the Woolworth Building in New York, a designated New York City Landmark. Starrett & Van Vleck specialized in commercial buildings and schools, and among the firm's major commissions during Goldwin's lifetime were the Lord & Taylor department store, the Hale Publishing Co. building, the Everett and the Berkeley office buildings, and the apartment house at 820 Fifth Avenue, within the Upper East Side Historic District.

## Neighborhood Development

In the 1870s this block was dominated by the Sixth Avenue Railroad Depot, a slaughterhouse, and nearby stables for stagecoach lines. Small private stables also existed in the area, two of which still remain on the Algonquin's block, one of them now the three-story extension of the hotel. Across Fifth Avenue to the east were large cattleyards.

By the time the Algonquin was completed Frank Case could state, "it was already in a decidedly smart neighborhood."<sup>2</sup> The two most fashionable restaurants of the period, Sherry's and Delmonico's, had moved from Madison Square up to Fifth Avenue and Forty-fourth Street, while a number of hotels had been constructed nearby including the Brighton, the Bristol, the Windsor and the Vendome. Theaters were also moving uptown, centering around Times Square. This relocation, coupled with plans for a new Grand Central, made the Algonquin's address a prime hotel location.

In 1905, the the old Sixth Avenue Depot located directly across from the Algonquin was replaced by the Hippodrome, advertised as the "world's largest playhouse,"<sup>3</sup> and in Case's words "an important event for us."<sup>4</sup> It was joined by a number of other theaters on West 44th Street, among the earliest the Belasco (1907), the Winthrop Ames (1912), the 44th Street (1913) and the Broadhurst (1917) Theaters.<sup>5</sup>

The Algonquin had originally been planned as an apartment hotel, which was to cater to long-term residents.<sup>6</sup> But, because of the nature of its neighborhood, it was soon recognized that the hotel was better suited to

transient trade.<sup>7</sup> Case also recognized the potential for restaurant and bar trade which the theater district's proximity provided. According to tradition his kitchen and accommodating service were what first attracted the Round Table group to the hotel.<sup>8</sup>

### Frank Case and the Algonquin

The Algonquin owes its prominence as a cultural landmark to one man, Frank Case. Born in Buffalo in 1870, he entered the hotel business there working first as the railroad ticket clerk at the Iroquois Hotel, and then as night clerk at the Genesee Hotel. As a teen-ager he had also worked as a vaudeville theater usher, and thus the two interests which were to inform his entire career, began in his youth. By the late 1890s, Case had moved to Jersey City, where he clerked at the locally famous Taylor's Hotel. He joined the Algonquin staff while it was still under construction, and owned by Albert Foster. At that point the hotel was to be called The Puritan, a name which the young Case believed had unpleasantly strait-laced connotations, although he did favor an indigenous American name rather than the more prevalent European allusions of contemporary New York hotel nomenclature. After a trip to the public library, he suggested the new name, perhaps also suggested to him from his days at the Buffalo Iroquois. With its rechristening, Case adopted the infant hotel as his own: he became manager and proprietor in 1907, and purchased the building twenty years later.

After a financially precarious beginning, Case began the Algonquin's transformation into a theatrical and literary mecca. A handsome man, generous, convivial and "star-struck" in the best sense, he encouraged a glamorous clientele both as patrons and friends. Douglas Fairbanks was a close confidant and the friendship continued after Fairbanks moved to Hollywood. When the Hippodrome opened across the street, its entrepreneur Fred Thompson, who, with his partner Skip Dundy, had also built Coney Island's Luna Park, moved into an apartment at the upper story of the hotel annex. There, Case danced the risqué new Turkey Trot side-by-side with such illustrious turn-of-the-century New Yorkers as Diamond Jim Brady and Flo Ziegfeld.

With the end of the First World War, Case's Algonquin entered its heyday. The advent of the Round Table heightened the importance of the hotel as a rendezvous, serving as a focal point, which attracted a host of other notable personalities. In 1917 -- even before the Volstead Act -- Case decided to close the bar, declaring that he "was not a rum-seller,"<sup>9</sup> a step which was intended to maintain the refined atmosphere which Case so carefully nurtured.

After Case's death in 1946, the hotel was purchased by Ben B. and Mary Bodne. The Algonquin had first caught their imagination in 1924 when they honeymooned there. They continued to maintain the standards and traditions of Frank Case, and today the hotel retains its identity while at the same time it has become a major attraction for tourists visiting the theater district. (The hotel has recently been sold, although the Bodnes continue in residence.)

The roster of actors, writers, producers, directors, agents, and editors who have visited the Algonquin spans several generations. To name

just a few : John and Ethel Barrymore, Douglas Fairbanks, Sinclair Lewis (who offered to buy into the hotel), Booth Tarkington, Thornton Wilder, H. L. Mencken, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Harpo Marx, Alfred Lunt, Paul Robeson, Talullah Bankhead, Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart, Noel Coward, Orson Welles (who spent his honeymoon there), William Faulkner, Norman Mailer, and John Updike. And, of course, the Round Table.

### The Round Table

Founded in the years immediately after the First World War, the Round Table, or the Vicious Circle as they apparently preferred to call themselves, began informally, first meeting for lunch in the Oak Room and later at a round table in the Rose Room. Its membership was never fixed, but generally speaking the group was fairly young and very convivial, confident and witty, and imbued with the high spirits of the 1920s. Their interests centered on theater and literature, politics and sports. Many were avid poker players. Frank Case provided them with an upstairs room for all night card games, played by the so-called Thanatopsis Literary and Inside Straight Club. It was founded by Franklin Pierce Adams, who named it after a similar poker group he had formed in Paris while serving on the Army newspaper, Stars and Stripes. The key figures were all writers, and all enjoyed quips, bons mots, and repartee. A favorite punning game was termed I-Can-Give-You-A-Sentence (see below.) Begun when the members were relatively obscure, all became famous in their own day. The group was early on associated with the New Yorker magazine, founded by Harold Ross in 1925. Ross, although never known for his witticisms, nevertheless played an important part in the Round Table. His "prospectus" outlining the intended character of his fledgling magazine, might well have described the Round Table itself:

Its general tenor will be one of gaiety, wit and satire, but it will be more than a jester. It will not be what is commonly called radical or highbrow. It will be what is commonly called sophisticated.... It will hate bunk.<sup>10</sup>

With the onslaught of the Depression, the original cast of characters and a good deal of the spirit of the Round Table was dissipated, although members of the New Yorker staff, among them Peter Arno, James Thurber and E.B. White helped to fill the gaps.

Among the central figures of the group: 11

Franklin Pierce Adams (1181-1960): "Father" of the Round Table, columnist for the Herald Tribune, World, and Post, writing "The Conning Tower" for thirty years, with contributions from Round Table members. Wrote light verse and appeared on the radio program, "Information Please."

"The trouble with this country is that there are too many politicians who believe, with a conviction based on experience, that you can fool all of the people all of the time."

Robert Benchley (1889-1945): Drama critic for Life and The New Yorker. Humorist and writer of Hollywood comedy film shorts.

"It was one of those plays in which all the actors unfortunately enunciated clearly."

Heywood Broun (1888-1939): Began as drama critic for the World. Liberal, politically active columnist, writing "It Seems to Me." Founded American Newspaper Guild.

"The only real argument for Marriage is that it remains the best method for getting acquainted."

"Repartee is what you wish you said."

George S. Kaufman (1889-1961): Playwright, producer, director and drama critic for the New York Times. Highly successful collaboration with other playwrights, creating Pulitzer Prize winning plays and musical comedies.

On visiting Boston: "I went through once, but it was closed."

Playing I-Can-Give-You-A-Sentence using 'punctilious': "I know a farmer who has two daughters, Lizzie and Tillie. Lizzie is all right, but you have no idea how punk Tilly is."

Ring Lardner (1885-1933): Began as a sports columnist in Chicago. A master of the short story and of rural American dialect.

On a certain baseball player: "Although he is a bad fielder, he is also a poor hitter."

"Mr. Cobb took me into his library and showed me his books, of which he has a complete set."

"Frenchmen drink wine just like we used to drink water before Prohibition."

Dorothy Parker (1893-1967): Literary critic, short story and verse writer. Drama critic for Vanity Fair. Politically liberal and high priestess of Round Table wit.

On hearing that Calvin Coolidge had died: "How can you tell?"

Playing I-Can-Give-You-A-Sentence using 'horticulture': "You can lead a whore to culture, but you can't make her think."

Of her poetry: "I was following in the exquisite footsteps of Miss Edna St. Vincent Millay, unhappily in my own horrible sneakers."

Alexander Woollcott (1887-1943): Literary and drama critic, and radio commentator. Important arbiter of contemporary taste and fashion.

"All the things I really like to do are either immoral, illegal or fattening."



## Description

Located at 59 West 44th Street, the Algonquin is a twelve-story building with a three-story annex at the west, and belongs to the turn-of-the-century and early 20th-century development which characterizes much of the block. The Mansfield and the Iroquois Hotels, the New York Yacht Club, the Harvard Club, the Bar Association Building, and the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen building are also among the buildings contributing to the block's architectural interest, while the Algonquin annex, a converted stable, recalls the area's earlier 19th-century history.

In plan, the Algonquin displays a modified version of the traditional "dumbbell" arrangement, with recessed courtyards on the east and west elevations, and with the elevators banked at the core of the building. Originally, each floor contained single rooms and suites .<sup>12</sup>

The facade of the building is executed in brick, with limestone, metal and terra-cotta detail in a Beaux-Art inspired version of the neo-Renaissance style. There are numerous comparable structures in the city, among them the Wolcott Apartments at 2 West 31st Street of 1902-04 and the Hotel Churchill at 252 West 76th Street of 1902-03. These buildings are all fine examples of their type, one very popular in the early 20th century. (At the Algonquin, major alterations are restricted to the first story, with its replacement marquee, and at the twelfth story, where the cornice has been removed.) The facade is symmetrically disposed with a two-story smooth rusticated limestone base beneath a projecting bandcourse on console brackets, and another bandcourse above the tenth story which demarcated the shaft and upper section of the building. Four groupings of projecting metal bays each with three lights and two-over-two sash rise from the third to the eleventh stories, flanking the three-bay wide central portion of the elevation.

At the first story which is five bays wide, segmentally-arched doorways appear at the outer bays with two segmentally-arched windows flanking the central main entrance (reached by a shallow stairway). The west doorway has glazed wooden doors, that at the east is a service entrance. The windows are tripartite with transoms. Canopies and the marquee shelter the doors and windows. Above the water table to each side of the main entrance with double doors are stone bases surmounted by planters. Unadorned rectangular panels appear above the four arches to each side of the main entrance.

At the second story, which is also five bays wide, tripartite square-headed windows with two-over-two sash appear at the first and second, fourth and fifth bays. These have central scrolled keystones with festoons. At the center bay are three windows divided by shell and tassel motifs, with a leaf-covered molding above. The bays are interspersed by the console brackets which support the projecting bandcourse above.

The upper stories are of light red brick with prominent keyed limestone bands. The central three windows at each story are square-headed with two-over-two sash. The projecting metal bays have a central window and narrower side lights. These angular bays are adorned with panels, floral and urn-like elements. Air conditioner grilles have been placed in

some of the panels. A balustrade and flagpole appear at the central portion of the facade beneath the third story windows.

Above the tenth story is the dentilled projecting bandcourse on scrolled console brackets. The windows in the outer bays at the twelfth story echo those at the second story. Between the three central windows at the eleventh and twelfth stories are panels with roundels and a panel also surmounts the 12th story windows. Above are festoons supported by lions' heads and roundels, with floral ornament suspended from them.

The annex, which was raised a story in 1905, when it was converted from a stable for the hotel's use, is three stories and constructed in brick with a glazed wooden storefront at the first story and metal detailing. The first story, beneath a sheltering canopy, contains a central double doorway, reached by a shallow stairway with railings, and is symmetrically flanked by paired windows which are decoratively enframed. These have transoms with metal grilles and panels beneath. Side pilasters are adorned by diminutive Indian heads. At the second story is a single projecting bay with a metal canopy, and a large central window with narrow sidelights. At the third story is a three-part window, beneath a metal cornice with brackets and modillions.

Report prepared by Nancy Goeschel,  
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#### Notes

1. Frank Case, Tales of a Wayward Inn, (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1938), p.30. Case was termed a 'boniface' in his New York Times obituary, June 8, 1946, p.21. Apparently a popular term in the 1930s and 40s, it is taken from a character in Farquhar's comedy Beaux Strategem and means a kind-hearted hotel or innkeeper.
2. Wayward Inn, p.47.
3. Mary C. Henderson, The City and the Theater, (Clifton, N.J.: James T. White, 1973), p. 243.
4. Wayward Inn, p.30.
5. Henderson, pp. 209, 215, 234, 283.
6. "Hotel Algonquin" [advertisement] New York Tribune, November 1, 1903.
7. Case (Wayward Inn, p. 25) noted that in its earliest years the hotel "was fortunate in attracting many well-known families from Newport, Bar Harbor and Narragansett, but only for brief stops twice a year."

8. For Case's hotel recipes, see Frank Case, Feeding the Lions: An Algonquin Cookbook, (New York: The Greystone Press, 1942).
9. Case continued to serve alcoholic beverages in the dining rooms. See Wayward Inn, p.170.
10. Quoted in Robert E. Drennan, editor, The Algonquin Wits, (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1968), p. 18.
11. For brief biographies, quotes, and bibliography of Round Table members' writings, see Drennan, passim. Other personalities connected with the Round Table include Edna Ferber, Robert Sherwood, Marc Connelly, Herman Mankiewicz, Irvin S. Cobb, Harpo Marx, Alice Duer Miller, Charles MacCarthur, Frank Crowninshield, Beatrice Kaufman, and Peggy Wood.
12. In 1903, room rates ranged from \$2.00 to \$15.00 per day. Tribune, 1903.

#### FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Algonquin Hotel has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Algonquin Hotel has played host to generations of famous men and women of the literary and theatrical worlds; that it was the meeting place of the legendary 1920s Round Table, a group of important humorists and critics known for their wit and repartee; that its particular cultural character was fostered by its proprietor and owner, Frank Case, known as a generous and convivial host, particularly welcoming to members of the theatrical and literary worlds; that it continues these traditions and is also today a tourist attraction in the theater district; that, designed by architect Goldwin Starrett, one of five brothers prominent in the construction and architectural fields, it is a representative example of a Beaux-Arts inspired style with neo-Renaissance detail popular in the early 20th century; that the hotel enhances and harmonizes with the other buildings on the block; and that its annex is an interesting reminder of the earlier 19th-century history of the area.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Article 25, Chapter 3 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Algonquin Hotel, 59-61 West 44th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1260, Lot 7, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.



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Algonquin Hotel  
59-61 West 44th Street

Architect: Goldwin Starrett  
Built 1902  
Photo: Carl Forster



Algonquin Hotel  
Photo: Carl Forster

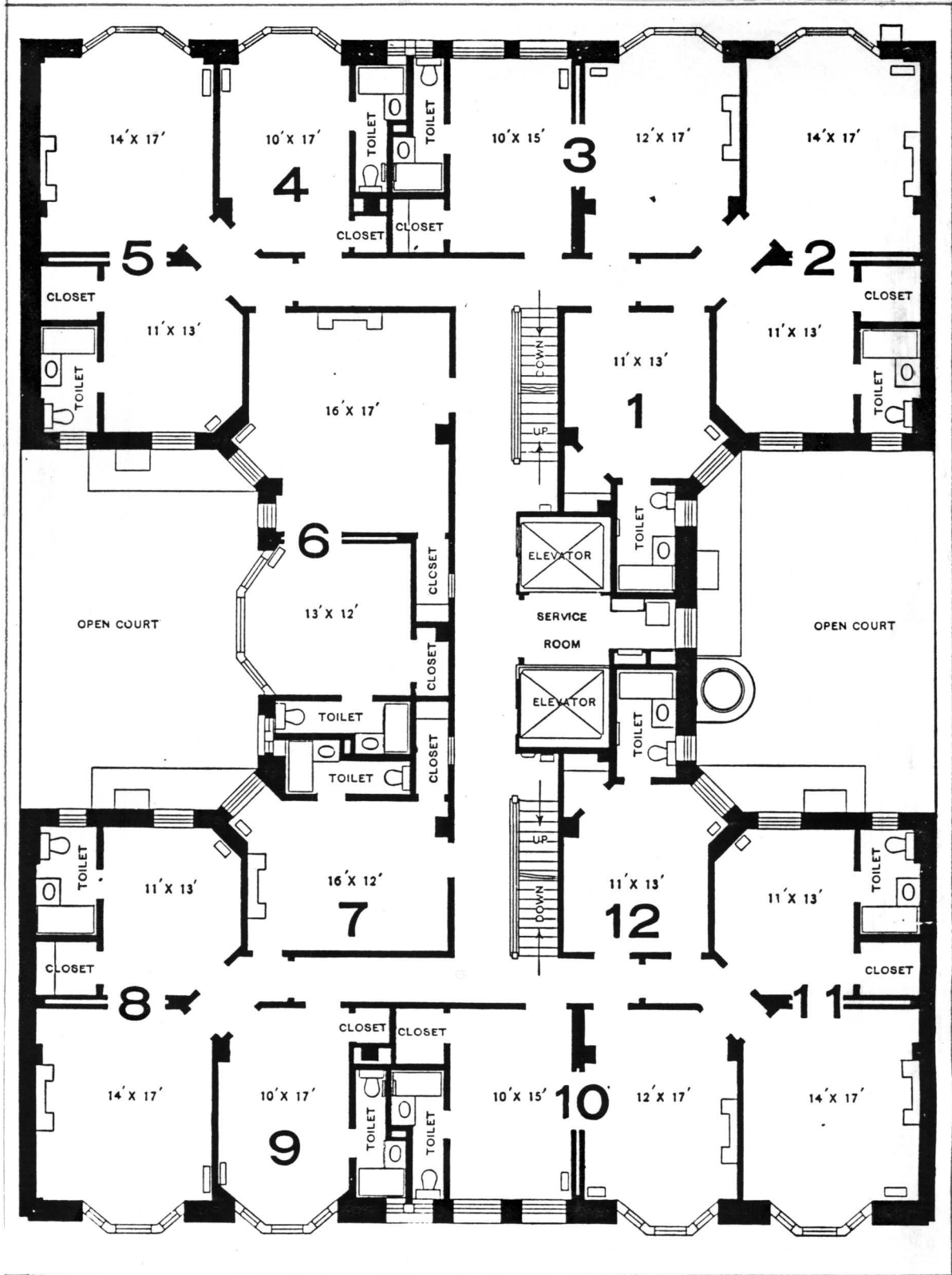
Facade and annex



Algonquin Hotel  
Photo: Carl Forster

Annex





Algonquin Hotel

Plan