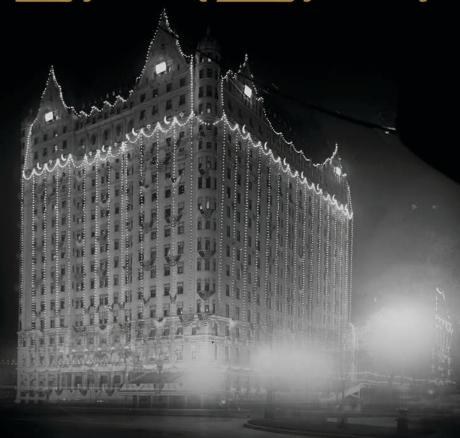
## THE DLAZA



THE SECRET LIFE OF AMERICA'S

MOST FAMOUS HOTEL

JULIE SATOW

# PLAZA

### THE SECRET LIFE OF AMERICA'S MOST FAMOUS HOTEL



## JULIE SATOW



New York Boston

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#### TIMELINE

- **1890:** The first Plaza opens its doors on the site of a former ice-skating pond; it is demolished fifteen years later.
- **1907:** A new, second Plaza, which still stands today, opens and is immediately hailed as New York's most opulent and expensive hotel. Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, the dashing millionaire, becomes the Plaza's inaugural guest, while outside the hotel's entrance, the ubiquitous New York taxicab makes its debut.
- **1909:** Princess Vilma Lwoff-Parlaghy becomes one of a long line of colorful guests to check into the Plaza, bringing with her a private zoo that includes a falcon, a family of alligators, and a pet lion who lives in her bathtub.
- **1920:** Prohibition and the Jazz Age arrive, and the Plaza becomes renowned for private parties, tea dances, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who famously jumps fully clothed into the Pulitzer Fountain.
- **1930:** The Great Depression takes hold, leading to the ruination of the Plaza's mercurial owner, Harry S. Black, who dies soon after from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.
- **1943:** Amid wartime rationing and the draft, Conrad N. Hilton acquires the Plaza. He is met with a chilly reception from its

#### Timeline

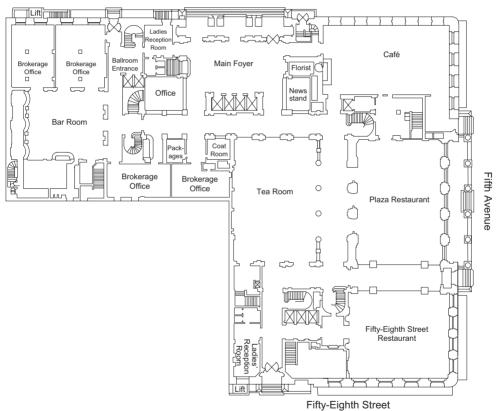
- blue-blood fans, particularly Clara Bell Walsh, the supposed inventor of the cocktail party and the most famous of the hotel's eccentric dowagers.
- 1955: The mischievous six-year-old Eloise becomes the Plaza's most famous resident, flooding the hotel lobby with diminutive devotees desperate for a chance to glimpse the fictional heroine. The Plaza's young fan base grows when, a decade later, the Beatles check in and are greeted by a mob of screaming teenyboppers and a nervous hotel staff.
- **1966:** Truman Capote hosts the Black and White Ball at the Plaza's ballroom, and the likes of Gloria Vanderbilt and Frank Sinatra mingle with the doorman from the author's apartment building.
- **1975:** With New York City facing fiscal ruin and near bankruptcy, Westin Hotels acquires the Plaza. It soon confronts bomb scares, armed robberies, and a sanitation strike that leaves a seven-foothigh pile of garbage next to the hotel's front door.
- **1988:** Donald J. Trump buys the hotel for a record price, using entirely borrowed funds. He installs his wife Ivana as the Plaza's president, promising to pay her \$1 and all the dresses she can buy.
- **1992:** The Plaza, unable to pay down the debt that Trump has saddled on the hotel, files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection for the first time in its history.
- **1995:** The Plaza comes under foreign ownership when Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal and a Singaporean billionaire purchase the hotel from Trump's lenders. A Trump lieutenant spies on the

#### Timeline

- negotiations from a hidden room at the Plaza, but fails to sabotage the deal.
- **2005:** In its biggest transformation ever, the Plaza is carved into multimillion-dollar condominiums, a boutique hotel, and retail stores. Preservationists, politicians, and the powerful New York hotel union stage a vociferous resistance, with New York mayor Michael Bloomberg negotiating a compromise.
- **2008:** The first apartment owners move into the Plaza, with a roster of buyers that includes Hollywood executives, Russian oligarchs, and anonymous shell companies with questionable links as far afield as Kazakhstan and the Pacific islands.
- **2012:** Subrata Roy, a colorful Indian business tycoon, purchases the Plaza Hotel without ever sleeping in one of its rooms. Under investigation, Roy is eventually sentenced to two years in jail in Delhi and is barred from traveling abroad.
- **2017:** The Plaza suffers from the indignities of an absentee owner, while Roy entertains offers for the hotel from a cast of characters of dubious repute. A series of fiascos ensues, replete with lawsuits, a fistfight in the Palm Court, and a journalist who is sent to the same jail where Roy himself was imprisoned.
- **2018:** In a surprise move, Roy's tenure comes to a sudden end when the hospitality arm of the Qatar Investment Authority emerges as a stealth bidder, successfully acquiring the hotel. Longtime Plaza aficionados are optimistic that the new stewards will restore the property to its former glory.

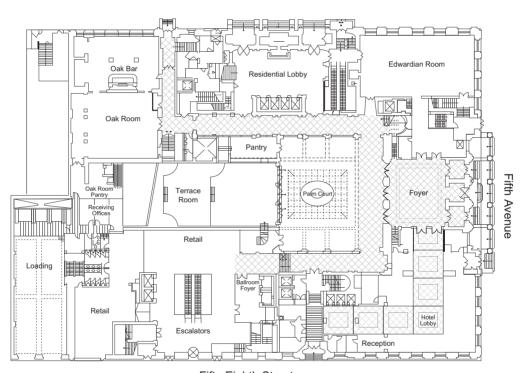
#### The Ground Floor of the Plaza in 1907

#### Fifty-Ninth Street



#### The Ground Floor of the Plaza in 2007

#### Fifty-Ninth Street



Fifty-Eighth Street



BUCOLIC ORIGINS: The site of the Plaza Hotel was once a skating pond, where New York's social elite enjoyed a wintry thrill surrounded by rolling hills and fields. Here is a season pass for the exclusive Fifth Avenue Skating Pond, circa 1863. *Credit: Museum of the City of New York* 

FIRST PLAZA: The first Plaza Hotel was an eight-story structure with a brick-and-brownstone facade, four hundred guest rooms, and a famous painting of a lion by the Massachusetts artist Alexander Pope Jr. It was, for a time, considered one of New York's grandest hotels. Here is how it appeared in 1894. Credit: H.N. Tiemann & Co. / Museum of the City of New York





DEMOLITION: A dozen years after opening, the first Plaza was torn down in the space of just eight weeks. In its place, a new white marble edifice, which still stands today, began rising. Here, workers in 1905 remove the foundation of the original Plaza. Photo by Museum of the City of New York / Byron Collection / Getty Images

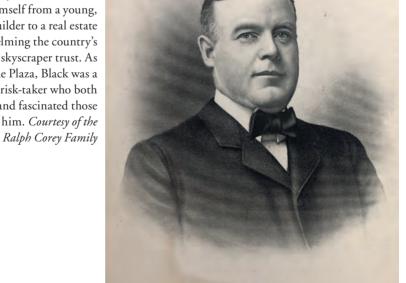


DEBONAIRE BLACK: A rare photo of a young Harry S. Black, the man who spearheaded the building of the current Plaza Hotel. It may have been taken when Black attended the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, where he met George A. Fuller, the inventor of the modern skyscraper and his future father-in-law. Courtesy of Beth Pringle

#### Over the years, Black transformed himself from a young, ambitious builder to a real estate titan, helming the country's

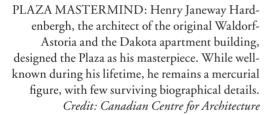
SKYSCRAPER TYCOON:

first-ever skyscraper trust. As owner of the Plaza, Black was a charismatic risk-taker who both confounded and fascinated those who knew him. Courtesy of the





HUMBLE START: Bernhard Beinecke was a German emigre who arrived in New York as a penniless teenager. Starting off pushing a meat cart through the Lower East Side, Beinecke eventually became one of the city's wealthiest butchers. In middle age, he transformed himself once more, turning into a hotelier, eventually partnering with Harry Black to build the Plaza. Here he is, circa 1904. *Credit: Beinecke Family Records. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University* 







WHITE BEACON: The Plaza was designed as a French chateau in skyscraper proportions, with a facade of marble and white terracotta, and a copper mansard roof that reflected the green of nearby Central Park. Here it is in 1920, dominating the skyline. Credit: Byron Company (New York, N.Y.) / Museum of the City of New York



PLAZA ON PARADE: On the Plaza's opening day, October 1, 1907, a stream of New York's wealthiest citizens arrived to check in to the hotel. None was more celebrated than the dashing Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, who remains indelible as the hotel's inaugural guest. Here he is with his first wife, Elsie French, whom he divorced shortly after moving into the Plaza. *Credit: Interim Archives / Archive Photos / Getty Images* 



QUINTESSENTIAL NEW YORK: On the Plaza's opening day, not only was the iconic hotel introduced to New Yorkers, but so was another indispensable city accourtement. Here, the first-ever New York City taxicabs line up along the Fifth Avenue side of the Plaza, awaiting their first passengers. It wasn't long before these taxis displaced horse-drawn hansom cabs as New Yorkers' transportation of choice. Courtesy of the National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library



PLUNGERS: Inside its doors, the Plaza was sumptuously outfitted with lavish furnishings in brocades of rose and green, more than one thousand crystal chandeliers, and elevators featuring glass doors through which the mechanical pistons could be seen. Called "plungers," these elevators were a technological feat, and remained in use well into the 1970s. Here, an image of the lobby as it appeared on opening day 1907. Credit: Byron Company (New York, N.Y.) / Museum of the City of New York



TEA TIME: The tea room, later named the Palm Court, featured a curved ceiling made of colored glass that let in daylight, and oversized palm trees and rubber plants, lending the room a garden-like ambience. It was here that the British actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell scandalized patrician patrons by lighting up a cigarette shortly after the hotel's opening. Credit: Byron Company (New York, N.Y.) / Museum of the City of New York

PENTHOUSE APPEAL: In 1921, Harry S. Black built an extension on the Plaza, and created for himself a sprawling penthouse on the eighteenth floor, replete with Tiffany chandeliers, a walk-in wine vault, and views that stretched across Manhattan. Here are some images of his library and living room, taken between 1923 and 1925. Credit: Beinecke Family Papers. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University









REPEAL: In 1920, the country went dry under Prohibition, and crowds shunned hotels like the Plaza in favor of illegal speakeasies. In 1933, when the dry laws were finally repealed, the Plaza celebrated by turning a shuttered corner of the hotel into the Persian Room, a swank nightclub that boasted a twenty-seven-foot bar and Persian murals by the painter Lillian Gaertner Palmedo, pictured here. *Credit: Bettmann/Getty Images* 

CAFE SOCIETY: In the 1940s, as World War II raged and the Plaza was inundated with soldiers, Hildegarde often held court at the Persian Room. A beautiful chanteuse, Hildegarde was famous for singing for her many military fans, kissing them on the cheeks or bald spots between tunes. Here she is in 1946. Photo by Eileen Darby / The LIFE Images Collection / Getty Images





COWBOY CONNIE: In 1947, Conrad Hilton became the hotel's second owner, and Plaza blue bloods immediately marked him as an uncouth Westerner who would upend their beloved institution. Despite being treated with disdain, Hilton lavished millions of dollars on the aging hotel, eventually quelling his critics' fears and earning their begrudging respect. Photo by Yale Joel / The LIFE Picture Collection / Getty Images



DOWAGER DOYENNES: The Plaza was known for many years as home to a number of rich, eccentric residents, collectively known as the Thirty-Nine Widows of the Plaza. They could often be found congregating in the hotel lobby, taking up positions on a favorite chaise lounge or settee, where they would while away the hours listening to the harpsichord wafting from the Palm Court or lobbing a string of complaints at the hotel staff. *Photo by Jerry Cooke / Pix Inc. / The LIFE Images Collection / Getty Images* 

ROYAL ECCENTRIC: Princess Lwoff-Parlaghy was one of the most famous Thirty-Nine Widows of the Plaza. Of murky royal lineage, she was a portrait painter and an animal lover, causing quite a scene when she arrived at the Plaza with owls, alligators, and eventually, a pet lion who lived in her bathtub. Here she is in New Broadway Magazine in 1908, in an article titled "Prominent People in Picture and Paragraph." Credit: General Research Division, The New York Public Library





FANCY PANTS: Kay Thompson was a singer and dancer who performed regularly at the Persian Room. She was the main focal point of the act, with the four Williams Brothers in dark matching suits moving in choreographed unison behind her. The fact that Thompson was the star, superseding the men, was notable, as were her trademark pants and her tiny, twenty-three-inch waist. Here she performs with her act in 1951. Andy Williams is second from right. *Credit: Photofest* 



SKIPPERDEE: While Kay Thompson was a notable performer, it was in book publishing that she achieved true fame. Joining with a young illustrator, Hilary Knight, the pair published Kay Thompson's Eloise: A Book for Precocious Grown Ups in 1955. It was an immediate blockbuster, and the Plaza, grateful for the publicity, gave Thompson a free suite, where she lived, off and on, for years. Here, Thompson hams it up with a young actress playing her diminutive alter ego. Credit: CBS Photo Archive / CBS / Getty Images



BEATLEMANIA: In 1964, four mop-haired musicians from Liverpool descended on New York, and mass frenzy gripped the city. The Beatles stayed at the Plaza for their first New York visit, and the staid hotel was inundated for days by hordes of hysterical teenyboppers. Here, fans run in front of the Plaza to meet the arriving musicians. Credit: NY Daily News Archive / New York Daily News / Getty Images



MCCARTNEY MOMENT: While countless young fans tried to sneak up the Plaza's back staircase into the Beatles' twelfth-floor suite, Gregg Salomone, whose father managed the hotel, strolled through the front door of the musician's rooms. Here, a six-year-old Gregg stands with Ringo, Paul, and George, as well as his sister Lourdes and her friend Bunny Castalano. Gregg's hand is hovering over his crotch because moments earlier, Paul had pointed out that his fly was open. *Courtesy of Gregg Salomone* 



ODD COUPLE: In 1966, Truman Capote was reveling in the runaway success of his true-life crime thriller *In Cold Blood*. To celebrate, he decided to throw himself the "party of the century" in the Plaza's Grand Ballroom. Realizing it was uncouth to have the fete in his own honor, he picked Katharine Graham, the publisher of the *Washington Post*, to be the honoree. Here, the diminutive author arrives with his date. *Credit: Bettmann | Getty Images* 

CULTURE WARS: By 1969, the Vietnam War, civil rights, and women's equality were dominating the headlines. The Plaza's old-fashioned Oak Room, an all-male bastion that prohibited female diners, soon came under fire from the National Organization for Women. Here, feminists, including Betty Friedan, picket the hotel before entering the restaurant hoping to be served. Credit: New York Daily News Archive | Getty Images





CITY ON THE BRINK: In the 1970s, New York City was plagued by drugs, a soaring crime rate, and the possibility of bankruptcy. During two days in July 1977, a citywide electricity blackout struck and the city's residents were plunged into mayhem, with looting and arson across many neighborhoods. Here, guests at the Plaza's Palm Court are forced to dine by candlelight. *Credit: AP Photo/Calvin C. Cook* 

OOZING STENCH: Throughout the 1970s, sanitation workers went on multiple strikes, including one in 1975 that resulted in the Plaza's basement being filled to capacity with rotting garbage. Finally, with no room left inside the building, the hotel began dumping its waste outside, creating enormous garbage piles on the sidewalk beside its Fifty-Eighth Street entrance. Credit:

J. Michael Dombroski/Newsday





REBRANDING: Faced with the challenges of the 1970s, the Plaza tried to shed its reputation as an old-age home for rich ladies and to refashion itself as a destination for the hip crowd. Here, an advertising insert in the Sunday *New York Times* features psychedelic swirls, pop star acts like Dusty Springfield, and a new, democratic tagline, "The Plaza is something for everybody." *Credit: New York Historical Society* 



GO-GO EIGHTIES: With the advent of the 1980s came shoulder pads, hairspray, and Donald Trump. At the peak of the decade of excess, the real estate magnate paid a historic sum to acquire the Plaza, a hotel he had long coveted. Trump had a direct view of the hotel from his office on the twenty-sixth floor of Trump Tower, and would often stare at the building, which he dubbed "the Mona Lisa," as he mapped out a strategy to acquire it. *Photo by Joe McNally / Hulton Archive / Getty Images* 



PRESIDENTIAL FIRST: As soon as he acquired the Plaza, Trump appointed his wife Ivana as the hotel's president—the first and only time a woman has held the position. In a press conference announcing her new job, Trump famously quipped he that would pay her "\$1 and all the dresses she can buy." Credit: Norman Parkinson / Iconic Images / Premium Archive / Getty Images



GROUND ZERO GAFFE: After Trump bankrupted the Plaza, the Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal and his billionaire partner, Singaporean Kwek Leng Beng, swooped in to purchase the hotel. On October 11, 2001, the one-month anniversary of the World Trade Center attack, Alwaleed visited Ground Zero to hand then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani a \$10 million check to help with the rebuilding efforts, seen here. Hours later, comments made by the Saudi owner of the Plaza drew immediate censure, prompting Giuliani to return the money. *Credit: AP Photo / Stan Honda, pool* 



HAND-OFF: By 2004, the owners of the Plaza were ready to sell. An ambitious Israeli-born condominium developer, Miki Naftali, flew to Singapore and convinced Kwek Leng Beng to sell him the historic property. Here, at the closing ceremony celebrating the sale, Naftali stands next to his boss, Isaac Tshuva, as well as Kwek Leng Beng and his son Sherman (R-L). The men hold a check representing the Plaza's price tag, and this time, unlike with Prince Alwaleed and Mayor Giuliani, no one returned the money. *Credit: Steve Friedman* 



PLAZA PROTESTS: In 2005, the Plaza was set to close for a multi-year renovation that would transform the hotel into exclusive condominiums for the very wealthy, as well as a small boutique hotel. The labor union that represented hundreds of middle-class doormen, bellmen, and housekeepers who stood to lose their jobs, decided to fight back. Here, workers begin gathering for one of many protests they held in front of the hotel. *Courtesy of the New York Hotel Trades Council* 

HOTEL ACCORD: In the end, after months of difficult negotiations, the hotel workers and the Plaza ownership struck a deal. Negotiated with the help of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, seen here celebrating with workers, the Plaza agreed to retain 282 hotel rooms and 350 hotel jobs. *Credit: AP Photo / Kathy Willens* 





BIRTHDAY PARTY: The Plaza's centennial was in October 2007, and even though the building was still closed for renovations, the owners celebrated with lavish abandon. The party included a twelve-foot cake replica of the hotel, an original song performance by Paul Anka, and what may have been the largest-ever pyrotechnic display attempted from atop a building. *Credit: Konrad Tho Fiedler / New York Sun* 



OSTENTATIOUS OWNER: In 2012, a new hotelier took over the Plaza. Subrata Roy was a colorful Indian tycoon who claimed to employ more workers than any other company in India, save for the Indian railroad. A regular on the celebrity circuit, Roy was known for partying with Bollywood stars, cricketers, and politicians, and for grand displays. Here, thousands of his employees stand in nearly 100-degree heat to break the Guinness World Record for the greatest number of people singing the national anthem. *Credit: Bloomberg / Getty Images* 



SCANDAL: Just a month after Roy acquired the Plaza, the Indian Supreme Court ordered him to repay \$3 billion plus interest to nearly thirty million poor Indians who had bought his company's bonds. Here, as Roy made his way to the country's Supreme Court in New Delhi, he was attacked by a critic who splattered him with black ink and called him a thief. *Credit: AP Photo* 

#### **NOTES**

Note on Dollar Figures: Historic dollar figures that have been converted into today's values are based on a purchasing power calculator that can be found at http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/.

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#### Chapter 15: The Indian Great Gatsby

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