

# **THE RITZ REMIXED**

## **The Rebirth of The Ritz Helps Atlantic City Reenergize**

By Lauren Avellino Turton

Back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, famous Swiss hotelier, Caesar Ritz, had an ingenious idea. A hotel for the world's elite, the crème de la crème. The Ritz-Carlton brand was born. In 1898, the famously coined "king of hoteliers, and hotelier to kings" opened the Hotel Ritz in Paris. What became "The Ritz Philosophy" became reality there. It encompassed carefully refined architecture, superior satisfaction for each and every guest, impeccable accommodations and gourmet cuisine. It was a private club for the extremely wealthy. Guests were checked regularly to see whether they were listed in The Social Register or Who's Who.

This concept of the European luxury hotel didn't take long to cross the pond. Consequently, several Ritz-Carltons were erected in the most prime U.S. locations of the time, including New York City on Madison Avenue, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boca Raton and Atlantic City.

On June 24, 1921, at Iowa Avenue and the Boardwalk, the doors of The Ritz-Carlton Atlantic City, officially opened with a grand gala. It was one of the most elite hotels in America at that time.

"President Calvin Coolidge was on hand for the celebration. He wasn't the only Commander-in-Chief to visit. Presidents Warren G. Harding and Herbert Hoover were known to stay there," says Matthew Kadlubowski, the Vice President of The Ritz Condominiums.

The Ritz-Carlton also played host to the debonair New York Mayor Jimmy Walker as well as seashore lover, Sophie Tucker, who dominated entertainment with her singing and comedy during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Created by prominent New York architectural firm Warren and Whitmore, the \$6 million dollar property was a marvel of modern hotel design. Even the heaviest-hitting guests were in awe of the magnificence of the lobby and popularity of The Merry-Go-Round Bar, which was actually a bar crafted like a carousel. Guests could walk right up from the beach in their flip flops and swimsuits.

"The Merry-Go-Round Bar was THE place to be seen. All of the best entertainment acts would take the stage. The mob bosses all congregated there. It had a great reputation," comments Kadlubowski.

It was the Roaring 20s in Atlantic City. The Ritz-Carlton was party central and the mafia wanted a piece of the action. Enoch "Nucky" Johnson, a big shot in South Jersey Republican politics back then, called the hotel home. During Prohibition, "Nucky" virtually owned Atlantic City, in terms of rum-running, numbers rackets and prostitution. As Atlantic County Treasurer, he had the city so under control he organized the first-ever national convention for the mob in 1929. "Nucky" hosted lavish parties at his 7<sup>th</sup> story suite and set up the likes of Al Capone and Lucky Luciano in suites there.

Then times began to change. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. Army was in dire need of a military base. The War Department acquired 45 hotels, including The Ritz-Carlton, and in the summer of 1942, the seaside resort was transformed into a basic training and medical care center. Convention Hall, the largest structure of its kind at the time, served as the headquarters for the Army's Basic Training Center No. 7. The transformation of Atlantic City's hotels and boardwalk during WWII became known as "Camp Boardwalk."

With the 1950s came throngs of inexpensive motels for the budget-conscious. Kadlubowski recalls, "Motor lodges got a lot more business instead of grand hotels. At the same time, the growing air travel industry lured high-rollers to faraway destinations. Atlantic City had lost its luster."

In 1958, hotel tycoon Sheraton purchased The Ritz-Carlton for almost \$2 million less than its initial \$6 million value. A few years later, it was converted into an apartment building.

The exclusive popularity and prestige was waning, but that did not stop The Ritz-Carlton Atlantic City from becoming a part of civil rights history. The first ever Miss Black America Pageant was held there in 1968, on the same weekend as the traditional pageant. Sponsored by the NAACP, it was a show of protest against the non-diversified Miss America Pageant. The following year, the Miss Black America pageant moved to The Big Apple.

It was not until after the turn of the Century that the resurgence of The Ritz-Carlton Atlantic City began to slowly but surely unfold. After many twists and turns, Board members signed off on an agreement to transform the building into The Ritz Condominiums. Matthew Kadlubowski, along with President Larry DeRose, have since vowed to help with the Ritz rebirth.

"After 2000, Atlantic City began to see a rebirth with more young professionals and less senior citizens. More clubs began popping up. The younger generation bought properties here as investments. A multi-million dollar restoration

campaign was launched. We are bringing back an era that has been long gone,” Kadlubowski says.

“The new goal looks to restore the property to its original grandeur while adding and updating luxury amenities for residents and guests.”

Nestled inside the walls of The Ritz Condominiums are 333 suites and town homes that offer waterfront views. More than 500 residents live in the pet-friendly building, which is only one of two such buildings in Atlantic City. Residents and guests enjoy 24-hour security, a valet, library, ballroom, fitness center with locker rooms and an entertainment complex complete with pool tables, flat screen televisions and wireless internet service.

The Ritz Condominiums will this summer unveil a brand new \$3 million state-of-the-art pool house. The 5,800 square foot facility is being built by T.N. Ward, who also built the new Pool at Harrah’s. It features an air conditioned pool area indoors and outdoor decks with breathtaking ocean views. Added to that, the lobby staircase that greets residents and guests has been resorted to its original grandeur.

The Ritz restoration will also include a complete facelift of the Boardwalk façade thanks to the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority. CRDA has committed \$99 million over 3 years to the Façade Project.

Thomas Meehan III, director of development for CRDA, reassures the project will breathe new life into the Boardwalk, Atlantic City’s most famous icon.

“\$50 million will be spent on the casino fronts. \$48.5 million will go to non-casino facades, the retail space and open space as well. CRDA has hired Lammey and Giorgio Architects of Haddon Township to come up with the concepts for new signage and exterior enhancements to the old historic building.”

Meehan adds that CRDA has hired an historical consulting architect, Michael Calafati, to design concepts that will modernize the buildings, yet entice feelings of Atlantic City’s yesteryear. The Ritz Condominiums are included in the plan.

“As part of the \$48.5 million Façade Project, The Ritz, in particular, will see improvements along the first floor shops where the public traverses.”

Matthew Kadlubowski couldn’t be more pleased. “The CRDA will get rid of the concrete jungle that now greets guests. They’ll put in trees and plants. To help foster the exterior upgrades, The Ritz has organized yearly group clean-ups. Residents come together for an afternoon to spruce up the sidewalks surrounding the building. I’ve seen the ugly, the good and the best and this city is improving each year. Private owners are restoring. It’s time to put the energy back into the city.”

