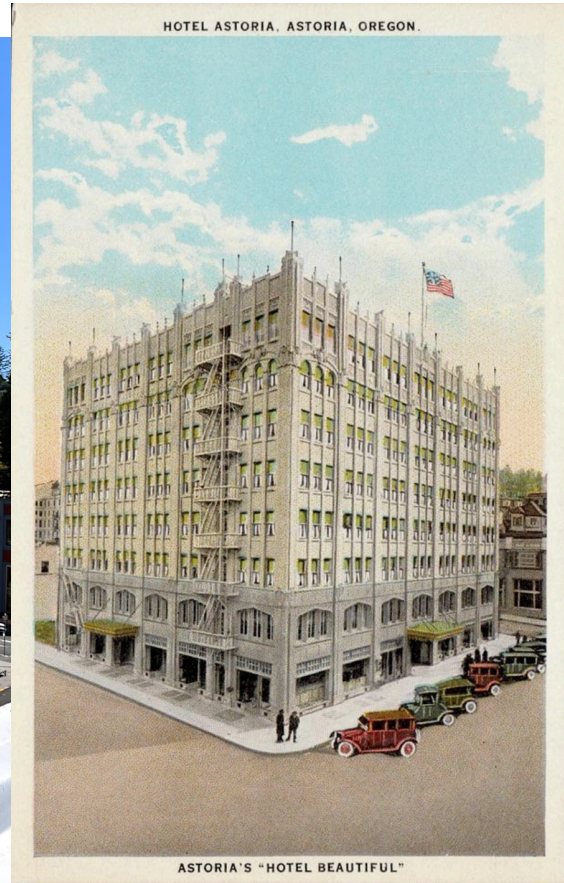


Out of the ashes: An eight-story wonder By Jaime Lump For The Astorian Dec 22, 2023



In its earliest days, the vision for Astoria was the ‘New York of the West Coast’ - it was new and it was a frontier where possibilities felt endless. Newcomers took root, big fish established natural resource industries that attracted people from all over the world to find prosperity in the coastal region, buildings and houses erupted along the hillside and spread out over the tideflats. Although it was never really possible for Astoria to fill the big shoes of New York City, early Astorians rarely let anything get in the way of their dreams.

In 1898, Astoria connected to Portland by rail, then in 1916, the Columbia River Highway officially opened and automobile traffic could make traveling between the cities a whole lot easier. Across the state, hostleries sprang up along the new highways and Astoria certainly wasn't going to be left behind in the trend. Although the five story 1910 Weinhard-Astoria Hotel, located at 12th and Duane streets, already served first-class visitors, Astoria's Chamber of Commerce dreamed bigger than that - believing that a grander, fancier hotel would bring more people and more money.

In September 1921, the Chamber announced that a new nine or possibly eleven story hotel would be built in the heart of downtown. For the ambitious plan to be completed, a considerable amount of participation and investment was needed prompting several eager businessmen to organize into teams competing to collect financial subscriptions from the community to raise \$250,000. Full page advertisement spaces in the newspaper extolled the advantages of buying stock in the project. At the same time, however, opposing ads issued words of caution, accusing the campaign of hot air and arguing a more sound investment could be made in expanding accommodations at the Weinhard-Astoria Hotel over needlessly building something brand new.

Dueling opinions aside, the campaign prevailed, only requiring seven days to surpass the financial goal by thousands of dollars, and in the very 1920s Astoria style, celebration ensued: “Horns popped into sight from mysterious sources and were soon tooting victorious refrains to the world, augmented by the beating of drums and blare of bugles. A parade was formed in which the 160 business men composing the various teams fell into line and headed by captain A. Brown’s goat getters marched through the business district, the men singing songs and giving yells that would have shamed a college yell leader. At the intersection of 12th and Commercial streets, the hotel campaigners milled about their leaders and for nearly a quarter of an hour blocked traffic while they continued to sing and yell at the tops of their voices.” Astoria Evening Budget May 16, 1922

With the money secured, the project began to become a reality and the newly incorporated Columbia Hotel Company awarded Portland architects Tourtellotte & Hummel, along with resident architect Charles T. Diamond the contract to draw up plans for the eight-story, 100 room, fireproof hotel.

On the night of the big fire, fate once again played more favorably for the new hotel. The only work completed on the structure was its recently poured foundation at Commercial and 14th streets, so hardly anything was lost. Determination remained undefeated and amid the momentum to rebuild, the hotel project was newly fueled by the need to replace the recently destroyed Weinhard-Astoria Hotel. Plans for the new hotel changed only ever-so-slightly with an



adjustment to the building’s footprint aligning with the newly widened streets as well as the addition of 50 more rooms. Its height and concept remained the same, crowned with the achievement of tallest building in Oregon outside of Portland. The newly named Hotel Astoria celebrated its grand opening on New Years Eve 1923.

Although the Hotel Astoria was widely admired for its elegance and modernity and went on to become a rather popular venue for gatherings and conventions, it couldn’t seem to secure mercantile

tenants in its street-level storefronts creating the much needed revenue to repay all the stock that had been acquired to build it. After only three years in operation, the hotel was finally feeling the full weight of a big city building in a little city that was beginning to bust at its financial seams. The hotel foreclosed January of 1928, initiating a decades long series of failed attempts to meet the hopes and expectations the hotel initially set out to do.

During the Great Depression, the hotel saw multiple title transfers and tax delinquencies, yet business continued to limp along. It wasn't until the World War II years, that its ever-degrading condition became apparent. In 1942, transient naval officers stationed in the area seeking housing found the hotel 'immoral and unclean' deeming it 'out-of-bounds' and having its license to operate pulled by Astoria City Council. Owners put in just enough renovation effort to reopen but it wasn't until the 1950s that Hotel Astoria would see a major change when new owners decided it was time to give the hotel a fresh start with a new name, John Jacob Astor Hotel, and a new identity.

In the summer of 1954, workers used 700 gallons of industrial spray paint - enough to cover 37,500 square feet of wall area, or 80 houses - to refresh all eight stories of the John Jacob Astor Hotel's outside walls. Owners chose the color pink, or more specifically, 'desert rose.' Why such an evocative color remains a mystery, but the 1950s marked a transformative time for pink. The year 1953 presented two legendary pink dresses, First Lady Mamie Eisenhower's Presidential Inauguration gown as well as Marilyn Monroe's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* dress. Pink also represented a popular color for Ford, Chrysler, and Cadillac cars, remembered best in the Elvis song, "Baby, Let's Play House."



John Jacob Astor Hotel's pink days are remembered less fondly than other rose-hued icons. The pattern of neglect and financial woes continued, eventually sublimating to abandonment and

permanent closure in 1968. In subsequent years, as the building deteriorated, it rapidly became a public hazard - constant trespassing and dangerous behavior led the police to stop responding to calls associated with the site and on one occasion a chunk of concrete fell from the building onto the sidewalk nearly missing a passerby. The 'pink elephant' faced multiple demolition threats, yet every ballot measure to complete the task ended up defeated by the voters.

The eventual road to recovery was prompted by placement on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979 making it eligible for special tax assessment considerations, provided the owners meet certain criteria. The building's most substantial and meaningful transformation finally took place in the mid-1980s when it was converted into 66 low rent elderly living spaces known as the John Jacob Astor Apartments and was repainted white. Since then, a preservation easement protects the building from falling again from grace and the residential structure continues to serve Astorians with high-rise living.

One hundred years ago, local people gathered to marvel at the sight of the new Hotel Astoria, an eight story wonder that ignited a sense of hope to a revived city. Modern visitors are struck by curiosity over what seems like a massive edifice in the heart of the small downtown. While it never grew to the size of New York City, today Astoria is a vibrant port city that continues to attract thousands of people from all over the world to its bustling historic commercial district.

Photos:

The Astor Building Apartments (Lower Columbia Preservation Society August 2023)
Hotel Astoria postcard (Lower Columbia Preservation Society)
Hotel Astoria 1920s Oregon Historical Society
John Jacob Astor Hotel 1974 (Sara's Old Photos)