

The Stevens Hotel

...The World's Largest Hotel...And Its Scandalous History

Hilton Chicago has the reputation for hosting every President of the United States as a guest from the time the Stevens Hotel opened in 1927. There is a fascinating early hotel history from 1927 with the Stevens family of Chicago who built the immense hotel only to lose it in bankruptcy with the Great Depression. The Stevens was the largest hotel in the world when it opened its doors to guests. Six years later, Ernest Stevens was on trial for embezzlement, his brother committed suicide after the family's insurance business went bankrupt and the U.S. Army purchased the Stevens Hotel in World War II to house soldiers. In 1945, the property was acquired by Conrad Hilton and the immense hotel property has carried the Hilton name for more than sixty years.

The Stevens Hotel opened in 1927 on South Michigan Avenue across from Grant Park in Chicago. Within six years of its grand opening, the Stevens family name was rocked by embezzlement scandals and suicide that brought down their Chicago family business empire. The 28-story hotel had 3,000 rooms, fine shops, cavernous ballrooms and even mini-golf on the roof. The landmark Chicago hotel was built by the Stevens family who had built their family wealth with the Illinois Life Insurance Company. J.W. Stevens had already built and owned La Salle Hotel that opened in 1909 with 1,000 rooms as one of Chicago's finest hotels in the loop. La Salle Hotel was demolished in July 1976. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens was the son of Ernest Stevens, the hotelier who was tried and convicted of embezzling millions from the family's insurance company to financially prop up their family-owned Chicago hotels. Ernest Stevens' conviction was later overturned on appeal, however, the family was bankrupted and two of Chicago's finest hotels went into receivership.

Hilton Chicago is currently the third largest hotel in Chicago by rooms (1,544 rooms), behind The Palmer House Hilton (1,639 rooms) and Hyatt Regency Chicago (2,018 rooms). Conrad Hilton purchased both Stevens Hotel and The Palmer House properties in 1945.

The hotel was at risk of being demolished in the 1970s. Hilton Hotels closed the hotel for more than a year in 1984 for the most expensive renovation to that date in hotel history at \$185 million. The size of many rooms doubled and reduced the total hotel rooms from 3,000 to 1,544.

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