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Louisville's Seelbach Hotel holds historical legacy

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (WDRB) - Hotels are popping up all over downtown Louisville.

Crews at the Hilton Garden Inn are finishing up work, and the Embassy Suites on Fourth Street will soon have its doors open too.

In an era of new hotels, there are still a lot of guests choosing the older overnight stays at places like the Seelbach.

It was built in 1903 by the Seelbach brothers.

"They had two grand openings on May 1, 1905," said hotel historian Larry Johnson.

The hope was to channel the class and look of hotels in Europe, through the grand staircase in the lobby, and the Rathskeller in the basement.

"It's a building that was built before it's time," Johnson said.

The plan worked and it became very clear, very quickly that this was the type of popular, swanky place that would entertain VIPs, during the Kentucky Derby and any other times Louisville was on the itinerary. It turns out "Very Important People" weren't the only ones who had heard about the Seelbach.

"There were even stories that Al Capone visited the hotel on several occasions," said Johnson.

One of America's most notorious gangsters is said to have frequented the Oak Room and the Rathskeller. Also at the hotel in those days was F. Scott Fitzgerald. The author used Capone, other people he saw and the hotel to write the popular book turned movie "The Great Gatsby." That is, until he had too much of the drink and was kicked out.

Baz Luhrmann, director of the 2013 adaptation of "Gatsby," which starred Leonardo DiCaprio, made a trip to the hotel before filming to get inspired just like Fitzgerald. "They called me and I came in and showed him around the hotel," Johnson said.

"The Insider," a movie about the tobacco business starring Al Pacino and Russell Crowe also featured the hotel.

Johnson said, "You couldn't find a better place to shoot a movie."

In addition to all those movies made featuring the hotel, there have been a lot of celebrities and politicians who have called the Seelbach home for a couple of nights.

Celebrities including Tony Bennett, Neil Diamond, Elvis Presley, Will Smith, and the late

Robin Williams have had their names on the hotel's guest registry. Some U.S. Presidents, including George Bush, Harry Truman and Bill Clinton have also been guests at the hotel.

"Anybody that was anybody. It's just fantastic," Johnson said.

The hotel has been bought and sold a few times over the years. The hotel is currently owned by Hilton Hotels and Resorts.

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