

THE HOTEL STERLING

CROWN JEWEL OF THE CITY

WHEN?
1898-2013

WHERE?
Wilkes-Barre, PA.



EVENT
The Hotel Sterling was the social center of the city

VOCABULARY
opulence Pulaski

The best food, the best ambiance, the best musical entertainment playing the popular tunes of the day, the best rooms, simply the best—that was the glowing reputation of Wilkes-Barre’s Hotel Sterling. The seven-story hotel opened for business on Monday, August 15, 1898 on the corner of East Market and North River Streets (Citizens’ Voice). Close to Public Square, it had 200 rooms, though only 125 bathrooms, starting at \$1.50 up to \$3.00 for the night (Times Leader). Rooms on the west side overlooked the mighty Susquehanna River. Shoes could be shined, and haircuts for men in the beginning. When the bobbed hair style became popular, hotel built a beauty shop for women to keep pace with the times.



Whatever the occasion—weddings, banquets, lavish dinners for hundreds or a quiet dinner for two, conventions—the Hotel Sterling was the social center. Named for Walter Sterling a local businessman and investor, it was designed by local architect John Henry Willis Hawkins an 1877 Cornell graduate (Times Leader). His first original Victorian style design was rejected in favor of a more up-to-date inspiration drawn in the Renaissance style. Its interior large, open spaces with towering columns in the lobby, paintings, sculptures, and elegant staircases welcomed visitors from around the world.

Around the turn of the twentieth century Wilkes-Barre’s population was surging—up to 51,000 by 1891 eventually reaching 86,000 by 1930 (Times Leader). The anthracite industry was booming, as were industrial giants Hazard Wire Rope and the Vulcan Iron Works. Transportation and communication networks grew to meet the changing needs of the population. Kirby and Woolworth opened their 5-and-10 cent store in Wilkes-Barre—the first of a national chain.

The first telephone had arrived in the city, General Hospital had opened—in fact, there were six other hospitals—six steam and two electric railroads, eleven newspapers, and four 18-hole golf courses. A trolley service took passengers throughout the city, north to Pittston and transported visitors to Harvey’s Lake. Trains were humming through the valley bringing businessmen, entertainers, and visitors to the area particularly the downtown. The Sterling, while the most upscale hotel of the time, was not alone. Other major hotels such as Wilkes-



Barre's tallest, The Redington, and Hotel Hart—named after mayor Daniel Hart—also welcomed guests as did the Plaza located next door to the Sterling.



The construction of Sterling on the corner site meant the demolition of the popular Music Hall. That entertainment venue seated 2400 people who enjoyed vaudeville shows, speakers like the celebrated Mark Twain (who enjoyed staying at the nearby Wyoming Valley Hotel on North River Street), and appearances by the Buffalo Bill show featuring sharpshooter Annie Oakley. That all gave way to make room for the new Sterling.

By 1920, the hotel had been taken over by entrepreneur Homer R. Mallow (Citizens' Voice). The interior was updated, and the banquet room—General Sullivan room—could seat 250-300 people (PBS). On the second floor was the Crystal Ballroom where the mirrored pillars made it seem even larger than it was. It had its own kitchen on that floor. There were several parties a day held there (PBS). The third floor also had a banquet hall that could seat 400-500 people.

Civic organizations such as the Kiwanis, Rotary International, and many other groups came to enjoy the outstanding food and atmosphere. Racers and those who watched the race at the Giant's Despair raved about the accommodations. Celebrities like Danny Thomas, singer Jerry Vale, jazz trumpeter Louie Armstrong stopped, along with Senator John F. Kennedy who visited while running for president in 1960 (PBS).



The musical shows now featured local bands, those from out of town as well as the Sterling's own house band all broadcast on WBAX (Citizen's Voice). The food was always top shelf prepared for the various groups and functions by up to 20 chefs. The smorgasbord or buffet had anywhere from 65-100 selections which made it a very popular attraction.

Later in the 1920s, Mallow purchased the neighboring Plaza hotel and connected it to the Sterling with a 14 story tower to accommodate an increasing number of guests. The hallway between the Sterling lobby to the tower elevators was known as "Peacock Alley" so-called because guests show their finest fashions among the sculptures and paintings "giving a big-city feel" (Times Leader). Men in tuxedos and women in gowns graced the dance floor during the Pulaski Ball. The oriental rugs, antique furniture, and crystal chandelier in "alley" added to the upscale décor.



All of the opulence began to fade as the country plunged into the economic crash of 1929 and the depression of the 1930s. By 1936, the city hotel faced bankruptcy. That's when former state senator Andrew Sordoni took on the challenges that the hotel faced. While the hotel adapted to the societal changes of the depression, the economy no longer supported all of the industry that had powered the strong surge of building in the 1920s. Those industries were on the decline, as was the population. Other once prominent hotels fell to the wrecking ball though the Sterling would hang on for a few more decades. From becoming dorm rooms for King's College for a few years,

to developer promises of condominiums, ideas to repurpose the building became fewer and at last it was slated for demolition in July 2013.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Sterling Citizen's Voice](#)

[Sterling Times Leader](#)

[Sterling PBS](#)