

The Doorknob Collector

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Louis Sullivan and the St. Nicholas Hotel, St. Louis, MO

By Patty Ramey

“The first “skyscraper” in St. Louis was built in the early 1850’s. The maximum height for downtown buildings in St. Louis was about eight stories until 1890, when a wave of tall building construction began, made possible by widespread use of elevators and development of steel construction. The first steel frame structure in St. Louis was the famous Wainwright building designed by Louis Sullivan in 1891.”

Architecture Early Skyscraper <http://www.builtstlouis.net/opos/victoriabuilding.html>



Several years later, another steel building (and the subject of this article) was conceived for St. Louis by Adler & Sullivan. The design phase for this newest Sullivan edifice began in 1893 and was completed in late 1894. The new building was to be a first class hotel named the St. Nicholas Hotel. It would survive in its original conception a scant seven years.

The 1890’s was a time when the more elite hotels provided Gentlemen and Ladies Restaurants, smoking and waiting rooms and elaborate parlor and ballrooms. The St. Nicholas Hotel had one of each. It boasted a telephone in every room with many rooms having adjoining private hot and cold water baths. The hotel was situated in the heart of St. Louis at 407 North Eighth Street and was considered quite glamorous when it opened its doors in early 1895. The top floor – underneath the sloped roof – was devoted to one long banquet hall.

During its short life, the St. Nicholas was host to the National American Institute of Architects convention in 1895 and was known for its excellent meals and accommodations. It became a rendezvous for actors and politicians and was also “the scene for many coming-out parties”.

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Inside		
St. Nicholas..... 1	From the Archives 5	Doorknob Exchange 6
The Crow Knob 4	From Back Issues..... 5	

The original structure was 8 stories tall with a central dramatic arched entrance, regularly spaced oriels (bay window areas), terra cotta faced balconies, a gabled roof and conspicuously designed chimneys. Sadly, the St. Nicholas was severely damaged by fire at the turn of the century (various dated from 1901 to 1903). The hotel was sold and the new owners began extensive remodeling (both



internally and externally) to convert the hotel into an office building. The exterior changes included new floors at the top, and significant changes to both the entrance and the roofline. This rebuilding did not meet universal approval. The new owners approached one St. Louis architectural firm, which "refused the job because of [their] high regard for the original design." Another firm, Eames and Young, was retained for the remodeling, which – in effect – involved sticking a square story addition on top in place of the sloped roof. The new structure was renamed the Victoria Building and it remained until the mid 1970's.

To the architectural world, the renovations severely compromised the integrity of the Sullivan design and the building quickly lost status as an important ex-

ample of Sullivan architecture. Sullivan's biographer, Hugh Morrison, commented in 1935 on the remodeling that "although 'Sullivan-esque' ornament was employed, the present appearance with four severely plain stories above the oriels and a flat box-roof is curiously mixed, like a gentleman in full dress wearing a battered felt hat." In the course of the remodeling, the hardware was apparently scrapped. Like so many other Sullivan creations, the building was eventually demolished and is now the site of a parking lot.

Records are sketchy and incomplete. A few floor plans, and sketches in Sullivan's own hand, survive but there appear to be no records of the decorative hardware used in the hotel. The most significant clues discovered so far have been provided by Bruce Gerrie of the St Louis City Museum and Tim Samuelson, the Sullivan scholar (and Curator of Architecture at the Chicago Historical Society) who started saving and preserving Sullivan pieces under Richard Nickel.

Tim Samuelson has explained that,

"Historian Richard Nickel discovered a doorknob and plate with the initials StN, installed on the doors of Sullivan's former office in the Auditorium Tower in Chicago. Not recognizing what the initials stood for, he sent it to former Sullivan employee William Gray Purcell for identification along with his own sketch of the design. Purcell speculated that it was from an unbuilt skyscraper with a name like "Northern Trust Savings". I came to the realization that it was from the St. Nicholas after seeing a similar StN monogram on a Sullivan sketch for a stair baluster for the St. Nicholas."

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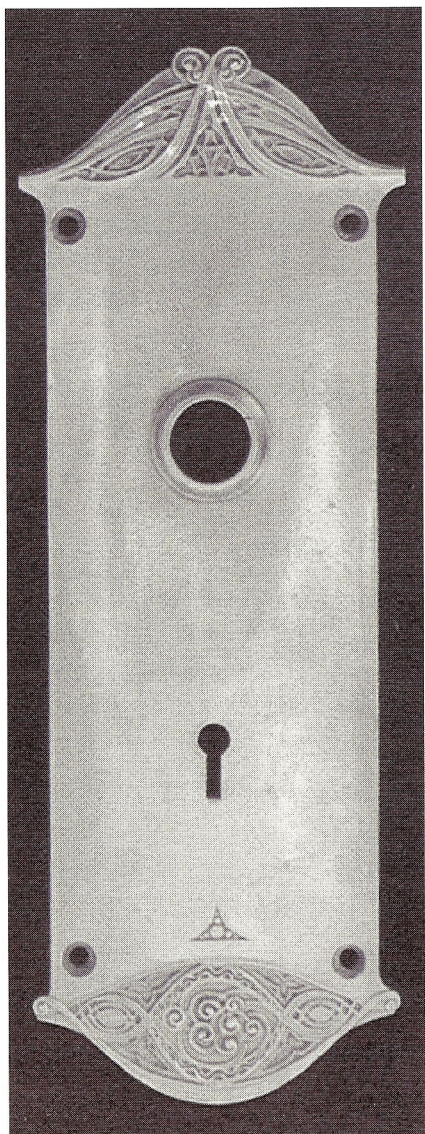
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Founded Sept 1981, the **Antique Doorknob Collectors of America** is a non-profit organization devoted to the study and preservation of ornamental hardware.

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Bruce Gerrie of the City Museum in St. Louis was also part of the solution. Bruce was present in the former St. Nicholas shortly before demolition in 1974. While searching the basement for architectural salvage he came across five doors with monogrammed door-knobs and plates. The initials were "S t N". Bruce concluded that the "StN" hardware was in fact the original St. Nicholas door hardware.



Although the hotel was touted for having an elaborate bell system ("call bells, return bells and annunciators"), no other examples of decorative hardware from the St. Nicholas Hotel have been found. This is similar to other Sullivan buildings, where the most that are found are knobs, plates and letter slots (except in the case of the Chicago Stock Exchange, where there are also kick plates and push plates).

Conceived during a transitional phase in Sullivan's career, the exterior ornamentation of the St. Nicholas was executed in terra cotta and utilized both his original style, a repeating design characterized by two distinct elements, organic and geometric with emphasis on the organic, and also incorporated a theme from his second stylistic phase in which the geometric motif was emphasized (the spandrel snowflake). The knob has a very attractive geometric border, with an elaborate central monogram. A stylized version of the geometric pattern used on the border of the knob is utilized on the top and bottom of the doorplate. Only the doorknob indicates its origin; like the plate from the Union Trust building, the St. Nicholas plate bears no mark of connection with a particular building. (Unlike the Union Trust design, the St. Nicholas plate was not carried as a stock piece by Yale & Towne). Both bronze and nickel plated examples of the St. Nicholas hardware are found. The familiar Y&T logo is marked on the back of the doorplates.

Louis Sullivan was the main architect on many historical building projects, four of them in St. Louis - the Wainwright, the St. Nicholas Hotel, the Union Trust Building and the Wainwright tomb. He added a particularly elegant flair to the ornamentation on his buildings and luckily for doorknob collectors, he extended this ornamentation to the hardware on a few of them – three of which were in St. Louis.

A significant antique door hardware display, including hardware from the St. Nicholas and other Sullivan hardware, is currently housed on the 3rd Floor of the City Museum in St. Louis. Be sure to stop by if you plan to visit St. Louis, or even if you have to make a special trip.

Thanks to: Tim Samuelson

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McSweeney, Timothy, About the Doorknobs, an Interview with Bruce Gerrie

<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/2002/02/01doorknobs.html>

Morrison, Hugh, Louis Sullivan, Prophet of Modern Architecture (Introduction by Tim Samuelson)(W. W. Norton, 1998)

<http://www.builtstlouis.net/opos/victoriabuilding.html> Architecture Early Skyscrapers

St. Louis Historical Society

The City of St. Louis and its Resources 1893 (the Star-Sayings)

Vertical Files - St. Louis Queen City of the West , 1899 STL.9.17/Sa22g

St. Louis Historical Society Bulletin, Design for St. Nicholas, XIV 2, p.184 (1958)

#2— The “Crow”

By Win Applegate

The “Crow” A-111 is an elusive knob. I know of one collector who even ran an ad in a Minnesota newspaper in an effort to find one. Officially, it is from *Crow Wing County, Minnesota*.

The subject knob and plate is a salesman’s sample. Definitely bronze and unused, the sample is absolutely pristine! The knob is 2 ½ inches in diameter, with a field diameter of 1 13/16^{ths}.

There is really very little to tell as the photos do most of the talking. If there is a highlight it is obviously the fact that the ‘Crow’ itself is **black**. The ‘color’ coverage is near perfect with even the eye of the bird untouched.



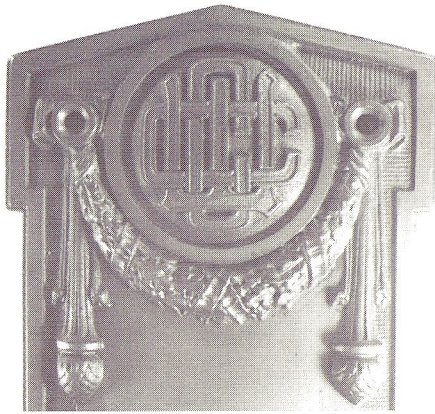
Is the color paint or is it thin enamel? Very good question. Because I have never seen a “Crow” with any black on it, my first guess that it is paint which, unlike enamel, would wear off quickly under use or disappear immediately with any attempt at cleaning. Add to this that there are some suspicious black drops on the plate and my conclusion is that it is paint applied to enhance only the display sample. This would be a real attention-getter during a sales presentation designed to show the expertise of the manufacturer.

The main attraction of the “Crow” is probably its rarity. The bird itself is fairly well detailed with feathers and an

iris added to the eye, but the background with the tree branch and leaves are not exactly outstanding.

So, that brings us to the “Crow” plate, which is probably even more rare than the knob. Isn’t the interlaced C-W-C monogram, standing for *Crow Wing County*, just great?

This is a quality bronze casting as the back of the plate is pretty much a mirror image of the front indicating to me that it was a two-part mold.



Who was the manufacturer? Well, another salesman's sample from the same individual was made by *Sargent*. This is not sufficient to label this a *Sargent* product. In fact, the back of this second plate (to be presented in #3 of this series) does not show the same care (two part mold) that is exemplified in this "Crow" plate.

A lovely piece of ornamental hardware! All in all, as the owner, I guess I am allowed to 'crow' about it.

FROM THE BACK ISSUES

An article in TDC from May-June, 1988, p. 7, gives some further history of the Crow Wing County knob. It reads as follows:

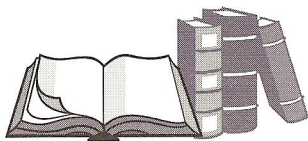
The Crow doorknob is probably one of the rarer knobs of those found in ADCA members' collections. Only four are known to be in collectors' hands. All were obtained by Charles Bednar.

Bednar advised us the knob comes from Crow Wing County, Minnesota. Brainerd is the county seat and is located about 120 miles north of Minneapolis.

"Years ago, north of Brainerd," Charles recalls, "there was a big salvage (or junk) place out in the woods. There were five doors, all with the 'Crow' doorknobs on them." The man on duty at the salvage yard wouldn't sell them, but after Charles had pleaded his case, the attendant made a phone call. After talking to someone on the phone, he gave Bednar the okay to take two pair.

"I kept going back," Charles related, "eventually they all disappeared. Finally everything was gone except one door with the escutcheon plates still on it. I am assuming that somebody didn't know how to get them off. They had a cylinder lock. The lock case had a double face plate that you had to take the first plate off to get at the set screw. He sold me the pair."

Today, Charles Bednar has a complete set two crow knobs and escutcheon plates handsomely mounted. The other two knobs were used in trades. One knob went to a west coast collector for a Statute of Liberty knob and the other to a Midwest collector in another trade."



From the Archives By Steve Menchhofer

You will find a catalog copies order form enclosed in this issue of the newsletter. Read it carefully and place your order. Remember catalog copies are offered only once a year to the membership, so you must decide now on what to order or you will have to wait until next year.

The deadline for accepting orders will be August 30, 2005. It will be several weeks after the deadline before you receive your order, so please be patient. These catalog copies are a great educational tool for the collector. Build your hardware catalog library by ordering some each time they are offered.

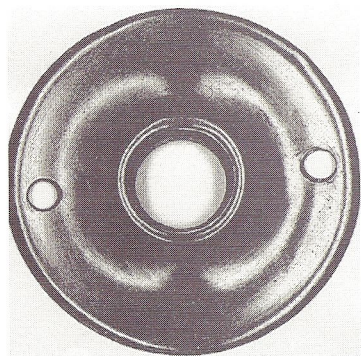
If you have any questions, email me at smenchhofe@aol.com or call at 317-862-6419.

THE DOORKNOB EXCHANGE

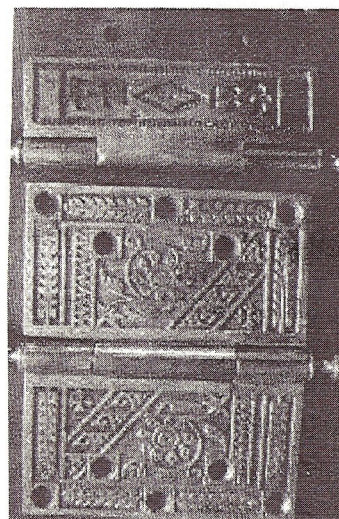
Members are reminded that your dues entitle you to advertise items for sale, trade, or wanted at no charge. ADCA is not responsible for any transaction or the condition of the items advertised.

Wanted:

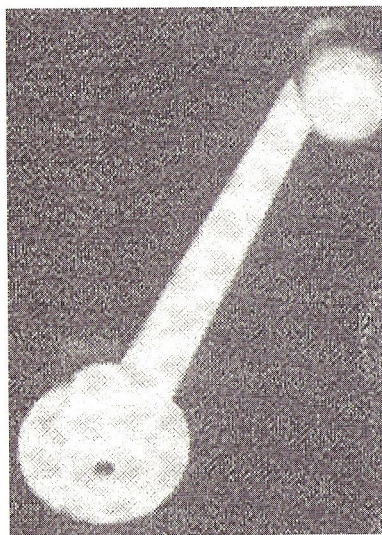
Vicky Berol ("Gofer #1") is looking for the following:



1. Six pressed brass roses, 2 1/4" in diameter. The share should be concave, NOT convex.



2. Eighteen pairs of cast iron, ball tip hinges, 4" x 4", circa 1880



3. A front door opening device.
Its use: the door at the bottom of the stairs leading into the house can be opened with this lever located at the top of the stairs. The arm is of iron, the handle of wood or ceramic.

Contact Vicky at sfgofer@yahoo.com or 415-771-9899

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