

# Flights of Memory (Not Just Birds) at the Barclay Hotel



An early view of the Barclay Hotel lobby, before the installation of its famous bird cage in the 1940s. The domed skylight in the picture was replaced during the recent renovation with a flat one.

Courtesy of Andrew Alpern

*The InterContinental New York Barclay — or the Barclay, as any New Yorker would call the hotel — is to reopen Friday in the Grand Central area of Midtown Manhattan after a 20-month renovation. It is not one of the most famous hotels in the city, but to judge from readers’ responses to a [Building Blocks](#) column about the renovation, it is among the most fondly regarded.*

Our family used to stay at the Barclay during trips to New York and there was a “singing elevator lady” who wore white gloves to ride us up and down.

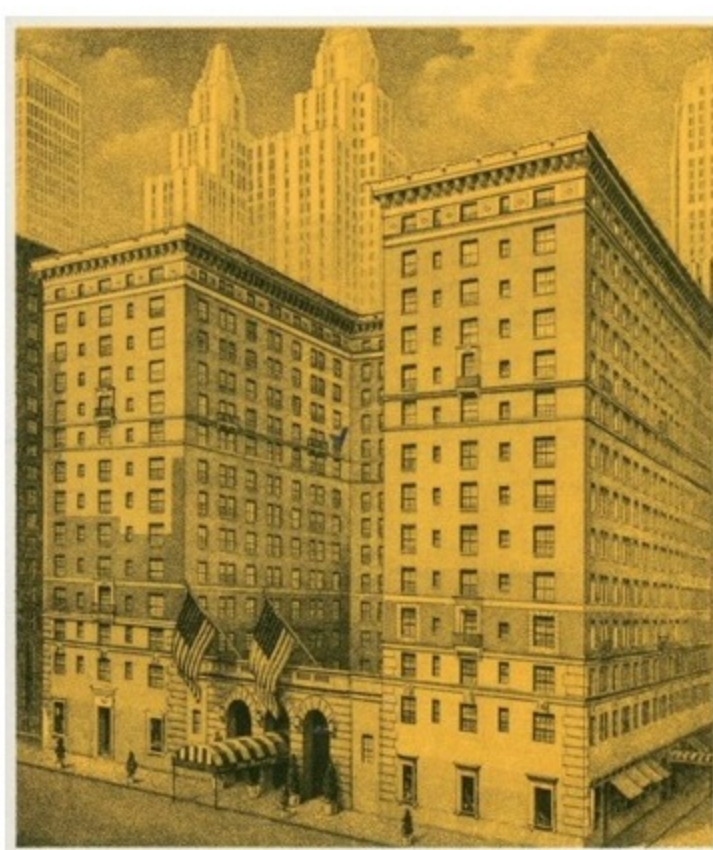
*Maria Christina Rago, Lincoln, Mass. (Her father, [Henry Rago](#), was the editor of Poetry Magazine.)*

I stayed there several times in my youth with my parents — for me, that means the early to mid-1950s. I recall the large bird cage that anchored the center of the lobby, with real birds singing and chirping. I also remember [Leblang’s](#) theater ticket agency at a window across the rear of the lobby from the reception desk.

*Bill Donnell, New York*

I so loved the Barclay! I had my interview for Smith there. When I was in my 20s, I used to go to Sunday brunch there. They had a buffet, omelet station, and the best was the music. A string quartet or strolling violinist, I think.

*Wendy Kassel, New York*



**The Barclay**  
NEW YORK

Acclaimed for the perfection of its accommodations and services, The Barclay is situated just a few steps off Park Avenue in New York’s famed East Side.

A 1960s postcard shows the Barclay and the Waldorf Astoria beyond.

My only hotel stay was at this hotel, when I was a 6-year-old in 1961. My grandparents brought me to the city while they attended some political function (Republican). The bird cage is still the only thing I can remember about the place. It made a big impression on me.

*Paul Mathewson, Stratford, Conn.*

Chopping a hole in the second floor to expand the lobby space was essential; the old place was oppressively low-ceilinged — just as is the old Park Central at Seventh Avenue, between 55th and 56th Streets, of the same vintage as the Barclay. My office is a block away on Third Avenue, so I know the Barclay well. What I really miss is [Caswell-Massey](#), which used to be in the shop at the southeast corner of the building. The new “skylight” is pathetic when compared to the original.

*Andrew Alpern, New York (He is, most recently, the author of “[The Dakota: A History of the World’s Best-Known Apartment Building.](#)”)*

I remember the demise of the Barclay’s near twin, the Park Lane, which was on the Park Avenue side of the block. The Cornell Club of New York had space in the west wing of the Barclay, with its own entrance. Since 1999, I have sometimes splurged on suits made in London. This meant going to a suite in the Barclay to pick fabrics and be measured and fitted. During the renovation, the London men have been staying in a suite at the Palace. The views are spectacular, but I missed the homyness of the Barclay. I am glad it has survived, unlike the Park Lane, Biltmore, Ritz, New Weston, Savoy Plaza and others from the early 20th century.

*Jason R. Gettinger, New York*

MEMO	DATE	EXPLANATION	CHARGES	CREDITS	BAL. DUE
1	FEB21-62	ROOM	* 25.95		
2	FEB21-62	— RTAI	* 1.30		
3	FEB21-62	PHONE	* 0.20		* 27.45
4	FEB22-62	ROOM	* 25.95		
5	FEB22-62	— RTAI	* 1.30		
6	FEB22-62	PHONE	* 0.20		* 54.90
7	FEB23-62	ROOM	* 25.95		
8	FEB23-62	— RTAI	* 1.30		
9	FEB23-62	PHONE	* 0.20		* 82.35
10	FEB24-62	— PAID		* 82.35	0.00
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In the early 1960s, a 10th-floor room could be had for \$25.95 a night (plus \$1.30 room tax).