



Staying Power

The grand
Lenox Hotel
celebrates
125 years
of luxury.

BY LEIGH HARRINGTON

YOU'RE IN BOSTON during the fall of 1900. The city is bustling. Immigrants from Eastern Europe, Italy, and the West Indies crowd the streets, a notable increase in population that started after the Civil War and will triple by World War I. Republicans dominate the state legislature, and Thomas N. Hart has just recently succeeded Josiah Quincy VI as Boston's mayor. On Beacon Street, wealthy

bohemian socialite Isabella Stewart Gardner is hosting glittering gatherings with local writers, artists, and musicians that will help establish her national reputation as a cultural icon. Across the Back Bay on Thursday evening, October 25, Newton-born conductor J. Wallace Goodrich performs Bach for the opening organ recital at the brand-new Symphony Hall, much praised for its groundbreaking acoustical

design. Two months later, on December 20, 1900, an elaborate staging of “Ben Hur,” complete with a live chariot race, launches the Colonial Theatre as a premier playhouse.

Near Copley Square, in the heart of this thriving city, which was poised on the precipice of massive growth and innovation, 22-year-old Lucius M. Boomer has spent over \$1 million (roughly \$39 million today) developing one of Boston’s first high-rise hotels, the refined, fully modernized Hotel Lenox. It opens on October 15, to the delight of its distinguished guests.

Now called the Lenox Hotel, accommodations are still luxurious. In honor of its 125th anniversary this month, let’s dig into its history and take a peek at what’s to come.

A PINNACLE OF MODERNITY

In 1900, locals referred to any 11-story building as a skyscraper. Today, we call that charming, especially when it falls in the shadow of a 52-story behemoth. But back then, Hotel Lenox

represented all that was cutting edge and refined, including indoor plumbing and private bathrooms, elevators, telephones, and electricity. Built of iron and concrete, it was fireproof, too.

As a good indication of how fancy a place Hotel Lenox was back then, consider that Boomer also built the Waldorf Astoria in New York City. He ran the Lenox until a few years before he died in 1947.

THE SAUNDERS ERA

Part of the charm of the Lenox starts with its independence. Today’s owners care deeply about their guests as well as their employees, many of whom have stayed on staff for decades. Jimmy Fisher famously worked as a bellman there for 60 years, and loads of others, including 45-year housekeeping veteran Maura, stayed for multiple Hotdecades.

So, just who are these owners? Living in Boston, there’s no doubt you’ve heard of the Saunders family. Between massive real estate holdings and several hotel properties (Raffles, for one), it feels



Opposite: The Lenox Hotel sign in 2023

Above: The Lenox in 1906, six years after it opened

Below: The Executive Queen Fireplace Room is especially lovely on cold Boston nights.

like they own half the city—and they probably do.

It started with Irving Saunders. After Boomer, the hotel went through 20 years of corporate ownership until 1963, when Saunders bought a minor interest. Back then, he was still making a name for himself, and over the following 62 years, he and several generations of his family managed the Lenox Hotel to great success, acquiring full ownership in 1996. Today, the Lenox is the Saunders Hotel Group’s flagship—and still independently owned.

CELEBRITIES AND STORIES

As with any historic building—and this one is officially registered as a Historic Hotel of America—the Lenox’s past comes with a stable of celebrity guests and a few stories.

Most notably, Judy Garland lived at the Lenox for three months in 1965 and stayed several other times when performing in Boston between 1939 and 1969, always in the same suite, Room 423.





Today, the Lenox specially honors the late singer and actress's legacy in the apartment, which is decorated with old Hollywood glamour and features the room's original fireplace and mirror.

Other reported famous guests include early 20th-century opera singer Enrico Caruso, MLB legend Babe Ruth, actors Ryan O'Neal and Ali MacGraw while filming "Love Story," and Boston Celtics coach Red Auerbach, who lived there part-time during the dynasty years from 1955 through 1968.

A FACELIFT FOR 2025

In honor of its milestone anniversary, the Lenox has undergone a refresh, from subtle branding and logo changes to a complete overhaul of its three on-site restaurants.

Stop in at The Irving (yep, named for that Irving), the hotel's bar, just off its lobby, for a Pop's Classic No. 2, featuring Lenox-exclusive Maker's Mark, mint, lemon, and Angostura

bitters. Bourbon and craft cocktails are the Irving's specialty. If you're keeping tabs, this renovated, renamed space was most recently City Bar, but longtime Bostonians will remember its other adaptations as the Lenox Arms Bar, King's Court, and The Lamplighter Piano Bar and Lounge.

One-time street-level Solas is now Sweeney's on Boylston. Regulars will be happy to know its British-pub vibe and imported Liverpoolian woodwork remain. The kitchen, too, still serves up beers and Irish-inspired fare, only now from Lenox executive chef Daniel Kenney, who came over from The Liberty Hotel and has more than 30 years of experience in Boston hotel kitchens. Kenney also helms the menu at the more refined Willow & Ivy—formerly the Delmonico dining room, then Anago, Azure, and City Table, but

always the Lenox's formal eatery.

The Lenox lobby has a fresh look about it with a centralized guest services station and new seating areas, highlighted with natural light. Guests from Boomer's time would likely be impressed, particularly the women. Back then, women had to enter through a separate ladies' entrance to a reception room where they waited while their husbands or brothers took care of registering. According to the Lenox, "It was an unwritten custom that ladies should keep out of the lobby, except to cross to the dining room, and should not linger, as that would expose them to smoke, which was generally permitted in hotel lobbies." Whew!

Leigh Harrington has been covering culture in Boston for over a decade.

Above left: The Saunders brothers, from left: Gary, Tedd, Roger, Jeffrey, Todd.

Above right: Lenox Hotel owner and general manager Roger Saunders in 1966. He leased a vintage Rolls Royce and parked it on Boylston Street as a promotion. A hotel guest came up to him thinking he was a cab driver. She was running late to the symphony, so Saunders drove her there.

Right: The Judy Garland Suite, a tribute to one of the hotel's most storied guests

