

HISTORY OF THE CLARKSON APARTMENTS

940-50 Clarkson Street, Denver Colorado 80218

The land comprising 940-50 Clarkson Street was not originally included within Denver city limits. Indeed, it would not be integrated until February 1883, when the city doubled in size to encompass 13 square miles. Just six months after annexation, the South Division of Capitol Hill was subdivided and added to the Denver city map.

One of the neighborhood's lead developers, Donald Fletcher, put himself on the map as well, naming what is now 10th Avenue "Fletcher Avenue." It wasn't his only effort at self-aggrandizement. Eight years later, he established a town on Denver's eastern plain, humbly entitled "Fletcher." But when the Panic of 1893 struck, the distressed opportunist ran out on the effort, leaving the residents with a lot of debt and no water. The 200 inhabitants were angered, but pressed forward all the same. In 1907 they changed the name of the town to "Aurora," ensuring that Fletcher's eponym would be lost even if they had to endure his legacy.

Construction

Charles Brewer Kountze, enterprising son of an Ohio farmer, purchased this property in 1894 under the aegis of the United Real Estate and Trust Company, and would retain it for more than thirty years. Kountze had received a practical education in business while working in his father's country store. At age nineteen, he joined his brother Luther in Denver at the bank and gold buying office, and in 1866, the Kountze Brothers banking house became Colorado National Bank. Five years later, Charles was elected its president and served as such until his death.

In 1924, Charles sold the property to Howard Coldren and Benjamin Houtz, young entrepreneurs like himself. Both were relatively young at the time: 24 and 39 respectively. Both owners were intimately familiar with apartment life: Howard and Mary Coldren lived in apartment #7 of 1272 Washington Street, and Ben and Ruby Houtz lived in apartment #19 of 174 Marion. Their vision for an apartment house on Clarkson would seek to rectify some of the shortcomings and build upon the amenities of ordinary apartment homes. Ironically, the success of their endeavor became evident when each owner moved into his own private home within just a few years of construction.

Both men were familiar with the construction business. Houtz had been working in Denver as a builder since at least 1920, and Coldren came from a lumbering family. In fact, his father Burt was the president of Denver's premier wholesaler: Hallack & Howard Lumber Company. Howard worked for his father as a sales manager, and his connections made it a good bet that 940 Clarkson would be built using some of the company's best supplies at rather favorable pricing.



Still, it would not be cheap. The three-story structure, measuring 133 feet by 42 feet, would incorporate high quality materials, raising the estimated cost of construction to an impressive \$45,000, equivalent to roughly \$6.5 million today.

The improvements began on December 10, 1924, with the issuance of a building permit. Twelve days later, Houtz and Coldren applied for a connection to the city water supply, which was completed two days after Christmas. On January 3rd, the city inspectors came by for their first inspection. The builders enjoyed uncommonly warm weather, perhaps accounting for their remarkable progress by March 20th, when the apartment house was three-quarters complete. Though inspectors considered the building "finished" on April 20th, the final inspection was not made until the first day of July 1925.

In the meantime, Houtz and Coldren were putting together one of the apartment's most distinctive amenities: its garage. Normally an afterthought for builders, the garage at the rear of 940-50 Clarkson was a marvel. At 50' by 125', the structure provided a covered space for virtually every apartment. Not only that, but the oil changing pit below would make regular maintenance a snap.

The demand for a car park was new indeed. Fifteen years earlier, just 1 of every 100 Americans owned a car. By 1930, ownership had soared to 1 in 5 Americans. The city of Denver had to keep pace with demand, paving nearly two thirds of all the city's streets by 1925. Indeed, the official city magazine, *Municipal Facts*, expressed surprise at the transportation revolution, indicating in 1928 that "it is very hard to believe that so recently Denver was a walking town - because today if you walk, you walk alone."

The garage would ultimately cost \$6,500, twice as much as might be spent for a very respectable Denver home in 1925.

Watts Apartments

Houtz and Coldren's apartments were first listed in city directories in 1926. By numbering the twenty-three units from 1 to 24, they avoided the bad-luck connotations of an Apartment 13. And the complex's official name reflected the building's new owners: Watts Apartments.

Harry and Hammond Watts had purchased the complex months before its completion, on February 2, 1925, but the deed wasn't filed until June 25, 1925. Because of this, one suspects that their involvement in the creation of Watts Apartments surpassed mere ownership and oversight. Indeed, the brickwork here was likely of their own design.

Born in the Canadian province of Prince Edward Island in the 1870s, the brothers came in the early 1880s to Denver with their family, as their father Hamilton took up work as a brick mason. Harry and Hammond soon took up the trowel themselves, working officially as Watts Brothers. Their handiwork was represented in several prominent landmarks, including the downtown Republic Building (1926) and the University of Denver's Mary Reed Hall (1932).

An unusually close family, the brothers lived with their parents for more than 40 years, first at 2544 Gilpin Street and later at 2547 Gaylord Street. Family members recalled the brothers' intense focus on business, moderated only by a love of reading. Also noted was their generosity, including a willingness to pay a mortgage for a friend in need.

If Walls Could Talk

As might be expected from such a high-class establishment, Watts Apartments had some rather prominent tenants. In the first year alone, the place boasted residents such as James Usher, an actor at the Denham Theatre, who lived in apartment #1; Hugh Watson, owner of the Denver Mantel & Tile Company, who lived in apartment #18; and Edward Shayne, representative of the Western Vaudeville Managers Association (which employed a young dancer named Ginger Rogers), who lived in apartment #8. Even greater things would come from apartment #22, where Freeman Talbot rested after long days as manager of one of Denver's earliest radio stations, KOA 630, broadcasting programs like *Amos n Andy* and breaking news of Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic.

To be sure, more ordinary occupations were represented as well. With rentals varying from \$50 to \$65, space was available for well-off teachers, salesmen, lawyers, clerks, managers, stenographers, and engineers. The building's first janitor, Severe Gilbert, was also a central character to the experience of living in the apartments. Fortunately, his unusual name belied what his family called a "very jolly and outgoing" personality.

Among other noteworthy later residents were Nathan and Elizabeth Newcomer, who lived in apartment #15 throughout

the 1940s. Both husband and wife were doctors, and even had their own diagnostic laboratories in the aforementioned Republic Building. Another doctor, Julius Wolf, lived in apartment #21 in 1940, and soon became infamous for his arrest for conspiracy to perform illegal abortions. Despite an illegal search and the protestations of noted attorney Phillip Hornbein, the US Supreme Court upheld his conviction in the landmark 1949 ruling, *Wolf v Colorado*.

Midcentury Growth

By this time, Watts Apartments had a new owner. After a brief receivership by the Public Trustee (likely due to the owners' default, a result of the Great Depression), the property sold in 1931 for the bargain price of \$33,250. The new owners, Ivanhoe Investments, held on to the property for several decades, and saw its value increase to \$41,890 in 1950 and then to \$46,200 in 1963. As their stake continued to grow, they decided to change the building's name. As of 1961, the complex would be known as Ivanhoe Investment Apartments.

Apartment manager Lois Price occasionally received notices from the city about such things as the fire hazard existing in 1972 when the boiler room was being used as a bedroom or the leaking boiler in 1981 that required \$12,000 in repairs. But no serious damage was actually noted, nor were stories about the building's issues ever recorded in newspaper indexes.

Sometimes the most interesting stories were those that went unnoticed. In 1982, a recent graduate of the University of Denver law school moved in to apartment #21. She worked for both the US Department of Agriculture and the libertarian Mountain States Legal Foundation, where she wrote about Americans' "right to pollute." She served as Colorado's Attorney General from 1991 to 1996, and was appointed US Secretary of the Interior in 2001. Her name: Gale A Norton.

A Star is Born

The building changed ownership several more times in the 1980s and 1990s, until it finally landed in the hands of the current owners, Classic Properties of Denver. Specializing in the management of Denver's finest historic apartment buildings, Classic Properties has acquired and restored over 232 individual apartments since 1999. Though they pride themselves in providing sophisticated living in historical surroundings, they credit their success to exceptional residents who appreciate the splendor of the past.

The history of the Clarkson Apartments validates Classic Properties' philosophy. While the owners sought out a site for judicious investment as well as a special place to live, it is the residents themselves who put life in the building. It is their stories, their troubles, and their triumphs which provide the significance of each dwelling. Though Clarkson Apartments is but three stories tall, there are thousands of stories here, most of which have yet to unfold.