

City demolishing Roger Smith Hotel

by Carol Grunewald
The Advocate

Perhaps the most mysterious thing about the hotel is its name. Who was Roger Smith?

One Stamford old-timer says the name was probably invented. He said the name "Roger Smith Hotel" was probably chosen because there are five letters in each of the three words and therefore the name would make a nice, neat rooftop sign.

Once upon a time, on a stormy November night long ago, a lone woman wrapped in a great coat emerged from the wind and snow and crossed the threshold of the Roger Smith Hotel.

Carrying only a small satchel, she registered at the lobby desk and walked through the silent hotel, whose guests were now fast asleep, to her room.

A few hours later the woman in the great coat paid her bill and walked into the blackness of early morning, never to be seen or heard from again....

Later, the hotel's night watchman, yawning and longing for sleep, made his last check of the hotel before retiring. Upon entering the room that the woman had vacated, the watchman discovered a tiny baby boy, only hours old, lying on the bed.

The next day, the citizens of Stamford, united in their determination to care for

the boy, christened him Roger Smith and generously provided for his future. Housed at the grand hotel, which became his home for many years, the parentless Smith is said to have eventually become employed as a bellhop there until he moved away and all communication with him was lost.

The legend of young Roger Smith, be it true or false, is only one of many tales that will live long after the hotel is gone.

And it won't be long before the building — whose giant rooftop sign, "HOTEL ROGER SMITH," had long served as a reliable landmark to many a sailor in Long Island Sound — will be gone.

The 53 year-old hotel is now being demolished at the behest of Jim Sotire, the city's demolition officer, chief building inspector and zoning enforcement officer who called the building "an attrac-

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Colorful history of Roger Smith Hotel comes to an end

(Continued from Page One)
tive nuisance that could easily be the object of a nice torch job." In two weeks

there will be nothing on the corner of Broad Street and Washington Boulevard but thin air.

According to urban renewal commissioners and other city officials, the Prudential Insurance Company and the only living owner of the hotel, Oscar A. deLima, will construct an office building on the site. Prudential would neither confirm or deny the reports, however company spokesman Bruce Kaufman said Prudential "has control of the property."

deLima said, "Most of the rumors are true. Everything is signed and sealed."

Once an elegant hotel whose high society guests spread its good reputation across the country, the building, and the neighboring Roger Smith Motor Lodge, built in the 1960's, had in recent years become a home to vagrants and a hiding place for muggers and prostitutes, according to police.

The Roger Smith's hotel license expired this month, and guests were received until the very end.

The owners of several businesses in the area attribute the dilapidated state of the hotel to an old urban renewal plan that had, for over 10 years, included the hotel. The plan was never realized, however, and the status of the Roger Smith remained in limbo.

"deLima never knew whether he should re-invest money into a dying proposition," said one businessman.

A portion of the hotel property, about 40,000 square feet, is still included in an urban renewal plan that will use the space for a parking lot. It is not known how this plan will affect the future development of the property.

Although not an antique in the strict sense (being under 100 years old), the hotel nonetheless has a rich and intriguing history.

The intrigue started years before the hotel was conceived when Stamford's Baptists built the First Baptist Church in 1790 along River Street, on the current site of the Roger Smith Hotel.

Back then, a section of what is now Washington Boulevard was called River Street. The Mill River, which now runs through Mill River Park and is confined by a narrow concrete channel, was, at that time a wild broad river which flowed right to the edge of what is now Washington Boulevard. Had the course of the river not been altered before the Roger Smith was built, the water would have flowed almost to the hotel's front door.

The Baptist church remained at its River Street address for several decades and established a cemetery on the site.

In 1848, a split among the parishioners caused half the congregation to form a new church where Landmark Tower now stands. A reunion of the two factions took place soon after, however, and in 1895 a beautiful church was constructed at the Landmark site. The First Baptist meetinghouse and its cemetery on River Street were abandoned and forgotten.

In 1928 excavation for the hotel began. According to deLima, a Stamford resident, only a handful of the Baptist's tombstones were visible when workmen arrived on the site. When excavation began, however, the remains of several bodies were accidentally exhumed by a steamshovel, and the graveyard was found to be more extensive than it had first appeared.

Excavation stopped for about three weeks while the hotel owners sought the church that owned the cemetery. The church was finally found but, deLima said, its pastor was no longer interested in the burial ground.

So the exhumed remains were transplanted to another portion of the hotel property near a white cottage which, it was discovered, had been the cemetery caretaker's home. Located behind the hotel, the cottage and three tombstones stand today although the cottage, which is in poor condition, appears to be used by vagrants.

No one knows what will become of the old Baptist cemetery when the new Prudential office building is installed. According to Sotire, modern-day law mandates that a cemetery may not be moved until the next of kin are notified. "In this case, they'll be hard pressed to find them," Sotire said.

Perhaps the most mysterious thing about the hotel is its name. Who was Roger Smith?

When questioned on this topic, deLima laughed. "Everybody knows a Roger Smith! We counted 21 famous Roger Smiths. I'm not going to tell you which one it is. There was a Roger Smith who skipped the boat that took Pocahontas to England. In Stamford many years ago there was a Roger Smith who killed his wife. There was one who was a general in the Revolutionary War. There was one who was a bellboy," he snickered in de light. "It's a mystery."

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