

### *America's Main Street Hotels*

#### *Transiency and Community in the Early Auto Age*

By John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle

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The importance of the hotel to understanding American cities and life is now widely acknowledged. From their inception in the early nineteenth century, hotels were not only emblems of the rise of urban centers, they were essential instruments in making urban growth a reality. Beyond accommodating the fast increasing number of travelers, early hotels were important gathering places for the local elite. The progress and potential of a community were judged to a significant degree by the extent and character of its hostelries. Major cities set the standard, the emulation of which became a ubiquitous phenomenon in smaller cities and towns nationwide. Hotels also served as catalysts to stimulate city building in communities where settlement was in its infancy. Ever bigger and better hotels remained central definers of downtown America into the mid-twentieth century.

Despite its historical value, the hotel has attracted less scholarly attention than it deserves. The horizon has been substantially expanded by some recent work, including A. K. Sandoval-Strausz's path-breaking cultural survey, *Hotel: An American History* (2007). His and the few other key studies have focused on work in the metropolis. John Jakle and Keith Sculle, on the other hand, explore

new territory by addressing developments in smaller communities during the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing from an array of period sources, the authors have organized the text in six chapters: physical attributes, development, management, clientele, dining and drinking facilities, and modernization. The content affords a solid introductory perspective. For those examining the history of hotels or the morphology of small cities and towns in the U.S. during the twentieth century, *America's Main Street Hotels* will be a useful reference indeed. And because such hostelries remain threatened in many communities, as the authors emphasize in the epilogue, the book should boost efforts to preserve the many remaining examples.

For all its virtues, Jakle and Sculle's volume skirts some basic issues. What do mainstream examples tell us that those in major cities do not? If "Main Street" hotels of the twentieth century were fashioned after their big-city cousins, did they differ in significant ways? And how do early twentieth-century examples differ from their forebears? The authors minimize physical change over time, when the evidence they offer suggests that cumulative change was substantial in planning and amenities. Despite the book's sub-

title, very little of its content addresses factors pertaining to automobile travelers until the final chapter, and then the treatment is sporadic. Little fieldwork appears to have been done in the course of this project. Had the authors been more ambitious in this realm they might have uncovered examples such as the Hotel Wareham in Manhattan, Kansas, constructed in response to the designation of the town's main street as U.S. 40. The Wareham boasted a two-story, full-service garage (topped by a ballroom!) as a rear annex as well as its own filling station and car lot. Or perhaps the Pierce Pennant Motor Inn (1929) near Columbia, Missouri, also built along U.S. 40, with an underground garage and landscaped grounds—as if a resort. Or, the Hotel Stafford (1931-32) along U.S. 1 on the northern edge of Fredericksburg, Virginia, with even more pretentious aspirations to be a fine resort. Fieldwork might also have underscored

the stunning variety of design treatments given to downtown hostelrys in the 1920s and revealed some of the new hotels—from Hutchinson, Kansas, to Columbia, South Carolina—built in the business core after World War II in a concerted, if vain, effort to maintain that core's dominance. Yet if this book lacks the richness and depth for which one might hope, it has opened the door to a subject that demands our further attention.

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