

MILLS HOTEL NO. 3

485 Seventh Avenue (aka 481-489 Seventh Avenue, 155-163 West 36th Street), Manhattan

Built: 1906-07

Architect: Copeland & Dole

Style: Neo-Renaissance



Described by the *New York Times* as the “world’s biggest hotel” and the “finest for the use of men of limited means,” this handsome 16-story neo-Renaissance building, erected in 1906-07, was the third and largest of the three model residential hotels for single working men erected by Darius Ogden Mills at the turn of the 20th century. Mills was banker and philanthropist especially concerned with the problems of housing the poor. In 1894 architect Ernest Flagg revolutionized thinking about low cost urban housing when he published an article in *Scribner’s* magazine calling attention to the problems inherent in the then standard dumbbell plan for tenements and proposing a new building type based on a 100 foot-wide module incorporating a central light court. A light-court tenement, Flagg argued, would employ less wall enclosure, corridors, and partitions than a conventionally-planned tenement while providing greater room space, light, ventilation, and fire protection. The ten-story 1,554-room Mills House No. 1 at 160 Bleecker Street (Ernest Flagg, 1896-97,) and Flagg’s no longer extant Alfred Corning Clark Buildings, six model tenements erected by the City and Suburban Homes Company in 1896-98, were the first buildings in the country to realize these ideas and they served as prototypes for future model tenements and ultimately for the provisions of the Tenement House Law of 1901, (the so-called “New Law”). Mills also commissioned Flagg to design the 600-room Mills Hotel No. 2 at Rivington and Chrystie Streets (1896-98, demolished). In 1906, spurred by the success of his two earlier hotels and the construction of Pennsylvania Station, Mills commissioned Copeland & Dole (Henry Lewis Copeland, William Herbert Dole) an architectural firm with offices in New York City and Olympia, Washington, to plan this building, which opened in October 1907.

Mills Hotel No. 3 incorporates two light-court units (one 75 feet wide, the other 100 feet wide) linked by central elevator hall. Rising to sixteen stories, the building originally had 1,885 small single bedrooms each with a window opening onto the street or courtyard. The unprecedented scale of the project together with the “utmost economies in administration” allowed Mills to significantly lower costs per room and offer the men residing in the hotel “a larger equivalent for their money” than heretofore possible. The facilities included a marbled palm-tree-filled lobby, sitting rooms and lounges, a library-reading room, restaurant, barbershop, and laundry. Intended to present “an impressive yet simple appearance” the building’s facades are clad with limestone, light-colored brick and terra cotta. As with Flagg’s Mill Hotel No. 1, the end bays are slightly projected and the windows are grouped in rhythmic patterns to provide visual interest. The stories are arranged into a three-story rusticated limestone base (the first and second story have been extensively altered), nine-story brick-clad mid-section, and four-story terra-cotta-clad attic. Molded string courses and cornices, fielded panels, cartouches, lion heads, and a richly embellished Renaissance copper cornice also contribute to the design.

After Mills' death in 1910, a family trust continued to operate the hotel as a low cost residence for single men. In 1940 Mayor La Guardia took part in a ceremony welcoming its 50,000,000th guest. In 1954 it passed to a group of investors who planned to reclad the building and convert it to offices and showrooms serving the garment industry. In 1956 a new group of investors took over and after refurbishing the building began operating it as the Keystone Hotel. In the early 1980s it was converted to stores and a parking lot at the first floor and offices and show rooms on the upper floors. Aside from the alterations to its lower stories the building remains largely intact and retains its historical and architectural significance as a reminder of the Housing Reform Movement and the Progressive Era. This building is within the Garment Center National Register Historic District.