From its opening in 1909 as San Antonio’s first luxury hotel — the brainchild of prescient businessmen and friends Augustus H. Jones and B.L. Naylor who believed in San Antonio’s destiny as a major tourist destination — The St. Anthony Hotel took its rightful place as gracious host to the rich, famous and luxury-seeking, a tradition that continues to this day with guests that range from rock stars to royalty, moguls to musicians to movie stars, and a parade of politicians and presidents. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this newest incarnation marks the hotel’s debut as a Luxury Collection hotel, part of the Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide.

The riches-to-rags-to-riches saga was not a simple one. The property was bought and sold at sometimes dizzying speeds, rollercoastering through decades of volatile change, including its latest near-death experience in the Great Recession of the early 2000s when the hotel fell into receivership, echoing its previous foreclosure during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Still — perhaps living up to its namesake of the patron saint of lost things — The St. Anthony refused to be gone forever.

“It’s not just a building,” says Brandon Raney, CEO of BC Lynd Hospitality LLC, the partnership that purchased the down-but-not-yet-out property in 2012 and began its sweeping restoration in 2013. “It’s a place with character and culture that has left an imprint on many people over the past century.” Clyde Johnson V, the company’s chief investment officer, agrees. “We walked the halls, knowing its history, and we knew we could make it work.”

That history peeks out at every turn in the 10-story, 277-guestroom property. The signature “St. Anthony Green” began life as “Dorothy Draper Green,” a shade favored by the internationally renowned designer hired in 1959 to create the then-private St. Anthony Club. The intimate library at the top of the lobby stairs is now accessible to the public for the first time in 50 years. Original mosaic tiles lie alongside custom carpet in the guestroom hallways along with the original Calcutta marble floor in the lobby entrance.

The historic photographs that line the walls are mesmerizing, with subjects caught in candid shots around a piano, at a dining table, or with drink in hand — in many ways not all that different from present-day guests gathered around the historic Russian Steinway piano in the lobby’s grand Peacock Alley, savoring a meal at the fine dining restaurant Rebelle or enjoying a cocktail at the new Haunt bar.

Raney recalls that back-to-the-future feeling. “About halfway through the design process we discovered the original architectural drawings from 1909, 1910 and 1936,” he says. “It turns out all the bright ideas we had were a lot like what the hotel looked like before.”

Way ahead of its time, The St. Anthony was a hotel of firsts:

• In 1936, “magic eye” auto-opening doors were added to the entrances on Travis and Navarro Streets, the first of their kind in any building in Texas.
• The same year, it became the first fully-functioning air-conditioned hotel in the world.
• In 1941, another hotel world first was a drive-in auto lobby.

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The building may have been air conditioned, but the cars of the 30s weren’t. Dusty, disheveled travelers dare not see and be seen in the hotel’s refined spaces. Guests could check in at the drive-through registration desk — paperwork was coordinated with the indoor front desk by a pneumatic tube delivery system — and use a private elevator to go to their rooms to freshen up before returning to Peacock Alley.

In the end, The St. Anthony Hotel has always been about people and history, especially people making history right there on the site. Crucial planning for HemisFair ’68, the city’s first and only World’s Fair, was done by city leaders and committee members over lunch. Southwest Airlines founder and CEO Herb Kelleher sketched out the original triangular route on a St. Anthony napkin. Billionaire entrepreneur Red McCombs negotiated his purchase of the San Antonio Spurs there in the early 1970s.

For all the peeling back of years and plaster, walls and woodwork, the complete story of The St. Anthony Hotel might never be known, and maybe that’s part of its beguiling mystique. This elegant and gracious lady will never reveal all of her secrets, except for one that will come as no surprise to anyone who has seen her lately: the best is yet to come.