Capone's fifth floor bay window, Lexington Hotel, 1994.
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Capone's lost lair:

The Lexington Hotel, Chicago

Ronan Thomas

For over a century, the Lexington Hotel on South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, saw it all. A US President regaling crowds from its balcony. Genteel 1890s salons for the respectable citizens of its Prairie Avenue locale. Businessmen on the make as the 'Windy City' became a vast hub for the American Midwest's meatpacking, stockyard and transportation industries. Cheering guests on news of America's victory over Japan in August 1945. Then, a painful post-war decline into the decayed haunt of vagrants, prostitutes and addicts driven in off the mean streets of the city's South Side. By the early 1990s, the Hotel's shocking neglect pointed to its inevitable fate. In 1996, just over a hundred years after its construction, this dilapidated testament to the optimism of a previous age was pulled down to be replaced by a modern glass apartment block. But scratch the surface of today's South Michigan Avenue and uneasy memories of the Lexington linger. Above all of the guest most associated with the Hotel's ornate, degenerate story. For at the height of the Prohibition Era the Lexington hosted one of history's most notorious criminals: Al 'Scarface' Capone.

Al Capone, 17 June 1931.
Library of Congress

Lexington Hotel, view south on S. Michigan Avenue, 1994
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Alphonse Gabriel Capone's bequest to history is a well-known catalogue of brutal racketeering, bootlegging, gangland murders (most infamously the St Valentine's Day Massacre of 14 February 1929) and the corruption of both American public morals and her elected officials, including the US Judiciary, Chicago mayoralty and city police force. Born in New York in 1899 to an Italian immigrant family, Al Capone began his criminal career in Brooklyn as a nightclub bouncer, acquiring his trademark left cheek scar in 1917 and a reputation for ruthlessness and extreme violence, before moving to Chicago in 1919. The failed experiment of Prohibition (1920-1933) gave Capone his chance to graduate from simple street thuggery to major organised crime. Eliminating rivals, he built a criminal empire – 'The Outfit' – staffed by thousands of employees and worth over US$120 million by 1929 ($1.5 Bn today). Its tentacles extended from New York to Miami with Chicago as its vicious centre. Brewing and smuggling huge shipments of illegal alcohol, Capone profited from a bewildering array of Chicago protection rackets, gambling joints, speakeasies, illicit saloons and brothels. He controlled the whole supply chain, from consumer goods and foodstuffs right down to laundries. On paper Capone had no net worth. He dealt only in cash, eschewing any physical accounts to incriminate him. He bribed government officials and intimated voters in Chicago elections: by 1929 Capone boasted he was paying $30 million per year for corrupt police and political protection. It was widely suspected that Chicago's Mayor during 1927-1931, William 'Big Bill' Thompson, was himself on Capone's payroll. The ultimate criminal parasite, Capone prospered for over a decade from the hypocrisy of an American society which paid lip service to virtue in public yet indulged its vices in private. "*You can't cure a thirst by law*", he reputedly sneered in 1927 to an audience of sycophants. In Chicago the Tommy guns of his enforcers cut down mob enemy and innocent alike as the Twenties roared, before America's Jazz Age vanished into the long dark tunnel of the Depression. Over 700 mob-related murders took place in the city during 1920-1933. Yet Capone ultimately overreached himself, his criminal acts so brazen that in April 1930 the Chicago Crime Commission dubbed him America's 'Public Enemy Number One'. The US government finally determined to be rid of him. Famously, Al Capone was brought to justice not for his most violent crimes but for income tax evasion. President Herbert Hoover authorised a new covert government investigation into Capone's income tax funded by a wealthy committee of businessmen (the so-called 'Secret Six').

This combined government agency operation was headed by the Special Investigation Unit (SIU) of the US Justice Department, Special Agent Frank Wilson (later Head of the US Secret Service) of the Inland Revenue Service (IRS) and an eleven-man US Treasury Department team of so-called 'Untouchables', led by Prohibition Agent Elliot Ness. These men put Capone under surveillance, tracked his beer barrel shipments to and from their breweries and raided his operations. Wilson nosed out Capone's accounts for 1924-1931. He identified a single accounts notebook naming Capone and shipments worth $1 US million. Under interrogation this was corroborated by Capone's cashier Fred Ries and corrupt bookmaker Leslie A Shumway. The 'Secret Six' then arranged for both men to enter the United States' first witness protection programme in 1931. Before his trial, Capone first attempted a plea bargain – rejected by Judge James H Wilkerson – and then tried but failed to rig his jury. On 17 October 1931 Capone was found guilty. On 24 October he received an eleven year sentence and was incarcerated in Cook County, Atlanta and then Alcatraz prisons. Released in November 1939, Capone died of a stroke in Florida on 25 January 1947. In 1950 he was interred in Chicago's Mount Carmel Cemetery.

But before then the good times rolled for Capone and his gangland associates. For most of the 1920s Capone lived like

The Lexington Hotel, located at the corner of Michigan Avenue and 22nd Street in Chicago, c.1910.

For most of the 1920s Capone lived like a latter day Medici in a series of opulent hotels in Cicero on Chicago's South Side, seemingly immune from justice.

a latter day Medici in a series of opulent hotels in Cicero on Chicago's South Side, seemingly immune from justice. The first of these headquarters was the Four Deuces at 2222 South Wabash Avenue, a gambling den and brothel in which Capone worked as henchman to crime boss and mentor John Torrio from 1920 to 1924. In 1924, after Capone inherited Torrio's gangland territory, he shifted his racketeering operations to the Hawthorne Hotel at 4823 22nd Street, Cicero, paid off the management and equipped it with bullet-proof steel shutters. It was a wise precaution. On 20 September 1926 Capone survived an assassination attempt when rivals sprayed the Hawthorne with over a thousand Thompson submachine gun rounds in a ten car drive-by shooting. In November 1926 he moved to the formerly-grand Metropole Hotel at 2300 South Michigan Avenue. Here, he took over two floors, overseeing gambling and prostitution whist running a hectic business office where, according to contemporary press accounts, the phones never stopped ringing. At the Metropole Capone acquired the nickname 'The Big Fellow'. His banquets became the stuff of mob legend and lasted for days. In 1926 Capone treated himself and his cronies to a three-day champagne-fuelled party, accompanied by the legendary Fats Waller on the piano. In June 1927 Capone staged a $25,000 champagne bottle shoot-out, followed by a week-long binge costing $50,000. Then, in July 1928, the jazz bands abruptly stopped playing. Police raids forced Capone to move from the Metropole one city block north – to the Lexington Hotel. This would be Capone's final Chicago lair.

Like the Hawthorne and the Metropole before it, the Lexington had seen better days. Located at 2135 South Michigan Avenue – on the north western corner of Michigan Boulevard and 22nd Street – the Lexington Hotel was opened in 1892, a happier age for Chicago. Operated and owned by the Interstate Hotel Company, the Lexington was designed in brick and terracotta by well-respected Chicago hotel architect Clinton J Warren. It was built in the then fashionable and rapidly expanding neighbourhood of Prairie Avenue on Chicago's Near South Side. The 1890s were a boom time for Chicago, spurred on by the city's huge meatpacking and stockyard business and construction of the world's first steel-framed skyscrapers. At ten stories the Lexington and its 362 rooms were built to an expensive fireproof European plan. The new hotel promised guests cafes, a refined Dutch Room and "cuisine and service unexcelled". The Hotel opened shortly before the launch of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (also known as the World's Fair) in October 1892 in Chicago, showcasing American ingenuity and culture, an idea borrowed from London's Great Exhibition of 1851. As the Exposition opened, the Lexington welcomed as a guest 23rd US President Benjamin Harrison (in office 1889-1893), who addressed a large crowd of onlookers from the Hotel's balcony. But boom time for the Lexington was temporary. As the first two decades of the twentieth century passed, the Hotel's once-smart neighbourhood declined. Respectable residents increasingly moved out to the city's North Shore, whilst light industry and shifting new populations moved in.

This suited Capone. By 1928 he had virtual control both of Cicero and of this, less salubrious, southern end of Michigan Avenue. The Lexington was also close enough to Lake Michigan for Capone to hear the hooters of his bootleg motor cruisers depositing their illicit cargoes from the smuggling run from Canada. His beer truck convoys rumbled past the Hotel at night. In late July 1928, Capone quietly moved into the Lexington, registering under the name 'George Phillips'. Reporters from the Chicago daily *Herald and Examiner* soon got wind of Capone's new billet and rang the Hotel Manager for confirmation. The Lexington's Manager was the soul of discretion: '*Al Capone in my hotel? Why the very idea!*', he told the press. Capone took over most of the fourth and fifth floors (over 50 rooms), accommodating thirty Italian bodyguards, his Greek mistress, personal chef, assorted messengers and gangsters' molls. Capone himself occupied a reinforced and lavish fifth floor suite with a large bay window overlooking 22nd Street and Michigan Avenue and sporting a luxurious green-tiled bathroom. In Capone's office – in which he held a daily business meeting – hung portraits of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and incumbent Chicago Mayor Thompson. Secret passages were reputedly added between rooms for use in the event of a police raid. Armed thugs watched the corridors and lobby whilst a succession of business associates, corrupt officials and police officers paid Capone court. The Head of the Chicago Crime Commission was even granted an audience in August 1928, at which he begged Capone not to interfere in the coming November US Presidential election. Flattered, Capone agreed. Whenever Capone left the Lexington's

Boarded-up Lexington Hotel Grand Lobby, 1994 (renamed New Michigan Hotel in 1938).
Author's collection

lobby, to be driven about Chicago in his four-ton bullet-proof 1928 V8 Cadillac Town Sedan – this armoured beast is set to be auctioned later this year – up to 18 heavily-set bodyguards were seen to accompany him. From this last eyrie of crime Capone clung to power whilst Wall Street crashed and the contradictions of Prohibition moved to their inevitable conclusion. The end of Scarface's career was fast approaching. From May 1929 to March 1930 he served a nine-month prison term for carrying a concealed weapon. Meanwhile, the Justice Department and Untouchables kept close watch over the Lexington with one undercover SIU Agent – M F Malone – checked in as a guest to observe the crime boss's movements. On 30 July 1931, now indicted and awaiting trial for income tax evasion, a still-confident, cigar-smoking Capone held a press conference at the Lexington dressed in black silk pyjamas with white piping. Laughing, he told the press that he expected only a light sentence. He told the *New York Times* that: "*When I leave this hotel, it's my goodbye to the racket.*" It was a fateful prophecy: Capone never returned.

After Capone's conviction the Lexington's owners attempted to rebrand their faded palace, hoping to dispel its previous reputation. In 1938 it was renamed the New Michigan Hotel. But the area's nose-diving fortunes after 1945 would ultimately seal the Lexington's fate. A popular kosher restaurant – Mama Batt's - kept its doors open on the Hotel's ground floor from 1950-1970, but otherwise the Lexington degenerated into a flop house, frequented by vagrants and prostitutes. It closed in 1980 yet took a further 15 years to die. The ground floor was boarded up, broken windows let the elements in and the Lexington was despoiled by drug addicts and vandals. Even so, the building held enough historical attention for it to be listed in 1985. The following year a live and lurid US television special presented by Geraldo Rivera filmed what was billed as the opening of Capone's 'private vault' in the Hotel's basement. In an echo of its anti-prohibition heritage, only a few empty whisky bottles were found. Interest in the Lexington was further rekindled by the 1987 Brian de Palma-directed film 'The Untouchables'. The Roosevelt University at 430 South Michigan Avenue and the upper foyer of the Chicago Theatre, East Lake Street, stood in as film locations. By 1989 plans were unveiled to renovate the Hotel to the tune of $28 million. But structural damage had taken a severe toll on the Lexington and the late 1980s plunge in local real estate prices finished it off. Every subsequent scheme to save it foundered. As late as 1994, the casual passerby – without lingering long in the high crime area of the South Side – could walk past the ravaged ground floor and observe the broken windows and peeling wallpaper of Capone's fifth floor bay window flapping in Chicago's notoriously biting wind. Faded whitewash letters on the blackened brickwork plaintively announced the Hotel's name. It was a blighted place at which to shiver and move on. In 1995 the Chicago city authorities condemned the Hotel as a 'death trap' and 'public nuisance'. Demolition crews razed it to the ground. The last of Capone's Chicago haunts, the Lexington shared the fate of its predecessors. Today, the Four Deuces is a vacant space of waste ground. The Hawthorne Hotel burnt down in 1970 and is now a car park. The former Metropole Hotel was demolished and replaced by the Motor Row rental condominiums (left vacant between 2008 and 2012 after their Lithuanian property developer pulled out and left the United States). In 2008 the Lexington site was similarly redeveloped. It opened as Lexington Park, a sanitised development at the corner of South Michigan Avenue and East Cermak Road. In 2012 it was renamed the Lex and combines a 35-storey block of glass-fronted apartments alongside a separate 7-storey tower of loft flats. But the new building's recent history has not been happy. The Lex has suffered from poor occupancy rates since the credit crunch of 2008. In 2013 the local Chicago real estate market is still only gradually recuperating. When asked, some local residents say they know who is really to blame. Al Capone may have checked out of his last Chicago lair eighty two years ago but his infamy lives on.

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