

# SEA ISLE CITY HISTORY

## -- THE CRONECKERS AND THEIR GUESTS --

It operated for 78 years. It became a Sea Isle institution which served up to ten thousand visitors annually. Names such as Woodrow Wilson, J.P. Morgan and Douglas Fairbanks showed up on its guest lists. When it opened in the 1880s, it was called the "Hotel de Bellevue." Later it came to be known simply as "Cronecker's."

It was also in the 1880s that Fritz and Caroline Cronecker came to town from Philadelphia. They recognized that the Sea Isle hospitality industry was about to explode. So they jumped right in.



Joseph Friedrich (Fritz) Cronecker



Margaretha Carolina (Caroline) Cronecker

### **The Cronecker Story**

The history of the Croneckers' early adventures in the Sea Isle hotel business has become a bit muddled over the years. Several versions exist, but it seems reasonable to use the two most contemporary accounts to tell the story. One is an interview given by Caroline herself to the Cape May County Times on her 67<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1918. The other is a set of actual hotel registers from the time.

According to Caroline's interview, Fritz and she came to Sea Isle in the mid 1880s and settled into the Bellevue on the west side of Landis Avenue between 40<sup>th</sup> Street and JFK Boulevard. The Croneckers had a hand in running the Bellevue, and apparently became so popular that the proprietor, Mr. Charles Bittner, became jealous and compelled them to vacate.

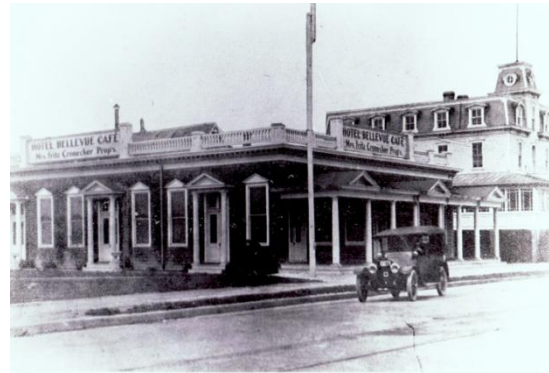
(It's intriguing to note that in 1887, while Bittner still owned the Bellevue, Fritz Cronecker apparently had the foresight to purchase the land adjacent to it. That land was to become the site of Cronecker's Cafe twenty years later.)

Fritz next owned the Depot Hotel adjacent to the West Jersey Railroad Station. He subsequently sold that, and in 1894 moved on to the Tivoli Hotel on the corner of JFK Boulevard and Pleasure Avenue. It was at the Tivoli that he died the next year, leaving Caroline to raise their children.

To support her family, she managed to purchase the Bellevue in 1896 and renamed it “Mrs. Fritz Cronecker’s Hotel Bellevue.” During her 31 years as proprietor, Caroline enlarged and improved the property, added a cafe building on the south side, and saw her hotel, bar, and restaurant become the most popular stopping place in Sea Isle City.



*Cronecker's Bellevue Hotel on Landis Ave*



*Cafe added near the corner of JFK Blvd*

When Caroline died in 1927, the hotel complex passed to her children. One of her sons, Gustav (Gus), assisted primarily by his brother, G. Fred, managed the Cronecker interests for the next 24 years. (Caroline's funeral services were conducted at the hotel.)

Another son, Richard, had taken himself out of the picture when he inexplicably disappeared in 1918 while serving as Sea Isle's mayor. Despite several Elvis-type sightings, he was never heard from again.



*Six Cronecker children: G. Fred, Richard, Minnie, Tillie, Gus and George (both seated)*



*Gus Cronecker*

When Gus took over, he enlarged the restaurant and installed a 36-foot-long bar on the Landis Avenue side – probably during Prohibition. Apparently this was legal as long as he just served Dr. Pepper. The new dining room had an architectural distinction: it was the largest in the state without columns to support the ceiling.

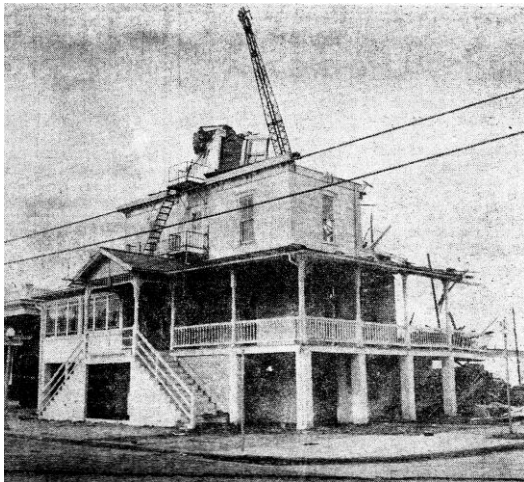
In a tip of the hat to gentility, Gus had the spittoons removed from the premises, he placed a water trough in front of the bar to collect cigar butts and other jetsam, and he put in a brass foot rail.

(photo from a later postcard)



Cronecker's was a genuine family affair. In 1951, Miss Margaretta Pfeiffer, Fritz and Caroline's granddaughter, purchased the hotel from her Uncle Gus. She maintained its Victorian flavor – without elevators or air conditioning. It was at Cronecker's in the 1950s that Cape May County's unofficial anthem was first played on the piano: "On the Way to Cape May."

Toward the end, the hotel wasn't making a profit. When Margaretta died in 1965, her will specified that the property be sold. After being vacant for three years, the hotel was demolished to be replaced by the LaCosta Lounge and Motel which, in turn, is now in the process of probably being replaced by a proposed new complex at the corner of Landis Avenue and JFK Boulevard.



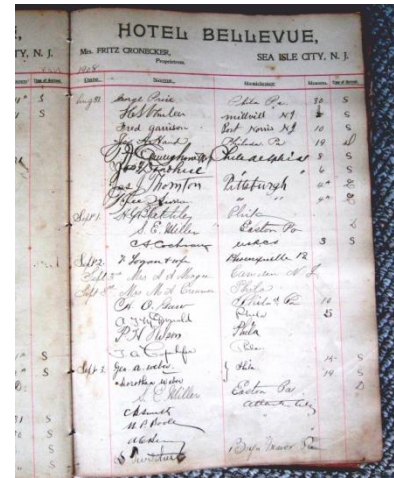
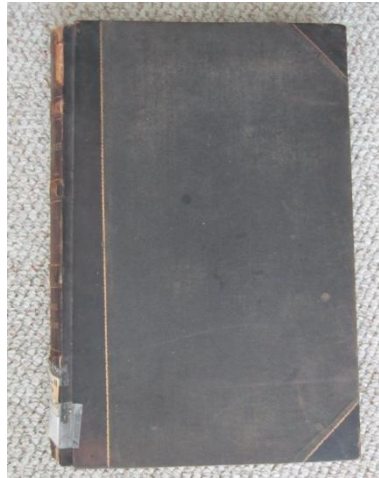
The hotel demolition photo shown at the left is from an undated copy of the Philadelphia Bulletin (c1968).

### **The Cronecker Guest Books**

The Sea Isle City Historical Museum is fortunate to have been given a number of Cronecker memorabilia by the family and by others, including the portraits of Fritz and Caroline which hung in their barroom for many years. But perhaps the most intriguing item is a set of six volumes of hotel registers dating from 1889 to 1943.



Each volume measures 11 by 16 inches. Taken together, the set weighs about 40 pounds. They tell a lot about those who visited Sea Isle – with a bit of humor and fantasy thrown in.



In the beginning, almost all guests came from Philadelphia. As Cronecker's moved into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the demographic changed so that now people were listing suburbs as their residences, and Sea Isle began to attract visitors from around the country. Some even came from Miami to sample Sea Isle's version of sun and sand. Eventually, people would return summer after summer.

Many members of early city administrations had homes elsewhere, and would travel to Sea Isle for few days every week to conduct their business. A prime example was Mayor Richard Atwater. (He seemed to have preferred Room Number 4.)

People with business on the island would stay at Cronecker's. One frequent visitor was lawyer Charles K. Landis, Jr., the son of Sea Isle's founder. There was a time when he would sign in almost weekly. Charles Landis Sr.'s signature appears on June 2, 1900 – just ten days before he died at his home in Vineland.

Charles K. Landis, Jr.

Charles K. Landis, Sr.

If the books are to be believed, and why not, guests registered in increasing numbers from places like Canada, Mexico, England, Germany, Italy, Russia, Australia, Brazil, the Philippines, and Jerusalem. Sea Isle was famous.

Many local names appeared over the years, names which echo through to today. Among them: Townsend, Ludlam, Endicott, Sofroney, Cini, Barth, Hand, and naturally, Cronecker and Pfeiffer.

Some guests, presumably salesmen or those looking for employment, would list their specialties: "Liquor and cheese merchant," "Chaperone and trained nurse," "Music teacher and voice culture." It was free advertising.

Some guests, or their mischievous companions, would enter little statements such as “owes his last bill,” “red hot party,” “lazy bones,” and “beer drinker.” Others would list “home,” “anywhere,” or even “Yellowstone Park” as their places of residence. All in good fun.

Warm hospitality was shown to all. The following note was written in the hotel register for Friday January 24, 1908: “(Nine of us) arrived at midnight...through six feet of snow...found the Bellevue in utter darkness. Nevertheless...served with a sumptuous feed before 1 am. Thanks to Mrs. Fred Cronecker.”

(And during the devastating storm of 1962, Margaretta Pfeiffer refused to shut her doors and kept them open to provide room and board for rescue and repair workers.)

### **Welcoming the Rich and Famous**

A truly impressive array of celebrity names were recorded in the hotel's register. Here's a sampling:

Presidents Cleveland, McKinley, and Wilson,

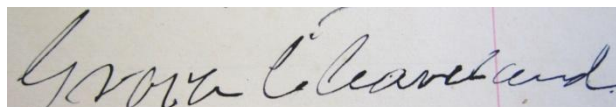
J.P. Morgan, Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, Astor, and Biddle,

Prince Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm (Germany), Lloyd George (England), Georges Clemenceau (France), and Count Togo (Japan),

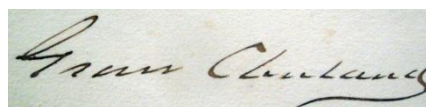
Fatty Arbuckle, Douglas Fairbanks, the wives of John McGraw and Christy Mathewson of baseball fame (just for lunch), and William Jennings Bryan,

And finally, Mafioso Salvatore Maranzano (Little Caesar), who was gunned down just 19 days after he had purportedly signed the Cronecker register.

Whether or not these people actually stayed at Cronecker's is a matter of conjecture. There were some misspellings such as “Cleaveland” and “Rockfeller.”

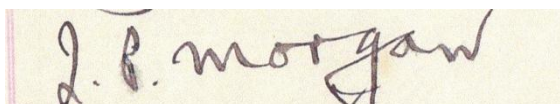


*Cronecker's Grover Cleaveland*

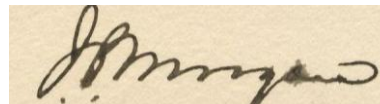


*Authentic Grover Cleveland*

The signatures usually didn't match the celebrities' handwriting. Of course, it could be that these people were so important that someone else signed in for them.



*Cronecker's J.P. Morgan*



*Authentic J.P. Morgan*

Certainly some of the entries were meant to be humorous, such as the “Imperial German Government and Staff” who registered smack in the middle of World War I.

Some of the names are probably genuine. It's fun to think that any of these well-known figures had spent at least one night in Sea Isle City.

But It doesn't really matter. Through the years Caroline, Gus, Margaretta, and the rest of the family played host to more than half-a-million happy and satisfied customers. That's what counts.

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To learn more about these early times in Sea Isle, and to see a display of Cronecker's memorabilia, please visit the Sea Isle City Historical Museum at 48th Street and Central Avenue. Hours are 10-3 Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday; and 10-1 Saturday. (Beginning October 1, we will be closed on Saturday.) Access our website at [www.seaislemuseum.com](http://www.seaislemuseum.com), or call 609-263-2992.

***This "Spotlight on History" was written by  
Sea Isle City Historical Society Volunteer Bob Thibault***

***Unless otherwise noted,  
photos were provided courtesy of the Sea Isle City Historical Museum***

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