

Lexington has date with a wrecking ball

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Spread the word among the guys and dolls. And watch out for falling bricks. There's a contract out on the Lexington Hotel.

You know the place in the 2100 block of South Michigan Avenue, just west of McCormick Place.

Big Al Capone ran his bootlegging and vice rackets out of there during Prohibition—the dry years of the 1920s when making liquor was illegal. That is, until the “G” and Eliot Ness got him on tax evasion.

Now, the hotel itself is facing government assault.

Moving with unaccustomed speed against what is widely believed to be the last vestige of Capone's criminal empire in Chicago, city officials acknowledged Friday that they have put out a contract to hit the Lexington.

The weapon of choice is a wrecking ball. And taxpayers are paying to have the deed done: a demolition contract worth \$671,000 to U.S. Dismantlement Corp.

Workers already have gutted the interior of the first floor and are eyeing the upstairs Art Deco ballroom.

The 10-story brick and terra cotta structure, designed by the architect of the Congress Hotel, Clinton Warren, opened in 1892, serving as a residential hotel. President Benjamin Harrison once spoke from its balcony.

No longer elegant, its fine dining and lodging gone with Capone, the 103-year-old Lexington is empty and crumbling. It may offer lots of nostalgia but not much else.

City officials condemned it as a public nuisance and a safety hazard. Demolition began Thursday.

“It's in terrible shape and needs to come down,” James Walsh, demolition superintendent, said Friday as he warmed himself in a truck outside the hotel.

“It's a dangerous building,” said co-worker Bob Westlund with a

nod.

The Lexington had been on the city's hit list of derelict buildings since it kicked out its last guest in 1980.

But its historic and architectural value had won it protection as an official landmark. That designation was quietly removed last week by the Commission on City Landmarks, acting at the request of city lawyers.

Thomas J. Murphy, an attorney for the Lexington's owner, Dr. Ganesan Visvabharathy, said his client “had hoped right to the end, and he still hopes, to develop 126 apartments on the site.”

Visvabharathy acquired the hotel in 1989, but his plans to renovate it never got off the ground.

In July, he put the hotel up for sale.

A decade ago, the Lexington appeared on its way back to respectability.

Owned by the Sunbow Foundation, a women's self-help training group, the hotel swarmed with trainees preparing for jobs in the construction trades.

Sunbow trained more than 200 women in the mid-1980s, but efforts to rehabilitate the hotel collapsed when an operating budget of public money ran out.

In 1986 came the embarrassing episode of “The Mystery of Al Capone's Vaults,” a television extravaganza narrated by talk-show personality Geraldo Rivera.

The show, with a worldwide audience of 60 million, was billed as a live exploration of the mobster's supposed secret vaults under the hotel.

But a disappointed Rivera was able to produce only a couple of empty whiskey bottles.

Capone was indeed the most notorious person to occupy the hotel and was known to enjoy watching his fleet of beer trucks, passing as if on parade, below his fifth-floor headquarters.

In the years after Capone went to prison in 1932, the Lexington

slipped from bordello to flophouse to firetrap.

In the 1950s, it was briefly renamed the New Michigan Hotel.

It is perhaps with good riddance that the building is falling to the wrecking ball.

That is the view of the Chicago Crime Commission, which as long ago as 1919 declared war on organized crime.

On Friday, commission President Donald Mulack clearly was not in a mood to reminisce.

“Perhaps at last,” he said, “we can put to rest any misplaced nostalgia for the violence, crime and corruption of the past and bury that image of Chicago once and for all.”