



News Release
For Immediate Release

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Fire Protection Preserves Story of Chicago's Heritage

CHICAGO—Stories from Chicago's past are materialized in the brick, mortar, plaster, and wood of the historic buildings that dot the downtown area. The distinctive architectural styles symbolize the great heritage of this bustling city carved along Lake Michigan. There are over 740 historic buildings in Cook County registered with the National Register of Historic Places and many more yet to be discovered. Upgrading these buildings to modern standards is not only crucial to the preservation of Chicago's history, but to the safety of its occupants as well. Tenants and building owners have been increasingly aware of the plight of older buildings in the Chicago area after the deadly fire in the Cook County Administration building revealed nearly 800 high-rises are without fire sprinklers. Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating, a mechanical contractor specializing in retrofitting older buildings, has seen a renewed interest in fire protection systems for these properties. "The volume of interest is significantly higher than usual," states Brian Conway, executive vice president of Great Lakes. "Maintaining the integrity of these older buildings and keeping them in compliance with current codes and modern amenities, is a challenging task, yet one that we feel very comfortable in undertaking."

According to Mike Jackson, an architect with the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, improving systems in historic buildings requires significantly more coordination, time and effort because a contractor or architect must work within an often irreplaceable envelope and finished design. Plaster moldings may be too tight to structural fixtures to allow for room to work or hide systems. Great Lakes faced this challenge in their renovation project at the Union League Club of Chicago, which was constructed in the 1890s and is one of the most prestigious and prominent clubs in the U.S. The interior of the club offered no suspended ceilings as in modern facilities to hide the fire protection piping, and elaborate, ornamental moldings that line the ceilings and walls in every room could not be destroyed.

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Jim Griffin, project manager for sprinkler retrofitting, devised a way to side-mount the pipe behind the moldings. Because the type of piping normally used in sprinkler systems was too large to fit behind the moldings, Great Lakes pipe fitters soldered small diameter copper pipe as a substitute. Then with painstaking care the fragile moldings were cut into small sections and numbered. After piping was in place, plasterers and carpenters came in to reinstall and patch the moldings – back in the exact spot they were originally situated. Griffin consulted with a preservation architect to color-match the aged paint on the moldings in order to complete the patching. Great Lakes provided total turn-key operations on the entire project – from piping to plaster – and worked closely with the architect and owners to maintain architectural integrity and aesthetics.

Renovation projects such as these require extensive strategic planning to integrate the placement of piping into these historic treasures. At Chicago's oldest hotel, Palmer House Hilton, Griffin's crew from Great Lakes had to analyze the decorative and irreplaceable paintings on the grand lobby ceiling, the main focus of the area, to strategically place sprinkler heads. Color samples were taken in order for the sprinkler manufacturer to match the color of the sprinkler heads and cover plates to the color of the painting. Now, the sprinklers in the ceiling are virtually indiscernible.

Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating has specialized in fire sprinkler retrofitting for the last 20 years, often maintaining bizarre work schedules to accommodate building owners and tenants. Currently, Great Lakes is installing fire protection systems at the landmark Drake Hotel in downtown Chicago. Other retrofits projects in some of Chicago's most prized architectural treasures include work at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Hall, Amoco building, John Hancock building, Knickerbocker Hotel, Merchandise Mart and First National Plaza.

Established in 1946, Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating Company is a full service mechanical contracting firm specializing in complex plumbing, mechanical piping, and fire protection. Great Lakes employs over 300 people from its Chicago office at 4521 W. Diversey Ave.