

Downtown Department Stores

A Retail Center In the Center of the City

Shopping used to be an event. In Atlanta and elsewhere, shoppers of a certain age will recall ladies wearing dresses and gloves for a day of perusing stores. And there could be more to shopping than just picking out new clothes and shoes or housewares. A day of shopping sometimes included a lunch at the store's restaurant or even, in the case of one Atlanta department store, a ride on a monorail.



South Downtown, 1920s

For many decades, Peachtree Street – and its surrounding thoroughfares – was “the” shopping destination for people from Atlanta and points beyond. A variety of shoe stores, furniture stores, pharmacies, and other retailers all once had a presence in the area. But it was Atlanta's big department stores that captured the imagination of shoppers throughout the region and helped to cement downtown Atlanta's reputation as the region's center for lifestyle and fashion. Though the glory days of America's department stores has long-since faded, the

memory of Atlanta's retail giants remains strong in the minds of those who grew up shopping in the downtown area.

Rich's

Over the years, there have been many department stores in downtown Atlanta: J. P. Allen, Kessler's, and Chamberlain-Johnson-Dubose, to name a few. But, when one thinks of downtown Atlanta department stores, chances are one-word springs to mind: Rich's. It seems that nearly any longtime Atlantan has a personal story about Rich's. Rich's has its roots in the journey of two teenage Hungarian brothers, Mauritius and William Reich, who had made their way to America. They initially settled with relatives in Ohio, where they changed their last name to Rich and Mauritius adopted the name Morris. They gained jobs as traveling salesmen and, in the years after the Civil War, made their way to Atlanta.



M. Rich Bros. Whitehall St.

Once in Atlanta, Morris borrowed \$500 dollars from his brother to open M. Rich and Co., a small dry goods store on Whitehall Street. The retailer would prosper, with generations of the family working for the store that came to be known as Rich's. Over the years, the store would grow, gaining a regional reputation and an intensely loyal customer base.



Rich's on Broad St.

In the 1920s, Rich's moved away from Whitehall Street, opening its flagship location, at Broad and Alabama Streets in downtown Atlanta. It was here that some of Atlanta's most beloved traditions would take root: holidays with the Great Tree on the Crystal Bridge, the Pink Pig, the *Fashionata* fashion show, and the Magnolia Room tearoom with its classic chicken salad and coconut cake.

Even the building itself, with its distinctive clock over the entrance, became a part of city lore. Even when Rich's opened stores in the region's shopping malls, some of these traditions followed.



Rich's Trademark Clock

A few years after Rich's centennial, the company was acquired by Federated Department Stores, an Ohio-based retail management corporation. By the early 1990s, the landmark downtown Rich's store had closed its doors for the last time. In the coming years, the Rich's name would slowly begin to disappear until all remaining stores operated as Macy's. As for the flagship Broad Street location, most of that complex became a federal government property, known as the Sam Nunn Atlanta Federal Center. The store may be gone, but the march of time cannot erase the years of memories of generations of Atlantans.

Regenstein's

Like the Rich brothers, Julius Regenstein was a European immigrant, having come to the United States from Germany. In 1872, Regenstein opened a store on Whitehall Street offering women's apparel. By 1890, less than two decades after it opened, the store moved to a larger space, still on Whitehall Street. According to Atlanta historian Franklin Garrett, one point that differentiated Regenstein's from its competitors was a member of the sales staff. Regenstein's, he notes, employed the south's first female salesperson.



*Sales Clerk in front of
Regenstein's*

In 1914, Julius Regenstein passed away but, with his sons at the helm, the store continued to prosper. By 1929, plans were underway for yet another move. Its newest location would be built at the southeast corner of Peachtree and Cain Streets. Ahead of the move, the new store was described by the Atlanta Constitution as an "ornate three-story structure of generous proportions and beautiful architectural design." With the Whitehall store remaining open, Regenstein's became a two-location retailer. The store would remain at this site for decades to come, while expanding its offerings in later years to include children's clothing.



Regenstein's on Peachtree St

In 1976, the Regenstein family relinquished control of the store, selling it to a Texas-based company. Two years later, the downtown store closed for good. But, by that time, Regenstein's stores could be found in Perimeter and North DeKalb Malls and Lenox Square. Those stores all have since closed. The street level of the Peachtree Street building is now home to a location of the Hooters restaurant.

Muse's

Originally from Alabama, George Muse came to Atlanta as a teenager. He found work in the Whitehall Street store owned by Dr. R.P. Kimbro. He quickly learned the retail business and, in short time, was able to purchase Kimbro's store. In the years to come, Muse would continue to expand the store.



Muse's on Peachtree

By 1916, Muse's store is said to have built a solid reputation among shoppers in Atlanta and points beyond. It was during this time that a new location was planned. The new store would be designed by Philip Trammell Shutze, who had played a role in the design of the Rich's Broad Street flagship store. When completed, the new Muse's would sit on Broad Street, where it intersects with Walton Street. It would be 1921

before the seven story store officially opened, four years after the death of the company's founder, George Muse.

As the years went on, Muse's continued to expand its offerings for its customers. It opened other stores, all the while maintaining its Broad Street location. In the last 1970s and 1980s passed, downtown Atlanta was becoming less and less of a shopping destination and Muse's began to struggle financially. By 1990, the company had filed for bankruptcy and store had shuttered. Today, the Broad Street building, where generations shopped for fine clothing, is a residential development, the Lofts at Muses.



Muse's Iconic Sign

J.M. High

Joseph Madison High was a Georgia native who came to Atlanta from Madison, Georgia, when he was 25 years old. Soon after arriving, he and a partner – E.D. Herring – opened a dry goods store on Whitehall Street known as High and Herring. By 1884, however, High had purchased his partner's interest in the store, and it became known as J.M. High and Company. J.M. High passed away in 1906, but the store continued to prosper, with another move coming in 1918 to a location across Whitehall Street.



J.M. High & Company building

Unfortunately, further details about the store's future after High's passing are unclear. The company did, eventually, cease operations, but High's name lives on in Atlanta. After his death, High's widow, Harriet 'Hattie' Harwell Wilson High kept the family's home, a Tudor-style mansion a few miles north on Peachtree Street. In 1926, she donated the house for use by the Atlanta Art Association. Today, the residence's onetime site is home to the High Museum of Art.

Davison's

In the last decade of the 19th century, a trio of former J.M. High associates partnered in a dry goods store. Like the other downtown department stores, Douglass, Thomas and Davison – named for the partners – began on Whitehall Street. And, like those retailers, it would move to other, larger spaces on Whitehall. Over the years, as a new partner was added or an original partner retired or passed away, the store would change names. By 1901, the enterprise was known as Davison-Paxon-Stokes Company.

In 1925, the store merged with New York's R.H. Macy & Company. Around this same time, plans were undertaken to move to a still larger space, this one further north on Peachtree Street, between Ellis Street and what was then Cain Street (now Andrew Young International Boulevard). The new location opened to the public in 1927.

The Peachtree Street store – designed by Philip Trammell Shutze, who also built flagship Rich's and Muse's stores - was modeled on Macy's New York flagship. Reported to be the largest department store south of Philadelphia at the time, it was marked by marble floors, high ceilings, and a spacious street level sales floor.



Davidson's, 1927

In the ensuing decades, the store would go through other name changes, from Davison-Paxson to eventually becoming simply Macy's. In 2003, the Peachtree Street store closed its doors for the last time. By this time, downtown Atlanta was not the retail center it once had been and there was not another store waiting to inhabit the Macy's space. In the years since it closed, the space has housed a variety of tenants, including a data center and the city's emergency response center. In recent years, the bottom floors of the building have been transformed into an event space.

- Takeaways:**
1. Downtown Atlanta was once a retail center for the city.
 2. There were more downtown department stores than Rich's and Macy's.
 3. Some department stores dated back to Reconstruction.
 4. Downtown department stores are now a thing of the city's past.

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