

Peachtree Plaza

Over a Century of History at the Corner of Peachtree and Cain

Writing about the city of Atlanta in 1867, a newspaper in Milledgeville, then the capital of Georgia, made note of the fast pace of life lived by “our friends in Atlanta.” The article concluded that “...to a stranger, the whole city seems to be running on wheels, and all of its inhabitants continually blowing off steam.”



Peachtree Street, c. 1870s

From its earliest inception, the City of Atlanta gained the reputation as a fast town. The New York Times in the 1860s said as much, describing Atlanta as “a go-ahead town, where enterprise, license and lawlessness form a blissful and inseparable trinity.” Atlanta...was a city on the move. . . and it was moving fast. Only four short years after its Civil War destruction, Atlanta was ambitious enough to launch a successful bid to become Georgia’s fifth capital. As with its inception, following the Civil War, Atlanta grew up around the city’s railroad terminal. The southern part of the city, where the

terminal was located, became the business district and, as the city prospered, what was then the northern end of town became residential property and the address of choice for Atlanta’s monied crowd was the northern end of Peachtree Street.

Extravagant mansions - part of a corridor of magnificent homes - lined both sides of Peachtree Street and one of those mansions belonged to banker John H. James. James built his grand, eclectic house, and lived there only one year when, in 1870, he sold the residence to the State for use as the first official governor’s residence in Atlanta.

Over the course of the next 51 years, seventeen governors would call the James mansion home. Among them was Alexander Stephens, the former Vice President of the Confederacy. John Brown Gordon, the storied Civil War general-turned-politician. Hoke Smith sandwiched two terms as governor between stints as U.S. Interior Secretary and a U.S. Congressman. And, Hugh Dorsey, who prosecuted the Leo Frank murder case, served two terms in the office during this time.



John James home, Peachtree at Cain Street, Atlanta

By 1921, with the James house falling into disrepair, Governor Dorsey moved into another home, effectively ending the service of the Peachtree Street mansion. Atlanta was continuing its rapid transformation, having increased its population nearly 10-fold in the more than five decades since the James mansion had appeared on Peachtree Street. Businesses were expanding northward beyond the railroads, displacing the elaborate mansions in their wake.



the streets of downtown Atlanta, c. 1920

By late 1923, the James home had been demolished and construction had begun on the new tenant at Peachtree and Cain Streets, the 13-story Henry Grady Hotel. Named for the Athens-born newspaperman and orator, *The Grady* would be a focal point for tourists and locals alike and, often, the source of community gossip surrounding politicians and businessmen. The Hotel's Paradise Room regularly hosted acts including – in the early 1950's – the Merry Mutes, a pantomime act that featured future Atlanta improv mainstay Phil Erickson and a gifted physical comedian named Dick Van Dyke.

As Atlanta progressed through the twentieth century, Peachtree Street appeared to be in a near-constant state of change. By the century's midpoint, the area around Peachtree and Cain Streets bore no resemblance to its past. The grand homes were all gone, victims of commercial growth. Buses had all but replaced streetcars, sharing the road with the omnipresent automobile. And, more than once, the corner of Peachtree and Cain was a focal point in the growing social unrest, with the white-only Grady the site of some anti-segregation protests.

But, like the James mansion before it, the Grady would find that its time had passed. In 1961, architect John Portman began transforming the downtown skyline, opening the first part of his sprawling Peachtree Center complex. Over the course of the next ten years, that first building would be followed by 6 more, including the Hyatt Regency hotel and more than 80 floors of office space. Then, in 1972, he set his sights on what would be the southern point of the complex, the corner of Peachtree and Cain.



The Henry Grady Hotel

The Henry Grady Hotel was imploded in 1972 and in its place, the gleaming, 73-story, 1,000 room Peachtree Plaza hotel rose. At over 700 feet high, the Portman-designed Peachtree Plaza was, at the time, not just the tallest building in Atlanta, but the tallest hotel in the world. When the Peachtree Plaza opened in 1976, it offered the largest ballroom in Atlanta and featured a 7-story, open atrium that rose out of an "indoor-lake."



Peachtree Plaza hotel atrium, c. 1976

By the time the Peachtree Plaza opened, more than a century had passed since John James had constructed his Peachtree Street mansion. And, in that time, Atlanta had grown from a railroad town making a comeback to a major metropolitan center.

And no place represents Atlanta's transition from small town to city with international ambition like the corner of Peachtree and Cain.

- Takeaways:**
1. Began as part of Peachtree Street's residential era
 2. A private house that became the governor's mansion for 70 years
 3. Henry Grady Hotel was symbolic of Peachtree Street as business center
 4. Peachtree Plaza symbolic of the city's growing convention business

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