

The Equitable Building and the English-American Building

Atlanta Enters the Skyscraper Age



*Midtown Atlanta skyline
Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

When one thinks of skyscrapers, chances are it conjures images of the skylines of big cities. Their streets lined with tall, gleaming towers of glass and steel, rising 50, 60, even 70 or more stories above the street. It likely does not bring to mind images of buildings with 15, 10, or sometimes even fewer floors. But, at the dawn of the skyscraper age, that was not uncommon.

Merriam-Webster defines skyscraper as, simply, “a very tall building.” That leaves the term open to a great deal of interpretation. That also might help to explain why some shorter buildings were once considered skyscrapers. In a place where the average building was no more than 3 or 4 stories, then an 8-story construction would, by comparison, be “a very tall building.”

Even New York City, the place that has practically made skyscrapers into an art form, once claimed as its tallest buildings structures that would seem less than imposing by today’s standards. In 1889, construction was completed on the Tower Building on Broadway. Topping out at 11 stories, it is considered by some to be New York’s very first skyscraper.

Atlanta entered the skyscraper age three years after the completion of the Tower Building. This was due, in part, to one man, businessman and real estate developer Joel Hurt. Born in pre-Civil War Alabama, Hurt came to Atlanta in 1875. Once there, he worked in the real estate and insurance fields. In 1886, his East Atlanta Land Company acquired more than 100 acres east of the city on which Hurt developed Atlanta’s first planned suburb, Inman Park.

Beginning in 1891, through the East Atlanta Land Company, Joel Hurt constructed a building at the corner of Edgewood Avenue & what was then Pryor Street (now Park Place). The eight-story building - designed by the Chicago firm of Burnham and Root - would come to be considered Atlanta’s first skyscraper. When it opened in 1892, the 117’ high skyscraper was called The Equitable Building, after its financier, the Equitable Life Assurance Society.

Though taller than any building Atlanta had seen before, the Equitable struggled to lease spaces in its first year. At its opening, it apparently only had four tenants. That would begin to change soon, though, when the struggling Commercial Travelers Savings Bank – located a few blocks away - was reorganized – reportedly at board member Joel Hurt’s urging. The restructured institution became a type of asset manager, or trust company. In 1893, the newly-renamed Trust Company Bank moved into the Equitable Building. Within a few years, Hurt would become the bank’s president and the Equitable Building would come to be known as the Trust Company of Georgia Building.



*Equitable Building
c. 1892
Via Wikimedia Commons*

The Equitable Building remained a part of the Atlanta skyline for nearly eight decades. By the late 1960's, though, it had been dwarfed by newer buildings, some more than twice its height. In 1971, 79 years after it opened, the Equitable Building was razed. Today, all that remains of Atlanta's first skyscraper are some of the columns that lined its street-level base.



The English-American Building
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The Equitable Building may have been Atlanta's first skyscraper, but it was not the tallest building for long. In 1897, five years after the Equitable was completed, another structure took the title of Atlanta's tallest building. At 160' high, it was nearly fifty feet higher than its skyscraper predecessor a few blocks away.

In the 1890s, the English-American Loan and Trust Company was established and quickly moved to erect a structure to house their company and lease space to others. The structure - constructed on a narrow plot of land between Peachtree and Broad Streets - would become Atlanta's tallest building. The group hired Bradford Gilbert of New York City to design the building. Gilbert was no stranger to creating tall, steel-framed buildings, having designed New York's Tower Building. Within one year of the English-American Building's 1897 opening, it was home to its namesake

company, as well as to Atlanta offices of Rand McNally, Southern Bell, Otis Elevators, and the National Cash Register Company.

The English-American Building still stands today, making it the city's oldest surviving skyscraper. But, chances are, the average Atlantan – even someone familiar with downtown Atlanta - might never have heard of the English-American Building. However, refer to the building by its nickname – the Flatiron Building – and they likely will at least recognize it. The nickname comes from the building's thin, triangular shape. Viewed from certain angles, it can almost appear to be one-dimensional. Similarly, structures in New York City and Toronto also bear that moniker, though Atlanta's Flatiron pre-dates its New York counterpart by five years.

The Equitable and Flatiron Buildings have been followed by decades of newer and successively taller buildings. The Candler Building, the Rhodes-Haverty Building, the Westin Peachtree Plaza, and One Atlantic Center have all – at one time or another – held the title of Atlanta's tallest building. Since the early 1990's, that distinction has been claimed by Bank of America Plaza. Rising over 1,000 feet, it is nearly ten times higher than the Equitable Building, the structure that brought Atlanta into the skyscraper age.



Bank of America Plaza
atexplorer/Wikimedia

- Takeaways:**
1. Equitable Building is considered to be Atlanta's first skyscraper
 2. Symbolic of Peachtree Street transforming from residential to commercial
 3. Flatiron continues to be part of the city skyline after over 125 years

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