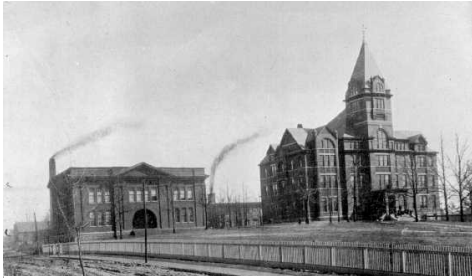# Georgia State University
From Evening School to Georgia's Largest University

Tech Tower and Shop, ca. 1899
Image via Wikimedia Commons / GA Tech

The Georgia School of Technology – or, as most people likely know it, Georgia Tech – has its beginnings in a need for change. In the late 19th century, Georgia was still attached to its agricultural roots. But times were changing, and industry was changing. That meant that Georgia needed to change, as well.

The school that would be Georgia Tech started classes in 1888 with lessons focused largely on mechanical engineering. By the early 1900's, the school had added other programs: civil, chemical, and electrical engineering. It was beginning to resemble a college. But Atlanta's pre-World War I business community needed a capable, educated workforce that was up to date on business trends. Engineering expertise was not enough. The School of Technology needed to find a way to meet this need.

It was around this time that one of the School's alumni, W. M. Fambrough, presented the idea for another curriculum, this one focused on the business world. That way, engineering students could expand their knowledge while businessmen could hone their skills. The classes, it was decided, would be taught in the evening, allowing working men to attend.

Whitehall Street, ca. 1915
Image via eBay

The Evening School of Commerce began with 44 students, at least half of whom were already employed in the Atlanta area, and one degree – the Bachelor of Commercial Science, or B.C.S. Though the initial classes were held on the Technology school's campus, the Evening School soon moved to the first of a series of locations in what is now downtown Atlanta. These included a number of buildings in the Fairlie-Poplar district, the Auburn Avenue corridor, and the Peachtree Arcade, an early twentieth century indoor shopping center along Peachtree Street, south of Five Points.

Peachtree Arcade
Image via GSU Library & Archives

In the World War I era, the school was faced with a challenge. At this time, the school's enrollment was all male. But, as more and more students joined the war effort, enrollment dropped. It managed to find what was a novel solution for the time: female students were allowed to enroll. In 1919, Annie T. Wise, a 51-year-old high school principal received a B.C.S. degree. Ironically, Wise had been opposed to coeducation in the high school she led. Yet, she is officially the first female graduate of what had – up to that point - been the all-male technology school.

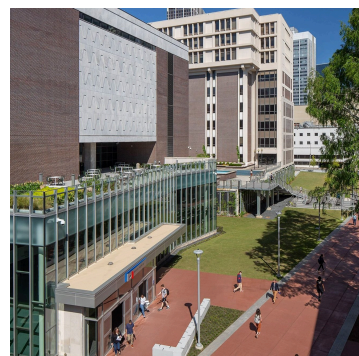Two decades after its founding, the Evening School underwent

a major change. By 1933, it was no longer part of Georgia Tech, having become an independent college. Over the next two decades, the school would operate independently and – for a time – under the umbrella of the University of Georgia, before finally gaining its independence for good.

In addition to the organizational changes, as time passed, the school added new programs and degrees. It was becoming more and more like a full-fledged college. In addition to the College of Business, a College of Arts and Sciences was added, as was a nursing school. These would be joined in years to come by six additional Colleges.

Though it had gained independence from Georgia Tech, there seemed to be some question as to what to call the college. Between 1933 and 1968, the school was known by no fewer than five different names, from the University System of Georgia's Evening School to Georgia State College. It would be 1969 before the college would settle on its current moniker, Georgia State University.

For much of its history, the school was a commuter college. Students – many of whom were non-traditional age – filled the campus primarily for classes but lived off-campus. That changed after the 1996 Olympics, when the Olympic Village athlete housing near Georgia Tech became the University's first dorms. The school no longer utilizes the Village, but since then, six dorm buildings have opened closer to the main campus.

In recent years, the University has continued to expand. Since the mid-twentieth century, the core of the campus has been a cluster of classroom buildings near Hurt Park. Today, the downtown campus now reaches from the former Turner Field to the Fairlie-Poplar neighborhood. It includes classrooms, libraries, housing, laboratories, sports facilities, an auditorium, a theater, and a law school. In 2016, Georgia State expanded further beyond the downtown area when it merged with Georgia Perimeter College.

GSU Library North, ca. 2021
Image via HGOR.com

Today, the school that began as the Evening School of Commerce is known as Georgia State University. From its initial 44 male students, it now boasts an enrollment of more than 50,000. From small spaces on the Georgia Tech campus and in downtown Atlanta, it now includes seven campuses in three counties. From the tiny Evening School, it has become Georgia's largest university.

Takeaways:
1. **Georgia Tech founded as Reconstruction-era trade school**
2. **State needed to stem loss of college-educated workforce.**
3. **Evening School created to teach Georgians about business opportunities**
4. **During the Depression, Evening School became independent entity.**
5. **Evening School is now Georgia State University.**

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