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A Brief History of Building High

The title of world's tallest skyscraper is only ever a temporary distinction. The Empire State Building held the honor for forty years, longer than any other skyscraper has, but half a century has passed since it surrendered the accolade. Its fifth successor, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, seized the mantle of loftiest building upon its completion in 2009.

Think back to when you first saw it. You were probably at least a little bit amazed. Certainly it helped if you saw Tom Cruise sprint across the side of it while dangling from a cable in *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol*. At 2,717 feet, the Burj Khalifa is almost twice the height of the Sears Tower, whose 1,450 feet set the world record when it opened in 1974.

Now take that three-and-a-half-decade timespan that it took to go from Sears Tower to Burj Khalifa and roll it back to a century earlier. Thirty-four years passed from the day the good citizens of New York City beheld the world's first ten-story office building—the Western Union Building of 1875—until the day they had to reconcile their minds with the world's first fifty-story skyscraper, the 1909 Metropolitan Life Tower. Mercifully, Tom Cruise was not around yet, or their heads might have exploded.

Skyscrapers are approaching their sesquicentennial anniversary. For nearly a century and a half they have stood as archetypes of technology and progress, symbolizing and manifesting the aspirations of humankind. But if we look today at the very first skyscrapers, now dwarfed by giants and dressed up like

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Greek temples from antiquity, we may find it hard to conceive that these too were once seen as modern marvels.

A ten-story building, after all, is hardly a remarkable sight to you or me or anyone now. But try to imagine that you have lived your whole life without ever seeing one. The main streets of your city have always been lined with stores and offices and hotels and apartments that are five stories tall at most. The reason is straightforward: Five stories is as far as anyone realistically can be expected to climb a staircase.



An 1874 illustration of New York before skyscrapers shows the near-uniform height of buildings interrupted by a few church steeples. (The artist shows the Brooklyn Bridge complete, although it was then under construction.)

Now imagine that suddenly the first ten-story building you have ever seen sprouts up from the sidewalk to soar above the others. Immediately, its neighbors on the block are overshadowed and under threat. More towers quickly follow in its wake, until the neat horizontal border of five-story rooflines you have known since childhood begins to resemble a lawn overrun by dandelions. And the dandelions keep getting taller.

Keep in mind also that, unlike now, when we have a mental framework for newer and taller skyscrapers, people in those days never had seen anything

like one. It was a widespread fear that such precarious contraptions would surely blow over in the first strong gust. The architect of one of New York's first skyscrapers, the Tower Building, actually clambered to the top of his unfinished eleven-story structure in the middle of a violent storm, and as crowds gathered at a safe distance to see if the building swayed or tumbled in gale force winds reaching seventy miles per hour, he dropped a plumb line. It didn't budge.

Safety concerns went beyond wind bracing. Early skyscrapers had to be equipped with adequate safeguards against fire, as well as reliable escape routes for any inhabitants unlucky enough to be caught inside in the event the fireproofing failed. A panoply of other technical challenges had to be surmounted, including ventilation, heat, light, plumbing, and adequate elevator service.

Once those were addressed to general satisfaction, tall office construction projects blossomed, first in New York and Chicago, and soon across the country. Searching for a descriptive term to encompass these awe-inspiring additions to the downtown grid, newspapers adopted a word already familiar to readers. In different contexts it could describe a racehorse, a bonnet, a preacher, an astronomer, or a sail at the top of a ship's mast. But its most widespread usage by then was in stories about the popular new sport of baseball, where it described a high fly ball: a sky-scraper.

The novelist Henry James, returning in 1904 to New York City after a twenty-one-year sojourn in Europe, was stunned by the colossal interlopers he found looming over the city of his birth. These "monsters of the mere market," he wrote in *Harper's Weekly*, were "like extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted, and stuck in as in the dark, anywhere and anyhow."

Other critics claimed tall buildings would swamp the real estate market, cause overcrowding and disease, and blot out the sunlight. To win over the public, those who constructed the first high-rises employed features engineered for mass appeal. Many had observation decks, and some even maintained rooftop gardens where patrons could gather for alfresco dining, concerts, and theatrical performances. At street level, no expense was spared on extravagant lobbies, making liberal use of Italian marble, rich wood

paneling, and elaborate brass fixtures and accents.



Lower Manhattan skyline from the Hudson in 1913

Draftsmen employed design motifs and decorative elements from ancient Greek and Roman architecture to convey an air of sophistication and class. Many prominent architects of the era had studied in Paris at the influential *École des Beaux-Arts* (School of Fine Arts), and the school lent its name to a neoclassical style of ornamentation that became highly fashionable: *Beaux-Arts* (pronounced “*boze ar*”). Not only were facades primped with columns in the Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian orders, but the buildings themselves were designed deliberately to resemble a classical Greek column. The typical antique skyscraper incorporates a base for the entrance and shops that is robed in a heavy stone, often granite. That is surmounted by a shaft of offices with a complementary cladding, either of brick or terracotta. Finally it is topped with elaborate decorations on the uppermost floors, constituting the column’s capital.

Such outer trappings of high culture helped to mask the structure’s true purpose: facilitating commerce. As companies grew, so did their need for accounting, recordkeeping, correspondence, and other clerical work. This required trained professional staff, ideally in one centralized location. All those white-collar workers congregating in ever-increasing numbers helped to drive up the value of downtown real estate. Landowners looking to

maximize the value of their parcels saw that stacking floors upon floors multiplied the number of leaseholders whom they could charge rent.

Skyscrapers also enabled another attractive convenience. Firms that did business together could share a building. It was so much easier to hammer out the details of a contract or deal if, rather than sending a telegram or a messenger boy across town, the principals were just a short elevator ride away.

“A machine that makes the land pay” is how Cass Gilbert distilled the essence of a skyscraper in a 1900 essay. Gilbert was one of the most acclaimed early skyscraper architects, well aware of the complicated marriage of art and engineering required to produce some colossal new edifice for a paying client. He also fundamentally understood what impelled that client to seek him out in the first place, the source of the demand that ultimately rewarded architects such as himself with considerable fame and bountiful fees: the profit motive. Namely, who could design the most appealing office block and woo the most lucrative tenants?

* * *

America at the end of the nineteenth century was a testing ground of unfettered capitalism. It was also an age of full-scale societal disruption driven by technological advances that struck like lightning. Transcontinental railroads. Gargantuan factories. Instantaneous communication via telegraph, telephone, and undersea cable. New sources of energy—oil, natural gas, and electricity—to power the country’s industrialization and fuel new modes of transport. By the 1920s, automobiles would crowd horse-drawn carriages off the roads, and even the skies would be conquered by flying machines. And, of course, by skyscrapers.

Behind each new skyscraper construction project was an investor. Almost always, it was someone who had made a reputation and a fortune through some novel product or business insight, through some innovation in manufacturing or marketing or retail. Or someone who, by perception and instinct, by know-how and guts, had risen through the ranks of the organization to a powerful perch.

The Northeast

A decade before she stepped onto her pedestal in New York harbor, the Statue of Liberty made her first public appearance in Philadelphia. She was merely a disembodied hand then, gripping a torch visitors could climb to have a look around the grounds of the 1876 World's Fair.

If they went into town, they could observe workers on scaffolds raising the walls of Philadelphia City Hall. Like the Statue of Liberty, it was still in an early, unfinished state, but the grandiose municipal pile in French Empire trappings promised to be an awe-inspiring sight one day. Its planners proudly boasted that, when the enormous central bell tower was erected and crowned with a thirty-seven-foot bronze statue of William Penn, this would be the world's tallest building.

The city already could boast the tallest office, a proto-skyscraper called the Jayne Building. At eight stories plus an additional two-story ornamental tower, the patent medicine company headquarters achieved an altitude both unprecedented and impractical. Employees weary from climbing its stairs no doubt came to regret that their building opened in 1851, predating the dawn of passenger elevators. Nevertheless, the Jayne Building's pronounced vertical silhouette no doubt impressed the young Louis Sullivan, who worked for five months as an apprentice at an architectural firm across the street before moving to Chicago. (The building was demolished to make way for Independence National Historical Park.)

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Philadelphia's Jayne Building was an unprecedented eight stories in an age before elevators. Louis Sullivan apprenticed at an architectural firm nearby.

Plagued by almost comical cost overruns and attendant delays, Philadelphia City Hall took nearly three decades to complete and was eclipsed by loftier structures long before its final brick was mortared. As Philadelphia was celebrating the centennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1876, construction resumed in the District of Columbia on its long-delayed Washington Monument. The 555-foot obelisk was finished the following decade, its pointed aluminum tip seven feet farther from the ground than William Penn's hat eventually would be. Visitors to the capital's new marvel rode to the top in a steam-powered elevator. The trip took ten minutes but the view was worth it. For a brief few years until the Eiffel Tower opened, this was as high as a person could ascend in a man-made structure anywhere on Earth.

It was actually the second Washington Monument. The first was a colossal column in Baltimore that opened in 1829, complete with an observation deck that visitors could reach via stairs. Soon after its debut, Boston erected the

taller Bunker Hill Monument, an obelisk with stairs and small windows at the top, much like the one that would eventually rise in the capital.

Even before skyscrapers, American cities vied for primacy with soaring feats of engineering and architecture. But regardless of any towers they raised, the cities of the Northeast were destined to trail behind New York because of something more elemental: water.

With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, New York became the first port with a direct shipping route to the rapidly growing Midwest. Moving freight by water instead of wagon slashed transportation costs, handing the city an advantage in trade and commerce it would never relinquish. Rival ports desperately raced to counter its supremacy with their own expensive canal systems—and later, railroads—through the Appalachian Mountains.

Meanwhile, new ports were born on interior waterways. As the easternmost settlement with navigable access to the Mississippi via the Ohio River, Pittsburgh got its start as a boatbuilding center. The keelboat Lewis and Clark sailed in 1803 to map out the Louisiana Purchase and find a route to the Pacific was made in Pittsburgh; its crew set forth on waters that would eventually become highways for barges. In Buffalo, packed schooners sailing from Lake Michigan transferred their cargo to smaller boats for transport down the Erie Canal. The settlement grew into the world's largest grain port, with steam-powered grain elevators towering over the harbor.

Buffalo also became the first city lit by hydroelectric power, generated in turbines that harnessed the torrent feeding Niagara Falls. That was in 1896, an exciting year for Buffalonians. Their former mayor, Grover Cleveland, was in the White House. The downtown skyline had two brand new additions by famous architects from the recent Chicago World's Fair: Daniel Burnham's imposing Ellicott Square Building and Sullivan's alluring Guaranty Building. Soon citizens would receive what seemed like even more good news, when Buffalo was chosen as the site for the 1901 World's Fair.

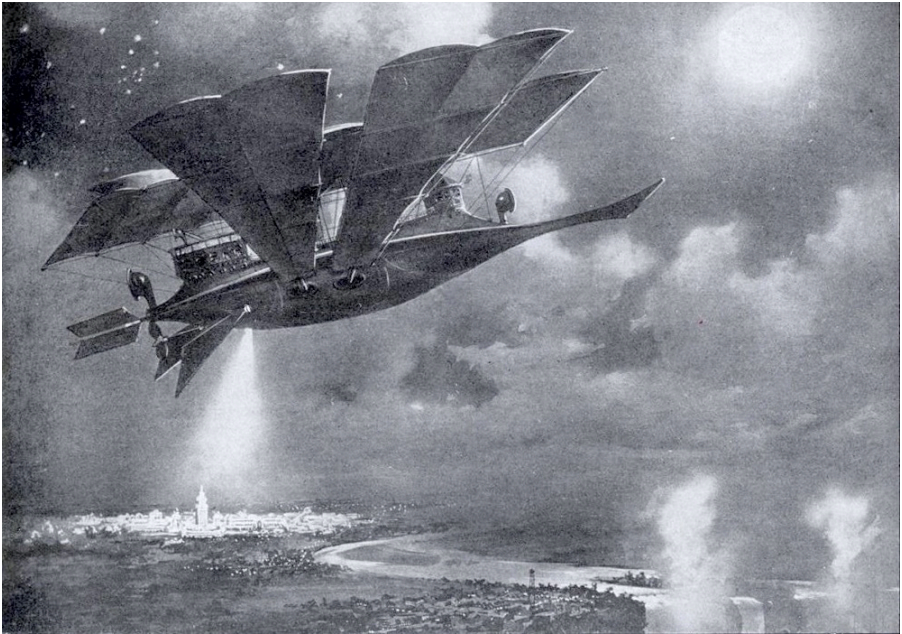
But instead of glory, the fair brought infamy. President Cleveland's successor, William McKinley, was shot by an assassin during his visit. Buffalo's fair took on a tragic cast, so the story is seldom told of its most imaginative contribution. "A Trip to the Moon" was the first electric indoor dark ride and

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the fair's most popular attraction. The fanciful spaceship Luna took thirty passengers at a time on a simulated flight over a model of the fairgrounds and Niagara Falls. Upon arrival on the lunar surface, they disembarked to wander through papier-mâché caverns, meet the local residents, and visit the palace of the Man in the Moon and his entertaining retinue of dancing moon maidens.

Four hundred thousand people bought a ticket for "A Trip to the Moon." The ride was such a sensation that enterprising businessmen bought it after the fair closed, crated it up, and shipped it from Buffalo to the other end of the state. At Coney Island, the imaginary spacecraft became the centerpiece of Luna Park. Only there, instead of Niagara Falls, riders blasted off over a model of the shining skyscrapers of Manhattan.

* * *



An illustration of the Luna spaceship from the 1901 Buffalo World's Fair ride "A Trip to the Moon." It was relocated to Coney Island afterward for Luna Park.

THE CAIRO — Washington, D.C.

The capital of the United States is also the nation's only large city without any modern skyscrapers. This is not, as many believe, because of some supposed rule that prohibits surpassing the Capitol dome or Washington Monument. Instead it is because of one antique skyscraper, the Cairo. Its creator was the enormously successful architect and developer T. Franklin Schneider, a man who was publicly reviled in the capital for lying to a jury in a failed effort to keep his murderous brother from the hangman's noose, and later was nearly murdered himself by a greedy son-in-law.

The son of German immigrants, Schneider apprenticed with a prolific German architect in Washington, D.C., and learned not only design—Schneider's house drawings won notice in national contests—but also the business of buying land and improving it at a profit. Opening his own office in 1883, Schneider started with single-family dwellings, then rolled the proceeds into bigger projects. By decade's end he was putting up rows of handsome townhouses, such as the ones that still line both sides of the 1700 block of Q Street. Schneider's mother and siblings moved in there, sharing the block with congressmen and other influential citizens. The newly married Schneider built a fifty-room mansion on the corner of Q and 18th, and the couple held their first ball there in January 1892. Their joy was not to last.

Schneider's younger brother Howard, in trouble with the law for shooting an unarmed Black man, had become smitten that spring with a young woman named Amanda Hamlink who lived a few doors down the block. A whirlwind courtship had ensued, and within a month he had convinced Amanda to secretly become his wife by threatening to shoot himself if she didn't. (Secret marriage would permit him to take her for conjugal carriage rides in the countryside, while living alone to see other women on the side.) When their covert connubiality was discovered that fall, Howard made a token effort to move in with the Hamlink family. But he soon was drinking and carousing again, and also seducing another woman. Her enraged father kicked Howard out the week after Franklin's housewarming ball. More angry confrontations and desperate entreaties followed. Finally, on January 31, Howard shot and

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*The Cairo, Washington, D.C. - 1894
1615 Q Street Northwest*

killed Amanda and her older brother on the sidewalk in front of their house as they were walking home from church.

Franklin Schneider heard the gunshots from his mansion. As a crowd gathered, he scrambled to fix the problem. That night he led police to a pistol that had been planted in an alley near the crime scene, hoping to convince them his brother had acted in self-defense. He made the rounds of the city's newspaper offices to try to control the story, spreading rumors that the Hamlinks had soured on Howard when they found out he wasn't rich. He bribed or leaned on witnesses to lie on the stand at the ensuing murder trial. None of it worked, and his efforts backfired. His brother was found guilty, and he himself was indicted for perjury, as editorial pages railed at his transparent effort to buy off the justice system. A last-ditch appeal to the White House for clemency was rebuffed, and Howard went to the gallows on St. Patrick's Day 1893.

Months later, Schneider departed for Chicago and the World's Fair. One of its most popular attractions, just across from the ticket line for the Ferris Wheel, was the exotic "Street in Cairo." There fairgoers could see bazaars and belly dancers, camels and fortune tellers, a reconstructed pharaoh's tomb and a Bedouin sheikh who raced Arabian horses. Schneider also marveled at Chicago's skyscrapers. He was especially impressed with the distinctive round archways employed by Louis Sullivan in his creations, including the city auditorium and the fair's Transportation Building.

On his return to Washington, Schneider blended these elements into the district's first skyscraper. He secured a building permit in February, and construction was complete before the year ended. His eclectic twelve-story apartment building has Chicago-style projecting window bays that suggest the minarets of a mosque, an elaborately-carved stone facade with trumpeting elephants at the windowsills, and an entryway arch that seems directly lifted from Sullivan. Residents could enjoy a rooftop garden and café, bowling lanes in the basement, and a sizable ballroom.

It was not universally loved. Around Dupont Circle, neighbors howled over the monstrous imposition to their residential streets. *Architectural Record* denounced the Cairo as "an absurdity and an outrage." Politicians entered

the fray, enacting a 110-foot height limit (the Cairo is 165 feet tall) that later became the Height of Buildings Act of 1899. With minor modifications, the law remains in force today.

The Schneiders moved into a suite at the Cairo and rented out the mansion, which became a private school for girls before it was eventually demolished. Franklin continued to build in the district, erecting nearly two thousand houses and nineteen apartment buildings during his career. He later started a business running candy stores across the country.

In 1914, the Schneiders' nineteen-year-old daughter Florence married a young attorney who had earned his law degree at Georgetown, and they took up residence at the Cairo. Within months, the man, Thomas Forney, was conspiring to murder Schneider for his inheritance. Forney and a hired hitman snuck into Schneider's hotel room during a candy business trip to Pittsburgh and attacked him in the dark with a hammer. Schneider fought them off with his umbrella but they escaped unidentified. When police showed Schneider the hat left behind by one of the thugs, he recognized it as his son-in-law's. He invited Forney to his office, and in the presence of three police officers, pointed a pistol in the young man's face until he confessed. "We took a snake into our home, but he was so clever he completely deceived us," Schneider later raged, in words that could equally have applied to his brother.

Over time the Cairo lost its cachet as a residential property and was turned into a hotel. After Schneider's heirs sold it in 1955, the building fell into severe disrepair and became a flophouse for drug addicts and prostitutes. It also had the only ballroom that in the 1960s was willing to host a D.C. drag group's annual Miss Universe Ball. Today, fully renovated, it is again an upscale residential property, with a lobby that retains elements of its original mosaic tile flooring, marble wainscoting, and carved ceilings.

GUARANTY BUILDING — Buffalo

The person who first conceived of it died without ever seeing it, and the architectural partnership that designed it never worked together again. But together the three men produced the most beautiful skyscraper of the nineteenth century—and arguably the most beautiful ever.

Hascal Taylor first rose to prominence in Fredonia, New York, crafting the off-road vehicles of his time—simple, stable buckboard wagons with a durable suspension he patented. The Civil War brought many orders for his company's wagons. When it ended, Taylor's rugged buggies became the all-terrain vehicle of choice for oil drillers in the rough country of northwestern Pennsylvania. Taylor tried his own luck prospecting, and when he and a partner hit a well in 1874 that gushed three thousand barrels a day, he sold his stake in the wagon company and went all in on drilling.

Oil was first used for kerosene, not gasoline. Cars would not exist for several more decades. But as a lamp fuel far cheaper than whale oil, kerosene was in high demand, and the potential for windfall profits lured speculative investors. Like most of them, Taylor ran up against a bigger competitor. John D. Rockefeller had started with a refinery in Cleveland and rapidly expanded his control to drilling rigs and derricks. As his Standard Oil snapped up wells, it pressured railroads to lower their shipping rates.

Taylor at first tried a business partnership with Rockefeller, but sued him when Standard violated the contract terms by lowballing Taylor's oil. The suit was settled out of court, and Taylor spent another decade trying to make a go of his company, Union Oil, which he based in Buffalo. Eventually he surrendered to the inevitable and sold out to the Standard Oil monopoly. Then he bought some downtown property, and in 1893 he commissioned Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan to design Buffalo's premier office building.

The year marked a career apex for the Chicago duo. Their flamboyant Transportation Building with its immense golden archway was eliciting admiring stares from visitors at the World's Fair, while in the city their Chicago Stock Market was rising under the scaffolding. For Taylor, the partners started with a plan similar to their Wainwright Building in St. Louis, added stories and

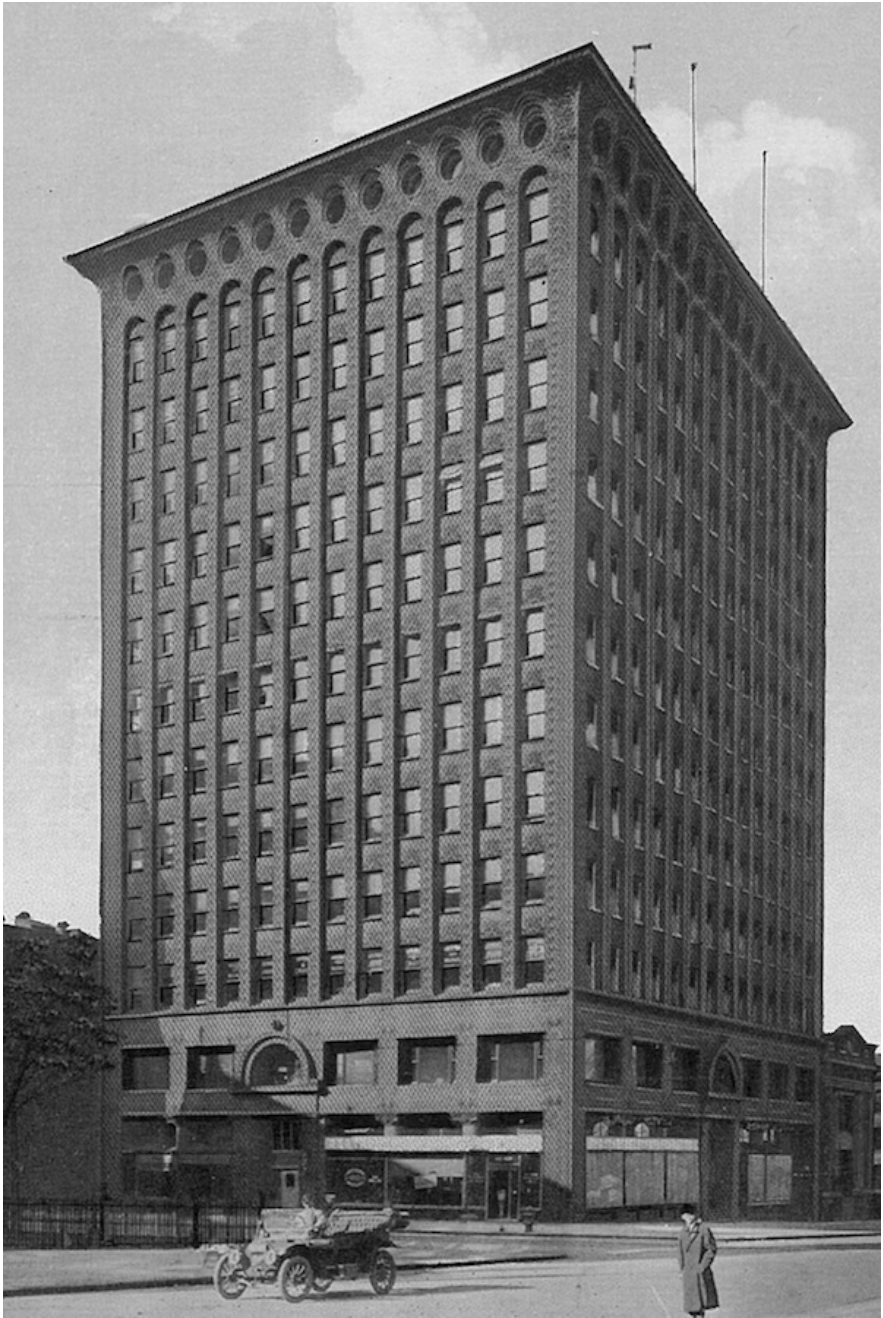
accentuated its height with prominent vertical strips, and covered every inch of its amber terracotta surface with Sullivan's intricate filigree. His unique motif of bold geometric and delicate organic shapes extended inside to a sumptuous lobby, the designs repeated in mosaics, murals, banisters, and a hypnotic art glass skylight.

But on the verge of the unveiling, with financing arranged and press speculation bubbling, Taylor had a severe stroke. He died the following month. The contractor, Guaranty Building Company of Chicago, immediately bought the project from his estate and stuck their name on what was to have been called the Taylor Building. They didn't keep it long; within two years, Guaranty refinanced the mortgage through the building's main tenant, Prudential Life, who assumed naming rights.

The Guaranty was the last project for Adler and Sullivan, who dissolved their partnership as commissions evaporated in a nationwide recession. Sullivan stayed busy writing manifestos like "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," published the month the Guaranty Building opened. In it, Sullivan coined his maxim that "form ever follows function, and this is the law." He called office towers "one of the most stupendous, one of the most magnificent opportunities that the Lord of Nature in His beneficence has ever offered to the proud spirit of man." And he blasted his fellow architects as unequal to the moment, "strutting and prattling handcuffed and vainglorious in the asylum of a foreign school." An artistic genius but bereft of business sense or a dimmer switch for his ego, Sullivan lived thirty more years after the essay's publication, and in that time designed only three more skyscrapers.

The Guaranty Building has survived being sandblasted and catching fire, among other perils. When the owners sought to demolish it in 1977, Senator Daniel Moynihan helped preservationists secure federal funding to save it, saying he would rather see Mount Vernon or the White House torn down. The preservationists' lawyers, Hodgson Russ, became tenants and now own the building as their headquarters. The firm has spent millions on refurbishment and an excellent interpretive center just off the amazing lobby.

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*Guaranty Building, Buffalo - 1895
140 Pearl Street*

LAND TITLE & TRUST BUILDINGS – Philadelphia

Perhaps no man in U.S. history enriched himself through networking more effectively than Peter Widener. Starting with all-night poker sessions in his butcher shop, Widener schmoozed his way into the city's Republican political machine, then built a corporate empire of streetcars and public utilities in Philadelphia and across America.

Widener's first experience with pork barrel politics came when he was handed a Civil War contract to supply mutton to U.S. Army troops stationed near Philadelphia. After the war, the Republicans nominated him for city treasurer. Local papers denounced Widener and the rest of his ticket as corrupt and self-serving; when he won despite their protests, he performed as predicted. Contracts ballooned for construction of the huge city hall, benefiting Widener and his cronies in the construction business.

One of those was William Elkins, a former grocer and oil refiner who acted as Widener's guarantor in office and also happened to be a key shareholder in the firm that made the bricks for city hall. Elkins and Widener became best friends and lifelong business partners, and after Widener left office in 1877, they consolidated the city's seventeen independent horse-drawn streetcar lines and began replacing them with cable cars, then electric trolleys. Acquiring a bundle of small natural gas and electric companies in the city, they combined those into larger utilities and installed streetlights powered by them. Finally, the pair bought up land along the trolley routes—parcels that Widener as treasurer had spent city funds to improve with sewer and water lines—then set about developing them into neighborhoods.

On North Broad Street, an enclave of the nouveau riche, Widener and Elkins built mansions across the street from each other. When the former's son George married the latter's daughter Eleanor, the partnership was further cemented. Applying a formula that had worked so well for them in Philadelphia, the two men and their allies gained control of streetcar networks in New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and more than a hundred cities across the country. They cashed in on inflated corporate shares and arranged sweetheart deals for the other companies they ran, laying electrical conduits

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*Land Title & Trust Building (right) and Annex, Philadelphia - 1898 and 1903
100 South Broad Street*

and gas lines, supplying fuel, and selling asphalt to repave the streets torn up to modernize their transit lines.

In 1896, finally ready to settle down, Widener set sail with his wife, Josephine, on their brand new 225-foot yacht for a cruise around the world. They made it as far as Bar Harbor, Maine, where Josephine died of heart failure. Widener sold the yacht to the U.S. Navy and donated their mansion to the library. Just north of the city limits, he commissioned Lynnewood Hall, a 110-room Georgian manor, for himself, his sons and their families with his vast collection of paintings and a thoroughbred horse farm and race track on the sprawling acres surrounding it. Elkins, ever loyal, built a mansion across the road.

The partners also assembled a large parcel on Broad Street a block south of city hall and offered it to Land Title and Trust, a real estate insurance company, in exchange for a stake and a seat on the board. There they hired Daniel Burnham to design a fifteen-story office tower decorated with his trademark banks of bay windows. The Chicago architect did not build to the edge of the lot but left an open light well on one side, hinting at a further annex to come next door. When it did four years later, it was also designed by Burnham, albeit in a somewhat more grandiose Beaux-Arts style and several stories taller than the original.

During construction of the annex in 1902, an eight-ton steel girder slipped from its chains and plummeted eight stories, killing one worker and barely missing the terrified Elkins, who was half-buried in a pile of rubble. His health failed and he died a year after the incident. His longtime partner lived to erect more Philadelphia skyscrapers, including the Widener Building next to city hall, which Widener toured on his final working trip downtown before his death in 1915.

Despite their immense wealth, the Wideners were never accepted among Philadelphia's high society, who lived along the Pennsylvania Railroad's original Main Line, not some upstart streetcar route. When Eleanor was scolded by the maître d' of the blueblood Bellevue-Stratford Hotel for lighting a cigarette, George retaliated by building a Ritz-Carlton directly across Broad Street. The couple set sail for Paris to hire a hotel chef, accompanied by their

son, Harry, who spent the trip hunting for rare books for his collection. On the journey home, they booked passage on a new White Star luxury liner that was part-owned by Peter Widener through his holdings in an international shipping conglomerate. Four nights into the return voyage, the Wideners hosted the captain at their table in the first-class dining room. Hours later their ship, the Titanic, struck an iceberg. The Widener men stoically helped Eleanor onto the last lifeboat and bade her farewell. Harvard's Widener Library was built in memory of Harry, who was an alumnus.

The tragedy of the Titanic did not soften the hearts of the old money families. Seventeen-year-old Fifi Widener, daughter of Peter's other son, Joseph, was left off the guest list of the 1919 Assembly Ball, Philadelphia's most prestigious social event. Pressed by her father to relent, organizers pointedly sent Fifi an invitation as an out-of-town guest; her mother, from a respected old Philadelphia family, was completely snubbed according to rules ostracizing any woman who married a man outside of polite society—in other words, Joseph. But he got the last laugh. The city's art mavens had long dreamed that the Widener family art collection, with its fourteen Rembrandts, would eventually grace the main wing of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Instead, in 1942 he donated every last piece to the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.

FRICK BUILDING – Pittsburgh

The austere classical granite slab named for Henry Clay Frick seems to be facing off against the belfry of the Allegheny County Courthouse across the street. For that it has earned the scorn of architecture aficionados, since the courthouse is the final masterpiece of H.H. Richardson. But the Frick Building was actually intended to cast a shadow not on Richardson's jewel but on Pittsburgh's first skyscraper, one named for Frick's former partner turned nemesis, Andrew Carnegie.

The two self-made millionaires both came from Scots-Irish immigrant families. Frick's grandfather owned a large whiskey distillery in rural western Pennsylvania, and the young man set a goal of becoming a millionaire by age thirty. He achieved it with shrewd investments in the local coal mines and beehive ovens to convert the coal into coke, a refined fuel for the region's steel mills. So impressed was Carnegie by Frick's business acumen that he brought the younger man into his organization as partner and eventually chairman.

But there were bumps in the road. One of the worst came in 1892, when Carnegie Steel workers threatened to strike over wage reductions. Carnegie told Frick to stand firm, then went on vacation to his castle in Scotland. When Frick instituted a lockout, workers surrounded the Homestead Works riverside mill complex, shutting it down. Frick's next ploy was to order a covert amphibious landing by two barges of armed Pinkerton guards to forcibly reopen the plant. It turned into a bloody fiasco, and the governor eventually sent in the militia to pacify the town. An anarchist and would-be assassin burst into Frick's office, shooting and stabbing the startled executive before being tackled and arrested. Frick's wounds healed, and never troubled him nearly as much as Carnegie's piercing suggestion that things would never have gotten so far out of hand had he been around.

Their long-simmering tension finally erupted in an 1899 boardroom dispute over coke prices. Carnegie jettisoned Frick from the chairman's seat and tried to force him to sell his eleven percent stake at below market value. Enraged, Frick chased the old man down the hall of the Carnegie Building,

THE NORTHEAST



Frick Building, Pittsburgh - 1902 (with Carnegie Building at right)

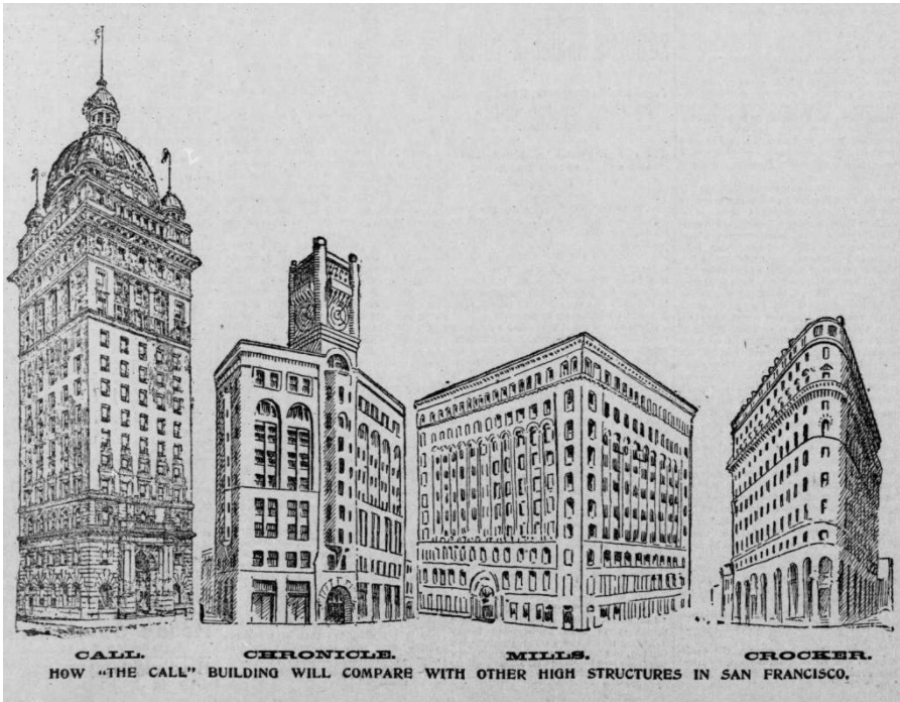
437 Grant Street

The West

America held two newspaper skyscraper races in the 1890s. While the *New York Tribune*, the *Sun*, and the *Times* were one-upping their competitors with eye-popping Manhattan headquarters at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, three rival publishers on the far side of the continent crowded three high-rises into their own edition of Newspaper Row.

The first skyscraper on the West Coast was an odd-looking affair. Chicagoans Daniel Burnham and John Root designed it for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1890, and it was arguably the strangest building they ever produced—an asymmetrically angled ten-story stone mass with an elephantine clock turret plunked on its roof. Five years later, the owners of the *San Francisco Call* revealed their plans for a “marble palace” one hundred feet taller than the Chronicle Building. When the publisher of the *Examiner*, a young Harvard dropout named William Randolph Hearst, failed to persuade his mother to allocate sufficient funds to outdo the others, his paper sniffed that its elegant new seven-story office was superior to heavier structures that “have no proper place in semi-tropic California.”

Catastrophe brought the rivals together, if only for one day. On April 19, 1906, a joint edition under the masthead *Call-Chronicle-Examiner* ran one huge headline: “EARTHQUAKE AND FIRE: SAN FRANCISCO IN RUINS.” Newspaper Row would never be the same.



A newspaper illustration from 1895 compares San Francisco's tallest skyscrapers.

The story of the American West is so full of dramatic twists, hidden treasures, and unspeakable tragedies that it can seem more screenplay than actual history. The first settlers who followed the Oregon Trail through the Rocky Mountains risked starving, freezing, drowning in river rapids, or being attacked by the resident population jealously defending their dwindling land. Despite the nationalistic sentiment of “manifest destiny” urging them to spread West until the land ran out, few were willing to take the risk. Travel by sea was hardly more appealing; a ship departing New York needed six months to loop around stormy Cape Horn and up the other coastline.

An 1845 guidebook for Americans considering the journey estimated that California had perhaps one thousand foreign residents. It was part of Mexico then, though not for much longer. In addition to being light on Americans, California had relatively few Mexicans. That proved helpful the next year, when the United States provoked Mexico into a territorial war, and its naval

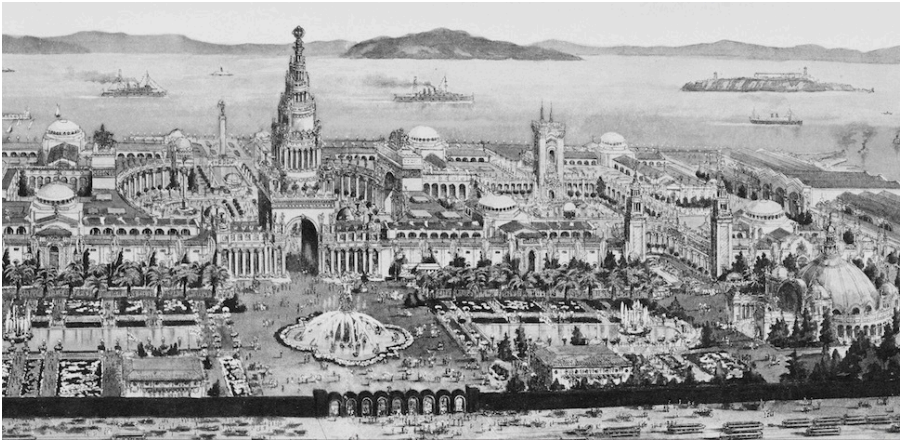
forces in the Pacific easily breezed down the coast and occupied each of the small California settlements without firing a shot. By 1848, treaties with Mexico and Great Britain reset the boundaries of a vast American hinterland. People just needed a reason to go.

Gold turned out to be an excellent draw. With its discovery in the western slopes of the Sierra Nevadas, swarms of fortune-hunters poured into the state in 1849. Subsequent discoveries of gold, silver, and other precious metals in Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, and elsewhere brought more prospectors. Merchants followed in their wake, settlements grew, and cities developed.

Some cities expanded for other reasons. Salt Lake City started as a colony of religious dissidents who sought to leave the United States entirely. Unluckily for them, just as they got to Mexico, its border moved six hundred miles south. Los Angeles was a ranching community until residents traded cattle pens for oil wells. San Diego, then as now, was simply too lovely not to want to live there. But it was mining that settled the West. The last great gold rush in 1896 transformed the remote lumber and fishing port of Seattle into a major supply center for prospectors headed for the Yukon gold fields. The influence of mining showed up even in unexpected places. Underground cables that pull the streetcars up and down San Francisco's hills, for instance, are adapted from cable used to haul ore out of a mineshaft.

Eventually, the United States had to solve the transportation problem. The massive undertaking to build a transcontinental railroad necessitated strong federal government backing, and politicians and railroad officials lining their pockets touched off several embarrassing corruption scandals. It also seeded racial animosity. Four of every five workers who built the tracks through frozen mountain passes and scorching deserts were Chinese immigrants recruited by the railroads. When their job was done, many chose to stay. Tension mounted until the passage in 1882 of the Chinese Exclusion Act. It remains the only time the country has ever barred an entire nationality from its shores, and it presaged further anti-Asian discrimination to come.

Another federally-backed construction project, the Panama Canal, resolved the West's final transportation problem. With work underway in 1904, the business leaders of San Francisco proposed that their city host the next



1915 San Francisco World's Fair

world's fair to celebrate the canal's completion. The 1906 earthquake only stiffened their resolve to hold their Panama-Pacific Exposition.

There was one small hitch five hundred miles down the coast. Business leaders in San Diego had a similar idea for something they were calling the Panama-California Exposition. Neither side relented, and both expositions were held in 1915. Both featured lovely buildings of classical design, though San Diego leaned more heavily on Spanish Baroque and Colonial styles than Beaux-Arts. Both drew good crowds; San Diego even extended its fair a year, and some of the international exhibitors from San Francisco relocated to the grounds at Balboa Park. Presumably it beat returning to Europe, which was embroiled in a brutal war.

The San Francisco and San Diego expositions broke new ground California-style thanks to Hollywood. Producer Mack Sennett sent two of his most bankable comedy stars, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle and Mabel Normand, to shoot at each event. Both silent short films can be found online today, though only one is worth watching. *Fatty and Mabel at the San Diego Exposition* is a slapstick romp, and features a chase scene with one of the fair's electric-powered wicker carts.

* * *

MULTISTORIES



*Flood Building, San Francisco - 1904
870 Market Street*

FLOOD BUILDING — San Francisco

The immense antique office block that towers over tourists waiting at the Powell Street cable car turntable was built for a man whose rags-to-riches success story is quintessentially San Francisco. The child of Irish immigrants, James Flood went from tending bar to trading stocks to the top tier of West Coast wealth. But even after he was known coast to coast as one of the “Bonanza Kings” of the Comstock Lode, he never forgot his wild side.

Flood was twenty-two and working in a Brooklyn carriage shop in 1849 when, enticed by news of the Gold Rush, he booked passage on a ship for San Francisco. The nuggets he found prospecting amounted to more money than he'd ever seen. Flood went home, married an Irish girl named Emma, bought a farm in Illinois, and moved there with his wife and his parents. But country life did not sit well with him. California was calling.

So James returned with his wife to San Francisco in 1856. He and a convivial fellow Irishman named Billy O'Brien opened a saloon that became a popular lunchtime haunt for stockbrokers from the nearby exchange. Flood was an excellent bartender, and his preferred tips were not coins, but hot tips on which stocks to buy. Investing his money and his partner's, Flood made enough speculating on mining stocks that in 1867 the men opened up their own brokerage.

That's when two more Irishmen, career miners James Fair and John Mackay, approached with a business proposition: They knew of a neglected mine in the Comstock Lode—the country's first major silver discovery, which had been attracting prospectors to western Nevada for a decade. Experience led them to believe it could yield many more tons of valuable ore if mined properly. Could Flood help them to quietly acquire enough shares to win control from the bankers who owned it?

The four created a partnership and did just that. At the next shareholders meeting, they voted out the leadership and made Flood the president of the Hale & Norcross mine. Fair and Mackay were right, and all four got rich. Rather than cashing out, they gambled again on what seemed an even longer shot, stealthily taking over another unproductive mine called the Consolidated

Virginia that Fair felt certain had more silver to give.

Twelve hundred feet underground, threatened by scalding hot springs as well as fires and tunnel collapse, the miners progressed slowly. Pounding away with sledgehammers and spikes by lamplight, they stuffed each hole with blasting powder. At last they found what they wanted: a deposit of pale green ore shot through with silver. The deposit was colossal, like nothing ever seen, before or since. The vein of ore—which in 1873 sold for more than \$600 per ton—was six hundred feet deep, two hundred feet wide, and stretched almost a quarter mile. Excited news reports called it the “big bonanza.”

It was about then that Flood did something crazy. A New York reporter was in town to write a story about the “Bonanza Kings.” He asked where in the scrubland they found enough timber to support all the underground excavation. Flood and Fair rode with him up into the mountains to show off their sawmill near Lake Tahoe and the log flume that brought the wood down to the rail yard below. As a lark, they dared him to ride down to the bottom of the flume with them in a wooden pig trough.

It was the ride of their lives. The flume was seventy feet high in places. Doused and blinded by the spray, the terrified writer gave up trying to gauge his speed and just tried to hang on. Half an hour later, at the end of the fifteen-mile flume, he knew they had averaged thirty miles per hour, faster than a locomotive. But that included comparatively tranquil bits. The fastest sections were as steep as a forty-five degree angle. His story in the *New York Tribune* reported: “Fair said we went at least a mile a minute, Flood said we went at the rate of a hundred miles an hour, and my deliberate belief is that we went at a rate that annihilated time and space.” Flood announced he would never do it again, not for the whole Consolidated Virginia mine, which produced enough precious metal to build a full-size replica of Trinity Church entirely made of silver.

The brick and sandstone skyscraper, built years after Flood’s death by his son, is still owned by his descendants. It survived the earthquake and fire, as did Flood’s brownstone mansion on Nob Hill, now home of the ultra-exclusive Pacific Union Club. But the Flood Building almost fell to the wrecking ball in 1950. Woolworth’s had a department store on the ground floor, and had a deal

to purchase the building and tear it down for a new store when the federal government stepped in, requisitioning the warren of office space for various agencies during the Korean War.

The boomerang-shaped gray marble lobby has patterned floors, red granite columns, and display cases packed with interesting artifacts such as a charred beam from the 1906 fire. Dashiell Hammett, author of the Sam Spade detective novels, worked as a Pinkerton agent in the Flood Building and set the final scene of *The Maltese Falcon* at the grill next door. Flood's great-grandson, Jim, considered the building a family heirloom and spent millions repairing damage from a Woolworth modernization of the original exterior, replacing its entryway arches. He died of a heart attack in 2020 at the age of eighty after a day of skiing in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Considering the log flume, adventure runs in the family.

MULTISTORIES



*Braly Building, Los Angeles - 1904
408 South Spring Street*

BRALY BUILDING — Los Angeles

Elegantly decorated though it may be, little about this office tower suggests it was once the tallest building in Los Angeles. More surprisingly, the skyscraper that surpassed it—the Art Deco city hall four blocks north—was designed by the same architect who created the Braly Building.

John Braly came to the West Coast when his father got so sick that his doctor ordered him to relocate somewhere with milder weather. The family sold the farm in Missouri, herded up the cattle, and joined a wagon train on the Oregon Trail. They narrowly escaped a massacre at a rest stop in present day Washington, departing ten days before the local Cayuse tribe attacked the camp and slaughtered fourteen people. Arriving in Sacramento at the front end of the 1849 Gold Rush, Braly and his father piled the wagon with flour, bacon, beans, picks, and shovels and immediately set out for the mining camps. They made a handsome profit—paid not in coins or bills, but strictly gold dust—and repeated the one-week trip several times to build up their savings.

The family started a farm near Santa Clara, and Braly went back east to college in Tennessee. When he returned, he got married and took a job heading a boarding school. Three years later, he left that job to gamble on loan sharking at a mining encampment in eastern Nevada. That scheme left him broke and humiliated, riding his mule back through the desert to rejoin his wife, Martha, and their baby daughter, Josephine. Martha forgave him, and they both got jobs teaching until John got better offers, first as superintendent of schools in Santa Clara, then as vice president of a college in San Jose.

Nearing fifty, the Bralys decided they had one more shot at making real money, so they moved north to Fresno to start a small bank and a hundred-acre raisin farm. Trained greyhounds kept the jackrabbits at bay, but a serious infestation of worms threatened to ruin their crop. Braly heard turkeys were the only solution—a good-sized bird could eat a hundred worms every day. He immediately bought all the turkeys he could, close to a thousand, and set them loose on the vines. Once the Braly farm was picked clean, he rented out his turkey troops to other farmers. The bank prospered too, and they opened

SMITH TOWER — Seattle

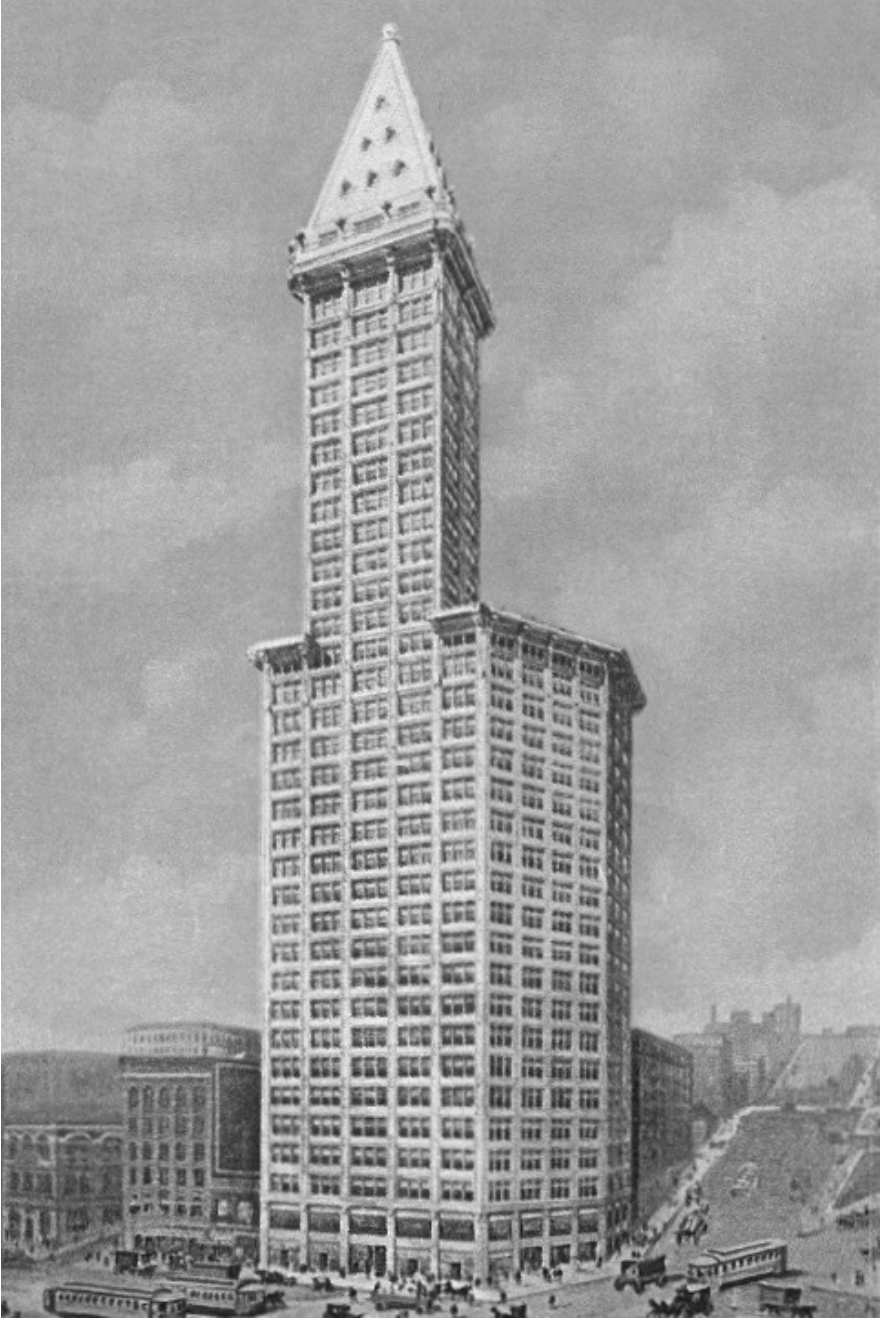
Skyscrapers often play fast and loose with the facts, but few can match the bombast of Seattle's Smith Tower. Even before it was built, it was touted as being forty-two stories tall. It still claims it is, though anyone with eyes can count the windows and see it is not. Skeptics might also refer to the number 35 on the button for the top floor observatory—that is, if the friendly elevator operator doesn't distract them. Smith Tower has its original lift cages, one of many reasons it is the best antique skyscraper in the country to visit. Fittingly, for tech-savvy Seattle, it was built by a maker of revolutionary office technology: typewriters.

Lyman Smith came late to the QWERTY party. The son of an upstate New York sheepskin tanner whose business suddenly went baaad, Smith and his older brother partnered with a Syracuse shotgun manufacturer, William Baker, in 1877. Smith married the wealthy mayor's daughter Flora the following year, bought out his partners, and brought his three younger brothers on board. Meanwhile, a competing upstate arms maker, Remington, had begun to expand its product line by manufacturing sewing machines and, in 1873, the first mechanical typewriter. When one of Smith's employees came up with a design with two sets of keys for capital and lowercase letters, the brothers launched their own typewriter company and got out of the shotgun business.

In 1888, Flora went on a West Coast trip with their son, Burns. They came back raving about Seattle, so Smith invested in several downtown parcels sight unseen. Life in Syracuse was rosy—they lived in an impressive mansion, and his business portfolio included a bank, several Great Lakes shipping businesses and a shipyard, and steel and cement companies. He gave Syracuse University a founding donation for a school of engineering, and spent his leisure time yachting, hunting, and collecting orchids.

He finally got around to viewing his western holdings during a visit to the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, better known as the 1909 Seattle World's Fair. While there, Smith told the newspaper he would build an eighteen-story skyscraper in town. But when he got back home, his son suggested he shoot

THE WEST



*Smith Tower, Seattle - 1914
506 Second Avenue*



About the Author

Mark Houser is a frequent writer and speaker on historic topics and recently won the Press Club of Western Pennsylvania Golden Quill Award for magazine journalism on history and culture. Houser is director of news and information at Robert Morris University, and has worked with foreign students to create an audio walking tour of Pittsburgh in eleven languages. He spent fifteen years at the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, where his work won national and international awards and led to appearances on CNN, FOX, and NPR. As a coordinator and former transatlantic fellow with the German Marshall Fund of the United States, he has arranged itineraries for more than one hundred European professionals visiting Pittsburgh, including a young Emmanuel Macron before he became president of France. Mark and his wife, Diane, live in suburban Pittsburgh and love to travel. This is his first book.

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