



THE SKYSCRAPER MUSEUM PRESENTS
THE DOWNTOWN NEW YORK WEBWALK



TOUR 3: CITY HALL

Downtown New York Webwalk

CITY HALL

1. 233 Broadway - **Woolworth Building**

Architect: Cass Gilbert

Completed: 1913

Frank W. Woolworth, the five-and-dime store king, commissioned architect Cass Gilbert to design a Gothic-style skyscraper on a full-block front on Broadway between Park Place and Barclay Street. When the building was erected it rose across the street from the main downtown Post Office by Alfred Mullett. This massive mansarded structure of 1875 was later demolished and the site reclaimed as part of City Hall Park.

Woolworth wanted his building to become the tallest in New York, and in the world, which meant that it needed to rise more than 700 feet— the height of the Metropolitan Life Tower. As the height escalated from a projected 625 feet to 792 feet, the cost grew from an estimated \$5 million to the final cost of \$13.5 million. Extensive foundations and wind bracing necessary for the tall tower as well as the ornate terra-cotta cladding and sumptuous interior fittings both inflated costs and created one of the masterpieces of early skyscraper design.



The exterior is clad in a cream colored terra cotta with subtle blue and yellow accents in the glaze. The design evokes the guildhall architecture of France and Belgium. Above the 24th floor a tower rises to the equivalent of 55-stories and is capped by a high-pitched copper roof, now a green patina, crowned with tracery and gargoyles. An observation deck, once open to the public, has been closed for decades.

The sumptuous lobby features marble, fine mosaics and a rich program of sculpture, including brackets with medieval-style caricatures, including Mr. Woolworth counting his dimes and Gilbert cradling a model of the building. Allegorical murals of Commerce and Labor and ceiling vaults accented with thousands of gold tesserae make the lobby seem like a church. Indeed, the gothic tower was nicknamed "The Cathedral of Commerce."



Downtown New York Webwalk

CITY HALL

Mr. Woolworth financed the skyscraper in cash, which was unusual for a project of this size and cost, and he noted that the tower would be a valuable generator of publicity for the company. Still, through the 1910s, the Woolworth Company only occupied one and a half stories of the building. The rest of the building was occupied by more than 1,000 tenants. For most of the twentieth century the building never had a mortgage -- something almost unheard of for such a large commercial structure. In 1998 the Woolworth Company's successor, the Venator Group, sold the tower for \$155 million: this was the first time the property changed hands in its 85-year history.

At the time of its completion the Woolworth Building was widely praised for its elegant massing, and the slender proportions of its tower. It was a paradigm of responsible high-rise architecture for the slender tower, which did not significantly limit the amounts of light reaching the street. Its slender silhouette contrasts strongly with the bulk of 120 Broadway, the Equitable Building, completed in 1915. Still, as a business proposition, the building's tower section has always been impractical since its floor-plate allowed only a small number of elevators, hardly enough to serve the needs of the first class office space it was intended to house. This problem may be rectified with the tower's conversion to residential use - a program that will not require such high elevator capacity.



2. City Hall and City Hall Park

Architect: John McComb, Jr. and Joseph Francois Mangin
Completed: 1811

Architect John McComb, who had designed Castle Clinton in Battery Park, joined forces with Joseph Francois Mangin, an emigré architect from France, to win the competition to design a new home for the city government. McComb and Mangin eschewed the standard English forms and simple materials that had until then defined the architecture of the new republic. Instead their

design referenced French sources reflecting post-revolutionary politics



City Hall Park has recently undergone extensive remodeling which created an open space with a nineteenth-century character. The elaborate tiled fountain and gaslights at the center of the park are reproductions of the park's mid nineteenth-century fixtures.

Downtown New York Webwalk

CITY HALL

3. 277 Broadway - **Broadway Chambers Building**

Architect: Cass Gilbert

Completed: 1900

Cass Gilbert's first building in New York was this boldly designed tower. Gilbert's design juxtaposes the grandly ornamented pink granite clad base with the plain red and blue brick clad shaft. The tower culminates in a highly ornamented colonnade, attic story and projecting cornice. At the time, this design was hailed by architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler as "the last word" in the period's dominant skyscraper style, which looked to the classical three-part column for inspiration. The building also features the first large scale use of polychrome terra-cotta architectural ornament in New York, a material that Gilbert would use extensively in later buildings.



Even before construction began, building owner Edward Andrews, a Boston banker, aggressively pursued tenants that could pay some of the highest rents in the city, including the main tenant, the United States Life Insurance Company. By 1901, with the building fully rented, Andrews was able to collect \$100,000 per year in rent, a considerable sum at the time.

4. 31 Chambers Street - Hall of Records/now **Surrogate's Court - Hall of Records**

Architect: John R. Thomas, and Horgan & Slattery

Completed: 1907

Across Chambers Street from City Hall Park is the 10-story granite Hall of Records. The richly sculpted exterior of this city government building is an example of "Beaux-Arts Classicism," a name derived from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris where many American architects pursued an elite education. Originally the architect John R. Thomas's design for the Hall of Records was the winning entry in a competition to replace City



Hall. His design was adapted for this site and program after the project to rebuild City Hall became mired in political dispute. On the Chambers street façade is a spectacular three-story Corinthian colonnade, topped with the figures of mayors, administrators, and governors of New York and New Amsterdam.

Downtown New York Webwalk

CITY HALL

The interior, accessible to the public, is truly spectacular. The foyer has a mosaic tiled ceiling decorated with a pseudo-Egyptian theme, as well as four monumental bronze eagle-topped radiator grills. The three-story main hall, which is surrounded by staircases and hallways and clad at its height in a golden marble, is a work of baroque theatricality.

5. 40 Center Street - **United States Courthouse**

Architect: Cass Gilbert (Completed by Cass Gilbert Jr.)

Completed: 1936

Cass Gilbert's final work, the United States Courthouse was completed by his son two years after his death in 1934. It is arguably the last classically themed skyscraper built in New York, which Gilbert used to reflect the building's function as a public federal building.

While the thirty-eight story, 590 foot tall tower lacks the rich ornamentation of earlier work, such as the Woolworth Building, or 90 West Street, its pared-down decoration seems more appropriate for a court of law. The building's shaft emerges from a six-story classical colonnade, decorated with sculpted American eagles. The tower culminates in a dramatic gilded terra-cotta pyramid roof topped by a lantern.



For security reasons the building's interior is not accessible to the public unless on court business.

6. **1 Centre Street** -- New York Municipal Building

Architect: William M. Kendall of McKim, Mead & White

Completed: 1914

The consolidation of the five boroughs into Greater New York in 1898 created the need for an impressive and suitably-sized headquarters for the city government. Between 1907 and 1908 the city sponsored an architectural competition for a large office building to consolidate various agencies. Urged by Mayor McClelland to enter, the firm of McKim, Mead & White won with a proposal for a classically detailed skyscraper. Designed by a partner William Mitchell Kendall (1856-1941), the U-shaped structure was adroitly placed on an irregular site adjacent to the ramps of the Brooklyn Bridge and criss-crossed underground by transit connections.

Completed in 1913, the 25-story block is surmounted by a central "wedding-cake" tower of spires, colonnades, obelisks and the sculpture "Civic Fame" by Adolf A. Weinman. This skyscraper grafts the language of traditional civic architecture onto a commercial office block form.



Downtown New York Webwalk

CITY HALL

The Municipal Building underwent a complete restoration of its exterior masonry in 1999, which entailed a the replacement of the badly corroded metal pins which hold the granite cladding in place.

7. Brooklyn Bridge Entrance Ramp - former site of the **World Building** and the **Tribune Building**

Located on Park Row – where the access ramps to the Brooklyn Bridge are now located – the New York World Building, the Tribune Building, and the extant New York Times Building formed a triumvirate of high-rise headquarters for major news organizations. These prime sites on Park Row, across from City Hall, placed these organizations at the center of political New York.



One of the first high-rise elevator buildings was Richard Morris Hunt's 1874 Tribune Building, a brick and masonry structure topped by a distinctive clock-tower and spire. Its height was increased several stories in later additions.

Completed in 1890, the World Building, (also known as the Pulitzer Building) was commissioned by editor Joseph Pulitzer as a headquarters for his paper the New York World. Designed by the

prolific skyscraper architect George B. Post, it was the first building in New York to surpass in height the 284-foot spire of Trinity Church. The number of stories is disputed: estimates range from the 26 stories claimed by the World to the 16 or 18 suggested by recent scholars. The World and Tribune buildings were demolished in 1955 for the expanded automobile entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge.



Downtown New York Webwalk

CITY HALL

8. **41 Park Row** - New York Times Building/now Pace University Architect: George B. Post; Addition: Robert Maynicke Completed: 1889; Addition, 1905



The New York Times had its headquarters in this building until 1904 when it moved to Longacre Square, later named Times Square. Park Row was also known as Newspaper Row, as it was at the center of the city's highly competitive newspaper industry throughout the nineteenth century. For reasons of economy, Post's new building went up around the 1857 Times building and incorporated elements of its structure. This was accomplished while regular newspaper operations went on in the old building.

When the Times transferred its operations to 42nd Street the building was again enlarged, this time by an additional 3-stories to accommodate more revenue-producing office space.

The gray granite building was designed in a Romanesque Revival style, with multiple levels of arcaded arches carried on slender stone columns. The clarity and beauty of Post's original design was marred by the removal of its graceful mansard roof and gables in the 1905 enlargement. Although the structure utilizes iron framing, its granite exterior walls are load-bearing, as was then required by the New York City Building Code.

9. **150 Nassau Street - American Tract Society Building**
Architect: R.H. Robertson
Completed: 1895

This office block was built as a speculative venture by the American Tract Society. Revenue from this investment would fund the charitable works of the Society which published and sold inexpensive Bible editions to Foreign Missionary Societies and newly arrived immigrants.

Rising from a plot 100 by 94 feet, this 22-story building contained 700 offices. The tower is topped by an elaborate open-arched pavilion with spectacular terra-cotta caryatids on its four corners that recall the figureheads of nineteenth century schooners.

Inside the building's lobby, the elevator hall is a semi-circular space with the cabs arranged around it in an arc, one of the few surviving examples of this early configuration in New York. The building is currently undergoing renovation for residential use.



Downtown New York Webwalk

CITY HALL

10. 12 Beekman Street - **Morse Building**

Architect: Silliman & Farnsworth

Completed: 1880

The 10-story Morse Building is one of New York's earliest surviving high-rise office buildings and was one of the first 'modern' tall buildings. It was built as a speculative venture by the nephews of Samuel F.B. Morse, whose early experiments with the telegraph were conducted on this site.

The flat roofline gives the building a simple box-like appearance that subsequent designers of high-rises worked hard to avoid. The building was a pioneer in its use of a nearly all brick façade, which also served the purpose, along with the wrought iron floor beams, of fireproofing the building. This red and black brick façade is articulated with fluted piers defining the central bay and corners. The almost industrial logic of its original architecture was lost when the basement and ground floors were refaced in 1902 and an additional 2-stories increased its height to 12-stories.



11. 38 Park Row, **Potter Building**

Architect: N.G. Starkweather

Completed: 1886

This iron-framed, brick building is a riot of robust clay capitals and classical details. What was viewed as its greatest innovation at the time of its completion was its virtually fireproof construction, a strength advertised by its iron-clad lower stories and storefronts. The richly ornamented façade is anchored by dramatic eight-story vertical piers in brick with enormous terra-cotta capitals, and the colossal eleven-story embedded column that seem to hinge the corner of Nassau Street and Beekman Place. A builder's plate giving the name of the foundry responsible for the cast iron work remains at the building's southwest corner.

The Potter Building is a masterpiece of architectural terra-cotta, and its construction played an important role in the development of terra cotta as a building material in New York. Terra cotta, a type of clay that is molded and fired, was chosen by the building's owner, Orlando Potter, for its fire resistant properties and low price. At the time, no source of terra cotta existed in New York, and a Boston company was hired to provide the material. Soon after the building's completion, Potter founded the New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Company, which would manufacture much of the terra-cotta ornament widely used in later skyscrapers.



Downtown New York Webwalk

CITY HALL

12. 15 Park Row - **Park Row Building**

Architect: R.H. Robertson

Completed: 1899

The 30-story Park Row Building was the tallest office building in the world from the time of its completion until the completion of the Singer Building in 1908. Built as a speculative office building by a syndicate of investors lead by August Belmont (also the entrepreneur behind the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT), a private company responsible for the building and operation of the original subway line) the office block originally accommodated 950 offices and over 4,000 workers. It exploited the newly developed all steel-skeleton technology. The syndicate bought and consolidated seven smaller lots to create this large but very irregularly shaped site which lacked the corner lot.

The exterior lacks the soaring profile and slender tower of the office buildings that would take the title of tallest building in the next decade, the Singer Building, Metropolitan Life Tower and Woolworth Building. The most distinctive elements of its design are the two three-story cupolas and four life-sized sculpted figures projecting from the fourth floor of the Park Row front.



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Downtown New York Webwalk CITY HALL

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Credits

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The Manhattan Borough Presidents Office and the Manhattan Borough President, C. Virginia Fields



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