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REAL ESTATE

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When a Sixth Avenue Flagship Struck Its Colors



LEFT, THE DAILY GRAPHIC/COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY; RIGHT, MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

By **CHRISTOPHER GRAY**

It is now hidden under renovation tarps, but in 1877, when the chunky cast-iron B. Altman department store opened on Sixth Avenue at 19th Street, it played a major part in attracting retailers like Siegel-Cooper to this stretch of the avenue in the 1890s.

By 1904, however, Benjamin Altman had seen the future and realized it was Fifth Avenue.

Born in 1840, Altman set out on his own in 1865, after having learned the dry-goods trade working in his father's business. His first move was to lower Sixth Avenue, not far from the emerging retail strip of West 14th Street.

By 1877, he opened his new four-story store at the southwest corner of 19th and Sixth with a cast-iron facade designed by David and John Jardine.

The Daily Graphic described the "thousands of ladies, who swarmed like bees over the three first floors" on opening day, saying that the staff had "all they could do taking orders for hunting suits, for grenadine dresses with damasked polonaise and trimming of white and black French lace, and for the pretty morning dresses."



"100 THE FIRST CENTURY A HISTORY OF B. ALTMAN & CO.," OFFICE FOR METROPOLITAN HISTORY

DRY-GOODS KING Benjamin Altman, photographed about 1900.

The next year the Sixth Avenue elevated train began running, bringing with it yet more customers. In October 1881, The New York Times reported the “most superb novelty” in women’s coats: “a Persian camel’s hair dolman, with all the hues of a rainbow woven into the fabric.” Also for sale: a white satin dress by Charles Worth embroidered with grasses and ferns, with a brilliant row of large silk butterflies.

In an article on early department stores, published in “Valentine’s Manual of Old New York” (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921), John Crawford Brown described B. Altman as “the best for ladies’ apparel, cloaks, coats and so forth,” especially for sealskin. “To have the Altman name on your coat or muff or seal collar was equivalent to the hallmark on sterling silver,” he said.

B. Altman later expanded southward to the corner of 18th Street. By 1900, it had been joined — overshadowed, even — by big stores like Siegel-Cooper, Adams & Company, Ehrich & Sons and others.

In 1896 The Times reported that Altman had hired the architectural firm of Kimball & Thompson to extend the store and transform it with a limestone front in the Spanish Renaissance style, with towers at the corners. He did expand — installing a great central dome of hundreds of round plugs of glass supported by decorated iron beams — but he left his old cast-iron facade as it was.

Altman was hedging his bets. In the early 1890s he had begun buying property on Fifth Avenue near 34th Street. Some smaller chic stores were already relocating to Fifth Avenue, and Sixth Avenue was recognized for mass, not class.

In 1902, Macy’s moved from 14th Street to 34th, where Broadway crosses Sixth Avenue, an apparent ratification of the importance of Sixth. But two years later, Altman announced plans to build at 34th and Fifth. The building now houses the Science, Industry and Business Library.

The vast Fifth Avenue store, with a French limestone facade, opened in 1906 (although sections were not completed until 1914, a year after Altman died). It established a new center of retail gravity on Fifth.

In 1906 The Real Estate Record & Guide, while calling the new B. Altman “the finest and largest retail dry-goods store in the city,” remained unconvinced of the passing of an era and called Sixth Avenue from 14th to 23rd Streets “the greatest shopping center in the world.”

In 1907, Greenhut & Company, another dry-goods firm, opened in the old B. Altman store. Joseph B. Greenhut, the founder, told The Times in 1911 that Sixth Avenue was unrivaled for large stores. “We won’t see much change in our lifetime,” he said.

But the exodus from Sixth Avenue continued. As other stores continued to relocate or simply closed, hundreds of thousands of square feet of retail space were thrown on the market. Mr. Greenhut died in November 1918, seven months after his store closed for good.

The old B. Altman store and the retail buildings were taken over for lofts or other miscellaneous uses, and until the 1980s this section of Sixth Avenue was like a La Brea Tar Pit of retail architecture, with its huge dinosaurlike buildings mired in neglect.

Gradually they were freed, several with significant restorations. Now the firm of [Howard L. Zimmerman Architects P.C.](#), is supervising a facade renovation of the old B. Altman building, where the Container Store now occupies retail space on the avenue.

Ilya Shtulberg, an engineer with the firm, says the cast-iron facade is “in decent shape” and will be secured with stainless-steel pins. The iron will be repainted light gray. While perhaps not the original color, this is the existing color and will permit a quick review by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Correction: November 18, 2007

The Streetscapes column on Oct. 21, about the first B. Altman department store, at 19th Street and Sixth Avenue, misstated the given name of the founder of Greenhut & Company, which opened at the site after Altman moved. He was Joseph B. Greenhut, not Jacob.