BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Going Downtown

HISTORY HUNT

THE HISTORIC RETAIL & THEATER DISTRICT
Going Downtown

Downtown was the place where people shopped and were entertained. Streetcars, and later automobiles and buses, linked this central theater and retail district to the places people lived. Loveman’s, Parisian, Pizitz, Blachs, Burger Phillips, Porters, Saks, and New Ideal — Birmingham’s big city stores— thrived on or near 19th Street.

The excitement of shopping store to store kept people coming. The goods and services they wanted were here (and nowhere else). Get someone older than you to describe a day of shopping downtown. Ask these questions:

How did you get here?
- Streetcar  
- Train  
- Bus  
- Auto

How did you dress?
- Dressed up  
- Hats and gloves  
- Heels for ladies

What did you do?
- Shop for a season  
- Have lunch  
- Go to a sale  
- Go to a parade  
- Go to the movies  
- Window shop

Why did you go?
- Need something  
- To be entertained  
- To hang out

With whom did you go?
- Your mother  
- Your parents  
- Your grandmother

How long did the visit last?
- All day  
- All evening  
- All Saturday morning

Was there any other place to shop in Birmingham? ______

What about mail-order catalogs?
- Sears & Roebuck  
- Montgomery Ward

What happens on 19th Street today?
- Shopping  
- Movies  
- Offices  
- Education
S. H. Kress opened the first five-and-ten stores in New York. They quickly spread across America forming the first national chains. Kress sold cheap, standard items in huge volumes for five to ten cents!

Find and circle Kress and Woolworth, another five and ten, in the photograph of Second Avenue above.

Trade in Birmingham was good. Kress built bigger and bigger stores. The second Kress store on 19th Street also remains today.

At which national chain stores do you shop? ________________________________________

Name stores selling cheap, standard goods.________________________________________

What can you buy for five or ten cents? _________________________________________
Here Birmingham stores looked like their trendy New York and Chicago “cousins:” Saks, Macy’s, and Marshall Field.

“We are here with Christmas cheer,” reads a Loveman’s holiday advertisement. The store’s displays brought everyone downtown . . . for window shopping, and sales.
These large stores offered many kinds of goods — organized into departments — located on multiple floors, all under a single roof.

At one time, Pizitz had 74 departments and 600 employees. They sold almost everything and delivered it to your door.

Sales attracted shoppers. Here they check out fabrics at Loveman’s (today’s McWane Center).

Name department stores operating in Birmingham today.
Birmingham’s Broadway

The performing arts and the movies also found their audiences downtown. More than 70 theaters and movie palaces hosted vaudeville shows, plays, musicals, and movies.

Marquees and signs announce store and theater names and purposes. To make sure nobody misses the message, chaser lights trim the elaborate signs.
Promotion with the streetcar railways — all of which converged in the downtown area — was a winning strategy to fill the theater seats.

This early Hollywood blockbuster told the story of building the railroads across America.
Palace of the Common Man

Birmingham’s and Alabama’s largest theater — The Alabama, Showplace of the South — provides splendor for the price of a movie ticket. OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

Spain, Morocco, and the Orient inspired this fabulous ornament.

This exotic place welcomes 2,500 persons into its world of illusion and fantasy. The Hungarian immigrant who built it wanted his theaters to look like European palaces.

Theater decoration includes African, Asian, and European designs, 9,000 light bulbs, 500 tons of molded plaster and paintings, statuary, and antique furnishings from Spanish castles! The Moorish-style Hall of Mirrors, Oriental Tea Room and English Manor Hall remain rendezvous sites to “Meet Me at The Alabama.”
Built to show silent movies, The Alabama seats 3,000 persons.

The theater’s mighty Wurlitzer organ — with the sound capability of a church organ, a jazz ensemble and a symphony orchestra — fills the palatial interior with marvelous sound.

How you seen a movie or attended a concert or a party here lately?
The Singing Fool, an early “talkie” that played at The Alabama, featured Al Jolson.

Movies were silent when The Alabama opened in 1926. A stage orchestra and organ provided the sound effects. Movies and big stage shows from New York changed weekly. Shows and movies, and community functions, continue today, but without costumed ushers.

*Decked out in buckskin skirts and feathers, these ushers welcome moviegoers to the Lyric Theater.*
During the early 20th century, store and shop owners considered their buildings a gift to the street. Skilled craftsmen created highly decorated building fronts. Look up to find these details.

Hunt Location: 200 Block 19th Street
1800 Block Third Avenue North
Going Downtown

Starting Points:
McWane Center, formerly Loveman’s Department Store, 200-16th St. North. Telephone for tours: 714-8414.

Hike Area: 200 Block 19th Street & 1800 Block Third Ave. North

Needed to begin: pencils, quarters for parking meters or fees, tour arrangements at individual sites, curiosity and a half an hour, not including site tours.

Vocabulary:
Broadway: a street in New York City near many of that city’s legitimate theaters and playhouses
Department store: a store selling a wide variety of goods arranged in many departments
Vaudeville: stage entertainment consisting of unrelated acts such as music, dancing, acrobats, pantomime and comics.

The parade route went right up 19th Street, with merchants and everyone pitching in to celebrate civic causes.

In the early 20th century, 19th Street became the center of downtown shopping and entertainment. Independent merchants and later immense department stores and national chains offered clothes and shoes, and everything needed for the home.

Comedies, operas, melodramas, minstrel shows, serious theater and the movies played in the lavish theaters and “picture” palaces, known as Birmingham’s Broadway.