

When the Empire State Building Was New

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Today, New York's Empire State Building is one of the most famous structures in the world. It stands hundreds of feet taller than the skyscrapers that surround it, and is visible from far away in New Jersey and Long Island. But it isn't the tallest building in the world. In fact, since the recent completion of One World Trade Center, it isn't even the tallest building in New York City!

But when the Empire State Building was constructed, it was more than just another skyscraper. It was the tallest, most remarkable building on earth—and it stayed that way for close to forty years. To understand what people thought about the Empire State Building when it was first constructed, we can look at original newspaper reports from *The New York Times*. These are called primary sources, because they were written by people who witnessed history first-hand. With these *New York Times* reports, we can see the building through the eyes of the past, and perhaps have a chance to appreciate this most famous skyscraper as though it were new.

The Empire State Building was built at the site of the famous Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, a lavish structure that, by 1929, was no longer up to the demands of the modern world. A corporation headed by former New York governor Alfred E. Smith proposed to build an office building there—not just any office building, but the greatest in the world. At this time, there was fierce competition to see who could build the tallest building on earth. The nearby Chrysler Building was set to claim the title, but Smith and his company wanted to steal it from them, by building something so big that it would be years before anyone could top it.

There was just one little problem: the Great Depression. The stock market crashed at the end of 1929, destroying banks, emptying savings accounts and leaving millions out of work. But the men behind the Empire State Building would not be stopped. They finished tearing down the old Waldorf-Astoria by the beginning of 1930, and on March 17—St. Patrick's Day—the work on the skyscraper began.

"Time was an essential element," wrote Smith, to complete "the greatest structural accomplishment" the city had ever seen.

Because height was of the utmost importance, the building was designed from the top down. At the very top would be a "dirigible mooring mast." A dirigible is a kind of giant blimp, built to fly across the Atlantic Ocean in the days before jets. Although now that may seem silly, at the time, dirigibles were cutting edge technology, and the mooring mast, according to Smith, was "a logical development of this day of air transportation." Moreover, the 200-foot mast would allow the building to solidly surpass the Chrysler Building in height.

The mooring mast was planned to reach nearly 1,300 feet above Fifth Avenue. Below that was the building—as wide as a city block on the first floor, but narrower as it went up. The places where it got narrower are called "setbacks," and they started at the sixth floor, a design the architects said, "will save space and assure light and air to neighbors."

"We believe we have solved the problem of light and air in congested districts," said Mr. Smith.

Construction began on the bottom floors even before the designs for the top floors had been finalized. Once it started, it went fast. *Times* reporter C.G. Poore described the process as "a chase up into the sky, with the steel workers going first and all the other trades following madly after them." To illustrate this, Poore produced "some staggering figures":

The building of the skyscraper represents an investment of \$50,000,000 and all other figures are in proportion. More than 50,000 tons of steel, 10,000,000 bricks, and 200,000 cubic feet of stone will be used before the frame is completed. There will be seventy-five miles of water mains and 2,000,000 feet of electric light and power wiring...More than 3,000 men are daily at work...Among them are 225 carpenters, 290 bricklayers, 384 brick laborers, 328 arch laborers, 107 derrick men.

Each day, those men walked to work past long unemployment lines, which reminded them how lucky they were to have such well-paying jobs. Building the Empire State Building was a dangerous job,

performed without hardhats, harnesses, or any of the safety equipment required today. Imagine walking out on a narrow steel beam, 1,000 feet above the street, and then having to work up there all day!

On each floor, Poore tells us, there was "a miniature railway system," to haul the steel, wood and marble brought up from street level. And to keep the men from having to go all the way down to eat lunch, there were "restaurants at various levels of the building" designed for the workers. At night, when the bosses went home, the workers could relax. They would pick a specific floor of the building, and throw a party—laughing and having fun, knowing that they were higher above the city than any of the richest men in town.

The building was finished in just over a year. Of all the words written afterwards, perhaps the most interesting come from Mrs. Alice Liddell Hargreaves, an elderly English woman who visited the tower soon after its completion. Seventy years earlier, Mrs. Hargreaves had known a quiet country pastor named Lewis Carroll, who used her as the inspiration for his most famous book: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Now much older than the character she inspired, Mrs. Hargreaves "seemed almost as excited with her newest adventures in the wonderland of New York."

The Empire State Building, she said, was "just like the tumble down [the] rabbit hole."