

April 24, 2013, 11:22 A.M. ET

Woolworth Building at 100: Early Skyscraper Rooted in History

By Jackie Bischof



Getty Images

A view of the Woolworth Building in 2011. See more photos of the building over the years in a slideshow.

It may no longer be the tallest building in the world, but the Woolworth Building stands tall in history as an example of the ambition that drove New York City's development in the early 20th century.

Its grand opening took place 100 years ago Wednesday, and the centenary is being celebrated this week with a series of events, forums and tours. An exhibition on the building is currently taking place at the Skyscraper Museum in Battery Park City.

Standing at 60 stories in a Gothic style, with gargoyle embellishments that call to mind a European cathedral, it was christened by a reverend as a "Cathedral of Commerce" at its grand opening, according to a city landmark-designation report written by architectural historian [Anthony Robins](#).

In the pre-skyscraper era, the city was dominated by tall church spires, Mr. Robins said in an interview, and some New Yorkers of the time mourned the loss of the skyline's religious character. One contemporary critic, he noted, even suggested that new skyscrapers be crowned with crosses.



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The top of the Woolworth Building, poking above the clouds in this undated photo, stands at a height of 792 feet. See more historic photos in a slide show.

"Before these enormous buildings went up — the Singer, the Metropolitan Life, the Woolworth — the New York skyline was really religious," Mr. Robins said. "When the buildings of commerce rose that high, it changed the flavor of the city."

The Woolworth Building, completed in 1913, was initially planned as a 16-story office tower but eventually grew into the tallest building in the world at the time of its completion. It was designed by architect Cass Gilbert, who created several other downtown buildings, and commissioned by businessman Frank Woolworth as the headquarters for his five- and 10-cent store empire.

Plans for the building's ever-increasing height were driven by Mr. Woolworth's desire to capture the advertising potential of owning the tallest skyscraper in the world.

In the landmark-designation report, the building is described as "the culmination of the early development of the tall office building that began before 1880, and the model — in terms of height, profile, corporate symbolism and romantic presence — for the skyscrapers of the great building boom of the post-World War I era that culminated in the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings."

Of Mr. Gilbert's buildings, which include museums, libraries and state capitols across the country, Mr. Robins counts the Woolworth as one of his best for its design and siting, which allows it to be viewed from top to bottom from a number of locations.

"It was extremely well known because it captured the title of the world's tallest building and it was the culmination of the development of skyscrapers," before WWM, Mr. Robins said.

The building was named a national historic landmark in 1966 and a New York City landmark in 1983.