

GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



## GEORGIA BUSINESS HISTORY INITIATIVE

*Sharing the Stories of the Businesses that Built Georgia*



SUNTRUST



Equitable Building, Atlanta, Library of Congress.



## A PROFILE IN GEORGIA'S BUSINESS HISTORY

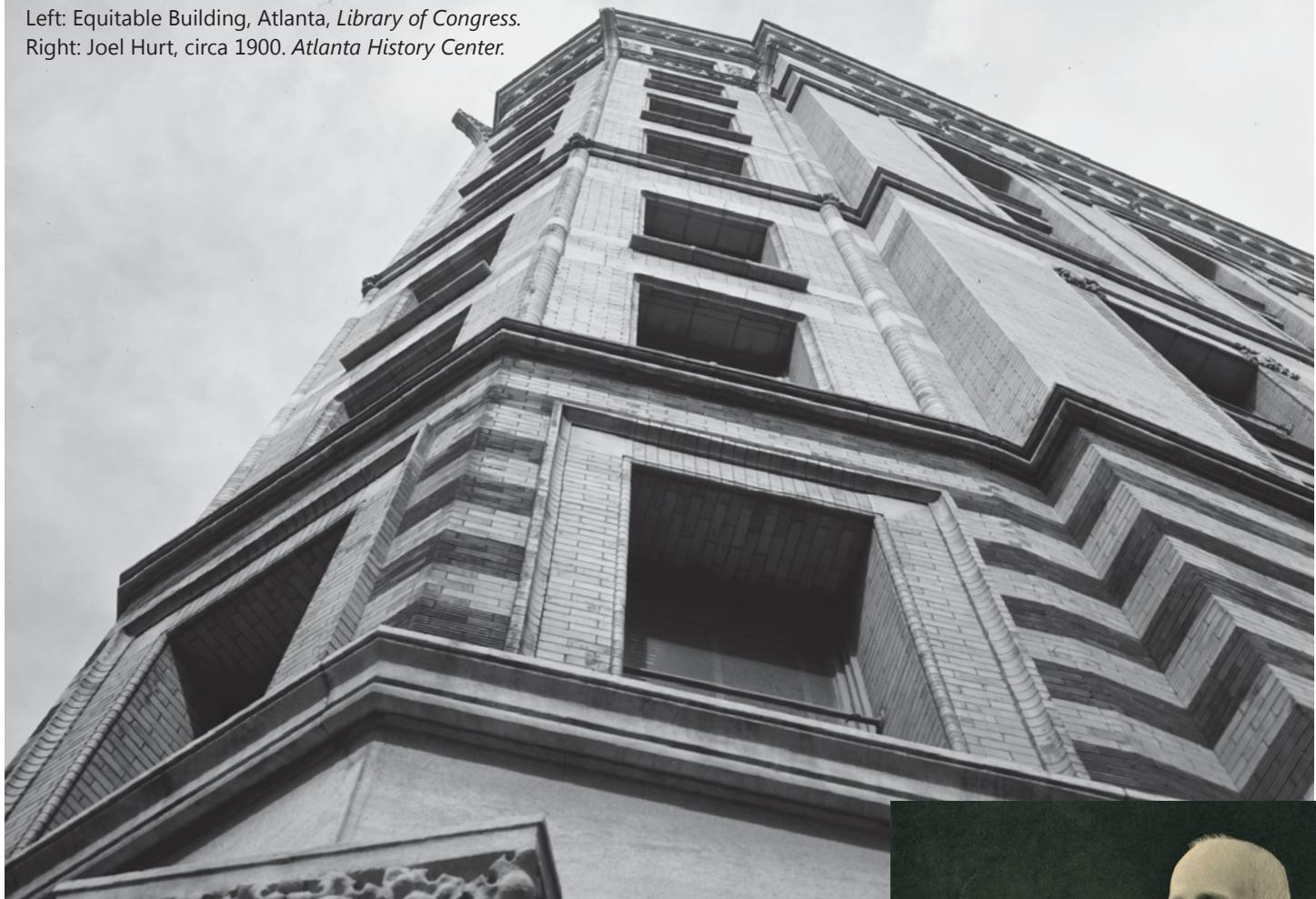
### THE BEGINNINGS

In 2019, SunTrust Bank along with BB&T Corp. announced a merger between the two regional banks resulting in the 6th largest bank in the United States. This merger—the largest of its kind since the 2008 economic recession—represents a pattern of consistent growth throughout SunTrust Bank's history and underscores SunTrust's long and significant history in Georgia.

The Commercial Travelers' Savings Bank was granted a charter, or approval, to open its doors from the Georgia General Assembly in 1891. The bank was founded by a group of 24 men in Atlanta—none of which were bankers—and during an economic recession in the post-Civil War era. The bank survived its first year of business competing against at least 18 other banks in the city. The founders were unsure about the future of their endeavor but it wouldn't take long for the bank to cement its place in the economic history of Atlanta and the Southeastern region.

In 1893, the name of the bank was changed to the Trust Company of Georgia (TCG) reflecting a shift in its overall business. Under the leadership of Joel Hurt, TCG became a trust and investment bank, managing banking services for companies, buying and selling stocks, and assisting mergers (when two companies join together).

Left: Equitable Building, Atlanta, *Library of Congress*.  
Right: Joel Hurt, circa 1900. *Atlanta History Center*.



In the same year, the bank's office was relocated to Atlanta's first "skyscraper," an eight story building known as the Equitable Building—built and owned by the president of TCG, Joel Hurt.

Despite the changes made under Mr. Hurt the bank did not abandon its practice as a savings and loan bank. It distributed small, metal home-savings banks for individuals who wanted to open a savings account—an account where money is kept so that it can grow.

Periodically throughout the year, owners of the "little banks" could bring them in to TCG to deposit the contents. The savings bank was advertised as a way to avoid potential disaster of losing hard-earned cash in a fire or other misfortune. The "savings accounts" were popular among railroad employees.

In 1904, Ernest Woodruff took over direction of TCG and presided over one of the most important financial acquisitions of the early 20th century when the Trust Company of Georgia helped provide financing for the purchase of The Coca-Cola Company in 1919.



# ERNEST WOODRUFF AND THE COCA-COLA COMPANY



Ernest Woodruff



Trust Company sign, early 1960s.  
*Georgia State University Library.*

From 1904-1922 Ernest Woodruff was the president of TCG. During his tenure he engaged the bank to help acquire, or purchase, young companies with great potential for growth and profit. Under Woodruff's direction TCG helped him acquire companies in industries such as transportation and distribution. For example, in a time before electronic refrigeration and gas furnaces, ice and coal were commodities in high demand. Woodruff organized a series of mergers bringing together smaller ice and coal companies to form the Atlantic Ice and Coal Company—one of the largest mergers of the time.

In 1919, Woodruff, and W. C. Bradley bought The Coca-Cola Company for \$25 million. The deal was the largest of its kind at that time. TCG provided underwriting services which made shares of stock, or ownership, of The Coca-Cola Company available to the public. As an underwriter, TCG guaranteed financial support for The Coca-Cola Company and in return Trust Company received some of the first stock in the company so its shareholders could reap the benefits of Coca-Cola's financial growth and increasing profits. SunTrust owned the original shares of Coca-Cola stock until it sold its last holdings in 2012. The only written copy of the Coca-Cola formula was held in the SunTrust Bank safe deposit vault in its main office in Atlanta until 2011, when it was moved to a vault built at the World of Coca-Cola, just a short distance away.

## TCG'S MODERN HISTORY

TCG's modern history is marked by the end of a temporary merger between the Trust Company of Georgia and the First National Bank of Atlanta (a bank that was also the result of

multiple mergers). The short-lived relationship between TCG and First National ended abruptly in 1933 when national banking laws were changed. This era marks TCG's debut as a full-service commercial bank offering



Trust Company of Georgia, East Atlanta Branch, Georgia, October 18, 1960. *Georgia State University Library*.

newly acquired community banks provided the bank opportunities to support small towns and meet the individualized needs of those who lived there. It is a point of pride that TCG (later SunTrust) allowed its community banks to operate on the unique needs of each community.

services to large companies as well as individuals and small businesses. Commercial banking services can include accepting cash deposits, offering checking and savings accounts, and making loans. After detaching from First National, TCG became the owner of five banks throughout Georgia in Augusta, Columbus, Macon, and Savannah.

TCG expanded greatly after World War II, supporting agricultural industries but also efforts to urbanize and industrialize the state of Georgia. TCG's



## THE BIG, BLUE "T" MARK

In the 1970s, TCG focused on expanding retail services to the communities its banks served. Retail services could include opening local bank branches and providing credit and debit services, as well as personal loans or mortgages for individuals and small businesses. New banking laws in Georgia allowed for county-wide banking, giving TCG the ability to acquire more, local banks and bank branches across the state. During this time TCG adopted the big, blue "T" as a marker for all of its banking activities—a symbol that would come to be recognized across the state.



## BECOMING SUNTRUST BANK

By far the TCG's biggest change came in 1985, one year after Georgia and Florida enacted reciprocal, or mutual, banking laws establishing interstate banking between the two states. Interstate banking faced a Supreme Court challenge but the constitutionality of the laws was upheld allowing for the formation of a brand new entity—SunTrust Bank.

The merger between Sun Bank of Orlando, Florida and TCG of Atlanta, Georgia was the largest in Southeastern banking history and established a precedent for regional banking. SunTrust Bank became the first of its kind in the Southeast. The consolidation of the two companies was cemented through the exchange of stock, with shareholders from each company receiving shares of stock from the other. The combined companies were responsible for approximately 450 offices in Georgia and Florida with a staff of more than 14,000 and its new common stock was publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange under the stock ticker symbol STI.

The next year in 1986, SunTrust Bank announced another interstate merger acquiring the Third National Corporation, a Tennessee bank holding company. This merger established SunTrust Bank as a true regional presence in the Southeast. SunTrust was now the owner of 56 banks in three states. Customers had access to 614 branch locations and the combined companies employed 19,000 people.

SunTrust Plaza in Downtown Atlanta, Georgia. Photo by ATLEXPLORER/Flickr.

## 21st CENTURY BANKING

In 1996, SunTrust acquired a 60-story building in downtown Atlanta known as SunTrust Plaza, not far from the bank's first home—the 8-story Equitable Building. Over the next decade, major acquisitions led to expansion of SunTrust's business into Virginia, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and the Carolinas.

In 2002, SunTrust Bank—a direct descendant of the Trust Company of Georgia—had more than 1,100 retail branches and more than 2,200 ATMs across the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. By 2013, it employed 26,000 people while steadily recovering from the 2008 financial crisis.

In 2019, yet another merger was announced for the once-named Commercial Travelers' Savings Bank. SunTrust Bank and BB&T Corp. of North Carolina are set to become Truist—a move that continues to represent SunTrust's conservative, yet substantial growth over its 128-year history in Georgia and the Southeast.



Top: SunTrust Bank Fifteenth and New York Branch in Washington, D.C. (2018). Photo by Yuhan Zhang.

Bottom left: SunTrust branch in Durham, North Carolina. Photo by Ildar Sagdejev. Bottom right: Truist, the new bank created by the merger of SunTrust and BB&T in 2019, will be headquartered in the Hearst Building in Charlotte.



## CASE STUDY: "BUILD YOUR COMMUNITY, BUILD YOUR BANK"

One steady constant in SunTrust Bank's history is its commitment to the people and communities it serves. From its earliest days, SunTrust has been committed to being a good "corporate citizen." It has consistently fulfilled two major roles as both a profit-making institution and an organization committed to advancing the public good.

SunTrust Bank, a direct descendant of the Trust Company of Georgia and The Commercial Travelers' Savings Bank has a long history of investing in the city of Atlanta. The founders were not traditional bankers. They represented a variety of industries from Atlanta's earliest business communities including grocers, salesmen, and manufacturers. These twenty-four men established their bank to invest in the city's growing small business community and support Atlanta as it grew into a transportation, trade, and distribution center.

The Bank's earliest leadership, Joel Hurt and Ernest Woodruff, invested heavily in building Atlanta. Mr. Hurt increased railroad transportation, invested in infrastructure, and developed land while Mr. Woodruff was responsible for organizing many landmark Georgia companies such as The Coca-Cola Company.



Atlanta branch of Trust Company of Georgia, 1956.  
*Georgia State University Library*

Even as the bank grew to serve more territory over time—it remained committed to its customers and its communities. As the Trust Company of Georgia, the bank recognized the interdependence between their corporate well-being and the communities they served by committing resources to improving education, better housing, and minority business development. It has encouraged its employees to participate in leadership roles and give back to their communities, even offering "Matching Gifts" when employees donated up to \$2,500 to qualifying non-profit organizations such as schools.

Even after becoming a large, regional bank and conducting business across several states, SunTrust remained committed to its communities by allowing decisions to be made at the local level rather than the corporate level—especially when it comes to clients' needs. Leaders in the banks at the local levels are given the power

to discern how best to meet the needs of their clients and how to engage local SunTrust employees in civic participation based on the uniqueness of their local community.

On an even broader scale, after uncovering through research that 75 percent of Americans were experiencing financial stress, SunTrust launched "onUp," a national movement for financial confidence in 2016. In 2019, SunTrust announced that five million people had taken a step to improve their financial wellness through tools, tips and counseling from The onUp Movement.

In an interview for Georgia Trend magazine in 2013, CEO of SunTrust Bank William H. Rogers, Jr. explained that the bank remained committed to what it could control and that was how the bank treated and served its clients. Mr. Rogers quoted one of the builders of SunTrust's predecessor, Sun Bank of Orlando, "Build your communities, build your bank." SunTrust has maintained that approach throughout its history, heavily impacting Georgia and the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic regions it serves.



SunTrust Chairman and CEO Bill Rogers on the cover of *Georgia Trend*, December 2013.



SunTrust teammates volunteering at a "Hiring Our Heroes" event held at SunTrust Park.

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"OnUp" resources can be found at [www.onup.com](http://www.onup.com).



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