

# The Story of the Stacks

The History and Transformation of the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills: from Inception to Adaptation



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As the late 1800s merge into the twentieth century, the constant roar of America's Machine Age echoes against walls of brick. Bales of cotton are unloaded from railroad cars while almost 3,000 workers (many of them women and children) spin, weave, bleach, dye, and print the cotton, creating bags and tents. Thick plumes pour from tall, brick smokestacks and mingle with the aroma of cabbage cooking in the shotgun style wood houses lining the surrounding streets. A hot Atlanta sun shines overhead, illuminating the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills.

One hundred years certainly changes things.

Today, the buildings of the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills, purchased by Aderhold Properties in 1996 for conversion to lofts, are now commonly known as "The Stacks at Fulton Cotton Mill," and according to Tom Aderhold, President of Aderhold Properties, the ongoing conversion has been the "challenge of all challenges."

↑ "View of the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill in the Cabbagetown neighborhood of Atlanta," a photograph by Marion Johnson, taken circa 1977 → "The Stacks at Fulton Mill," by Jeff Herr, photograph taken January 2008





## From landmark to lofts

Nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976, the buildings of the former mill had already started to deteriorate when they were closed for business in 1977. Surrounding Cabbagetown was subsequently declared a Landmark District, but the neighborhood was dwarfed by the hulking presence of the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills.

In the early 1990s the Cabbagetown Neighborhood Improvement Association approached Louis Brown, then President of Winter Construction, and asked if he would be willing to purchase the buildings and adapt them for reuse. Brown subsequently left Winter and formed a partnership with Tom Aderhold and his father, John Aderhold, to accomplish this Herculean task. “It started off slowly,” Tom Aderhold reminisces. “We bought the Mill in 1996, moved on site in a trailer, and we’re still here.”

Brown (who died five years ago) was the one who “figured out how to make all this work,” Aderhold says. “We had good architects and good engineers,” but it was a daunting and expensive task. Historic guidelines dictate what must be saved, and as a result, elevated support trestles, the two mammoth smokestacks, the water tower, and the old boilers are still standing. Current residents of the Stacks see them as a kind of art. Marae Simone, a “condo stylist” by trade, bought her loft partly because of the

way the ghostly water tower’s metal stairways cast shadows on the old brick at night, framed by the tall windows in her living room. She likes to call the Stacks, “Industrial Chic.”

## Rising from the ashes of war

The Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills complex was founded by a German orphan immigrant named Jacob Elsas, who came to America to seek his fortune when he was 18. Elsas soon found himself in a Union Army unit stationed in Cartersville to guard General Sherman’s supply lines. Once the war ended, he opened a general store and quickly discovered the region’s need for cotton bags. A smart businessman who seized opportunities in the resurrecting South, Elsas soon made his way to Atlanta and, in 1867, purchased a charter to build a cotton mill from hotelier H.I. Kimball. He then acquired a 16-acre tract of land east of downtown Atlanta that had once been a Civil War foundry known as “The Rolling Mill,” Atlanta’s largest manu-

☐ Originally the entryway to the tower, the Deardorffs’ loft mixes antiques from their former home with larger scale pieces to fit the space. ☐ The view from the kitchen to the living room. ☐ Their bedroom, once the Mill’s storage room, has 16-inch deep walls.



**The ongoing conversion of the Stacks at Fulton Mill has been the “challenge of all challenges.”**

facturing plant before being destroyed during the war.

Elsas and his partner, Isaac May, began construction on the “Fulton Cotton Spinning Company” in the late 1870s. As was common practice at the turn of the century, the initial mill building was constructed with bricks made from clay found on-site. The Old Bleachery, the first mill building, was completed in 1881, just in time for the conclusion of Atlanta’s International Cotton Exposition and the subsequent rebuilding of the Southern textile industry.

According to an 1886 Sanborn map, originally created to help fire insurance companies with risk assessment, the complex consisted of the original Old Bleachery, a picking room, the engine room, plus a large cotton warehouse, waste house, lumber shed, water tank, and well and pump building.

In 1889, Elsas dissolved his partnership with May and re-chartered his growing business as the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills, Inc., which eventually included operations in New Orleans, St. Louis, Dallas, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, and Denver.

In 1895, Elsas expanded even further with Mill #1, a building that housed 40,000-spindles. He also added one of the largest steam engines in the South. After a final mill addition (c. 1904), the Atlanta property’s configuration was similar to the way it stands today. A 1911 Sanborn map shows Mill #1, Mill #2, Warehouse #6, the Bag Factory, Office Building, Machine Shop, and water tower. The last significant building in use today, the New Bleachery, was constructed in 1953.

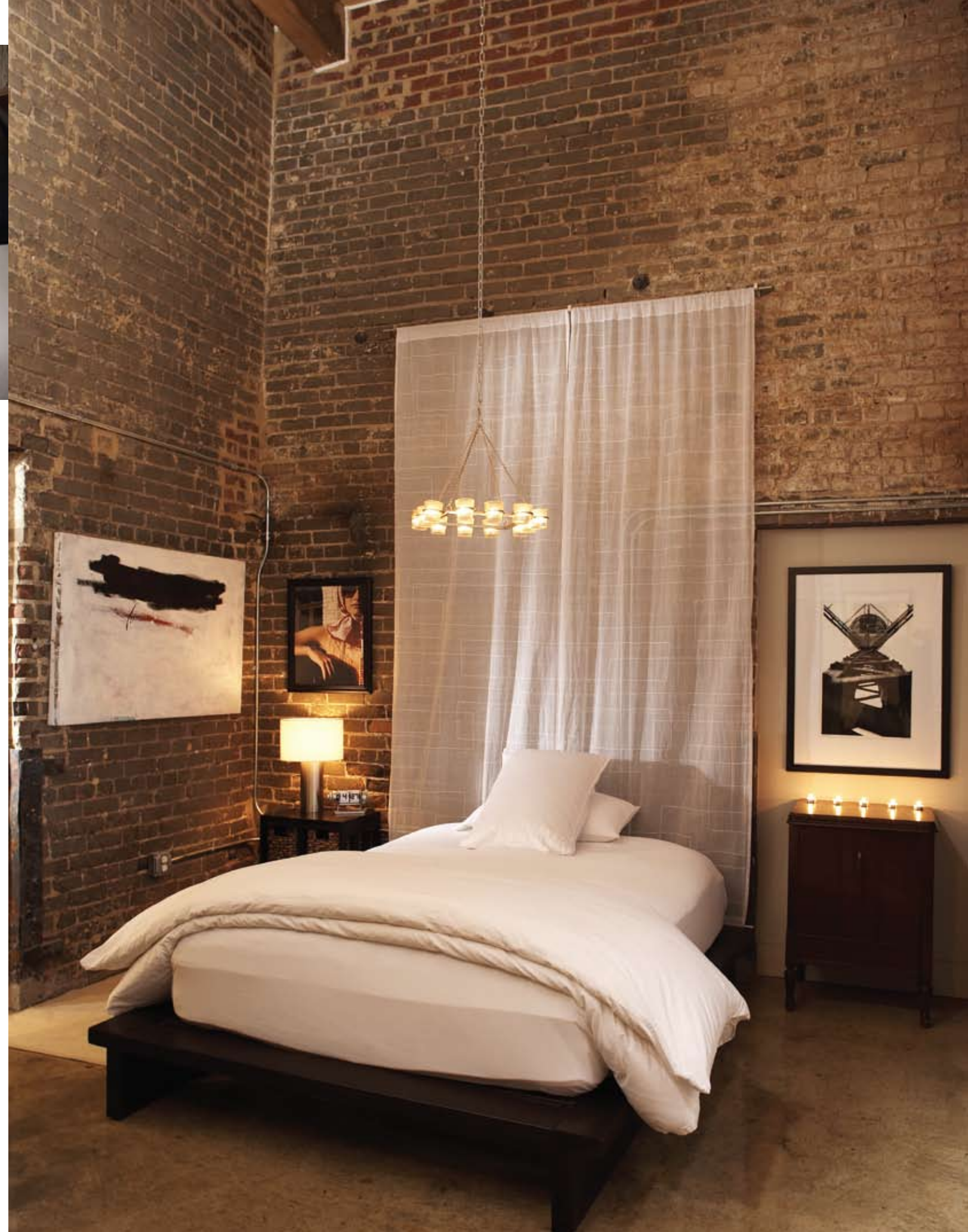
At the time, it was a common textile mill practice for the owners to erect company housing for some of their employees. Records show that there were homes in the area as early as 1878, predating the Old Bleachery. However, Elsas and other owners constructed additional housing in the adjacent neighborhood which came to be known as Cabbagetown.

**Enter the residents**

All told, “Phase I” of the transformation of the Stacks (the restoration of the New Bleachery, Warehouse #6, and the Bag Factory) was a \$50 million project. To fund the restoration, Aderhold Properties applied for a Section 42 Low Income Housing Credit. A requirement for acceptance was that 40% of the 206 Phase I units be set aside for low- to moderate-income renters. “We needed 82 units in the low income housing component,” Aderhold explains. “We have 84.” Section 42 is a 15-year project. “We started in 1998 so all of Phase I must remain rental units through 2013.”

Ben Morgan has been at the Stacks for 2-1/2 years, in two different apartments. “I really like living here,” he says. “The apartment I’m living in is wide open, with really cool, big win-

📍 Sutton’s tower loft features a Natuzzi sofa and sidechair from Italia Furniture; a Firenze sideboard serves as a wet bar. His ceiling gives new meaning to “loft.” 📺 An abundance of headroom in Sutton’s Romantic bedroom.





dows and lots of brick,” Morgan says.

The unusual windows are a focal point—no two are exactly the same size. “We kept the window company busy for a year,” says Aderhold. Another draw is the large community pool framed by the ruins of the Old Bleachery. When they were trying to figure out where to put the pool, an architect suggested putting it *in* the building. “Everyone said yes!” says Aderhold. It is a stroke of genius: a sleek, modern pool within an old, brick façade.

Phase II of The Stacks began in 1999. On April 12<sup>th</sup> of that year a raging fire broke out in Mill #1. Flames leapt over the five-story structure and trapped a crane operator on top of his machine. A daring, televised rescue ensued as a helicopter plucked the operator off his perch. Aderhold says he was standing next to then-Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell when he asked the operator through a radio how he was doing: “He said he was fine but a little hot . . . That was a fairly long day.”

Historic guidelines dictated that 60% of the interior must be intact in order to qualify for rebuild. Fortunately Aderhold Properties was allowed to proceed with its restoration. Due to the high combustibility of cotton, Mill #1 and its companion structures were built to withstand fire, in what was commonly known as “slow burning construction.”

The restoration of Mill #1 proceeded, and Aderhold’s Phase II was complete with the rentals of lofts in four other buildings. In April of 2006, Aderhold Properties teamed up with Jennings Partners Inc. and the Condo Store to market and sell new units. According to Wayne Anderson, Sales Manager at The Stacks, it took “barely over a year” to sell the 165 available lofts. They

are now marketing Phase II of the condominium project, starting with Mill #2. Available lofts range in price from the high \$100,000s to the mid-\$300,000s.

Brandon Sutton was a renter in Mill #1 (known today as “Building H”), and moved into the Stacks in March of 2001. “I was one of the first to move in,” he says. “I had a one-bedroom loft on the first floor. In November 2002, I moved into the Tower. I had an increase in rent but it was worth it.”

Sutton loves the history of the Stacks, adding, “Aderhold Properties has done a phenomenal job of preserving it.” He comments that wandering the halls is like a treasure hunt: old photographs line the walls and original machinery is on display in the corners.

When the building turned condo, Sutton jumped at the chance to purchase his unit. He loves most that his loft is “unlike all the others.” In fact, many of the lofts at The Stacks are unique. Tom Aderhold reports that there are 90 different floor plans in the 165 converted units.

Most residents agree with Sutton when he says, “the people are great.” Aderhold adds, “This kind of living draws people from every walk of life. We rejoice in the diversity.” There are parties around the pool, movies shown on big screens, and other events to bring residents together. Unless you’re here, Aderhold says, you just don’t know “how much fun it really is.”

☑ This two-bedroom model loft features birdcages suspended from the ceiling and a painting by artist and Stacks resident, Dagmar Bruehmueller. ☑ All units in the Stacks have spiral staircases; here, one leads from the living area to the upstairs bedroom.



The Stacks residents also agree that the location is ideal. “I’ve seen Cabbagetown change so much,” says Sutton. “I’ve watched Carroll Street come alive.” And indeed, there are now numerous restaurants and watering holes within walking distance. Downtown is one mile to the west, plus more loft buildings and restaurants are transforming the adjacent Memorial Drive corridor. I-20, I-75, and I-85 are easily accessible.

Lyn and Tom Deardorff, semi-retired, moved from Decatur to their loft at The Stacks, where they helped start The Stacks Artist, Architect & Loft Tour in December of last year to “showcase artists and showcase the lofts.”

The Deardorffs knew the Stacks was “not the same as the other places; the diversity appealed to us.”

“We had ‘Empty Nest syndrome,’” they explain, joking that they bought a loft with only one bedroom, “so no kids could move back in.”

Marae Simone says the things that sold her were “the high ceilings, concrete floor, and exposed brick.” She is proud that her loft is “the first home I’ve owned. I have more friends in this building than in all my other homes combined.”

Simply put, she says, “I love coming home.”

**EXIT**

↑ The wall behind Simone’s bed has a “reptile” faux-finish by Bridget Taylor. Beside it: an installation crafted from a found tree trunk. → With help from Le Corbusier, van der Rohe, and a prized mirror too heavy to hang on the wall, Simone’s living-room reflects her signature style: minimalist drama.