

## Student Handout 1-John Wanamaker and his “New Kind of Store”

### J O H N   W A N A M A K E R ’ S   B E G I N N I N G S

#### **Wanamaker “Firsts”**

- 1861 First clothing store to advertise in newspaper*
- 1876 First store with a restaurant on site*
- 1879 First use of Bell's telephone in a store*
- 1880 First store lit by electric light*
- 1882 First store with elevators*
- 1911 Largest pipe organ in the world installed*
- 1912 First to receive news of the Titanic disaster via wireless telegraph*
- 1916 New store medical offices opened with free care to employees*
- 1956 Premiere of the Christmas Light Show, continued today by Macy's*

John Wanamaker was born on July 11, 1838 on a modest farm just outside the city of Philadelphia. Growing up, he was a boy of high energy, ambition, and imagination. These feelings were fostered by a strong love for the city of Philadelphia and all of the excitement and opportunities that existed there. Raised in a devout Protestant household, he also developed strong religious beliefs and a reputation for honesty and fairness.

After graduating high school at the age of 14, he went to work in Philadelphia as a clerk at the Tower Hall Clothing Store, where he learned the basics of buying and selling clothing. He left Tower Hall in 1858, and married Mary Erringer Brown in 1860. It was then that he finally decided to go into business for himself.

With the funding of Mary's father and the support of her brother Nathan, Wanamaker opened his first store, Oak Hall, on April 8, 1861, on Market Street in Philadelphia. Oak Hall, however, was one of over 3,200 similar “dry goods” stores selling clothing and home goods in Philadelphia. Wanamaker's solution to distinguish his store was mass advertising, placing ads in newspapers, handouts, and billboards. In these messages Wanamaker let the city know of the honest deals and savings they could regularly expect from his store.

By 1871 Wanamaker's store was earning more than \$2 million dollars a year and was the largest men's retailer in the country. Still, Wanamaker wanted further store growth, and the source of his vision was the 1876 Centennial Exposition, a giant fair displaying the newest inventions and merchandise from around the world.

On March 12, 1876, Wanamaker opened the Grand Depot, advertised as a “new type of store” selling a wide variety of both foreign and domestic items, along with the newest technology, just like at the Exposition. Thousands coming to the fair flocked to his store where they were encouraged to buy the wonders on display. Together with his advertising, Wanamaker would continue to add modern additions such as electricity and elevators to draw crowds to sightsee and shop all in one special store.



### **THE GRAND DEPOT, 1876**

*Courtesy of the Pennsylvania State Archives*

#### **THE NEW SHOPPING EXPERIENCE**

Shopping in Philadelphia during the mid-1800s was a tiring chore as urban shoppers traveled to numerous stores specializing in the sale of specific goods to find what they needed at the best price. You went to the cobbler for shoes, the haberdasher for hats, the ironmonger for iron products, the confectioner for candy, the clothier/draper for cloth, and, if you weren't exhausted from walking all over town, you might stop in at the tailor to customize your clothes. Stores at the time were often small, dirty, and lacked a broad selection of goods. Furthermore, shopping during this time often involved "haggling," a process in which the buyer and seller debated the price of an item, often settling to the seller's advantage. Merchants would also sell poorly made goods and refused any attempts at returning them.

Wanamaker resented these corrupt business practices, and so he took a stand against them through his "one price system" and ten-day "return guarantee." These two policies raised the trust in Wanamaker's business while saving shoppers time and trouble.

In addition to changing business practices, manufacturing methods were evolving as well. The Industrial Revolution in America after the Civil War allowed goods to be produced in greater numbers at cheaper prices. Furthermore, the success of industry meant more Americans had well-paying jobs and sought to spend their money on these new items available for sale. New domestic roles also influenced shopping trends. In the late 19th Century, women were expected to run the household while their husbands went to work. This gave women control over shopping for necessities, as well as for items that would make the home more comfortable for the family.

Wanamaker and other department store owners capitalized on these changes by offering consumers the newest goods industry could provide at reasonable prices that would benefit the family home. The department store turned shopping from a chore into an enjoyable experience, with colorful displays, in-store shows, and holiday celebrations. Women and their families became targets of advertising, drawing consumers to the marvels of the department store. The roots of this shopping revolution remain with us today as shoppers browse the most attractive, decorated stores that offer the newest goods at affordable prices.



**BARGAIN BASEMENT SALE OF WANAMAKER'S DEPARTMENT STORE,  
PHILADELPHIA, PA, CIRCA 1935-1940.**

*Courtesy of Temple University, Urban Archives, Philadelphia, PA*



**JOHN WANAMAKER**

*Courtesy Library of Congress*

**I N S I D E   T H E   G R A N D   D E P O T**

On March 12, 1876, Wanamaker opened the Grand Depot from an old Pennsylvania Railroad warehouse. Wanamaker knew the value of placing his store in a central location in Philadelphia and located the new store just across from the current City Hall. The Grand Depot offered state-of-the-art items and a wide assortment of clothing and accessories from all over the world. Live music and shows, works of art, religious festivals, and scientific and historical exhibits drew people to the store and inevitably to shop.

The Grand Depot had five large circles, each with six glass counters, surrounding a central circle where the cashiers were located. Large signs hung above the store and divided the store into true "departments." Locals shopped comfortably as heaters and air vents kept the temperature stable.

Electricity lit the store after 1880, providing more comfortable shopping and colorful light displays. Wanamaker kept expanding the store until it took up most of the block, later adding a basement and second floor. In an attempt to stay modern, construction on the Grand Depot began in 1907 to replace it with the new, granite "Wanamaker Building".

### W A N A M A K E R ' S   T O D A Y

Wanamaker continued to expand upon his successful business. He completed the 12-story granite "Wanamaker Building" on the site of the Grand Depot in 1910. Throughout his life he donated millions of dollars to educational and religious charities. He continued to oversee the store until his death on December 12, 1922.

Wanamaker left an impressive \$40 million dollars to his heirs, but they were unable run the business like its founder. By 1979 the stores suffered from a lack of good marketing and management and sold to other investors. On August 28, 1995, Wanamaker's ceased to exist. Its current owners converted the store first into a Lord and Taylor's and then a Macy's, as it exists today. The 1910 Wanamaker building and many of its landmarks can still be seen; these include the Grand Court Organ, the largest operational pipe organ in the world, and the 1600-pound bronze "Wanamaker Eagle" statue which symbolized the Wanamaker chain. A stroll around this historic store reminds customers of a man who made shopping an eye-catching, enjoyable experience.



**OUTSIDE THE WANAMAKER BUILDING**  
*Image courtesy of Herbert Adams Gibbons. John Wanamaker. New York: Harper & Row, 1926.*



**INTERIOR OF WANAMAKER BUILDING, WITH GRAND COURT ORGAN AND WANAMAKER EAGLE**  
*Courtesy of the Friends of the Wanamaker Organ, [www.wanamakerorgan.com](http://www.wanamakerorgan.com)*