"Hanging on the skirts, very literally, of indecision," a small boy wearily trailed his aunt through the splendor of the "ladies' great shop" in New York City in the early 1850's. Five stories high, A. T. Stewart's magnificent Marble Palace "bravely waylaid custom" on the Chambers Street corner of Broadway. It regularly interrupted aunt and nephew on their way home from a dentist's office on Wall Street, confronting them with displays of fashionable life familiar to the boy from reading Godey's Lady's Book, the first American women's magazine, while waiting his turn in the dentist's chair. Shopping gave his aunt "the familiar Stewart headache from the prolonged strain of selection" and exposed him to "the enjoyment of our city as down-towny as possible," Henry James recalled in his old age.¹ Their experience reflected some of the impact of a new urban institution, the department store, on the residents of the modern city.²

The modern city, providing the economic incentive and the physical setting for new enterprise, produced the department store. The city stimulated the expansion of the retail market, improved communications systems, and generated a new building technology. Swept along by the tide of progress, residents steadily expanded the range of their consumption beyond food and material for clothing; the ambience of the large city encouraged many people of modest affluence to aspire to an air of solid comfort, if not luxury. Changing life-styles engendered a new pattern of urban life. Making money absorbed men, while women sought to realize their growing expectations through the purchase of household furnishings, ready-made clothes, children's toys, and other fashionable goods. These new desires took all sorts of women into the heart of the city, hastening the emergence of a new kind of store, one that displayed conveniently a large variety of goods under one roof and served shoppers obligingly.

The department store was the focal point for a novel form of downtown life. Its imposing appearance lent dignity to other, smaller shops that had gained a foothold among wholesale establishments and warehouses, hotels and churches, banks and offices. Its alluring presentation of merchandise attracted legions of women. Horsecars, trolleys, and cable cars facilitated the invasion of what had been—with the exception of a trip to church on Sundays, an occasional visit to a dentist, or a carriage ride to the theater—predominantly the austere world of draymen, clerks, merchants, lawyers, and bankers.

The palace of merchandise towered over the parade of pedestrians and the lines of streetcars that discharged women on the sidewalks skirting it. Coachmen and cab drivers quickly recognized that the curb in front of the main entrance had a special significance for their passengers. It was the starting point for a successful shopping spree and the best place to pick up returning customers carrying bags and bundles. These activities projected some of the order and safety of the store interior onto the sidewalk, reassuring those women who felt ill at ease in the hustle of porters and messengers or under the stare of loafers and workmen. The extravagant size of the plate-glass display windows also bestowed an aura of security and splendor upon the downtown streets, making the clean, smooth sidewalks into a woman's world—even though the glass might be "easily shivered by a boy's marble or a snowball," as Philip Hone feared when he first saw Stewart's Marble Palace in 1846.³

"There is nothing in Paris or London to compare with this dry goods palace," the former mayor of New York noted with satisfac-
tion in discussing the significance of the first department store in his city. However, he was wrong. Similar stores did exist elsewhere. General economic and social trends produced analogous institutions of retailing in most industrially advanced countries by the middle of the nineteenth century. Internal policies and external operations were roughly the same wherever such stores emerged as a big-city feature, though some variations from country to country, reflecting the weight of custom and tradition, added distinctive touches to the emergence of the new mode of retailing between the 1840's and the 1890's.

In each case both the rate and nature of economic growth and the conditions and expectations of urban life influenced the transformation of dry-goods stores selling fabrics into stores offering ready-to-wear clothes and a large variety of other goods conveniently arranged in various departments. The visions of entrepreneurs and the aspirations of women were also factors: needs barely recognized one day were fulfilled the next by novel services that department stores were well suited to provide for awakened consumers. This interplay between buyer and seller accounted for both the similarities and the variations in the development of the full-fledged department store.

The lack of agreement on the definition of a true department store limits any search for the so-called first department store, as it does, for instance, the identification of the first skyscraper. However, the conflicting ideas of historians reflect subtle differences in the social conditions that gave rise to the variations among the emerging stores in France and England, and illuminate the unique features of the department store in the United States. Although in 1827 the German architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel, in his search for utility and beauty in domestic architecture, sketched a department store that achieved "the highest degree of both novelty and quality" in design, it was not until the end of the century that Berlin had enterprises that as buildings, businesses, and social institutions measured up to department stores in other countries.

In France the phenomenal growth of industry in the 1840's and 1850's stimulated changes in retailing that led to the appearance of the magasin de nouveautés, as Parisians called dry goods. This new kind of store carried textiles, hosiery, and gloves, which established storekeepers had considered and sold as exclusive lines of their specialty shops. Other features of these new emporiums were equally startling. Organized into departments, they brought order to the jumble of the general store, relied on marked and fixed prices, allowed customers to look around freely, and reimbursed them or exchanged their purchases if they were not satisfied. Their proprietors learned to buy in bulk from manufacturers on discount and to rely on high turnover, special sales, and constant advertising to compensate for their low prices. Their business flourished. In 1844, the largest of the magasins de nouveautés, the Ville de Paris, had 150 employees and a volume of annual sales of about eleven million francs.

Economic and social changes guided the expansion of the magasins de nouveautés into department stores. Textile manufacturers entered large-scale production and demanded dependable retail outlets. A national railroad network linking textile mills to city stores strengthened the big business of production and distribution and provided an organizational model for devisor and operating large enterprises. In addition, simplified manufacturing processes and semi-skilled workers debased the crafts of traditional tailors and shoemakers with ready-to-wear that came to be bought increasingly in place of hand-tailored clothing, second-hand clothes, and handmade shoes. Although ready-to-wear touched only the fringes of women's fashion, its appeal, assured by low prices and immediate satisfaction of the desire for a new possession, hastened the flowering of new retail stores based on rapid turnover of merchandise. In turn, the increasing sales encouraged more production, and the concentration of the expanding consumer market in large cities led to new sales techniques that appealed to growing numbers of urban residents.

The surface prosperity of the Second Empire also contributed to the rise of the department store. Its social whirl provoked a clamor
for luxury goods, but social reform was also fashionable, giving currency to the idea of providing underprivileged groups with access to the comfort of the comfortable life. Additionally, any concern for a measure of social justice made sense because it increased consumption. Although the demand for consumer goods taxed the resources of retail merchants, enterprising bankers extended credit to expand businesses, and ingenious storeowners went to work with low prices and special sales to assure a rapid turnover of their stock and to attract new customers en masse.

The general migration to the cities contributed heavily to the success of department stores. In the case of Paris, which had been transformed into the dazzling showcase of Europe by Louis Napoleon and George Haussmann, the population doubled during the first half of the nineteenth century to more than a million inhabitants. During the following decades, it increased by another 600,000. As a by-product of the renovation of the cityscape, newly opened tree-lined boulevards facilitated cross-city traffic, providing splendid opportunities for leisurely promenades that encouraged window-shopping. By 1860, public transit moved about 70 million passengers annually. Railroad trains brought customers from the countryside into the city and took back to the provinces goods ordered by mail from the catalogues of large stores.

In a typical process, this movement of people would inspire the proprietor of a successful magasin de nouveautés to buy a valuable commercial site at a strategic crossroad, acquired fortuitously when the property became available as a result of city planning on an imperial scale. He then experimented with new marketing techniques based on steady advertising and constantly changing displays. The success of this merchandising concept would ultimately lead the merchant to acquire an entire building for the operation of his store, in contrast to traditional shops that were restricted to one dark, ground-floor unit of a residential building. The extension of a store into adjacent buildings or the move into a magnificent new structure transformed the magasin de nouveautés into the grand magasin, the department store.

While most magasins de nouveautés failed to make that transi-
full-fledged department store only in the 1880's, after his death. However, Bouicaut created the modern department store as a specific building type on the European continent when he commissioned a new structure for his Bon Marché in 1867. His vision of it was enriched by the fusion of architecture and engineering that grew in the artistic soil of Paris, creating what Zola called "la cathédrale du commerce moderne." When finally completed around 1880, its facades, elaborate as well as monumental, radiated the luxury and solidity that befitted a store selling distinction and respectability. Its corner rotunda drew people in toward the magic of the large windows grouped between the entrance portals leading into lavishly decorated grand halls that trumpeted the greatness of the store through the dramatic use of space.

A flood of daylight illuminated the interior, adding dimensions to Zola's felicitous metaphor. Through the sacrifice of the central floor space in the upper stories, light fell from glass domes into the central court, past two tiers of iron galleries and their passerelles—small iron bridges that allowed customers on the upper galleries to cross the great hall directly. In the center of the building, the graceful grills and spectacular double revolution of a majestic iron stairway radiated modern elegance. The extravagant steps enticed women, long accustomed to climbing the stairs of tall apartment houses, to the upper floors. The whole structure inspired the passerby to gaze, to shop, or to buy as the three ways to share its splendor. To use a contemporary phrase that linked the department store to a museum or a world's fair, this "musée de marchandise" transcribed into modern idiom the richesse, goût de la couleur, luxe, and volupté of Parisian life. It was this same quality that contemporaries admired in Charles Garnier's new Opéra. This accomplishment set the Bon Marché as much apart from its counterparts in London as did the special development of retailing in England.

Although England set the pace for commercial and industrial growth at the middle of the nineteenth century, no rising mercantile palace accompanied the beginnings of the department store in London. There, the modern age had found its symbol in the Crystal Palace of the Great Exhibition of 1851, which displayed the raw materials and the manufactured goods of the world. Like a gigantic emporium, the enormous hall with its countless exhibits bespoke organizational drive and ability. The sense of purpose and dedication to order caught the attention of about 400,000 sightseers daily, women and children, laborers and clerks. The visitors admired in particular the section of manufactured items, such as cottons, woolens, silks, velvets, leather goods, clothing and finery, furniture, mirrors, and decorations. This merchandise not only demonstrated the productive capacity of the most industrially advanced nation in the world, but also held out the promise of a better life.

Several kinds of stores made some of these riches accessible to the average person. Although they had few departments in the strict sense, their arrangement pointed toward a clear division of merchandise as the way to cope with the growing complexities of retailing. "Heavy" and "fancy" goods were the basic categories of wares in a draper's shop (dry goods store). Fabric with woven or printed designs made up the bulk of the business because women bought it for sewing their own dresses or to supply to their dress-makers. Gloves, hosiery, ribbons, lace, and handkerchiefs constituted "fancy" goods. Finally, there was a section of small wares—mostly threads, buttons, and needles—and a section of ready-to-wear, primarily long, drab woolen cloaks for women.

Great bazaars came closest to creating the atmosphere of a department store. They occupied large halls, with or without a gallery, where small traders rented a counter or a stall. In addition to dry goods, they carried an enormous variety of merchandise—jewelry, cutlery, children's dresses, toys, sheet music, and ornaments—as well as refreshments. Exploring the pretentious Pantheon Bazaar, George Augustus Sala, one of the most fashionable recorders of London life during the 1850's, found himself in a "labyrinth of avenues between triple-laden stalls, all crowded with ladies and children." Some of the traders operated shops in long colonnades or covered arcades, where they sold everything. Sala
felt, that he could do well without. However, all these forms of retailing—dry goods stores, bazaars, colonnades, and arcades—still lacked the efficient organization or the diversified merchandise of a department store.

William Whiteley’s single-minded pursuit of the great emporium of goods conjured up by the Crystal Palace contributed to English retailing. He had learned his trade in a country drapery store and developed an expertise in imported ribbons after he came to London, but he lacked the means to break into the fashionable establishments in the center of the city. The physical expansion of London in the early 1860’s provided him with an opportunity to launch the kind of business he envisioned, on Westbourne Grove in suburban Bayswater. He speculated that the metropolitan railway would bring customers to his door. When one of the termini of the London Underground Railway linked the West End with the City and connected with a nearby station of the Great Western Railway in January 1863, he felt able to challenge the assumption that a new, large store in a suburb would be doomed. Two months later, he started a shop with two female clerks and an errand boy.

His store flourished immediately because he allowed customers to browse freely and view his merchandise in attractive window displays or on well-arranged tables. His wares were reasonably priced and clearly marked, and he let them speak for him, shunning sensational sales or extravagant advertising. To lace, trimmings, ribbons, and other fancy goods he added silks, linens, mantles, dresses, jewelry, furs, umbrellas, and artificial flowers. All of these departments soon thrived, with dresses and silks leading in sales.

Diversification and expansion went hand in hand. Within a year, the number of his clerks rivaled the size of the staffs of the leading neighborhood stores. In 1867, Whiteley leased his second shop, near the first one, and embarked on a system of expansion made feasible because property changed hands frequently in the suburbs. In the course of the next few years he occupied an entire row of shops, and ultimately he possessed several clusters of shops on Westbourne Grove and adjacent streets that made up Whiteley’s. In 1876, he had fifteen shops and two thousand employees. At the time of his death in 1907, he owned twenty-one shops, most of them remodeled from old structures.

During the years in which the Bon Marché structure was being built in Paris, William Whiteley also gave his shops the dimensions of a department store. However, he concerned himself exclusively with the extension of merchandise lines and service, rather than with architectural considerations. Consistent with his ambition and in response to the solicitations of his customers, his store became, as its name indicated, the Universal Provider. Whiteley ingeniously buttressed his expanding dry goods departments with customer services. A real estate agency and a restaurant became parts of his complex in 1872, and a cleaning and dyeing establishment was included in 1874. During these years he also introduced stationery and foreign departments. Carpets, trunks, and china and glass, as well as the sale and repair of furniture, followed in 1875. Adding provisions to his line of merchandise represented the most momentous step of that year, when the Universal Provider began selling meat, poultry, eggs, vegetables, butter, cheese, biscuits, and chocolates. In the next year, Whiteley’s shops added a hardware department with house and building decorations as a special feature.

In 1876, the amenities included, besides rest rooms a reading room with reference books, a hairdresser’s salon, a restaurant, a telegraph bureau, a post office, and a funeral parlor. “Mr. Whiteley will take charge of you from the cradle to the grave,” the London correspondent of the New York Daily Graphic quipped, “and give your meals as you go along—if you can pay for it.” Before Whiteley’s propaganda began compensating for the intense dislike that local merchants and businessmen expressed for his emporium on Westbourne Grove, the Bayswater newspaper reported that some of his activities produced “the most hideous eyesore that an English visitor can look upon” and added emphatically: “We do
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not want to Americanize the Grove."17 And yet, it was Whiteley’s adherence to customary English ways that, in the 1870’s and 1880’s, kept him from creating what became a sign of modern life—of Americanization, as some of his critics called it—a full-fledged department store.

Steepled in the tradition of English retailing as commercial transactions conducted in individual shops, Whiteley thought of himself as London’s shopkeeper. He regarded his emporium as “the first great instance of a large general goods store in London, held under one man’s control,” in the words of the 1911 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.18 He followed the operations of large stores in Paris and New York, but his innovations in retailing did not break with English usages, and when he tried to record his enterprise for posterity he chose ways fitting the conventions of English society. He attempted to commission W. P. Frith, one of the favorite painters of his day, to do a canvas to be called Whiteley’s at Four O’clock in the Afternoon and only stipulated that “the whole length of the shops should be shown, care being taken that the different windows should display the specialities.” But even in this he seems to have stepped out of bounds because Frith, distinguished by royal patronage, politely declined the commission, although “greatly interested” in Whiteley, “that extraordinary man.”19

Whiteley, as a merchant prince, retained a shopkeeper’s deference to nobility, hoping to see in his painting “aristocracy making their purchases” and “nobility and gentry stepping into their carriages.”20 He catered to the ladies in a sequence of shops and through an efficient delivery system that gave a sense of exclusiveness. In the summer of 1879, when the peripatetic George Augustus Sala found his way to “Wonderful Whiteley,” he noted that the customers belonged “exclusively to the well-to-do classes.” The store’s setting in “the centre of a new, prosperous and refined district” and the general tone of English life also kept Whiteley’s from contributing to that Americanization of life that the Bayswater Chronicle dreaded—the excessive mingling of all classes of people determinedly pursuing the advantages of urban innovations.21 This mentality was expressed by the novelist Anthony Trollope: “I wish we had nothing approaching” the department store, he commented, “for I confess to a liking for the old-fashioned private shops.”22 The Universal Provider obliged, remaining, in Sala’s words, “Whiteley’s Shops—a chain threatening to stretch to the crack of doom.”23

The social dynamics of the modern city in the United States generated the momentum that brought the full-fledged department store into existence. This store not only sold great varieties of goods, constantly advertised in newspapers and conveniently displayed in an impressive building, but also served large numbers of women from all segments of society and made the presence of women a distinct attribute of the downtown section of the modern city. In contrast, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the absence of women in the center of London, Paris, Berlin, or Vienna struck American travelers in Europe. At the beginning of the twentieth century, an Italian visitor to Boston, “fighting his way along Washington Street” through “a solid immovable congestion of femininity,” concluded that “the Public is here a common noun of the feminine gender,” since the “whole world of women in the city, and from its suburbs, apparently, betakes itself to the shops every day.”24

The department store made the new phenomenon of a feminine public possible. Its rise accompanied that of the modern city. In New York, which, with one million inhabitants, offered the largest department store market, in the 1860’s and 1870’s, the department stores that emerged during these two decades still accounted for almost half of the city’s leading department stores a century later.25 The department store thrived on the concentrated urban markets that clamored for goods and on the industrial sector of the American economy, which eagerly sought new outlets for its products. It brought about the decline of many small retail shops that could not keep up with the systematic marketing of goods on a large scale. Railroad lines and urban transit speeded the flow of
merchandise as well as the movement of people from their homes to stores that sold inexpensive products. The advance in building technology provided practical as well as lofty structures that permitted spacious displays and attracted attention as expressions of that boundless energy generated by the modern city. Slowly the metropolitan press became the primary medium for the advertisements of the department store.

In 1846, an anonymous pamphlet directed attention to the new mode of doing business in New York. Its author considered the kind of organizational genius and executive ability which A. T. Stewart represented indicative of "the paramount tendency of the age . . . to systematize." A commercial house, with "several heads properly organized, may divide its labor into various departments of buying, selling, and management," the author explained, and "become perfect in its adaptedness." In his view, Stewart carried out "what must be apparent to every reflecting mind the proper plan of business—to render a Dry Goods store a grand magazine." In the following year, Hunt's Merchants' Magazine expressed admiration for the departmental organization of a Philadelphia dry goods store which had perfected the new form of business organization. The management of any firm along departmental lines created "a beautiful thoroughness" that "is becoming more and more part of our national character," Putnam's Monthly stated in 1853.

The American national character, only vaguely defined in the first place and now being modified by the impact of large waves of immigrants, encouraged and accommodated new methods of selling and buying. "We are so busy in improving what the Past has bequeathed to us, that we forget we owe it anything," Harper's "Easy Chair" explained in 1854. The expansion of merchandise beyond the conventional limits of a dry goods store was accepted readily by New Yorkers who, accustomed to thinking of their city as a great clothing emporium fed by ready-to-wear factories, put everything "used for covering the human body" into the category of dry goods.

Although the sale of dry goods provided the start for most department stores, in some instances other products made up the core of the merchandise. A few major department stores developed from jewelry, crockery, and hardware shops, such as E. J. Lehmann's Fair in Chicago in 1875. At times a department store emerged because retailing on a big scale in a magnificent building seemed the most profitable way to use a downtown lot or a large structure. The Emporium in San Francisco grew out of a real estate speculation when first developed in 1896. The extension of the circle of customers to include women from all walks of life occurred as a matter of course. The practice of calling any woman who might buy something from a merchant a "lady" coincided with the rise of new businessmen in the modern city. In 1825, A. T. Stewart, fresh from Belfast, offered his goods "for sale to the Ladies of New York" in the Daily Advertiser. With this extension of the term went the egalitarian assumptions that began to shape the relationships among customers in a store. "Testify no impatience if a servant-girl, making a six penny purchase, is served before you," Miss Leslie's Behaviour Book counseled in the 1850's. "In all American stores, the rule of 'first come, first served,' is rigidly observed." In the late 1840's and early 1850's, women "squeezing toward the counter of the last new emporium" represented a familiar sight in the changing downtown scene. In his editorial accompanying the opening of Stewart's Marble Palace in 1846, Herald editor James Gordon Bennet stressed that "as long as the ladies continue to constitute an important feature of the community, the dry goods business must be in a flourishing condition." The Panic of 1857 convinced other segments of the public that the woman shopper had definitely arrived because the recession, in the language of Hunt's Merchants' Magazine, "brought us the lady buyer."

The financial crisis of 1857 drastically tightened the supply of money in the United States. The shortage drove shopkeepers to desperate measures in their attempts to raise enough cash to meet obligations. It sanctioned certain business practices that hitherto
had been used only by reckless men to drum up business quickly. Cost sales, fire sales, shipwreck sales, distress sales, and panic sales succeeded each other, and the tumbling prices heightened the delight of shopping for women who used their time to look around extensively to find the best buy. At auctions, the stock of bankrupt tradesmen fell cheaply into the hands of more fortunate merchants who indiscriminately added the merchandise as new attractions to their repertories of goods. During the late 1850's, the "inevitable dry goods stores," which before the Panic had already been notorious in New York for crowding churches out of the downtown district, fostered a "rage for building superb business palaces" that filled "acres of brick with gorgeous marble and stone fronts and converted New York into a city of palaces." 37

Among these calico palaces, occupied by such firms as Lord & Taylor—whose name is still a household word—A. T. Stewart's new uptown store stood out as the epitome of a true department store. Erected between 1859 and 1862, the breathtaking building covered the entire block between Broadway and Fourth Avenue, Ninth and Tenth streets, and was separated by Astor Place from the Cooper Union, another New York landmark exhibiting and distributing through shows and lectures the practical accomplishments of the age. Various designations, such as "Stewart's Tenth Street Store" or "Astor Place Store," referred to the store by its location. However, no name did justice to the significance of the building as did "Stewart's New Store," which distinguished it from the Marble Palace, now clearly "old" after sixteen years of renovations and additions. That name also suggested, albeit unintentionally, the novel achievement embodied in one enormous building devoted to the sale of a great variety of goods to a large clientele of women.

Many features of the building bespoke the special nature of the store. A. T. Stewart, "an enthusiastic advocate of cast-iron fronts for commercial structures," often used to compare the iron front dressed in white paint "to puffs of white clouds." The cast-iron facade, with plain columns and molded arches in the Venetian manner of the Italian Renaissance, rose five stories in height, "arch upon arch," eighty-five feet above the sidewalk. 38 The artistic economy of John Kellum, a New York architect with expertise in iron fronts, immediately touched the practical sense of the masses of people who daily thronged the store, "as they do an exposition," A. T. Stewart thought. 39 Kellum's plain design shunned the hideous filigree work and elaborate pattern of fluted columns that had discredited the first iron fronts when they appeared in the 1840's. Instead, he reduced the four enormous walls of the store facing the surrounding city to rows and rows of windows that brought "ample light" into every corner of the building. 40

The merchant's conviction that "everybody will know it is A. T. Stewart's" kept the facade free from signs and advertisements and increased the distinction of the magnificent building. 41 The purity of the cast-iron design also added a definite American note to the city's eclectic architecture, one contemporary commentator stressed. He felt that such "a chaste and airy edifice of iron" formed a happy contrast to the pretentious marble palaces and bulky brick offices that crowded the densely built-up business quarter. An observer standing "on any of the four corners of Stewart's immense dry-goods store," he argued, could not mistake its "lightness and grace for anything but iron," and iron he considered "emphatically an American building material." 42

Stewart's intimate knowledge of the urban scene inspired his choice of building styles. The "graceful dome" that rose ninety feet above the main hall of his old Marble Palace owed much to the splendid rotundas of two New York landmarks, City Hall and the Merchants Exchange. His use of a rotunda in department store construction in 1846 shaped commercial architecture for some time. Stewart himself may have been influenced by the wide publicity given fifteen years earlier to Frances Trollope's Graeco-Roman-Turkish Bazaar in Cincinnati, the only commercial building to use dome, rotunda, and stairway before the Marble Palace, as part of her concept of combining the dissemination of culture with the sale of merchandise. 43
Formally sanctioned in the 1870’s by Boucicaut’s use of the dome in his Bon Marché, the rotunda’s charm kept it a feature of department store architecture long after electricity and fire hazards had made it obsolete, as many buildings constructed in the 1880’s and 1890’s indicated. In 1896, the first San Francisco department store, the Emporium, opened with a central dome and kept the rotunda until 1957, through its reconstruction after the earthquake and fire of 1906. The most stunning example appeared in 1902, when Marshall Field & Co. in Chicago opened a new store, built by the firm of D. H. Burnham, with a gigantic Tiffany glass dome.  

Stewart shaped the development of the department store in various ways. In building the New Store, he boldly defied conventions and flew in the face of the praise his contemporaries had heaped on the Marble Palace, which added distinction to a generally drab cityscape. Calling it a “white marble cliff” when marble was considered a singular “ornament to the city,” New Yorkers regarded it as a “model” giving character to the city’s architecture. Their enthusiastic approval launched the palazzo mode barely two years after the North American Review had proclaimed its greater virtue for American architecture over that of the Greek Revival.

With the design of his New Store, Stewart turned against the tide his Marble Palace had helped to create. The choice of iron, the hallmark of industrialization, over marble in the midst of the Civil War gained approval as a result of the general preoccupation with military technology, from cannons to trains and from ironclads to bridges. But behind his daring also stood sound economic sense, because the iron structure permitted wide windows that opened to all floors the daylight that cumbersome walls faced with marble had kept out of Stewart’s downtown store.

Almost immediately Stewart’s New Store fulfilled the promise its visual impression made. The efficient arrangement of the uniform interior highlighted the sense of purpose and expressed dedication to service. An enormous skylight admitted sunshine directly into the vast main floor. Its simple harmony of lines, formed by the individual panels of glass, did not obstruct the flow of light, correcting a shortcoming of the Marble Palace, where daylight had to struggle past the ornamentation of the rotunda and “the elegant lantern in the dome.” The carefully arranged space, with counters and aisles symmetrically disposed, gave the ground floor and the open circle of upper stories the appearance of a utopian order that was a relief after the orderly anarchy of modern city life that engulfed the building.

In Stewart’s New Store, a minor feature of Edward Bellamy’s utopian vision seemed to have come true, a quarter of a century before Looking Backward appeared in 1888. There it was, a warehouse for an entire city, “where the buyer, without waste of time and labor, found under one roof the world’s assortment in whatever line he desired.” The novelty of the displays heightened the impression of boundlessness conjured up by the great variety of goods. Prefabricated household furnishings, ready-made clothes, mass-produced toys, fashionable stationery, and inexpensive books helped make Stewart’s the largest retail store in the world. Its departmental organization ordered countless displays with “military precision,” Harper’s Monthly noted, the whole machinery working, “as it were, by electric touches.”

Alexander Turney Stewart, to give at least once the full name that seems to have been used sparingly during his lifetime, kept strict discipline among his 2,000 employees. His absolute authority resulted from an intimate familiarity with all aspects of the business. An immigrant, a well-reared Ulster Scot holding a Dublin Trinity College degree, he had built up his organization methodically since the 1820’s, when he began in a dry goods shop measuring twelve by thirty feet on lower Broadway. Although he seemed almost inaccessible, maintaining the granite-like reserve that often goes with a Scottish ancestry, he constantly managed to impress his clerks on the floor with his standards of service. His customers liked the bland friendliness he showed them. His honesty gained him their loyalty, which compensated for his shortcomings: he ad-
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verted extensively but poorly, and banned displays from his store's show windows and interior. His salesmanship stressing service was what attracted a steady stream of customers.

A shrewd trader, who sold on credit but always paid cash for his purchases, Stewart ran several eastern mills that manufactured woolen goods, cotton and silk, ribbons, threads, blankets, and carpets. He operated offices and warehouses in Great Britain, Ireland, France, Germany, and Switzerland to control his imports. His European buying organization, the outgrowth of annual trips he began in 1839, served as a model for other American retailers. The range of his business corresponded with his success, and in three years before his death in 1876, the combined wholesale and retail sales amounted to $203 million.52

Stewart's careful business calculations undoubtedly contributed much to his accomplishment. However, his determination to keep abreast of general trends of urban and industrial growth made him also a brilliant entrepreneur. A sequence of daring moves revealed him as a good judge of human nature and urban expansion. Against the wisdom of the 1840's, he built his Marble Palace on a corner lot of the penny or shilling side of Broadway, where he could acquire real estate cheaply because most merchants preferred the other side of the street where pretentious stores attracted well-to-do customers. The spectacular store immediately drew the dollar trade across the street, with "the beautiful carriages of the millionaires stopping on the shilling side of Broadway to purchase dry-goods."53 When he located his New Store further uptown in the early 1860's, in another act of seeming folly, he had assessed the population movement of the surging metropolis correctly and found his customers already uptown.

The image of his business, the variety of his merchandise, and the organization of his enterprise provided the foundation for a full-fledged department store. In addition, the orientation of his services toward large numbers of women gave his store its cultural significance as the focus of a new community. The grief expressed in the faces of women listening to the announcement of Stewart's death in front of his New Store, captured by one of the best nineteenth-century American illustrators in Harper's Weekly, suggested the bond that linked them to the store.54 About forty years later, Gordon Selfridge, who had come to London from Chicago's Marshall Field in 1906 and started a department store, coined the phrase that explained the constant stream of women shoppers in such a store: "You know why they come here?" he asked. "It's so much brighter than their homes. This is not a shop—it's a community center."55

The social functions of the department store turned around the needs of women shoppers who emerged as directors of family consumption in the middle of the nineteenth century. These services, at first piecemeal accommodations rather than systematic programs, assured the popularity of the department store among women who regarded the new activity of shopping as a relief from the boredom of familial confinement or the drudgery of domestic routine. In a long-range perspective it can be seen that shopping actually provided the framework of a gilded cage keeping women from their share of freedom. However, in the 1860's and 1870's the ability to shop in the center of large cities seemed to the large number of women crowding the department store a form of real emancipation. It was a small but tangible token, like the independence Elizabeth Cady Stanton had urged on the wife of her Congressman in 1854, when she induced her to buy a much-needed stove without her husband's approval or company.56

The attention the department store devoted to its female customers changed the urban environment and made downtown streets attractive to women. Clean and orderly sidewalks became an extension of the street. The displays in the large plate-glass windows added the diversion of window-shopping to the pleasures of the promenade. Women came downtown purposely to see and to be seen, to chance meeting a friend in the store's hospitable atmosphere, or to enjoy shopping in company. They arrived in numbers that continuously called for more services. In 1883, a cartoon facetiously labeled a group of window-shoppers a neglected class be-
cause the storekeeper had failed to make provisions for their comfort and they were forced to inspect the exhibits of a clothing store sitting on piano stools. Under these circumstances the department store and the upgraded downtown also furnished a setting that placed on an equal footing with each other women who might have suffered from a sense of inequality if they had visited one another at home.

Dreiser’s Sister Carrie, who cringed when she compared her small flat with rich Mrs. Vance’s apartment, managed to recover some of her equanimity during mutual shopping sprees, seeking “the delight of parading here as an equal.” The department store also permitted fleeting identification with ladies from the upper crust of society who visited it as part of their carefully timed pursuit of pleasure. Women aspiring to the air of solid middle-class comfort could find it, at least temporarily, in the atmosphere and appearance of the new downtown center of their life.

The appearance of the department store heightened the illusion of shared luxury among the shoppers. In the form of a marble palace, a cast-iron showplace, a sprawling grand depot, or a masonry castle, it emphasized dedication to the ideal of shopping as an endless delight. The fact that no offices or other tenants crowded the building’s upper stories signaled its commitment to a sole purpose. Rows and rows of large windows filled it with daylight and relieved the shopper’s dependence on gas lighting for the many purchases that involved a decision about the colors of fabrics. Elevators accommodated customers who felt reluctant to climb more than one flight of stairs. These features symbolized prosperity and prestige. Above all, they emphasized convenience.

The arrangement and display of the merchandise reinforced the leisurely atmosphere the store sought to create. The division into departments assured easy access to goods, contrasting with the orderly confusion of the general store and the exclusive air of the specialty shop where gloves or shawls waited in boxes for the right customer to call. Clearly marked prices on wares attractively displayed on tables and counters made social equality an element of the convenience of a store catering to a cross section of the population; for pre-established prices eliminated the possibility of any embarrassment that might have arisen had the sudden disclosure of a price taxed the shopper’s means excessively.

Haggling over prices had gradually disappeared from the retail scene in large cities during the first half of the nineteenth century, although the practice continued in smaller cities as a “regular and accepted part of retail buying,” with formal discounts given to so many groups that “the occasional person who did not ask for a cheaper price paid too much for his goods.” In large stores, however, where many sales were made by many clerks, bargaining was quite understandably passé—proprietors saw no way to entrust setting prices to the numerous and often inexperienced salespeople on the floor. Furthermore, a department store management recognized that feature of human nature that aspires to get something for nothing—or, at least, for less than it seems to be worth. Thus came the introduction of the bargain table and the bargain basement, as stores catered to the economic as well as the psychological needs of some of their customers. In 1888, John Wanamaker created in his Philadelphia store a Bargain Room “into which our other rooms will empty all those goods that block their way to serving customers quickly with style and size sought.” Edward Filene’s Automatic Bargain Basement, a distinct innovation introduced in Boston in 1909, featured unsold goods at reduced prices in order to generate high turnover and to clear the other floors of distress merchandise.

Most stores backed extensively the claims they made to attract customers. They buttressed the policy of accurately advertised merchandise with money-back guarantees, if a customer was not satisfied. John Wanamaker summed up his attitude with a “trinity of square-dealing”:

All goods to be sold openly,
All traders to be treated alike,
All fraud and deception to be eliminated.
Some stores, like Marshall Field in Chicago, gave short-term credits and billed monthly, occasionally offering discounts for cash. Others, like Macy’s in New York, had no charge accounts at all for many years. All avoided excessive markups and instead sought profits on volume, selling at low prices and low margins. The key to high stock turnover was extensive local advertising, coupled with price reductions on slow-moving items and extensive customer service. Rapid turnover provided the cash needed to buy in quantity the latest lines and thus to be responsive to ever-changing consumer demands.

The orientation of the department store toward service and mass merchandising was reflected initially in the spectacular selection and convenient arrangement of its merchandise. But new facilities became essential when large numbers of customers spent several hours in the building. Rest rooms and lounges led the way to restaurants and reading rooms. At the end of the nineteenth century, nurseries for customers’ children, mail-order services, complaint and credit counters, check-cashing windows, post offices, and ticket agencies quite naturally joined the features of the department store because women wanted these services.

Customer service became the credo of department store personnel. “Public service is the sole basic condition of retail business growth,” John Wanamaker emphasized in 1900, while in 1916 the designer of a model store called it a “Service Store,” because “every detail has been laid out with the customer’s convenience in view.” As different as their approaches to retailing and management may have been, most of the legendary builders of great stores—Aristide Boucicaut, William Whiteley, A. T. Stewart, Rowland H. Macy, Isidor and Nathan Straus, Potter Palmer, Marshall Field, Gordon Selfridge, John Wanamaker, Jordan Marsh, and Edward Filene, to name the better known among them—made service a tenet that they upheld meticulously during their regular walks through the aisles of their stores. Through example and exhortation, with fines and dismissals, they impressed the staff with their determination to carry out the policy of service. Their routine rounds and sudden appearances drove the point home to clerks and customers alike.

At such moments, shoppers saw their yearnings to be served answered by a patrician merchant who personified the store’s written policies. Clerks saw the owner’s art of salesmanship giving dignity to their own skills in a society that considered waiting on people a menial task, somewhat below the dignity of free men and women. A millionaire who greeted his customers and responded to the grievances of a shopper on the crowded floor of his store elevated an obsequious act to the level of a public service, well respected and highly regarded in a professedly democratic society. The Chicago novelist Ernest Poole recalled that as a boy shopping with his mother, he would stare at a “cold-souled courtly merchant” with “a low voice and charming manners,” as “he moved about the store with bright observing smiling eyes”: Marshall Field, “the richest man in Chicago and ace merchant of the West.”

In the 1870’s and 1880’s, Marshall Field stood out among Chicago merchants who sought to make their department store servants of the public. He followed approaches to the “carriage trade” and the “shawl trade” that had been laid out by Potter Palmer, his one-time business partner. Field used equality of service to create a social no-woman’s-land that allowed upper- and lower-class women to shop together. He made both groups essential actresses in the drama of shopping and spending. A poor woman’s self-esteem was elevated by her ability to share a display counter with a rich woman, who in turn achieved her satisfaction from the admiration of clerks and customers. Field’s salesmanship made easier the use of the “pecuniary canons of taste,” Thorstein Veblen’s term for the basis of a new gentility that considered all people equal who had the money to acquire certain goods, indicating they knew which possessions mattered. Although Field at times handled customer-store relationships on the floor of his emporium and actually saw to it that the lady got what she wanted, his skillful
displays of merchandise and well-timed promotional campaigns ensured that his customers "wanted things and services that money alone could buy." These things and services he sold.

Field's success depended to a great degree on making his store "irresistibly attractive" to customers. He, and the other great retail merchants, incorporated personality into their cult of public service. Before marketing research made retailing a science, they knew instinctively that not only the quality and price of the merchandise, but also the image and identity of the enterprise, attracted people to shop a particular store. Each was the personification of his store, and because they could not wait on every customer personally, they relied on the store image they created to convey the impression that they were indeed serving their public.

If this magic failed, floorwalkers stood ready to reinforce the elusive sense of the owner's presence with a touch of managerial involvement. They substituted diligence for those features of the owner's style they were unable to copy. They also extended the doorman's measured greetings cheerfully into the more remote departments where they served as "a politely convenient living directory." The notion of public service they maintained pervaded the entire house and also extended to the store detectives, who discreetly dealt with thievery as an accident best kept out of earshot because the sight of one apprehended thief could conjure up the fear of pickpockets everywhere and undermine the harmonious ritual of buying and selling.

The great number of well-categorized employees made harmony possible, but most remained hidden from view. The sales clerks, the group most directly in contact with the customers, served the public in the most literal way. Although they waited on individual customers for ten hours a day and for roughly six dollars a week in the 1890's, they considered themselves not as servants, but as friendly counselors who provided information about materials, comments about quality, and advice about style to untutored women shoppers.

Increasingly, women assumed the role of sales clerk as the opportunities of the city lured men elsewhere. By 1900, due to the wide range of better-paid jobs open to men, women became the dominant sex behind the counters. Most managerial jobs were closed to them, although Margaret Getchell rose from cashier to superintendent in Macy's during the 1860's and became one of the first women to attain an executive position in American business. On the other hand, management and customers welcomed women clerks as especially competent sales people. Unlike men, who only tolerated the changes in retailing, young women adjusted quickly to the new ways of selling because the department store represented an economic start for them. They cherished being in urban surroundings that removed them further from domestic chores than did waiting on tables in a restaurant or sewing clothes in a sweatshop. Here, they did not rely on tips, but earned wages. They were able to experience something of the glamour of the big city and meet interesting people. The seasonal help even endured wholesale dismissals preceding the slack months and came back willingly when needed.

Furthermore, the female sales force fit better than men into this new kind of store that replaced the hard sell with an emphasis on service. They easily accepted the novel requirement of attention to the orders of all superiors, essential to the operation of a store no longer run by a single proprietor. They adapted smoothly because they did not bring to the job the burden of outdated practices. To them, strict regulations and disciplined operating procedures were not impersonal or degrading but primarily new, because they had no memories of "the good old days" in the life of a "real clerk." To be sure, they resented some rules, particularly the store's demand that they stand continuously during their long working hours, and they managed to bypass other edicts they found unreasonable. Massie, "a deep-tinted blonde, with the calm poise of a lady who cooks buttercakes in a window," one of the 3,000 clerks in O. Henry's "Biggest Store," chewed tutti frutti "when the floorwalker was not looking" and "smiled wistfully" when he did.
Quite naturally, female clerks also meshed smoothly with the department store's female clientele. They knew what these shoppers wanted because they themselves desired similar possession. The customers, for their part, found it easier to share their intimate desires with them than with men. Fitting new garments was also simplified with the help of sales people of the same sex. Constantly exposed to fashionable goods and demanding customers, the clerks themselves became models of stylish elegance, smartly dressed like O. Henry's Miss Claribel Colby, who personified the "thousand girls from the great department store." When they needed a new gown, like Maida in "The Purple Dress," they skipped meals or starved on skimpy diets and, with the encouragement of management and employee discounts, they spent an inordinate amount of their meager salaries on their wardrobes.74

Shopping as a new social art and the department store as a new social institution rose simultaneously, complementing one another. The personnel's commitment to service, the atmosphere of ease and luxury, and the magnificence of the building awed many customers unfamiliar with the idea that they, too, were entitled to service. Under these novel circumstances, they felt relieved, as well as flattered, by the attention and assistance they received. But many people who were pretending to be as affluent as they craved to be lacked experience in shopping for the luxury goods of the new manufacturers, particularly dress goods and household furnishings that came ready-made from the factories. While the specialty shops carried these lines too, the department store strove to take the lead with the newest items. Its lavish displays, conveniently arranged and clearly priced, also provided a wide range of choices in one location, allowing customers unfamiliar with such objects to absorb information about goods just by wandering through the store, without revealing their ignorance as could have happened in an exclusive shop where a haughty sales clerk might have taken any inquiry as an admission of social inferiority. Women shoppers who went into the department store with one purchase in mind invariably left it with many new ideas. Thus clerks and customers learned that shopping as a social art involved acquiring a share of the better life in the future by dreaming of it in the present, both savoring the moment when the purchase actually took place.75

Indeed, the buying stage of shopping appeared as the most widely visible sign of female emancipation in the modern city. A Chicago Herald political cartoon, reprinted in other newspapers of the Midwest, portrayed that concept in a comment on the presidential campaign of 1892. A young woman representing the American shopper briefly interrupts her window-shopping at a dry goods store in order to straight-arm William McKinley into what in that year seemed political oblivion, with an imperious gesture that clearly indicates she is not buying.76

In their daily lives, women also responded alertly to the dictates of necessity and the lure of opportunity, and some may even have followed consciously Elizabeth Cady Stanton's advice to "Buy, Buy" as a welcome expansion of their domestic routine. For the most part, they spent the salaries of white-collar workers, professional men, and small entrepreneurs, who had begun earning just enough money to keep the cash tubes of the department store humming with pouches of coins and to keep the women busy making change in the basement cashroom. Buying on credit was not a common practice among these people who were just learning to buy things they did not need, but had not yet discovered that they could do so with money they did not have.

There were of course ladies among the ranks of customers who could afford the purchases they made in the new department stores. Their presence and style set standards of behavior that raised the expectations of women from less affluent homes and led them to buy some new item as the most direct way to prolong the association with the rich which the store induced. Much of the store's success depended on the intensification of desire through the shopping process that helped create this identification. The consideration with which A. T. Stewart and Marshall Field wel-
nomed enormously wealthy ladies to their stores indicates that they appreciated the fact that the visits of these influential people induced vast numbers of other customers to patronize their stores.

Window displays and store decorations also played a major role in stimulating demand. The department store, growing with the new technology of construction, new forms of management, and new systems of communication, quickly utilized these innovations to influence people. The activities of pioneer owners soon swept aside A. T. Stewart’s restraints. Potter Palmer, originally an upstate New York merchant who once had bought his goods wholesale from A. T. Stewart, opened his Chicago store with fanfare. His window of gloves and hosiery, black silk and white cotton, skillfully arranged against a background of crepe shawls, stirred the city in the fall of 1852. Novel phosgene lamps illuminated the display at night and radiated their brilliant light onto the murky street. In 1878, in his Philadelphia “Grand Depot,” a rambling old freight depot of the Pennsylvania Railroad converted into a huge dry goods and men’s clothing emporium, John Wanamaker first used electricity to light an entire store “as in daytime.” At the time of the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, Marshall Field & Co. had blended displays and exhibits into such an artistic achievement that advertisements could declare the entire store “an exposition in itself.”

Advertising had previously been drawn into the service of the department store, but it took John Wanamaker’s genius for promotion to make it a major force. His messages telling consumers to buy the latest item appeared on every fence, construction site, and empty building in Philadelphia; even the curbstones advertised his offerings. Before he opened his store in 1861, he littered the city with a series of handbills that built up curiosity. He took in $20.67 on his first day of business, and promptly spent $20 on advertisements in the Philadelphia Public Ledger announcing a sale of complete men’s suits for $3—since he had suddenly acquired the stock of a bankrupt ready-to-wear maker of men’s suits. Within ten years he ran the largest men’s re-

tail clothing operation in the United States, an accomplishment announced in 100-foot-long signs along the train tracks leading into the city. He marshaled parades, gave a suit to everyone who returned one of the large balloons he released, and sent costumed employees through the streets blowing hunting horns from tallyho coaches that were pulled, not by four horses as was customary, but six.79

John Wanamaker went all the way with his promotional campaigns, and he did the same with newspaper advertising. Most early department stores advertised modestly, but regularly, in newspapers. In New York, after the Civil War, Lord & Taylor and Macy’s moved into double-column-width advertisements, a long step away from the tiny display ads used extensively by A. T. Stewart and Arnold Constable & Co.; but Wanamaker outdid them by advertising daily, using more space on a newspaper page than his competitors, and enlivening the descriptions of goods with hints about their usefulness.79 His first full-page advertisement appeared in 1879. By 1890 other stores were copying his methods so liberally that they furnished Wanamaker with additional publicity, enabling him to accompany his messages with announcements such as the following: “17 quotations found in the East and the whole advertisement copied bodily in the West.”80

Wanamaker understood that truncated messages about new merchandise in the advertising sections of a newspaper could not systematically make casual readers regular shoppers in his store because women also liked to hear the story behind the new dress coats or kitchen utensils. He therefore sponsored advice columns about style, etiquette, and fashion trends that subtly prepared readers for the next novelties to appear in his exhibits. His store talks in newspapers informed his customers about the latest innovations in the store to make shopping easier, detailing the functions of service centers or providing instruction on how conveniently a novel safety catch could be installed on an apartment door. Soon these messages began spilling over into regular advertisements and helped to make advertising more literate as well as
more honest. In 1866 Wanamaker acquired Stewart's New Store. Its magnificent building had for years been defaced by hideous slogans and gaudy banners that the executors of Stewart's estate had used in a vain attempt to save their declining business. The modest tablet Wanamaker placed at the main entrance reflected his intelligence as well as his integrity as advertiser. It read:

JOHN WANAMAKER
FORMERLY
A. T. STEWART AND CO. 81

The work of John Wanamaker reflected yet another aspect of the sophistication of retailing, one which shaped the department store as well as the shopper. His use of display advertising and paid newspaper columns helped educate the consumer and thus contributed to the rise of the knowledgeable downtown shopper who ultimately freed the department store from its dependence on the wholesale side of the business, which had filled the orders traveling salesmen drummed up in country stores and provided some of the support for the lavish extension of the retail operation. 82 Creating large groups of customers, new concepts of shopping and selling expedited the expansion of a store like Macy's in New York, which in the 1860's, without the support of a wholesale operation, grew from a small clothing and fancy dry goods store into a department store by adding different lines and acquiring adjacent shops. 83

Advertising messages and advice columns awakened large numbers of women to the art of calculated shopping based on deliberation and selection. Women who supplied their families' needs by buying in the department store came to rely on these forms of publicity for keeping in touch with the latest styles and offerings. Department store newspaper advertising also introduced women shoppers to a concept of obsolescence that merchants considered quite acceptable. The fashion cycle kept alive the demand for merchandise without violating the ethics of the business vis-à-vis the quality of goods. Changes in taste shortened the life span of a garment or a lamp much more effectively than the use of cheap material or shoddy craftsmanship could have done, without stirring suspicion of creating resentment among customers, who greeted "something new" with delight.

The fashion cycle, which sustained the rising department store by making shopping a perpetual social drama, received its impetus from the freedom of modern city life, which abrogated the political, social, and economic restraints that in the pre-modern age had curbed extensive social use of fashion. It did away with innumerable ordinances and conventions that had once governed life from cradle to grave. In the 1670's, new laws of the Free Imperial City of Frankfort in Germany not only determined the dress of its citizens but also regulated the kind of meals and the number of guests permitted at baptisms, weddings, and funerals. 84 Although such extreme sumptuary laws did not work in the English colonies in North America because the temper of the people and the nature of the setting eroded the instruments of coercion, some dress regulations existed. In 1676, the Suffolk County Court severely admonished a former Boston servant girl for excess in her apparel. 85

The economic opportunities of the modern city vastly expanded the range of participants in the fashion cycle, and the tempo of life accelerated the speed with which one style succeeded another. More and more people strove to outdo one another in their attire, and as soon as one style became established, new ones emerged. The less impressive people's position or family background was, the more they relied on fashionable appearance as a credential. Jane Addams explained the sound economic sense behind a working woman's spending most of her income on appearance: "Her clothes are her background and from them she is largely judged." 86

Men and women on the make swelled the ranks of stylishly dressed people, and their numbers increased the chance that the vogue of any particular fashion would have an abrupt end. In the free air of the modern city, anyone with money could aspire to become a social aristocrat by staying just ahead of the next turn of
the fashion wheel, while anyone not rich but intent on getting ahead in life could draw closer to the leaders by acquiring a ready-made version of the made-to-order dress or suit of a style-setter. "There is a tide in the affairs of (wo)men that, taken at the flood, leads on to Fashion," an advertisement for a St. Louis department store explained in the 1890's, tying the fashion cycle directly to a department store—"That Kind of Flood is Always at Barr's." In Philadelphia, Wanamaker's emphasized: "What the public desires, we must do." 87

The democratization of the fashion cycle through the department store depended also on new, practical components that gained significance as the number of participants continually expanded. The days of owning one working dress and one Sunday suit became numbered as modern city life created more and more social pressures. The promenade required different attire from the parlor; shopping called for one dress, a social call another. The office and the theater each made different demands on one's wardrobe. People who wanted to belong needed to know what was appropriate for a specific occasion, so that at least their dress, their furniture, or their food would indicate that they had arrived or showed promise of being part of the charmed circle of insiders. The department store selling these status-conferring accoutrements provided guidance by means of displays, advertisements, and advice columns that, in turn, increased the demand for the goods.

Dress requirements were correlated with the seasons, particularly in the field of ready-made clothes, and thus added new complexity to the female shopping expedition. Spring, fall, summer, and winter emerged as divisions of the fashion year promulgated by the department store. Each signaled the automatic beginning of a new fashion cycle. Christmas and Easter became high points of fashion, as did the summer vacation and the opening of school in the fall. Colors, cuts, and trimmings changed with them. Wool gave way to silk, and silk again to wool. Full-page advertisements

in the Sunday papers of the metropolitan press eliminated any possible confusion for people tied to the wheel of fashion. "It wasn't a cyclone! Nor a 'landslide' that took St. Louis by storm last week and set all the Ladies to talking," the announcement of "Barr's Grand Value-Reducing Sale" clamored. "OH, NO! It was an Avalanche of New Spring Goods," which produced "the greatest sacrifice" of "strictly first-class fine wool dress goods." 88

The time-honored device of the sale quickened the tempo of style changes. By the 1890's new features had been added to the repertoire of inducements used in the 1840's. "Miss January" and "Mr. Merchandise" came out in costumes at Wanamaker's in January 1888, and launched their sale as "The White Occasion." The sensational language of the advertisements and that of the news columns of the metropolitan press reinforced each other. Nouns like "bomb" and "crash" and adjectives like "desperate" and "solid" spoke not only of the social conditions of the 1890's but also of the department store sales of the period, which fluctuated between "slaughter" of prices and "sacrifice" of goods. Shipwreck sales diminished when big stores moved inland, but trainload sales increased, and grand anniversary sales and white sales were institutionalized. An emphasis on great selections of goods and on low prices, and a lack of restraint, characterized most promotions. In 1893, a St. Louis department store proclaimed itself, on the occasion of a spectacular sale, "by popular vote the headquarters of the North American Continent, both as regards to variety and low prices." 89

Sales and seasons produced a constant succession of changes. Highlighted through new displays in store windows and on bargain tables, and introduced with advertising campaigns in the newspapers, the frequent turns of the fashion cycle camouflaged in a superficial way social and cultural divisions among the residents of the modern city. The cycle encouraged the egalitarian activity of department store shopping, and thus steadily increased membership in the society of consumers and stimulated identification.
across social classes. The process also established a distinct urban identity, because access to downtown shopping facilities was essential for participation in the latest fashion trends.

The department store made shopping itself fashionable. It gave status to what had been drudgery and added an element of diversion to the lives of women who could afford to play the game. "Fashionable Shopping in New York" was the caption of a large woodcut illustration of Stewart's Marble Palace in a Herald advertisement in September 1848, on the occasion of the store's opening. The department store captured an audience of women shoppers who found a female enclave amid splendid settings and constantly changed scenes which matched well the ever-changing modern city.

By its very nature, shopping in a department store became a public act that educated people for living in the city. Successful participation demanded that the shopper possess not only money but also the poise to assess shrewdly the offered goods. It involved familiarity with the ways of the world and knowledge of the value of things. Buying, the culmination of shopping, constituted yet another measure of success. Though the goods people bought reflected well-established divisions among them, the egalitarian features of shopping diminished these inequalities and linked shoppers as an interest group. Through their shopping and buying activities women acquired not only a knowledge of what to buy but also the power to determine what was sold. Women's consumer's leagues began using that power in the 1890's, when the spread of the department store enabled them to touch all the major retail outlets with one boycott.

Most women welcomed the adventure of downtown shopping, which for many was not only a fashionable activity but also a truly urban one. They went window-shopping, strolled through the stores, gazed at the displays and each other, chatted with friends, listened to clerks' explanations, assessed the articles and other shoppers, bought something they considered a bargain, and under fortunate circumstances went home with the feeling that they had not only done something women were supposed to do, but had actually enjoyed doing it. This experience, repeated almost daily, intensified their identity as modern urban women.

This new identity also engendered stress. At the beginning of the twentieth century one observer, sketching her impressions of "typical American women on a typical shopping tour," discovered "the anomaly that the longer they take to shop, the less they actually buy." She saw women "poorly clad, pale and irritable from fatigue," moving from counter to counter, "fingering, pricing, commenting, passing on, hour after hour," with "an ice-cream soda in the basement" as their "only lunch." This was followed by a "complete rearrangement of hair in the 'Ladies Parlor,' " and "a slow stroll through the Art Department," in a routine common to "tens of thousands of our women in every city in the Union." The identity of the modern urban woman acquired its distinct character through her relationship with the department store. In response to the lure of shopping, women became a presence in the downtown section of the modern city. As shoppers, they exercised daily control over the household budget; this not only gave them a growing measure of independence but also earned them the special attention of merchants, who recognized their purchasing power as the sine qua non of large-scale retailing. Moreover, though the women who worked as sales clerks may have earned low salaries and worked long hours, this form of employment opened up a major female avenue into the male-dominated urban job market. The total effect was to introduce women as a new social force in city life.

A broad cultural perspective suggests a simile from the Communist Manifesto of 1848. Summarizing the history of industrialization in the Western world, Marx and Engels argue that the bourgeoisie liberated countless peasants from the "idiocy" of rural life and chained them to the factory. Analogously, the department store freed large numbers of women from the isolation of domesticity and chained them to a novel form of servitude—shopping as a social obligation. With the feminization of shopping, the depart-
Department store turned a chore into an elaborate process that oriented most residents of the modern city toward money as the common denominator of urban life.

Shopping also reinforced the separation between two spheres of life, leaving the acquisition of the funds for shopping to men while making the task itself a woman's affair. Ultimately, shopping and increased consumption may also have shaped the subtle relations between some men and women in an age that reinforced the ideal of middle-class marriage with layers of convention. In Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Mr. G. W. Hurstwood enjoyed himself thoroughly in Philadelphia during a brief escape he had engineered from the demands of his Chicago home life. On his return the whole incident was glossed over, “but Mrs. Hurstwood gave the subject considerable thought. She drove out more, dressed better and attended theaters freely to make up for it.”

Both men and women felt the social impact of the department store in other realms as well. They witnessed the transformation of the center of the city, which, during working hours at least, had been almost exclusively a male domain, into a downtown area where clean sidewalks enticed women to linger in front of store windows without fear of being harassed by draymen and crowded by office boys. The department store brought into the hustle of downtown the civility that most men had reserved for those aspects of city life they considered properly the social sphere. Thus the store added a new charm to the modern city by opening the city center to the civilizing influences of women and visitors from out of town, making urban life, in the words of Henry James, “so much more down-towny.”

Much of that new urban charm stemmed from the substitution of a shopping district for a wholesale or business district as the core of the city. Magnificent buildings and attractive sidewalks introduced into the downtown section the same sense of spatial order that the department store had brought to large-scale retailing. In a world barely touched by concepts of city planning, this innovation expressed the promise of an ordered urban life. In addi-