

JOHN WANAMAKER ALONG THE OLD YORK ROAD

By William A. Zulker

John Wanamaker, a resident of the Old York Road community from 1868 to 1922, lived an extremely busy life yet one that at the same time was so simple. It was a busy life due to his involvement in numerous organizations and institutions, yet simple because he never allowed anything or anyone to control or manipulate him.

Seemingly, Wanamaker had time for every individual and every organization that sought his help and attention. He nearly always responded as requested, and as a result became Philadelphia's most prominent citizen by 1900, and nearly everyone's friend.

Unlike most famous people who gain wide-spread popularity of their success in one given area – sports, music, the theater, politics or business – John Wanamaker became famous because of his success in many areas of his life.

Most everyone knows of the great department stores he created in Philadelphia and New York City. Following his death, additional stores, all bearing his name and famous signature, were opened in fourteen other locations. Not everyone knows, however, that he was also an educator, writer and publisher, advertising pioneer, popular speech-maker, church builder, government official, political candidate, civic leader, humanitarian and philanthropist. A list of the organizations to which he belonged at the time of his death – many as an officer – would fill two type-written pages. Amazingly, he rose to the top wherever he chose to become involved.

With thrift, a characteristic of his German heritage, and a self-confident determination to succeed, Wanamaker overcame numerous difficulties and hardships during his eighty-four years, which ultimately resulted in his becoming a multimillionaire. Few people are able to accomplish as much in their lives as this remarkable man. He was a many-sided man whose legacy is far-reaching.

Born in Philadelphia in 1838, in a humble brick-maker's home of devout parents of French and German descent, the young lad who had only a few years of formal schooling was intent on learning by listening to others and reading books. He learned quickly, had a remarkable memory, and was willing to take innovative risks.

When only twenty years old he became the first paid secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Philadelphia and within one year increased the membership from fifty-seven to more than two-thousand. Simultaneously in 1858, he began Bethany Sunday School with just twenty-seven students and developed it into the largest Sunday School in America by 1900, with five-thousand pupils in attendance each week. He continued as its Superintendent for sixty-four years and never missed a Sunday unless he was ill or out of town.

Young Wanamaker, at twenty-two, opened his first store just three days before the outbreak of the Civil War. He and his brother-in-law, Nathan Brown, pooled their savings totaling \$4,000 and began a men's and boys' clothing store at Sixth and Market Streets, a few feet from the present location of the Liberty Bell. The small store, which they named "Oak Hall", occupied a first-floor room measuring approximately thirty by eighty feet. With just a few customers entering the store on the first day, cash sales amounted to only \$24.67.

But like an acorn, Oak Hall seemed destined to grow – and it did. Securing a contract for uniforms for the guards at the U.S. Customs House, the enterprising Wanamaker showed that he was not going to be content to wait for customers; he would go after them. It was the beginning of an aggressive endeavor to “go to the people”, a characteristic that soon made him the nation’s foremost advertiser. As the first merchant to place a full-page advertisement in the newspapers he was mimicked by some and criticized by others for taking away their business. Today, every business executive who knows the value of advertising can thank John Wanamaker for setting the pattern.

Customers can thank him for being one of the first to place a price-ticket on goods to be sold. What we take for granted today was a departure from the usual agony of having to haggle for a satisfactory price. Wanamaker felt that everyone should pay the same price and that it should be clearly marked on every item. Moreover, he said, “if the goods don’t satisfy the folks at home, bring them back.” A money-back guarantee – common to us – was one of the basic principles of the largest retail establishment in America. He sold “Everything from Everywhere for Everybody,” including pianos, bicycles, automobiles and airplanes.

President William Howard Taft arrived in Philadelphia in 1911 to dedicate the new Wanamaker twelve-story building across from City Hall, which was described as containing 24,000 tons of granite and having forty-five acres of floor space. The store occupied an entire city block. There were 6,000 employees in Philadelphia and an equal number in Wanamaker’s New York store. Having developed the John Wanamaker Commercial Institute for the 750 young employees still in their teens, Wanamaker gave them free educational courses early each morning and at the end of their work day. Camp Wanamaker, thirteen acres located on Barnegat Bay in New Jersey, was the site for their exciting two-week free summer vacation among the pines and at the healthful salt-water beaches.

In 1889, President Benjamin Harrison invited Wanamaker to his cabinet as Postmaster General, but he could not have imagined how the fifty year-old millionaire-merchant would revolutionize the United States Postal System. Moving to Washington and putting his son in charge of the store, Wanamaker seemed as devoted to his governmental department as he would be if he owned it. No detail escaped his attention. He initiated Rural Free Delivery so that people living in the country could receive mail like those living in cities; established the commemorative stamp program to honor great Americans and historical events; sought to reduce the price of a first-class stamp to a penny; and strongly promoted the idea of the Parcel Post System. Though the latter was not approved by Congress until after he had left office, he was given the honor of mailing the first parcel post package from Philadelphia in 1913.

While Postmaster General, he became a close friend of the President. Both men were active Presbyterian laymen serving in their home churches, and they shared many common interests. Wanamaker encouraged the President to vacation with him at Cape May Point, New Jersey, and even secured a home for him there, which led to serious legal problems. Ultimately, the title for the large summer “cottage” was switched to the President’s wife.

Wanamaker also convinced President Harrison to attend the anniversary of the old “Log College”, a school founded by William R. Tennent, a Presbyterian minister, in 1726 in Neshaminy, about ten miles from Wanamaker’s country home in Jenkintown. The Log College operated until Tennent’s death in 1746, and was the forerunner of Princeton University. The importance of the Log College was not in the number of students who attended or graduated from it, for they were few, but rather in

establishing a relationship with the beginning of the Presbyterian Church in America. The College provided an educational (Seminary) foundation for the ministry of the church emphasizing learning as well as piety. It was the first of many educational institutions of the church which followed. And so, on September 5, 1889, the Presbyterian President of the United State joined many other distinguished leaders of the nation for this celebratory event on the farmland near the site of the long-gone college.

The event itself, as reported in minute detail in the *Buck County Intelligencer*, began with the early morning parade of fifteen hundred horse-drawn carriages starting at Lindenhurst, the Wanamaker estate where the President had been an overnight guest. The President and Wanamaker were in the first carriage, followed by Mrs. Harrison and Pennsylvania Governor James A. Beaver in the second. Forty-two members of the First Regimental Band of Philadelphia, dressed in scarlet uniforms, led the way. Thousands of spectators lined both sides of Old York Road decorated with flags flying from stores, telegraph poles, homes, fences and trees as the procession made its journey to the old Tennent farm. Three-hundred children gathered on the lawn of the Abington Presbyterian Church, waving their red, white and blue flags. In the center of Abington, a huge arch, higher than the telephone poles, spanned the roadway at the location of a grandstand holding seven hundred ladies. At that point, the procession stopped while flowers were presented to each lady in the Presidential party and a bouquet of orchids given to the President's wife.

After passing Hatboro, where veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic hailed the President, an estimated crowd of twenty-five thousand greeted him at the twenty-five acre meadow near where the Log College began one hundred and fifty years earlier. Seats for 5,300 people had been set up near a luncheon tent where the President and one hundred special guests were to be served. It is interesting to note that a hospital unit, water stands, lunch stands, a station for checking parcels and lunch baskets, and hundreds of hitching posts were a part of the physical accommodations.

Even before the presidential party arrived, the first services of the day began at 11:00 a.m. with the singing of a hymn, scripture reading, prayer, and music by a choir. But everything came to a temporary halt as the President appeared, "leaning upon the arm of the Postmaster-General Wanamaker." After several other speeches, it was the President's turn. He chided the chairman, not having consented to be a speaker, but only to appear, and expressed embarrassment at being on the platform "with gentlemen who have manuscripts in their pockets."

After lunch, at another service with several more speakers, John Wanamaker stepped to the podium to give one of his well-prepared addresses. It is one thing to read excerpts from his speech in the newspapers, printed on the following day, but much more exciting to actually handle Wanamaker's handwritten manuscript with all its crossed-out corrections, presently in the files at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

"It is because I am your neighbor that I am honored today with a place on the program. The compliment is paid me by your committee of putting my name on your historic program which in itself is a roll of honor. I am too grateful to take advantage of this by a long speech." He went on to speak of other "obscure places out of which streams of light have shed brightness over the land," referring to Bethlehem and Jesus, Ramah and David, as well as Elisha from "the land of the plough. Their faith lay through the shining gateway of faith in God." Tennent and the Log College were added to those religious pioneers.

President Harrison was not the only distinguished person ever to be a guest at the Wanamaker country home in Jenkintown. Mrs. Wanamaker was a very gracious hostess who once stated, "I had a family of 28 for four days; now I have only 20. When all other helps fail, I am sure that I shall be able to keep a boarding house." She called it "an elastic house." Dwight L. Moody, the world-renowned evangelist; General John J. Pershing and Billy Sunday were among the many who enjoyed the beauty of the estate with its gardens and floral conservatories, and the remarkable art gallery displaying a broad variety of valuable paintings.

The estate had grown with the success of its owner, having started as a more modest retreat. When he was but thirty years old, Wanamaker purchased a 108-acre property from the Isaac Mather family. Some years later in 1883-84, Wanamaker replaced the house on the property with a large, Queen Anne style home built of grey stone quarried on the grounds. For the enjoyment of their daughters, the Wanamakers built a fully equipped playhouse, "The Bird's Nest," on a wooded slope nearby. Yet another stone building included an indoor swimming pool, an upstairs billiard room, and a bowling alley added in 1889.

Though a huge iron fence encircled the estate, there was no high wall for secrecy. Wanamaker said, "I wish to share all these things with others who have less." Open house was normal at Lindenhurst. Once a year, on Labor Day, members of Wanamaker's Sunday School were invited to spend the day playing games on the lawn and having supper – a real outing for the city folk. At other times, Mrs. Wanamaker could expect that her husband had decided at the last moment to bring several friends home for an overnight stay.

The house was totally destroyed by a tragic fire on the evening of February 8, 1907. A servant had set aside an electric flatiron on a table in the linen room when the electric service was not working and had failed to turn off the switch. A good portion of the art collection was rescued before the house burned. The loss was estimated at \$1,500,000, being evenly split between the home and its contents. Those art works that were saved were moved to the stables, which subsequently burned several months later at a total loss. Rodman Wanamaker hired Philadelphia architect John T. Windrim (1866-1934) to design an even more luxurious French-style mansion for his parents complete with music room and art gallery. Construction began in 1911 and culminated with an open house in January 1913.

Following the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Wanamaker in 1922 and 1910, respectively, Henry W. Breyer, Jr. bought the entire estate in January 1929. In 1944, he gave most of the former Wanamaker property to the Philadelphia Council of the Boy Scouts of America to be used as a training area. The Boy Scouts disposed of the grounds in 1981. Presently, three large office buildings, and a number of town houses and condominiums, occupy the site at the intersection of Routes 73 and 611. In the spring of 1998, the Pennsylvania College of Optometry moved into two of the office buildings. Because it is so often referred to as Breyer Woods or the Breyer estate, many are unaware that it was the Wanamaker estate for over sixty years. A reminder of its former magnificence can be seen in the beautiful iron-latticed gazebo at the end of the pond in front of the large office building.

While living at Jenkintown during the summer months beginning in 1868, the Wanamaker children attended Sunday School in the Lyceum building on Old York Road. In 1870, Wanamaker offered to pay for the construction of a new building for the Sunday School as an extension of the Abington Presbyterian Church. But before it was completed, his five-year old daughter Hattie died. Wanamaker then decided that the new "Grace Chapel" would be a memorial to her. The chapel was later organized

by the Presbytery of Philadelphia as Grace Presbyterian Church in May 1881. Ninety years later, in 1962, the church dedicated a new "Wanamaker Chapel" in which hangs *The Adoration of the Magi* by the sixteenth century Italian painter, Paolo Veronese (c. 1528-1588). The painting came from Wanamaker's art collection. Also in the room is a stained-glass window portraying the life of Wanamaker.

Across the road from the church is the Friendship Masonic Lodge No. 400, a classic temple in Doric style, with a lodge room seating three hundred fifty, given by Wanamaker in 1913. In the lodge is a full-length portrait of Wanamaker, who had become a 33rd Degree Mason, and its Worshipful Master in 1905.

As an educator, Wanamaker was President of the Board of Trustees of the Pennsylvania Military College (now Widener University) in Chester, for twenty-two years, a member of the Philadelphia Board of Education, founder of Bethany College (later the Wanamaker Institute of Industries), founder of the American University of Trade and Applied Commerce, and an organizing trustee of the Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades in Media.

He was one of the founders of the Presbyterian Hospital, founder of four Presbyterian churches and a generous benefactor of numerous civic, church and welfare organizations. He gave buildings for the YMCA in China, Japan, India and Korea as well as land for the Colored Young Women's Christian Association in Philadelphia, and property for the Salvation Army on North Broad Street. As a newspaper reported in 1889, "His charities are boundless, his courtesies constant, and his humanitarianism wide-horizoned."

The literary skill of Wanamaker first revealed itself in *Everybody's Journal* which he published when he was just thirty. He claimed that he was the originator of *The Farm Journal*, started *The Ladies Journal* before Cyrus H.K. Curtis came to town, owned and published *The Sunday School Times* and many other books, periodicals and pamphlets in his own Times Printing House Establishment. His home-spun daily editorials numbering more than 5,000 were published by newspapers and anxiously awaited each day by the reading public. His philosophical "Wanagrams" were almost as famous as the epigrams of Benjamin Franklin. Wanamaker's book department was the largest and most important retail book business in America by 1887 and sold more than one million books a year.

One can hardly grasp the magnificence of a store that once drew a hundred-thousand people a day, provided free daily organ concerts for the public for more than eighty years, opened a free fine-arts gallery, initiated profit-sharing programs and free health care for employees, produced a ton of candy each day in one of its several factories, sold 573 bicycles, 223 pianos and 185 rugs in a single day, served more than 2500 meals a day in the Crystal Tea Room (the largest restaurant in Philadelphia), and built an athletic field on the roof of the store for the physical and mental well-being of the "store family."

Though the John Wanamaker stores have now all disappeared, there is a deep and abiding gratitude that many share as they remember the founder, John Wanamaker, who unashamed and unapologetic for his faith as a Christian has touched and influenced our lives in more ways than we shall ever know. Still, he said, "The only wish I have, is that I could have done my work better. Thinking, toiling, and trusting God is my biography."

Standing tall on the east side of Philadelphia's City Hall is a statue of Wanamaker erected on Thanksgiving Day 1923 by the multitudes that held him in high esteem. It bears the simple, yet profound tribute: JOHN WANAMAKER

1838-1922

CITIZEN

The above article was published in the Old YORK ROAD HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN, Volume LVII, 1997, accompanied with several photos from the author's personal collection.



John Wanamaker



Mr. and Mrs. John Wanamaker



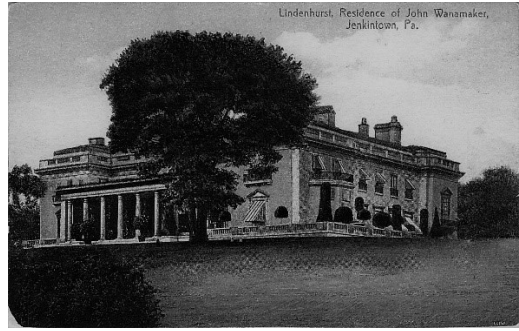
Lindenhurst – Wanamaker Home Before Fire



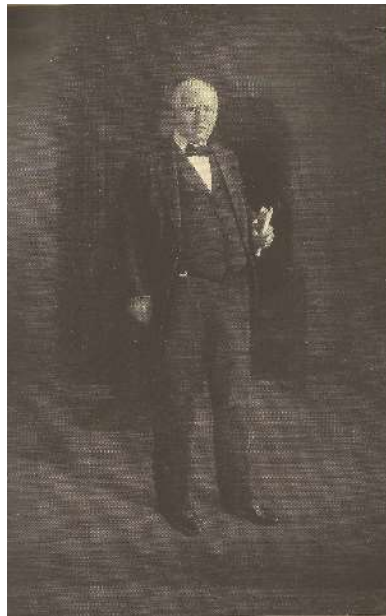
Doll House for Daughters at Lindenhurst



Lindenhurst after 1907 Fire



Wanamaker Mansion- 1913



John Wanamaker

Life size portrait at Friendship Masonic Lodge in Jenkintown, PA