## John Wanamaker: King of Merchants William Allen Zulker Eaglecrest Press 1993 (236 pages)

## **A REVIEW**

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The first biography of the world famous department store founder written in nearly three-quarters of a century, John Wanamaker: King of Merchants offers a glimpse of the multi-faceted life of the individual once hailed as "Philadelphia's most prominent citizen." Most appreciate Wanamaker's place in history as the department store titan, but few know of his role as advertising pioneer, educator, church builder, humanitarian. philanthropist, writer, gubernatorial candidate, banker, Sunday School teacher, publisher, and Postmaster General of the United States (an appointment made in 1889 by Pres. Benjamin Harrison). Born in 1838, John Wanamaker opened The Grand Depot in 1876 at Thirteenth and Market streets, now the site of the famous flagship store in center-city Philadelphia. The ungainly two-acre structure, which had served as a freight station for the Pennsylvania Railroad from 1853 to 1874 (hence the reason Wanamaker called it Depot), became an overnight sensation, attracting countless visitors from the throngs who crowded the Centennial Exhibition at Fairmount Park. The opening of the Grand Depot was a turning point for the thirty-eight year old retailer; fifteen years earlier he had entered the clothing business with brother-in-law Nathan Brown but was considered too young and inexperienced to compete with the established clothiers. Nevertheless, the first store, Oak Hall, survived - and the rest is history (see "Original and Genuine, Unadulterated and Guaranteed!" by Linda Kowall in the winter 1989 edition). John Wanamaker: King of Merchants goes far beyond recording the Philadelphia's business achievements, successes, and appointments. Instead, it offers an intimate portrait of a merchant prince who made precious time available for his causes, family, and friends. Truly visionary, he created a library for his female employees, "many of whom I am sure must be great readers," he wrote. Despite his hectic schedule, he founded the University of Trade and Applied Commerce, Bethany College, and the First Penny Savings Bank; built three Presbyterian churches; and helped establish the Presbyterian Orphanage, the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, the Presbyterian Hospital, and the Citizens' Relief Committee (to aid victims of the famine in Ireland). He served as a member of the city's board of education. He accepted the presidency of the Pennsylvania State Sunday School Association. He was a member of dozens of charitable, civic, and religious organizations, most of which benefited from his largess. John Wanamaker: King of Merchants also discusses the maxims and epigrams he wrote in the style of Benjamin Franklin, whom he greatly admired. In the Anniversary Herald, published by the department store in 1908, several of his "Wanagrams" made their debut: "Men are great only as they are kind"; "Shirkers get paid what the are worth"; "How common it is for ignorance to admire itself"; "Customers have no short memories", and "Untruthfulness is the leprosy of a business life." Perhaps the best characterization of the crown prince of commerce is in the foreword written by sociologist Anthony Campolo. "John Wanamaker represents an America that was. A study of his life is a call to greatness that we hope and pray will come to America again. He was the sort of man who inspired the Horatio Alger

novels, and his character was of the kind that led the French journalist Alexis de Tocqueville to believe that Americans were the best human beings that the planet had to offer."

In this book, the author seizes the opportunity to create a vivid, at time quite zealous, portrait of an individual whose name "was a household word for many years." Even more important, *John Wanamaker: King of Merchants* offers a well rounded look at Wanamaker in several of his many roles, including those of father and husband, friend, civic official, and church leader. The text is supplemented with nearly fifty illustrations, including several of John Wanamaker at work and - not too surprisingly- at play.

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