



Presidential Profile: Our 19th— John Wanamaker: King of Merchants

by the Rev. Dr. William
Allen Zulker

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before his retirement in 1990, Dr. William Allen Zulker was the Assistant to the President at Eastern College in St. David's, Pennsylvania. He served at Eastern for thirty years in a variety of administrative positions—Dean of Admissions, Director of Financial Aid, and Dean of Christian Life.

A Presbyterian minister, Dr. Zulker served as pastor of Bethany Temple Presbyterian Church, one of the four churches founded by John Wanamaker. For the past seven years, he has been researching the life of John Wanamaker. During those years he has been working as a volunteer intern at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, processing and classifying the Wanamaker collection estimated to include more than a million documents. His book, *John Wanamaker: King of Merchants*, was published in 1993, and is available through Eaglecrest Press, PO Box 9, Wayne, PA 19087.

Dr. Zulker and his wife of forty-five years reside in Wayne, Pennsylvania, and have three daughters and nine grandchildren.

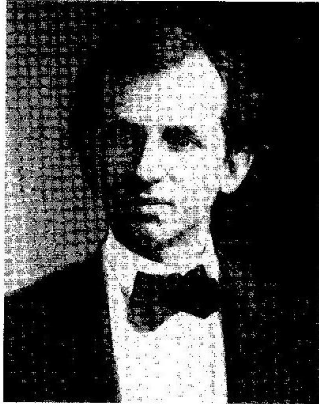
Pennsylvanians of German heritage can be proud of the accomplishments of people like John Wanamaker, Adam Gimbel, Nathan and Isidor Straus, Edward and Lincoln Filene, and David Day, all of whom shared a German ancestry. (Yes, David May is the founder of the current St. Louis-based May Company that recently purchased the Wanamaker stores!) All of these persons of German ancestry became very successful as leading retailers and their names have been at the front of the mercantile scene since the middle of the nineteenth century.

John Wanamaker celebrated his German ancestry each year by presenting a German Volksfest in his store—a time of joyous festivity. Of course, no beer was served by this strict prohibitionist, but no one seemed to mind—it was understood that it was against his personal beliefs as a Christian. In fact, he kept to his practice even when entertaining President Benjamin Harrison and members of the Cabinet while Wanamaker was in Washington as Postmaster General of the United States. (1889-1893). He was noted for serving only “Potomac Water”.

In 1907 Wanamaker's store displayed large photographs of the German Kaiser as customers enjoyed daily concerts by a local German singing group. One might rightly conclude that a part of Wanamaker's success in business was due to the large following he had among German immigrants populating the nation at that time. As he opened his first store in 1861 in Philadelphia, nearly one-third of all foreign-born residents in the United States were German. They comprised the largest ethnic group - almost one-quarter of the total population - as reported by the 1990 U.S. Census Bureau.

With thrift characteristic of Germans and a self-confident determination to succeed, young twenty-two year-old Wanamaker overcame numerous difficulties and hardships which ultimately resulted in his being called, “Philadelphia's Most Eminent Citizen” by 1900. Few people are able to accomplish as much in their lives as this remarkable man did during his eighty-four years. It is also apparent that most individuals who gain widespread popularity do so because of their success in a single field of endeavor. But John Wanamaker rose to the top wherever he chose to become involved. Founder of the well-known department store, pioneer in the mercantile world, advertising genius, educator, writer/publisher, speech-maker, public servant, church-builder and humanitarian, he was a many-sided man whose legacy is far-reaching.

Born in Philadelphia in a humble brickmaker'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 eighteen years old, he became the first paid secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Philadelphia, and within one year he increased the membership from fifty-seven to more than two-thousand. Simultaneously, he began Bethany Sunday School with just twenty-seven students, and developed it into the largest Sunday School in America, up to that time, with five-thousand pupils. He remained as its Superintendent for sixty-four years and never missed a Sunday unless ill or out of town.

Wanamaker 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 he named "Oak Hall", occupied a first-floor room of approximately thirty by eighty feet. With only a few customers entering the store on the first day, cash sales amounted to \$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 twenty-one-year-old 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 made him the nation's foremost advertiser. As the first merchant to place a full-page advertisement in the newspaper, he was mimicked by others and criticized by some for taking away their business. Today, every business executive who knows the value of advertising can thank John Wanamaker for setting the pattern.

Every customer 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. 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 Wanamaker emporium. It is no wonder that his business grew to become the largest retail establishment in America.

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When President William Howard Taft arrived in Philadelphia to dedicate the new Wanamaker twelve-story building across from City Hall, it was described as containing 24,000 tons of granite and having forty-five acres of floor space. 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 of the store, he offered 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 the healthful salt-water beaches.

President Benjamin Harrison invited Wanamaker to his cabinet in 1889, but could not have imagined how the fifty year-old millionaire merchant would revolutionize the U.S. Postal System as the Postmaster General of the United States. Moving to Washington and putting his son in charge of the store,

*"It is not the wick of the lamp that makes the light,
but the oil that feeds the wick to give out its brightness"*

John Wanamaker

Jan. 26, 1916

Wanamaker seemed as devoted to his governmental department as he would be if he owned it. No detail escaped his attention. Finding damaged canvas mailbags discarded, he set up a repair shop. He initiated Rural Free Delivery so that people living in the country would 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.

As an educator, Wanamaker was President of the Board of Trustees of the Pennsylvania Military College (Widener Univ.) in Chester, PA for twenty-two years, a member of the Philadelphia Board of Education, founder of Bethany College (now 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, PA.

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. As a newspaper reported in 1889, "His charities are bound-



less, his courtesies constant, and his humanitarianism wide-horizoned."

Wanamaker was a great joiner. It seems as though every club and organization wanted to boast of his membership and support. He did not disappoint them. The list of his memberships is far too long to include in this article. But it is noted that he found great satisfaction in being a member of the Pennsylvania German Society. When he was unanimously elected President in 1907, he made a short address in which he said;

"I am surprised and honored by your election which I do not deserve. I intended at first to decline it because I am too old to undertake a new official obligation. But the German blood in my veins did not rest and urged me to accept your election...The parents of my father were Germans, my grandfather was one of Pennsylvania's pioneers...In all my life I will never forget the impression when I read my own name on the tombstone, as I was named after my grandfather. Standing at his grave, I prayed that I would become as good a man as the departed had been. I am proud of my German blood which creates energy and perserverance. I believe that without the Germans, Pennsylvania would long ago have gone to pieces."

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 in the 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 a 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 2,500 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".

A T R I B U T E

And standing tall on the
east side of Philadelphia's
City Hall remains the statue of
John Wanamaker erected on
Thanksgiving Day 1923 by the
multitudes who held him in
high esteem. It bears the
simple, yet profound tribute:

JOHN WANAMAKER
1838-1922
CITIZEN