

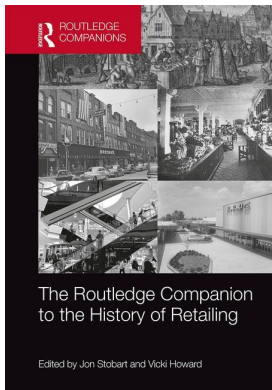
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### Penny retailers and merchant princes

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## PENNY RETAILERS AND MERCHANT PRINCES

*Susan Spellman*

### Introduction

When the doors at the corner of Broadway and Chambers Streets opened on 21 September 1846, few in attendance at the much-anticipated event thought themselves at the centre of a retail transformation. Alexander Turney Stewart's "Marble Palace" had drawn shoppers and reporters who for months had speculated about the store's rumoured opulence and grandeur as they watched the austere façade of a four-story structure rise along one of New York City's main thoroughfares. It was the building's location, in fact, that initially caused the biggest stir. 'Well – we are at last actually in the midst of a revolution, and in a short time the East side of Broadway will be as fashionable as the West', one New York journalist surmised ("City Items" 1846). As crowds of women streamed through the front doors they met with 100 uniformed clerks ready to show \$1,000 shawls, kid gloves, valuable laces and expensive dresses housed within one of the grandest spaces many had ever shopped. Massive plate glass windows illuminated mahogany counters and maple shelves, while a domed ceiling rose 90 feet above the sales floor supported by Italian marble columns, each topped with a 'cornucopia intertwined with the caduceus of Mercury, the god of commerce' ("Stewart's New Dry Goods Store" 1846). There was no mistaking Stewart's intention with his symbolism. His was a store designed for abundance and profit-making.

Stewart's contemporaries likewise saw benefit in expanding the scope of operations and providing shoppers with plentiful goods and posh spaces. A few doors up on Broadway, James Beck & Company sold an impressive array of expensive embroidery, laces and other stocks estimated to be worth nearly the same \$600,000 Stewart claimed ("Fashionable Shopping in New York" 1846). Meanwhile in England, Emerson Muschamp Bainbridge had by 1849 organised his Newcastle-upon-Tyne drapery and dry goods store into twenty-three different departments, and provided a ladies' tea room for female sociability (Mitchell 2014). A few years later in 1852, Parisian entrepreneur Aristide Boucicaut transformed Au Bon Marché from a small notions shop, where he sold laces, ribbons and thread, into a full-scale department store with a wide assortment of merchandise, fixed prices and guaranteed returns (Miller 1981).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the movement towards big retail organisations and mass merchandising was well underway. With its flashy and expansive selling spaces, division into sales departments and one-price system, Stewart's store and methods signalled for some scholars a

“retail revolution”, a transition from the penny merchants who had directed retail commerce for much of the nation’s early history to the merchant princes who would transform shopping from an everyday task to an experience (Leach 1993). While department stores brought about an alteration in the size, scope and methods of some retail operations – particularly in urban locations – many underlying trade principles remained remarkably similar for small and large-scale traders alike. In other words, Stewart and other merchant princes may have built the physical structures that gave rise to mass retailing, but they did so on methodological foundations laid by penny retailers.

Initial forays into retailing history by business and consumption scholars nevertheless led many to the merchant princes. Evaluating department stores and methods, historians focused on identifying signs of “modernity” to help explain the transition to mass retailing during industrialisation in America and Europe (Pasdermadjian 1954; Ferry 1960; Miller 1981; Benson 1986; Leach 1993; Lancaster 1995). Developments such as Stewart’s fixed-pricing system, the Bon Marché’s guaranteed return policies and the creation of elaborate shopping spaces supposedly demarcated the line between so-called “traditional” penny merchants operating on a small scale and “modern” large-scale retailers. As a result, much of what we understood about retailing in the industrial era centred on Gilded Age, urban department store owners and consumers, despite the overwhelming presence of stores and shoppers who neither operated nor patronised big-city consumption palaces. The emphasis, too, has been on the most successful businessmen and their enterprises. Names like Rowland H. Macy, Marshall Field and H. Gordon Selfridge adorned buildings, wagons and labels for decades, their longevity making them an obvious foundation for tracking long-term trends and innovations. Like most royalty, though, these merchant princes rarely represented the majority of subjects who populated the retail kingdom.

Equating “bigness” with modernity likewise led to characterisations of rural and urban small-scale shops as places where “confusion and disorganization” reigned, making them a seemingly fitting counterpoint for those seeking to explain the rise of the mass market (Tedlow 1990). Yet as more recent scholarship has acknowledged, a remarkable number of small grocers, dry goods dealers, boot and shoe merchants, confectioners, haberdashers and other retailers persisted alongside department and other big stores well into the twentieth century, and in some lines even into the twenty-first century. Were they not just as “modern” as the department store contemporaries? The entrepreneurial men and women (if there were merchant princesses, we have yet to learn their stories) who owned and operated microenterprises tended to operate in the rural and urban niches of the economy. Their persistence has challenged historians in the last twenty years or so to reconceptualise modern business along broader lines that includes not only organisational systems and selling methods, but also technology adoption, merchandising, distribution and contributions to local as well as national economies (Blackford 1991; Wills 2005; Sparks 2006; Gamber 2007; Spellman 2016).

These more recent histories cover both European and US retailing and range in time from the early modern period through the twentieth century. Collectively, they demonstrate that there was no clear break between the so-called “traditional” methods of small retailers and those of their large-scale counterparts. Elements of design and practice such as fancy interiors, alluring displays and show windows, along with cost accounting, departmentalisation and fixed-pricing systems could be found in backwoods shops as readily as urban stores, and often long before department stores made them standard (Walsh 2003, p. 68; Fowler 1998; Spellman 2016). Others have identified elements of “modern” retailing in eighteenth-century England (Mui and Mui 1989; Cox 2000; Stobart, Hann, and Morgan 2007), as well as in the networks and practices of peddlers, open-air markets and fairs of medieval and early modern Europeans (Benson and Ugolini 2003).

Moving away from binary comparisons of “traditional” and “modern”, others have begun to consider how small-scale merchants contributed to local, national and global economic, social and cultural systems (Elvins 2004; Wenger 2008; Martin 2008). In so doing, they have illuminated the complicated ways in which retailers became central to the growth and development of communities large and small, and the relationships upon which these economies formed and operated. As a result, our understandings of retail enterprise have expanded beyond store walls to consider the role of commercial exchange within broader and more sophisticated frameworks. While Alexander Stewart’s 1846 grand opening may once have marked a transition from old to new, the notion of a nineteenth-century “retailing revolution” in the US and Europe has been complicated by our growing knowledge of the many and varied ways small retailers innovated and implemented many of the methods often associated solely with the era’s consumption palaces.

Evaluating the stores, sales methods and distribution strategies of penny retailers and merchant princes reveals as many similarities as differences between the two forms. While there were changes on all three fronts – stores got bigger, sales strategies evolved and distribution systems varied across product lines – there were ties that bound and continue to bind together turn-of-the-twentieth-century entrepreneurs. Indeed, the coexistence of small- and large-scale retailing throughout the period and beyond throws into sharp relief assumptions that industrialisation and its concomitant population, transportation and technology developments elevated consumer demand as prerequisites to the rise of “modern” retail systems. This essay will explore the similarities and differences between penny retailers and merchant princes, their stores, methods and long-term contributions to the development of retailing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the focus is primarily on the US and the UK, it will make occasional forays into other markets in an attempt to highlight the multi-faceted nature of retailing in the period.

### **Penny retailers**

Small retail merchants were present in the US from its founding, initially in the form of independent trading posts and later in the shops that emerged in colonial villages and towns. These early outlets furnished shoppers with a wide range of Atlantic World goods, enmeshing both retailers and consumers in a complex international market economy (Martin 2008). In the UK during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, fixed shops catered primarily to wealthy customers, with others relying on public markets to satisfy many of their needs. Specialty craftsmen such as saddlers, cabinet makers, jewellers and clock and watchmakers combined both workshop and retail space as some of the first traders to open storefront locations. Grocers, however, were among the most numerous both in the US and the UK, as the regulated nature of public markets and concerns over sanitation prompted the increased privatisation of food selling (Tangiers 2002; Winstanley 1983; Spellman 2016). Regardless of their specific origins, small merchants dominated retailing in the middle of the nineteenth century and remained so well into the twentieth century. They were key agents in the formation of local, national and international economies. Their stores, sales methods and distribution networks served as templates for commercial exchange and developments that came to characterise the industrial and post-industrial eras.

General stores dominated US retailing in the early nineteenth century. Small and fragmented markets, especially in rural regions, influenced the development of outlets that sold a range of bulk goods from brooms and calicoes to crackers and pickles. Merchants focused on accommodating customers’ essential needs, both in cities and in frontier towns. In 1824, New York storekeeper Alexander Walsh, boasted of having a ‘large stock of Dry Goods, Hardware, Groceries,

Crockery, Glass, &c &c', in his Lansingburgh shop, and carried 'nearly every article in usual demand, and extending the variety to whatever constitutes the character of a general store' ('Fresh goods' 1824). Rural shops tended to be small free-standing structures approximately 20 by 30 feet, with shelves, hooks and pegs lining the walls. A countertop served as both point of exchange and packaging station in the absence of boxed and canned goods. In urban regions, these same kinds of stores took root in the narrow, but deep street-front buildings that lined board sidewalks. There was little in the way of formal merchandising or display in either country or city shops, but rather a functional arrangement familiar to storekeepers who picked items at the customer's request. Walsh, however, understood his village store in terms that became more common later in the century, announcing the "numerous additions" made to his "*Grocery Department*" ("Stock Renewed" 1825), a nod to Walsh's grasp of organisation.<sup>1</sup> Others like New Orleans dealer William Smith sold items like guava jelly and marmalade in "handsome glass jars", acknowledging the importance of presentation and merchandising in these early days ("Choice Havana Sweetmeats" 1827).

In the US, many of these early proprietors, including Walsh and Smith, conducted both retail and wholesale businesses, buying and selling in large quantities with an eye towards supplying both consumers and other merchants. Wholesaling helped stabilise profits in the wake of unpredictable consumer demands and a reliance on barter to supplement a cash-starved economy. Likewise, few wholesalers in this early period carried the small lots most general storekeepers required. Merchants procured their stock of goods by knitting together nascent distribution networks of commercial intermediaries that required them to travel twice yearly to trade centres in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Charleston, and other port cities (Spellman 2016). One trip could take up to six weeks of hazardous travel through undeveloped lands by horseback, riverboat, wagon, railroad or an exhausting combination of all (Blackford 1991). Indiana merchant John Brownlee, for example, endured frigid sleigh rides, frozen canals and "very lonely" horseback rides in the 1830s and 1840s as he made his way to commercial centres hundreds of miles away in Pittsburgh and Baltimore.<sup>2</sup> Storekeepers like Brownlee would visit multiple manufacturers, wholesalers, drummers, commission merchants and other retail intermediaries to purchase and arrange shipping for their goods. The commercial networks these entrepreneurial men and women forged supplied the growing nation's interior and established a distribution system utilised for decades to come.

Urban shopkeepers, like those in England, sometimes benefitted from better access to a range of goods. Port cities profited from the regular arrival of both supply ships from abroad and merchants' wagons from the interior, which brought produce and other agricultural products to trade in commercial centres. Liverpool, for example, by the late eighteenth century imported cotton on a large scale in addition to a wide variety of linens and animal skins, lumber, tobacco and wines from around the Atlantic world, and built large warehouses to accommodate this trade. The city opened its ports to a growing number of manufactured and agricultural goods, such as Chinese silks and tea, by the middle of the nineteenth century (Haggerty 2003, p. 108; Milne 2000). The close proximity of urban merchants to these resources reduced travel and transportation costs, potentially increasing profitability. City retailers, however, faced greater competition from a range of large and small merchants who competed for shoppers' attention. Parisian arcades and galleries, along with sizeable drapery shops and English department stores, emerged in the late eighteenth century, giving consumers their first taste of shopping for pleasure as they strolled past window displays (Furnée and Lesger 2014, pp. 11–12). In both the US and England, though, small retail outlets grew significantly over first half of the nineteenth century, expanding rural and urban commerce and opening the door for entrepreneurial men and women who sought to join their ranks.

While small-scale retailing theoretically offered men and women in both the US and England a promising path to financial independence, many who undertook the risk found the rewards long in coming. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic bemoaned the lack of preparation and skills in aspiring storekeepers. The grocery trade in particular saw its share of entrepreneurial spirits who found the low entry barriers an enticing opportunity. Tales abounded of men who purchased a barrel of peanut butter, pickles or crackers, laid an old plank on two crates, opened their doors and declared themselves in business. These undercapitalised ventures often struggled, owing in large part to the practice of wholesalers and other middlemen overextending credit to merchants in the interest of moving more products, thus contributing to an epidemic of failures that befell many nineteenth-century small businesses (Spellman 2016). While no agency tracked the total number of bankruptcies in the period, newspapers routinely announced the many and varied kinds of firms that shuttered their doors. 'Bank and business failures are the order of the day', one Ohio daily opined in 1854 ("News of the Week" 1854). Word of a company's collapse sometimes travelled far and fast over the wires. Missouri readers learned in 1851 of a Philadelphia firm 'doing a very extensive business' that had failed just the day prior ("By Telegraph" 1851). Over in Indiana, journalists relayed a *New York Times* report indicating that losses in 1856 due to failures amounted to \$200 million, 'of which nearly three-fourths fell upon the dry goods trade' ("The Dry Goods Business" 1857). Accurate or not, few could deny that small ventures tended to be unduly burdened by those who entered retail trade without the capital or knowledge needed to make such undertakings profitable.

These cautionary tales did little to dissuade would-be penny retailers throughout the nineteenth century from commencing business. Developments in industrial manufacturing triggered the mass production of goods on a larger and broader scale, with new retail shops emerging to accommodate the demands of an enlarged consumer population. Advances in transportation, communication, and industrialisation spurred the expansion of urban and rural markets alike, prompting corresponding changes in the retail sector. Between 1815 and 1860, costs for long-distance travel in the US fell nearly 95%, while goods moved along by rail and steamboat five times faster than they had by canals or wagons (Spellman 2016). The ease with which even frontier storekeepers could now place orders by telegraph and postal mail and receive them by train led to changes in distribution patterns. Travelling salesmen replaced merchants' bimonthly buying trips, relaying orders to wholesalers and jobbers, who now sold the small lots corner storekeepers demanded. Indeed, most consumer goods manufacturers continued to rely on wholesalers for distributing the vast majority of their products. The costs associated with marketing and warehousing the large quantities and range of their products deterred many manufacturers from taking on these marketing and distribution challenges. As a result, intermediaries continued to supply the thousands of US small retailers who made up the late-nineteenth century's diffuse retail sector (Porter and Livesay 1971).

The speed and ease with which goods now travelled through established distribution lines helped give rise to a greater number of retail outlets. While general stores prevailed in the first half of the century, specialisation intensified in the second half, particularly in the US post-Civil War years. A range of jewellers, milliners, boot and shoe merchants, stationers, musical instrument stores, confectioners, hardware dealers, clothiers, grocers and others appeared in backwater towns and commercial centres alike, echoing many European towns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These shops reflected both the growth of a consumer society that sought luxury and staple goods and the expansion of economic opportunities that arose both during and after the war. US retail proprietors numbered almost 430,000 in 1869, soaring to over 600,000 a decade later (Spellman 2016). Between 1869 and 1919, the number of retail employees in these outlets grew from 720,000 to 4 million (Blackford 1991). While men



predominantly occupied the retail sector, female employees and proprietors were a small, but growing category within the retail space, as one study of San Francisco has shown. By the 1870s, 6% of the city's women business owners identified as "traders and dealers" or "hucksters and peddlers" in keeping with national trends. The majority congregated in the grocery, dry and fancy goods, confectionary, clothing and drug trades (Sparks 2006). Low entry barriers combined with the ease of operating shops from within the home attracted a significant number of women to the grocery business, where they could service parlor-front stores while tending to family needs in the kitchen or upstairs.

In England, storekeepers catering to the working-class trade increasingly organised as co-operatives or multiples, otherwise known as chain stores in the US. Both retailing forms initially focused on selling foodstuffs, while maintaining similar organisational features, including limiting product availability to a few high-demand and easily sourced items; deep discounts negotiated through large volume purchasing; and vertical integration, with several firms manufacturing and marketing their own branded items. While both co-operatives and multiples operated large numbers of small shops, co-operatives appeared earlier in the mid-nineteenth century and tended towards a decentralised structure, where several entrepreneurs joined together specifically to benefit from the economies of scale offered by manufacturers' and other distributors' volume discounts. The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, formed in 1844, generally is credited with originating the co-operative enterprise model, with partners passing along dividends to members as incentive to patronise their stores. Thousands of co-operative shops opened across northern England throughout the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Other shop owners themselves became co-operative society members and bought from co-operative stores; in Bolton, over three-quarters of the town's retail operators were co-operative society members by 1909. In contrast, co-operative retailing would not appear on a large scale in the US until well into the twentieth century, when small entrepreneurs would face fierce competition from chain store conglomerates (Winstanley 1983; Spellman 2016).

As the number of retail outlets grew, so too did competition for customers. Price wars were common among tradesmen in similar lines. Retailers lured shoppers into their stores with bargain-priced goods with the intention of selling them higher margin items to compensate for any potential losses. Others focused on more innovative methods by creating enticing decors, a technique generally attributed to the late-nineteenth-century department store magnates (Leach 1993). Well before large emporiums emerged, however, scores of small retailers decorated their shops with fancy wallpapers and parlour furniture to attract customers. Glass showcases enhanced the appeal and desirability of gloves, tobacco, pocket watches and other valued goods while safeguarding them from light hands (Sparks 2006). Packaged and canned foods replaced the barrels and crates found in most grocery stores. Meanwhile, products lost their generic quality with branded and labelled products appearing nationwide on store shelves and in magazine advertisements. Manufacturers worked to differentiate their products in the market, while simultaneously seeking consumers' trust by promoting the superiority, taste, style and appeal of their goods over other brands. Companies like Sapolio Soap, one of the first to mount an aggressive advertising campaign, used colourful trade cards, lithographs and broadsides to promote their product, much like English tea dealers such as Melrose and Company did in the late eighteenth century (Strasser 1989; Mui and Mui 1989). Working together, manufacturers and penny retailers introduced scores of shoppers to mass production and mass consumption, altering the retailing landscape to accommodate new products and different ways of selling.

Small retailers employed manufacturers' fancy labels and advertisers' imaginative lithograph posters and displays as merchandising centrepieces. Pyramids of canned goods rose from grocers'

floors; cigar box lids depicting faraway places topped drugstore counters; and mirrors promoting well-known chocolatiers backed confectioners' shelves. Some shopkeepers drew customers into their stores by creating elaborate window displays that included stuffed and mounted animals, holiday decorations and mounds of shoes, boots, coats and hats. Others, however, went to extra lengths to keep passers-by curious about what delights could be found beyond the glass. Shoppers, for example, delighted in the window display of one Washington, DC druggist who installed a barnyard scene complete with a hen and brood of chicks with dyed feathers, making them appear 'not unlike a lot of animated Easter eggs' ("Easter Window Displays" 1889). While amusements drew attention, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, abundance became a popular merchandising theme in these rudimentary exhibits. Between 1869 and 1909, the total value of US goods rose from \$3.6 billion to over \$13 billion, with many viewing the proliferation of consumer goods pouring out of factories as a sign of advancement and material progress (Olegario 2006; Lears 1994). Storekeepers piled high cans, boxes, baskets and bottles in their front windows to tempt customers into their stores, spurring the growth of a consumer market and increasing retailers' bottom lines.

Expansion of the retail market, however, came at a price. Despite advances in manufacturing, advertising and distribution, the risks associated with small-scale enterprise remained, with countless numbers of undercapitalised firms emerging in all lines. This was possible in part because of the structure and function of the retail trade system, which relied heavily on credit. Wholesalers extended generous credit lines to most storekeepers, encouraging them to purchase large stocks for their stores to generate faster turnover rates and greater profits. Retailers likewise took advantage of this system to extend their buying power and financial capacity, with many quickly becoming indebted to several commercial intermediaries, often with disastrous results. Figures from as early as 1858 suggest that in the US, country storekeepers on average owed approximately \$14,500 each to wholesalers, a number that sometimes represented four or five times the actual value of a retailer's business capacity (Olegario 2006). Female proprietors were often disadvantaged in this system, as credit reporting firms typically based their assessments on available capital and collective business experience, both of which women in the period generally had limited access (Sparks 2006). Longstanding custom and competitiveness often overruled rationality, however, and wholesalers routinely granted generous credit lines even to those deemed unworthy, thus perpetuating the system.

Retailers in both the US and Britain likewise extended consumer credit as a necessary function of running a small store. Limited availability of hard cash in the US for much of the early and mid-nineteenth century gave rise to systems of barter and credit in small shops. Rural shoppers in both the UK and the US traded produce and livestock for goods and services, additionally maintaining credit lines paid in conjunction with harvest cycles. Wealthy and working-class city shoppers alike regularly held accounts settled on a monthly, quarterly or yearly basis, depending on the proprietor's liberality. In England, co-operative stores adhered to a strict cash-only basis, which sometimes excluded poorer shoppers who relied on credit to make ends meet. While most nineteenth-century merchants understood the advantages of dealing on a cash-only basis, they found it exceedingly difficult to acculturate shoppers to pay before taking their purchases, especially in rural and tightknit towns where such longstanding practices had become an expectation for community members (Spellman 2016).

With retail competition on the rise at the turn of the twentieth century, credit and personal services such as delivery and telephone ordering increasingly became a method small proprietors employed to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. Storekeepers promoted their crediting policies as one of several services that fostered community welfare, while corporate-owned



chains were routinely criticised for funnelling their profits to out-of-town management and investors (Spellman 2016). Proprietors selling high-ticket items such as furniture, household goods and jewellery likewise found credit selling one of the only ways to move a profitable quantity of wares in a timely fashion. Clothiers, dry goods dealers and others who marketed essentials routinely found themselves dependent on credit sales to accommodate customers who demanded goods at a quantity and rate that exceeded their budgets. Credit likewise enabled merchants to turn stock faster, an issue particularly acute to those who dealt in perishable goods, and earn customer loyalty. Yet limited capital combined with excessive encumbrances to both creditors and customers often limited the ability of many small merchants to expand their businesses beyond one shop. This became increasingly worrisome as large-scale chain stores and multiples began to emerge in the US and the UK in the early years of the twentieth century, bringing significant changes to retailing.

Looking eastward to Russia, however, the retail landscape had remained remarkably static, with public markets and small shops scattered and large stores rare. While manufacturing firms such as the Singer Company had made inroads by the turn of the twentieth century, establishing upwards of 4,000 outlets across the country, these *magaziny* and other similar outlets catered to a largely metropolitan consumer population. Railroad improvements had made the year-round movement of goods and people faster easier as it had in the West, yet nearly 80% of retail licenses in 1912 were still held by *lavki* – peddlers, street vendors and market stall hawkers – concentrated in major cities (Hessler 2004). These penny merchants faced little competition from the kinds of new retailing forms emerging in the US and Western Europe. Peasants' limited purchasing power combined with a lack of manufacturing and distribution advances stalled commercial development, and was further hampered by the nation's transition to a Communist state. One exception was Moscow's GUM (*Glávnyj Universálnyj Magazin*), the nation's largest retail store. The GUM started in the early nineteenth century as a trading centre filled with small shops housed in one building; by the start of the Russian Revolution in 1917, nearly 1,200 stores occupied the glass-roofed structure. A few years later, the state established the GUM as a model retail store, designed to serve consumers of all classes and advance Bolsheviks' goal of squashing private enterprise. By 1918, Bolshevik leaders had shut down nearly all privately owned stores, concentrating commerce in the hands of the state (Hilton 2011).

While shopkeepers in the newly formed Soviet Union found few commercial paths open, small retailers in the US and Western Europe faced new pressures at the turn of the century from department stores and other challengers. Penny entrepreneurs who once dominated the commercial landscape now saw merchant princes establish themselves as commercial leaders. Men like Stewart, Field, Selfridge and Macy constructed oversized emporiums that drew shoppers with promises of opulent fixtures, abundant goods, courteous salespeople and extensive services. While their buying and selling methods might have appeared fresh to those outside of retailing, many who operated within the commercial space found them to be familiar and tried. It was the scale and scope of these operations that initially distinguished merchant princes from penny retailers. Some, like William Whiteley, a London draper who dared to combine groceries with dry goods under one roof in building the West End's first department store, ran afoul of small dealers for challenging retailing custom (Rappaport 2000). As their imposing structures rose in cities across the US East and Midwest, and in places like London and Paris, millions of urban shoppers lauded their arrival. Countless others, however, continued to patronise the penny merchants who retained the lion's share of the marketplace, particularly in rural and outlying areas. Yet even from afar, most consumers could not help but notice merchant princes' shopping emporiums, as they cast a long shadow over the retail landscape.

## Merchant princes

Alexander T. Stewart was no stranger to small-scale entrepreneurship. The Irish-born merchant opened his first dry goods shop in 1823 on Broadway in New York City, not far from City Hall. The space was compact at approximately 12½ feet wide and 30 feet deep, a typical urban street-front store for the period. Like most retail entrepreneurs of his day, Stewart functioned as clerk, bookkeeper and delivery man, taking on every task necessary to carry on trade, with the doors open up to eighteen hours daily. Stewart's willingness to try new methods to attract customers – like other fellow penny merchants – distinguished him from some competitors. In addition to setting fixed prices on his goods, Stewart also instituted liberal return and exchange policies, installed floorwalkers – employees trained to meet customer needs – and applied principles of rapid stock turn and departmental organisation. High stock turn rates soon would become a hallmark of department stores, as merchant princes amassed fortunes on the principles of volume sales and low markups. Unlike many of his smaller contemporaries, Stewart bought from wholesalers on cash terms and frequented “sample lot” auctions, where larger (sometimes damaged) assortments were broken down and sold to the highest cash bidder (Elias 1992). He likewise insisted in receiving cash on delivery from his customers. Upon Stewart's death, the *New York Times* noted that ‘buying on credit and selling on credit forced him to the adoption of this rule’ after he found himself early on encumbered by creditors. Stewart's cash trading was a luxury he could afford, having inherited a tidy sum of £1,000 in 1823 (approximately £82,000 in 2015) from his Scottish grandfather (“Death of A. T. Stewart” 1876).

Stewart's ample capital and cash policies were some of the many advantages he and other merchant princes exploited to build their retailing empires. First department stores, and later chain stores, represented the expansion and growth of mass production and mass distribution during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In both the US and the UK, men with big ideas and a keen understanding of retailing methods built grand, multifloored structures designed specifically to move large quantities of goods profitably through calculated organisational and merchandising methods (Howard 2015). While department stores have been credited with pioneering the use of showcases and windows, bargain sales, delivery, parcel wrapping and departmentalised operations, what made them appear fresh and new was the scale and refinement with which they were employed. Merchant princes constructed retailing empires that both presaged and guided the growth and development of consumer culture and society. They did so by creating a new kind of shopping environment focused on female shoppers that encouraged browsing, lingering, and engaging with products, sales staff and other consumers. From dry goods, ready-to-wear, home furnishings and groceries to lunch rooms, phrenology studios and libraries, visitors to these consumption palaces could expect to not only buy what they needed and wanted, but also to be entertained while doing so. While perhaps not revolutionary, department stores and the men who pioneered their development represented a notable departure from established selling norms.

Much like Stewart, many of the era's merchant princes had emerged from the ranks of penny entrepreneurship, with most learning the trade while working as clerks, stock boys and salesmen in various retail establishments before striking out on their own. Marshall Field clerked for a Pittsfield, Massachusetts, dry goods dealer, spending five years sweeping floors, arranging stock and reading *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine* to learn about women's consumption preferences and general business practices before heading west in 1858 at the age of twenty-one. He furthered his retail education in the frontier town of Chicago with the dry goods firm of Cooley, Wadsworth and Company, eventually becoming a partner and then proprietor of his eponymous store. In 1879, an energetic Harry Gordon Selfridge joined the firm

of Marshall Field as a stock boy. The Michigan-born 21-year-old soon after became a wholesale salesman before being moved to the retail sales floor, where his merchandising ideas earned him a promotion to head of the retail division and later junior partner. Thirty years after joining Marshall Field, Selfridge struck out in 1909 to open his Oxford street emporium in London. Demolishing a host of penny merchants and their shops to clear the city block for his store, Selfridge later noted, 'Bigness alone is nothing, but bigness filled with the activity that does everything continually better means much' (Selfridge 1918). Embarking on a mission to cut costs and vertically integrate, he delegated decision-making to a host of managers who added mills and factories to produce textiles, foodstuffs, glassware and furniture for his enormous store. Selling to London's masses was Selfridge's primary goal, one that he embraced by employing marketing strategies learned during his time with Marshall Field.

Drawing on the bolder, more colourful and assertive style of American advertising, Selfridge conjured up images and copy that cast his store as a theatrical experience, one in which all were welcome to enjoy. Full-page ads extolled the virtues of shopping, encouraging consumers to take in poised mannequins in dramatic window displays and elaborate lighting and grand productions frequently staged in various departments. Selfridge likewise promoted his store to journalists, inviting reporters and editors to indulge in personal tours and private dinners, and cultivated relationships with the press to encourage free advertising in the form of extended editorials in the papers touting his emporium (Rappaport 2000). Not all found the merchant's outspoken and boisterous personality appealing, with some West End competitors deriding Selfridge as "the American hothead" ("Dislike American Hothead" 1912). Addressing critics who speculated that he would never make a go of large-scale American-style retailing England, Selfridge remarked in a 1918 interview about his vigorous advertising campaigns, 'We never could have broken through these traditions. . . . We had to use all we could to break down prejudices. We made people stop, look and listen. Then the store itself did the rest'. Paying upwards of one dollar per copy line, Selfridge credited the power of advertising for making him a merchant prince. 'We are limited only by the limitations of the newspapers', he claimed, 'I will take all [the ad space] they will give' ("Advertising Is Secret" 1918).

Back in the United States, Rowland H. Macy started his first business in 1844, a small Boston thread-and-needle shop that promptly failed. He next embarked on a course of serial entrepreneurship, opening another short-lived Boston shop, a gold-rush trading venture in California and a Haverhill, Massachusetts, dry goods business that also closed. While Field and Selfridge had avoided Macy's trial-and-error method for learning the retail trade by joining established firms, Macy finally cobbled together a winning strategy when he opened his New York City fancy goods shop in 1858. Macy's inclination for diversifying his product lines allowed him to test small quantities of goods before committing to a full-fledged department. He took chances in his first year by adding men's gloves and hosiery and house furnishings to his stocks, later experimenting with imported pocketbooks, picture frames, dolls and jewellery, along with books, garden implements and fancy groceries. More of a seat-of-the-pants buyer than merchandise planner, Macy and his methods were perhaps unorthodox when compared with other department store merchants, but they afforded him flexibility in his offerings and the ability to take advantage of bargain lots. Macy, like many of his contemporaries, travelled regularly overseas in search of fresh stocks and well-priced products to fill his stores. He took chances on velocipedes, potted plants and anything else he thought would sell, enabling him to accommodate a wide range customers' pocketbooks and tastes. Upon his death in 1877, his store conducted over US \$1.5 million in annual sales, and featured multiple departments, delivery service and dynamic advertising campaigns that drew customers from across the region. In the following years, several

part-owners directed operations before Lazarus Straus and his son Isador Straus took control and grew the company into a nineteenth- and twentieth-century retail giant (Mahoney and Sloane 1966).

Throughout the nineteenth century, retailing ideas and methods flowed like goods across the Atlantic. In addition to department stores, chain stores (or multiples) opened doors for those looking to capture budget shoppers by stocking their stores with large lots of identical products purchased at deep discounts and sold for cheap prices. In the US, George Gilman, founding proprietor of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P), has been credited with pioneering the chain grocery model with his 1859 beginnings in New York. By 1878, the firm boasted seventy-eight stores spread throughout the Northeast (Levinson 2011). Gilman's UK counterpart, Scottish-born Thomas Lipton, left his family in 1865 at the age of fifteen bound for the United States. There, Lipton travelled throughout the South labouring first on a Virginia tobacco plantation before finding work as an accountant and bookkeeper on a South Carolina rice plantation, eventually moving north to take a position in a New York grocery store 'run on up to date methods', according to Lipton (Mathias 1967). Upon returning to Glasgow in 1869, Lipton settled into his family's provision shop, applying his newly acquired skills to the trade. When his reticent father hedged at expanding the family firm into a second store, Lipton struck out on his own and opened his first grocery shop in 1872. Inspired by his time in the US, Lipton maintained, 'Every business idea, every successful move I have made has been suggested to me by my observation of American methods' (Mathias 1967, p. 106). This included daring advertising techniques that featured elements such as parading pigs, cheeses and brass bands through public streets to draw attention to store openings, sales and philanthropic efforts.

Much like Selfridge, Lipton's outspoken personality, combined with his flair for self-promotion, aided him in growing his firm at an extraordinary pace. By the end of the century, Lipton boasted over 250 retail outlets across the UK, eventually expanding to thirty-eight countries, including Germany, China, Chile and New Zealand, among others. It was an impressive feat, especially given Lipton's penchant for overseeing every facet of his vast organisational empire. Whereas department store operators like Selfridge employed decentralised management to administer their enormous operations, Lipton preferred to remain the primary decision maker on all matters large and small. This was particularly challenging as Lipton vertically integrated, buying tea plantations in Ceylon, bakeries in the UK, and pork processing facilities in the US. Lipton's insistence on running his business in the style of a sole proprietorship created difficulties for the organisation, with poor business and financial decisions such as ill-advised forays into wines, spirits, and beef extracts, imperilling the firm at the turn of the twentieth century. Ultimately, it was Lipton's expansive tea business, though, that stabilised the firm and garnered the purveyor the recognition he desired. Identifying an untapped market in selling low-priced, high-quality tea to the masses at home and abroad, Lipton established the tea-packing firm of Thomas J. Lipton Company in 1893, and sold his affordable, standardised product in pre-measured packets. Lipton was forced out of the company in the 1920s at the age of seventy-six, and his grocery store empire eventually refocused its efforts solely on consumer goods manufacturing, a holdover from Lipton's intense nineteenth-century efforts to vertically integrate and cut production costs (Mathias 1967).

While Lipton was building his grocery empire through bold and brash methods, Earle Perry Charlton was quietly and confidently helping to pioneer the five-and-dime chain movement in the United States. Born in 1863 in Chester, Connecticut, Charlton broke with his family's artisan roots (his father was a blacksmith) and moved to nearby Hartford, Connecticut, to work in a local retail shop. From there he went to Boston, clerking for a penny dealer before

taking to the road as a “drummer”, or travelling salesman, for Thomas C. Newell, a wholesaler specialising in fancy goods, notions and toys. Eight years after joining Newell’s firm, Charlton partnered with Seymour Knox – Frank W. Woolworth’s cousin. In 1889, they opened a store in Fall River, Massachusetts, based on the principle of selling a wide variety of merchandise bargain priced at five and ten cents, with nothing over fifteen cents. It was a model Frank Woolworth first introduced in 1879 in Pennsylvania, and one that Charlton would launch into California, the Pacific Northwest and Canada. After splitting with Knox in 1896, Charlton formed E.P. Charlton & Company, and sold nine of his New England stores to Woolworth to capitalise his expansion into Canada. His first store opened in 1900 in Montreal, followed closely with a second and third shop in the same city, along with outlets in Ottawa, St. John, Quebec, Halifax and Amherst, Nova Scotia. By 1910, Charlton boasted thirteen stores throughout Canada and its provinces. Concurrently expanding in the US, Charlton opened his first west coast shop in 1905 in Portland, Oregon, with Los Angeles and San Francisco, California, close behind. Dozens more followed in Washington, Montana, and Utah, with E.P. Charlton & Company operating fifty-three stores in two countries by 1911, yet Charlton continued directing activities from his company’s headquarters in Fall River. Nevertheless, the organisation’s rapid national and international expansion made it one of the few US retail chain operations in this period conducting business at such vast distances (Charlton and Winus 2001).

Charlton relied on his low-priced merchandise to do much of the selling for him. His bargain prices, Charlton believed, spoke for themselves. Although men like Selfridge and Lipton liked to employ flashy advertising to draw customers, Charlton instead maintained a muted and reserved media presence. Preferring simple copy to announce store openings, he rarely promoted sales or products available in his shops. ‘If you have never seen one of these modern, novel, and thoroughly up-to-date “5, 10 and 15¢ stores”’, one newspaper post quietly announced, ‘it will pleasantly surprise you to see our store and goods’ (E.P. Charlton Advertisement 1909). Charlton shunned flashy demonstrations and instead focused on the principles of five-and-dime chain retailing, negotiating deep discounts with manufacturers for large lots of everything from glassware and sheet music to clothes lines and dime banks. He often purchased goods in conjunction with Woolworth and a number of other five-and-dime dealers affiliated with Woolworth, expanding the groups’ buying power. While department store merchants like Macy, Field, and Selfridge promoted their emporiums to the middle-class masses, five-and-dime retailers like Charlton pitched their stores and products to the throng of frugal shoppers in search of deals rather than experiences. In a 1929 essay on mass selling, Charlton ascribed the success of five-and-dimes to rapid turnover, allowing companies like his and Woolworth’s to profit by making ‘the same invested capital work for it eight and one-half times in one year’, by turning stock faster than most penny retailers or department stores could muster. It was a risky strategy, Charlton admitted, as ‘the moment the public fails to buy fast enough and steadily enough, our whole structure crumbles’ (Charlton and Winus 2001).

By 1911, Charlton perhaps thought the gamble too great. When Frank Woolworth proposed a merger with Seymour Knox (who had gone on to open 112 stores on his own), along with his brother Charles Sumner Woolworth, former business partner Fred M. Kirby and William Moore, Charlton agreed, helping to form the conglomerate F.W. Woolworth Company (Pitrono 2003). Charlton retained his original store and Fall River headquarters (which continued to operate under his own name), but chose to retire from the day-to-day ministrations of retailing, and instead served behind the scenes as a vice president of the newly formed corporation. Upon his death in 1930, Charlton had amassed a fortune of over US \$30 million, making him one of the era’s more notable, if unassuming, merchant princes (Charlton and Winus 2001).

## Conclusion

How did some storekeepers grow to become merchant princes while others remained penny retailers? It is impossible to say with any certainty. Several who expanded their retail empires shared entrepreneurial qualities such as a willingness to take risks, a flair for self-promotion, and a pioneering spirit. Yet many small retailers likewise possessed these same characteristics and remained microentrepreneurs. Others might point to the ability of the princes to raise capital, their extraordinary business acumen or their keen understanding of markets and consumers. A quick perusal of any city directory, though, will likely turn up any number of individuals tucked away in small towns who also benefitted from these same insights and abilities, but their names and businesses were familiar only to those locals who patronised the shops. By the same token, there were many who had all the makings and advantages of merchant princes, opened grand stores that catered to shoppers' every whim and failed miserably.

This was the case in 1908 when the D.C. Beggs Company of Columbus, Ohio, failed, making news from Washington, DC, to San Francisco, California. Once touted as "the largest department store in central Ohio", the firm operated by David Carson Beggs boasted fifty departments in an eight-story building some described as "mammoth", and was outfitted with modern conveniences including telephone service ("Independent Telephones Adopted" 1906). Beggs had started in business in the 1870s as a clerk and salesman for local carpet and upholstery dealers. He partnered in the 1890s with another carpet retailer, and together the pair ran a successful trade for several years, with Beggs demonstrating "good business qualities", which included "conscientious work" along with "courteous manners and characteristic energy" ("D.C. Beggs a Successful Carpet Merchant" 1904). Sometime around 1902, Beggs consolidated his operation with another well-known area merchant, bringing together two of the city's largest department stores. Despite his mercantile experience and advantages, however, Beggs's slow customer debt collections, combined with an 'inability to dispose of the huge stock in a short time', forced the company into receivership after only a few years ("Big Department Store Fails" 1908). Just as there was no guarantee of success in the retail trade, there was no secret formula for becoming, or remaining, a merchant prince.

Department store princes and their stores loomed large over the retail landscape by the end of World War I. The overwhelming majority of shoppers, however, never stepped foot inside their lavish interiors or experienced firsthand the plethora of services they offered. Despite their size and scope, the period's department stores, like their smaller counterparts, served largely local markets. Most consumers continued to patronise neighbourhood shops, five-and-dimes, regional outlets and a growing number of chains for most of their needs and wants. Visitors to those stores, knowingly or not, likely experienced department stores' influence on the way products were priced, displayed and arranged. They might also have discerned a difference in the way clerks spoke with them and how their accounts were handled at the sales counter. It is also possible that the floors were a bit cleaner, the walls a slightly more decorated, and the windows filled with attractive arrays of enticing goods. Shoppers may now have strolled from department to department, instead of perusing a single aisle of products. In this way, penny retailers and merchant princes combined to propel retailing in new and significant directions, indelibly altering the commercial landscape at the turn of the twentieth century.

From backwater towns to major metropolises, retailers small and large took note of each other's methods and practices, continuing what worked, modifying what did not and innovating where necessary to increase demand and profitability. Few (if any) penny retailers or merchant



princes found themselves driven to modify their methods solely based on either demand or supply, or any other single economic or political development. Rather, their businesses and economic contributions are best understood by acknowledging the opportunities and constraints under which they operated, and the dynamic combination of commercial, social and cultural processes that influenced their choices. While entrepreneurs like Alexander Stewart and other department store moguls often forged their path to prosperity (and failure) through highly capitalised urban enterprises, microentrepreneurs tended to focus on servicing niche economies by providing products and services that catered to local and regional consumers. The complexity of both retail types and the men and women who ran these operations speaks to the need for understanding large- and small-scale commercial development as two sides of the same coin. Both made significant contributions to national and international commerce, with both representing the range of entrepreneurial opportunities open to those willing to take a risk.

### Notes

- 1 Italics in original.
- 2 John Brownlee to Jane Brownlee, May 13, 1834, folder 2, "Correspondence, 1833–1838," Brownlee Family Papers, 1828–1851, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

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