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## ‘Wanamaker’s Temple’ Review: Merchandise and Moral Uplift

The founder of Philadelphia’s fabled department store was as committed to evangelism and the social gospel as he was to selling silks and satins. Marc Levinson reviews “Wanamaker’s Temple” by Nicole C. Kirk.

By *Marc Levinson*

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The John Wanamaker Department Store was one of America’s first great temples of consumption. Opened in 1876 as Wanamaker’s Grand Depot, the store filled a former railroad freight depot at 13th and Market streets, a corner that was becoming the business center of Philadelphia. The interior featured dozens upon dozens of counters, arranged in concentric circles beneath a glass ceiling. For the 10 million or so people who visited that year’s Centennial Exhibition in nearby Fairmount Park, Wanamaker’s was not to be missed.

In “Wanamaker’s Temple,” Nicole C. Kirk argues that Wanamaker’s was more than a successful business enterprise, it was also a successful ministry. She notes that John Wanamaker, a Presbyterian, was as committed to evangelism and the social gospel as he was to selling silks and satins. As she writes: “Wanamaker saw his retail empire not as separate from religion but as an instrument of it, as a means for achieving moral reform in business, in the city, and in individuals’ lives.”

PHOTO: WSJ Born into a working-class South Philadelphia family in 1838, Wanamaker began his career as a clerk in a men’s clothing

WANAMAKER’S TEMPLE

By Nicole C. Kirk  
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store owned by a friend of his grandfather’s. By accident, he walked into a prayer meeting and heard a hat maker explaining that religion was part of his trade. Wanamaker was soon swept up in the Businessmen’s Revival, a Protestant

prayer movement. The local group in Philadelphia set up a chapter of the recently founded Young Men’s Christian

John Wanamaker (1838-1922). PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Association, and in 1857 the young Wanamaker was asked to become its first full-time secretary. He honed his marketing skills raising money and attracting working-class Philadelphians to the evening prayer meetings that the Y sponsored. On the side, he started a Sunday school in an immigrant neighborhood, calling on the firemen he had befriended at prayer meetings to protect the school from threatening gangs.

In 1861, with a wife and widowed mother to support, Wanamaker left the Y to open a men’s store with his brother-in-law, Nathan Brown. Advertising was in its infancy, and Wanamaker & Brown generated buzz with advertisements touting “W&B,” with no further explanation. Even as he was building a flourishing business, Ms. Kirk tells us, Wanamaker expanded the Sunday school he had started by founding the Bethany Presbyterian Church and overseeing the construction of its building. Gothic on the outside, it was like an opera house on the inside, a space where an evangelizing preacher

could be heard by 1,500 parishioners despite the lack of amplification. The sermons at Bethany advanced the social gospel, aiming to attract the working poor and the foreign born to a Christian—that is, Protestant—way of living that would help them better themselves in a rapidly industrializing world.

A visit to the International Exhibition in London in 1871 gave Wanamaker the inspiration for an establishment that would sell far more than menswear. His concept for the Grand Depot—which he made available for revival meetings in the weeks before the store opened—was that a variety of specialty retailers would lease space alongside his menswear business. When no interest materialized, Wanamaker slowly added merchandise on his own, developing a department store similar to those that were all the rage in Paris. In an inspired move, he placed luxury goods at the center of the store, forcing affluent shoppers to pass other merchandise in order to see them.

The store was filled with innovations: electric arc lamps, elevators, pneumatic tubes to move money and receipts. And it was infused with Wanamaker's religiosity. In full-page newspaper ads, six days a week, he assured potential customers of his high-quality merchandise, his honest treatment of customers and his fairness to employees. "It was more than image making, although it was that as well," Ms. Kirk writes. "Wanamaker saw it as a part of his business mission—to make business a Christian enterprise and profitable." Profitable it was, so much so that Wanamaker began acquiring adjacent properties. Between 1904 and 1911, he replaced the Grand Depot, in stages, with a 12-story structure spanning a full city block. The harmonious façade, Ms. Kirk says, was his contribution to a more cohesive community.

Ms. Kirk is a historian of religion at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, and her interests clearly run more toward religion than other matters. Wanamaker's tumultuous term as postmaster general for the Republican president Benjamin Harrison—which began with firing thousands of Democratic postmasters but later brought about the establishment of rural free delivery—gets short shrift. What possessed Wanamaker to seek a U.S. Senate seat in 1896 and the governorship of Pennsylvania two years later remains obscure; both forays are mentioned by Ms. Kirk only in passing, in the same sentence. A reader wanting to know why this legendary businessman flirted with failure in 1907 is out of luck; Ms. Kirk tells us only that "he had nearly lost everything in the economic downturn."

When he died in 1922, at age 84, Ms. Kirk writes, "the outpouring of grief at Wanamaker's funeral demonstrated that he was more than a successful businessman and the founder of a large Sunday school and church. People lamented his passing because he had changed the emotional and material landscapes of their lives." Yet her book offers hints that we might not consider him an altogether admirable character. Wanamaker's religiosity, as she describes it, reeks of a sense of superiority. Whether aimed at the Catholic immigrants who attended his revival services or the rowdy teenage employees who became "cadets" at his in-store academy, his mission, it seems, was to replace cultural traits he deemed ill-suited to the modern world with his own, more refined, views and values. His was not a universal version of the Gospel.

*Mr. Levinson's most recent book is "An Extraordinary Time: The End of the Postwar Boom and the Return of the Ordinary Economy."*

