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**“Proof of good intention”: Modernization at James T. Mullin
and Sons, Wilmington, Delaware, 1900–1930**

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University of Delaware (Winterthur Program), 1993

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"PROOF OF GOOD INTENTION":
MODERNIZATION AT JAMES T.
MULLIN AND SONS, WILMINGTON, DELAWARE, 1900-1930

By
Mary Anne Caton

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early
American Culture

Spring 1993

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a case study of consumer responses to the advertising and merchandise of a specialty store in a small city. My assumption is that to understand consumer response to Mullin's, both the store's ads and its goods, together with the consumer's choices must be considered. James T. Mullin and Sons, a menswear store in downtown Wilmington, Delaware, provides an opportunity to study the kind of store often neglected in department store scholarship. From its opening in West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1865 until 1930, the store was actively involved in the production and sales of men's and boy's clothing. When Mullin's moved to Wilmington in 1878, the store benefited from quicker access to its wares, a larger potential market, and Wilmington's diverse and growing economy. Mullin's gradual modernization of its advertising and merchandise by the 1920s, however, was not paralleled by any corresponding change in the purchases of its clientele.

CHAPTER 1

CONSUMERISM AND THE RISE OF MODERN AMERICA

The department store as an institution has figured prominently in historians' efforts to understand the enormous changes that altered the material lives and social relationships of Americans in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In the commonplace account of consumerism, department stores have been treated as a microcosm of late-nineteenth-century American life. This interpretation needs revision, and consumerism needs to be understood as the product of economic circumstances, not as blind customer obeisance to advertising, and not as a "democratizing experience."

This thesis is a case study of consumer responses to the advertising and merchandise of a specialty store in a small city. My assumption is that to understand consumer response to Mullin's, both the store's ads and its goods, together with the consumer's choices must be considered. James T. Mullin and Sons, a menswear store in downtown Wilmington, Delaware, provides an opportunity to study the kind of store often neglected in department store scholarship. From its opening in West Chester,

Pennsylvania in 1865 until 1930, the store was actively involved in the production and sales of men's and boy's clothing. Its move to Wilmington in 1878 placed Mullin's directly on three major railroad lines, thus assuring the store quicker access to basic supplies like cloth, as well as to wholesalers' fashions from Philadelphia and New York, and manufactured clothing and accessories from upstate New York and New England. The new wing added to the store in 1917 increased sales floor-space that could only be stocked via the proximate railroad lines. The relationships examined here between consumers, advertising, and clothing are direct, textured, and specific.

Despite the existence of many stores similar in size and scale to Mullin's, most scholarship on department stores and consumerism focuses on large stores in major metropolitan areas. The conventional definition from the U.S. Census refers to department stores as those large, downtown stores selling a full line of household goods, furnishings, dry goods, and clothing. However, this definition has often been applied as well to large specialty stores, like William Filene's Sons in Boston and Lord & Taylor in New York that sold only clothing. As Susan Porter Benson says about these stores, "...their managers saw themselves as part of the department-store

industry and were in fact leaders in developing management strategy and a public presence for department stores."¹

James T. Mullin and Sons of Wilmington, Delaware, (also known as "Mullin's" in later advertising) the focus of this study, is an example of one such specialty store. Specialty stores catered to an often gender-specific market and sold a broad range of goods, in Mullin's case, men's clothing, accessories, and small furnishing items in a series of distinct departments. Similar to the department store described by Theodore Dreiser in Sister Carrie (1901), the specialty store was also "[an] effective retail organization, with hundreds of stores coordinated into one and laid out upon the most imposing and economic basis."² Like the larger and more diverse department stores, specialty stores provided multiple kinds of goods and services all in one place. Mullin's three floors carried items in narrowly defined, distinct departments: suits, overcoats, hats, footwear, custom tailoring services, luggage and stationery, and

¹ Susan Porter Benson, Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890 - 1940 (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 12-13.

² Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (1901; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 22-23.

accessories like collars, cuffs, and ties. Whereas smaller shops only sold one or two brands of shirts, for example, Mullin's stocked them in several styles and price ranges from three different manufacturers. Mullin's also had a tailoring department that provided alterations and made custom orders that were central to the lines of many early department stores. The firm combined the modern sales techniques of the larger department stores with specialized wares characteristic of antebellum shopping, and therefore an examination of Mullin's helps us understand a transitional moment in retailing history.³

Retailing in early nineteenth-century America followed two models, both of which operated to the customer's disadvantage. Most small towns had a general

³ Neil Harris, Cultural Excursions: Marketing, Appetites, and Cultural Tastes in Modern America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925" in The Journal of American History Vol.71, September 1984, 319-342; Susan Porter Benson, Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1914 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986) are all good resources for recent scholarship on department stores. An old standard for strict chronology is John William Ferry A History of the Department Store (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960). See also Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1900, 1981,) 22-3 for one of the earliest definitions of American department stores, in this case, Marshall Field's in Chicago.

store that serviced the local community with basic staples. In larger urban areas, the specialized shop selling one narrow line of goods like shawls dominated the business. These retailers bought and sold merchandise mainly on credit, rather than on a cash basis, and prices were deliberated between clerk and customer. New stocks were available only infrequently. Customers paid entrance fees and were pressured to buy before leaving. Quality-control services like free merchandise return and guaranteed quality did not exist.

As a transitional store, Mullin's refuted these practices. Borrowing from old patterns, the store kept its specialized merchandise focus. As the management added new, customer-friendly return policies and services, Mullin's increasingly resembled the large urban department stores.⁴ By combining qualities from old and new styles of retailing, Mullin's shows us that small-town stores operated in ways that did not always correspond to the model of the large city store.

Mullin's also offers an opportunity to re-examine how retail environments were gendered. As the store catered to a male, rather than a female, clientele,

⁴ Susan Porter Benson notes the uneven progress in retailing toward consumer-friendly practices between 1850 and 1890 in Counter Cultures, 12-27.

conclusions about how department stores provided the (female) public with new forms of leisure activities, and new diversions from work need to be reconsidered. The earliest descriptions of department stores found in literature are from Theodore Dreiser's 1900 novel Sister Carrie. This quote is used extensively in the literature on stores and consumerism to apply to all stores even though it describes only women shopping. Carrie Meeber, Dreiser's heroine:

passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, shoes, stationary and jewelry. She could not help feeling the charm of each trinket and valuable upon her personally and yet she did not stop. There was nothing there which she could not have used- nothing which she did not long to own.⁵

Many female customers used stores as public space for promenading, displaying their goods and status, and for window shopping, the only method of consuming open to those without discretionary income.

The example of Mullin's suggests that the male customer is a long-neglected group in the historiography of consumerism. As a recent thesis on Wilmington, Delaware salesgirls summarizes, "men were not a usual sight on the selling floors of the great department

⁵ Dreiser, Sister Carrie., 22-3.

stores,...either as customers or as other coworkers."⁶ Unlike their female counterparts whose shopping activities filled leisure hours, male shoppers worked. Elaborate methods were used to lure women into stores and to keep them there. Such methods were less likely to work with individuals who had much less time to spend shopping. Middle-class business culture encouraged conformity, thrift, and hard work as masculine values; these ideals are unlikely to have been sympathetic to seasonal fashion changes.⁷ Thus the dominant assumptions about consumption patterns do not apply to a men's store, where the display of social status through sartorial finery figured less prominently.⁸

In describing the significance of the emerging "consumer culture" between 1850 and 1890, scholars have focused on the variety of goods and services available

⁶ Marianne Morris, Selling Perfume Suits Some Girls Better Than Cutting Chunks of Pork: Department Store Saleswomen in Wilmington, Delaware 1910. (Master's Thesis, University of Virginia, 1988,) 13.

⁷ While gender roles' effect on customer purchasing and store sales has been overlooked, they deserve further exploration. It would be interesting to know whether contemporary gender roles were alluded to in store ads. The Mullin's customer, when directly addressed in ads, was usually considered thrifty, and after the modernization, stylish.

⁸ Susan Porter Benson comments perceptively on gender in stores from a labor-customer relations point of view in her work Counter Cultures.

from department stores. Two major interpretations dominate the existing scholarship on department stores. One group, represented by Daniel Boorstin, regards consumerism as a positive development: the diversity of goods leveled social and economic differences between consumers. The other position, taken by Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen and Roland Marchand among others, considers the public to have been manipulated by the consumer culture of the department store. Neither view considers customer response to the store environment. Both models define the department store as a powerful catalyst for only one kind of customer behavior: passive.

Daniel Boorstin argues that department stores changed shoppers positively, assimilating immigrants, the working class, women, and anyone else who crossed the threshold into membership in the homogenous American consumer community. A major problem with Boorstin's argument, though, is his conclusion that the immense variety of goods on display in stores constituted a "democratizing experience" for shoppers.⁹ "For citizens of the sprouting towns the new department stores gave dignity, importance, and publicity to the acts of

⁹ Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Democratic Experience (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 107.

shopping and buying."¹⁰ Boorstin fails to describe any consumer transactions beyond window shopping. Moreover, he neglects to discuss how lower-class urbanites or poorly-paid store employees participated in consumption.

Department store services encouraged an unquestioning, passive acquisitiveness in the customer according to Susan Porter Benson and Michael Miller. They see the store as an artificial environment where overwhelmed consumers bought goods to be up to date with the current style. Consumer passivity, for Porter Benson, was re-enforced by the store's lavish physical amenities; by indulging in club-like services, or watching the opulent displays, customers learned middle-class gentility.¹¹ She comments that the

Department stores' appeal were, in short, tied to an emerging set of class-specific manners and mores. Stores reinforced the notions of ever more elaborate material accompaniments: the correct clothes for each occasion, the huge assortment of china, silver, and glassware necessary for proper entertaining, the home decorated in the acme of taste.¹²

¹⁰ Boorstin, The Americans, 101.

¹¹ Michael B. Miller, The Bon Marche: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 1-5, 184-190 and Porter Benson, Counter Cultures, 12-23.

¹² Porter Benson, Counter Cultures, 22.

Certainly this list of necessary goods owes its potency to the assumption of a direct consumer response to advertising.

Roland Marchand's exploration of advertising also portrays the consumer as passive. His Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920 - 1940 (1985) describes the evolution of name-brand ads for a national market and their distinct visual style, but ignores the brand ads that were used by individual department stores. According to Marchand, advertisements "adapted a therapeutic role in helping Americans adapt to new social and technological complexities."¹³ Marchand presumes that people buy goods only in response to advertising rhetoric. While goods do have meaning, much of it comes from individuals' interactions with goods. For Marchand, the main goal of advertisers was to convince consumers that "what was new was desirable."¹⁴

In their interpretations of department stores, however, most scholars have tended to emphasize corporate business structures, the development of national brands,

¹³ Roland Marchand, Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920 - 1940 (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985), xvi, xxii, 2.

¹⁴ Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 9. Marchand also fails to distinguish between consumption of national brands and of local manufactures.

and product promotions without considering the customer's response to the merchandise. Few studies link store ads and consumer purchases, or address the economic decisions made by consumers and store management. The literature on department stores also ignores the broader historical developments that gave rise to these new retail forms.

Several forces altered the structure of everyday American life in the era that witnessed the birth of the department store. The unification and standardization of railroad transport and the expansion of the telegraph system in the 1870s and 1880s accelerated commodity production and distribution systems. Distribution of goods, through the railroads, became the responsibility of large numbers of managers and clerks, who maintained the schedules, equipment, and payments for each branch of each line. The railroad managers' success determined whether merchants were able to move large numbers of goods reliably and inexpensively. Alfred D. Chandler has argued that modern managerial capitalism, a system which required permanent, salaried managerial workers to maintain the large volumes of any business, transformed America's economy. As a result, by 1860, "new technology and expanded markets permitted the historically

unprecedented high volume and speed of materials through the process of production and distribution." ¹⁵

Improvements in transportation and communication prompted urbanization and especially the growth of New York as a national center to finance further railroad expansion. New types of businesses, like the stock market and the multi-unit firm with a permanent managerial hierarchy, developed to handle the increased volume of goods.¹⁶ Such businesses operated large factories that produced clothing and other goods sold in department stores in mass quantities.

Most individuals participating in this increase in production were part of the expanding middle class of non-manual workers. By the 1880s, the middle class had fostered a new work culture characterized by increased homogenization, specialization, and centralization. In Wilmington by 1890 business colleges had been established to teach clerical and accounting skills. By 1900, over one million American office clerks constituted a ready

¹⁵ Alfred D. Chandler, The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 90.

¹⁶ The department store is a good example of these new business forms that were dependent on improved transportation and communication systems.

market for clothes off the shelf. For Wilmington, in 1900, that meant a population of over 1,800 clerks.¹⁷

The gradual reorganization of American corporations into national firms with specialized divisions increased the numbers of middle-class managers and clerical staff in banks, manufacturing companies, and heavy industry. For example, Wilmington's Du Pont Corporation underwent a reorganization in 1911 that saw its number of departments increased from seven to twelve.¹⁸ The employees in these new departments would have made up a large part of Mullin's clientele, which was predominantly urban and middle class.

This study will show how Mullin's differences from large stores in terms of size, scale, and gender of the clientele call into question the assumptions of the current scholarship on department stores. Mullin's significance in the local Wilmington retail market shows that not all customer transactions took place in consumer palaces. The relationship between what the store departments' sold and clothes that were advertised will

¹⁷ Stuart Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 289 and Zunz, Making America Corporate, 68-71.

¹⁸ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., Pierre S. Du Pont and the Making of the Modern Corporation (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 305-315.

be examined to show that consumerism was not simply a function of advertising, but instead responded to the particularities of the local market. The rise of transportation and communication systems, the expansion of material goods production, and the development of managerial capitalism all contributed to Wilmington's distinct economy and work force.

As with all other businesses in Wilmington, the Du Pont Corporation's overwhelming presence affected retail clothing stores, and Mullin's among them. The company created the northern downtown by financing the Du Pont office building and the Hotel Du Pont. Du Pont's structure insured a large market of scientists, managers, and executives for suits and accessories sold by Mullin's. Since the company controlled such a large part of Wilmington's economy, the more varied market that characterized other cities does not apply in this case.

Mullin's ads and modernization process show the direct response of a specialized retailer to particular economic conditions. The first section of the paper traces the store's history and its relationship to its market in Wilmington. The second section analyses consumer purchases at Mullin's from 1900 to 1930 by department. Comparing these figures with an analysis of the store's ads from the same period, I discuss the

store's importance in Wilmington's retail economy. The last section addresses the effect of Mullin's modernization on consumer behavior.

CHAPTER 2

A STORE AND ITS MARKET

Like the international exposition of the late-nineteenth century, the huge department store buildings with their large displays of stylish objects represented mechanized production on an unheard-of scale and this spectacle affected shoppers tremendously. Novelists like Theodore Dreiser and Emile Zola considered department stores important windows on their society and wrote about the effects of stores on consumer desire. Dreiser's Sister Carrie describes Marshall Field's in 1890s Chicago. Zola's 1883 Au Bonheur des Dames portrays a Parisian store, possibly The Bon Marche.

To solidify its hold on the consumer, the department store sought a role as "an institution in the community; . . . guide, counselor, and friend to the customer."¹⁹ This strategy extended beyond the large stores depicted in fiction to smaller stores, like Mullin's, in smaller cities.

¹⁹ Beatrice Judette, "The Changing Customer" in Stores 42 (Nov 1960), 14 as quoted in Porter Benson, Counter Cultures, 36.

Customer services were adopted more slowly by smaller business like Mullin's. Through the late nineteenth century, James T. Mullin and Sons underwent much of the same modernization process as the larger stores had earlier. Founded in West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1862, by a Chester County businessman, James T. Mullin (1836-1896), the store made and sold men's and boy's clothing. From its beginning, Mullin's offered a wide variety of clothing, probably intending to service both the town and rural residents. Early stocks came from many sources and the frequent appearance of army issue and manufacturer's overruns suggests that well-made standardized manufactured wares were difficult to find. Before 1878, advertisements refer to dress, work, and business suits, working coats, and dress coats. Other stock included clothing from other stores' bankruptcy sales, and special orders of government-issue infantry and cavalry uniforms. Clothing was available ready-made or by custom order. The latter constituted an important enough part of the business to warrant an announcement in local papers every time Mullin hired a new cutter.²⁰ Seasonal stocks of ready-made clothing

²⁰ Newspaper clipping file, "Chester County Business Houses;" Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, PA.

and yard goods were bought by James T. Mullin in New York and abroad, and sold for cash in the store. In the 1870s, these practices were common to retailers of all sizes.

Mullin's advertisements in the late nineteenth century as a "clothing emporium," and later as a "merchant tailoring depot" reflect their stock of mass-produced and custom clothes. Inventive promotions included outfitting ninety local orphans with suits, and donating large umbrellas emblazoned with the firm's name to the drivers of the newspaper, railroad, and street sprinklers's carts. In 1875, the firm boasted about forty employees, including nine tailors, two cutters, three salesmen, six seamstresses, all in the store, and sixteen women pieceworkers in the town as well as a tailor and helpers in nearby Bucks county.²¹

Descriptions of the store dating from between 1870 and 1875 mention many features common to stores at the time. Office space was segregated from the selling areas by galvanized wire screening. The two center well skylights and large front display windows supplemented oil lamps with natural light. The few decorative touches

²¹ Newspaper clipping file, "Chester County Business Houses;" Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, PA.

included peach-colored wallpaper above long display counters with tiered shelves, two new gold-lettered signs, and two large plate glass windows with lace curtains fronting Gay St.²²

James T. Mullin sold the West Chester store in 1878 to his brother, John S. Mullin and a former employee, Esau Loomis. Mullin and Loomis built on an addition and a third floor workroom, before 1891, when they sold the store to James T. Mullin's son, J. Herbert Mullin. From 1891 until 1909, the West Chester store was known as "J. Herbert Mullin," then it became "Mullin's Clothing" after J. Paul Mullin, the grandson of the founder, took over. The decision by James T. Mullin to open an independent Wilmington branch of the store in 1880 suggests that the firm's principal and founder saw expansion opportunities in Wilmington that warranted assigning the West Chester branch's operations to his son.

Several factors must have influenced the partners' 1880 decision to re-locate to Wilmington: easy access to stock, large groups of potential customers, and an economically diverse, growing community. Wilmington

²² Newspaper clipping file, "Chester County Business Houses;" Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, PA.

was more centrally located with respect to the railroad than was West Chester, which was on a trunk rail line. Three major railroads ran through Wilmington, and the city was also a major shipping port. Thus, Mullin's could re-supply its stock using these direct links to its wholesalers of ready-made clothing from New York and New England. Deliveries of imported textiles that James T. Mullin frequently purchased abroad could be shipped to Wilmington. The 897 "officers, firm members, and clerks" listed in the 1890 census in Wilmington were only part of Mullin's broad base of prospective customers.²³ Located in the central downtown commercial district, Mullin's was four blocks south of the major luxury hotel, the Hotel Du Pont, and right next to the Town Hall. .

Wilmington's businessmen and laborers probably provided Mullin's with a greater sales volume than West Chester. Unlike the smaller city, Wilmington contained the modern components of a large city: industries, banks, and firms that distributed goods. Wilmington was a medium-sized city of about sixty thousand inhabitants, or more than twice the size of West Chester. Most important, among the total population, over 12,000 Wilmingtonians were native white male adults in 1900, about one third of

²³ United States Census Bureau, Compendium of the Eleventh Census, 6-17, 619-621, 645.

whom were employed in managerial occupations, such as professional services, mercantile trade, or transportation. These men, most of whom probably wore a suit to work, were potential shoppers at Mullin's. It is also likely that the store did business with the 6,750 mechanical and manufacturing laborers, as dungarees and overall covers (worn over street clothing) are included in the store's ledgers.²⁴

Both West Chester and Wilmington were county seats in the rich agricultural area of the Delaware Valley. As small-to-medium sized satellites of Philadelphia, the closest large city, both towns operated markets and distribution centers for nearby farming communities and housed several light industries. In Wilmington, manufactures like tanning, railroad car building and repair, and bookbinding flourished. More important, from 1860 to 1895, Wilmington developed a more industrialized economy while West Chester remained predominantly agricultural. In 1880, the two largest U.S. iron shipbuilders were located in Wilmington,

²⁴ United States Census Bureau, Supplement to the 1910 Census 573, and 1900 Census "Statistics of Occupations," 756-7. Detailed occupational breakdowns are not available for West Chester.

benefitting from the city's cheap industrial land and major transportation routes.²⁵

The Du Pont corporation anchored Wilmington's economy as a black powder manufacturer. The company's largely white-collar workforce, and well-to-do family management were largely middle and upper-middle class. According to one estimate, in 1900 Wilmington's white collar workforce was above 16 per cent of the total population, which represented a substantial increase since 1890.²⁶ With headquarters in Wilmington and manufacturing plants nearby, Du Pont provided the major growing industrial base for the economy. Corporate law was the second economic base once Wilmington became the home of liberal corporate statutes in the early twentieth century.²⁷

From 1890 to 1910, American business structure changed from small, de-centralized, local firms to integrated, national corporations with multi-tiered departments. For Du Pont, this corporate revolution

²⁵ Mary Procter and Bill Matuszeski, Gritty Cities: A Second Look at Allentown, Bethlehem, Bridgeport, Hoboken, Lancaster, Norwich, Paterson, Reading, Trenton, Troy, Waterbury, Wilmington (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 245-246.

²⁶ United States Census Bureau, 1900 Census, 244-247.

²⁷ Procter and Matuszeski, Gritty Cities, 245-246.

culminated in the 1903 centralization of the firm. The new system created three sales departments, a department each for legal and real estate matters, and the three operating departments. Each department was managed and staffed separately.

Despite the city's size and diverse population, Wilmington never developed either a comensurate volume of retail trade nor a vigorous wholesale trade. In Wilmington, the large businesses like railroad car manufacture and leather tanning slowly became secondary facilities used for backup supplies rather than major production sites. Nevertheless, Wilmington's population grew between 1900 and 1920. In the 1910s, Du Pont employed over 500 sales and accounting employees.²⁸ Unsuccessful competition with its larger neighbor, Philadelphia, became particularly acute in the retail economy in the decade after World War I.²⁹ For Wilmington, surges in sales in 1919 and 1925 punctuated the otherwise stagnant 1920s as light industries,

²⁸ Olivier Zunz, Making America Corporate, 1870-1920 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 145.

²⁹ Carol E. Hoffeecker, Corporate Capital: Wilmington in the Twentieth Century (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983) and Carol E. Hoffeecker, ed. Readings in Delaware History (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1973) discuss Wilmington's economy.

especially local tanneries, lost business and city population declined.³⁰

Mullin's competed not only with the Philadelphia stores, but also with some seventy-two other clothing stores that Wilmington city directories indicate were located in the immediate downtown area between 1920 and 1930. Mullin's, however, occupied an advantageous location in Wilmington. Unlike Mullin's, Crosby and Hill and Lippincott's were local department stores with small menswear departments and sold mainly inexpensive brands. Mullin's main competition after 1924, however, was Mansure and Prettyman, another menswear specialty firm that promoted high-end business and leisure clothing. Prettyman, a former Mullin's salesman, established the small store as a self-consciously elite purveyor and located it in the first floor of the expensive Du Pont office building.

Both Mullin's and Mansure and Prettyman catered to the middle-class professionals, who wore business suits and whose salaried positions as clerks, managers, lawyers, and bookkeepers made up a large portion of Wilmington's and Du Pont's workforce. The uniformity of appearance imposed on Du Pont employees, as well as the

³⁰ See Hoffeecker, Corporate Capital, 65-96.

sheer increase in their numbers after 1903, suggest that the corporation's restructuring created an even larger market for Mullin's. The standards of behavior for Du Pont salesmen advised them that

every salesman should be equipped with a full length mirror with this suggestion hanging above it: 'Before you go out to tell people you represent this firm look yourself over and see if you do or not.'...You are well-dressed when no one can remember anything you are wearing.³¹

Such nondescript clothing meant monochromatic business suits easily combined with multiple accessories. These garments made up the bulk of Mullin's stock.

Throughout the nineteenth century, men's clothing became more subdued. Bright colors were abandoned in favor of dark blue, brown, and green.³² Black, interpreted before 1830 as a stylish color worn only by dandies, became commonplace for dress coats. By mid-century, unrelieved black was synonymous with the middle-class businessman. Writing in Hints on Household Taste in 1878, reformer Charles Eastlake recommended men's

³¹ Zunz, Making America Corporate, 187; quoted from Hagley Museum and Library, Du Pont file, "Program of the 9th Annual Banquet, Sales Convention, and Dinner," n.d.

³² Alison Gernsheim, Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey (New York: Dover Publications, 1981), 33. The range of colors offered in early mail-order catalogues was limited, too.

clothing reform in order to distinguish socially between the clergyman, the dinner host, and the butler.³³ For Eastlake, the standardization of clothes had led to a blurring of class identity.

Given Wilmington's corporate character in the twentieth century, Mullin's role as a Wilmington clothing retailer focused around the wardrobe of the middle- and upper-middle class, white-collar businessman. The quality and price of the ubiquitous dark lounge suit was nearly indistinguishable without a close examination of its fabric, cut, and seam finishing technique.³⁴ A shirt, for example, woven in an Egyptian-style, imported cotton would have a finer finish, and more hand-sewn details than less expensive shirts. Mullin's sold both high-quality and inexpensive items. The highest volume of transactions in the store involved the smaller accessories of the work suit, not the leisure-related clothing, like motoring, riding, or cycling coats, featured in ads.

³³ Wendy Cooper et al., "The Art That is Life": the Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1900 (Boston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1987), 360.

³⁴ The term "lounge suit" was used during the late-nineteenth century to differentiate between the formal coat with tails, the cutaway frock coat, and the tailless sack coat of the lounge suit.

Mullin's account books divide the merchandise the store stocked and sold into six broadly defined categories: custom, clothing, furnishing goods, hats, shoes, and basement wares. The custom department provided in-house tailoring services for expensive, made-to-order clothing, especially suits and overcoats. In all the other departments, prices corresponded to the garment's quality; the higher the price, the better the quality of cloth, details, and finishing techniques. Furnishing goods were small ticket items like collars, shirt studs, handkerchiefs, socks, ties, underwear; basement wares were sale items or low-end goods. Clothing included ready-to-wear garments like suits, overcoats and capes.

The Security Trust Company account established at Mullin's from 1915 to 1923 for its employees illustrates the standard business wardrobe and its relationship to Mullin's departments. Handkerchiefs, shirts, and collars predominate in the account. Sets of coats and trousers were uncommon purchases, but trousers were bought frequently; the twenty-one suits listed vary widely in price. The bank employees bought accessories like hose, shirts, collars, and handkerchiefs in multiples, spending far more money on accessories than on large-ticket items

like suits and jackets. The most unusual items in this account are the varieties of shoes: oxfords, tennis shoes, and "arctics" (presumably an overshoe). The small number of objects purchased by any given buyer suggest that these customers were buying items to complement their suit, rather than buying new suits every season. Frequently paired entries include companion items like shirts, ties, and collars; shoes and hose; and hose, undergarments, and garters. For central business district bankers, these items would have been seen as necessities, more conveniently purchased near their place of work. The presence of casual shoes in the bank's account suggests that its employees also bought leisure clothes at Mullin's.

However, the store's records indicate that the business suit was the staple of the store's sales. This standardization of clothing was accompanied by the modernization of advertising in order to reach an up-to-date audience, who would hopefully follow the pronouncements of these new ads.

CHAPTER 3

MODERNIZATION AT MULLIN'S HOME STORE:

ADS AND CONSUMER RESPONSES

Modernization involves several cumulative processes, including the development of production and increase in labor productivity, the rise of urban life, and the establishment of centralized political power.³⁵ In the early twentieth century, the process of modernization created a market for department and specialty stores in the expanded middle class, and provided the merchandise to stock the stores. Advances in engineering, and new management theories profoundly changed stores between 1850 and 1890. In the next phase of modernization, from 1890 to 1940, these improvements were diffused to smaller stores. Most stores, regardless of size, by 1940 had floor-through construction (metal structures made possible larger open spaces than in earlier frame construction), escalators, and air conditioning.³⁶ Many stores also adopted new, highly

³⁵ Jurgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1987; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 2.

³⁶ Porter Benson, Counter Cultures, 39.

pictorial modern advertising styles to complement their interior modifications.

In Mullin's case, the new ad styles, starting in 1921, followed the completion of a new wing and the updating of the Market Street entrance with a stylish granite facade. Mullin's records from 1914 to 1930 document customer buying patterns. During this time, Wilmington's economic stagnation as well as competition from other local stores, probably influenced the store management's decision to modernize its advertising style. The new, refined ads failed to elicit Mullin's customers' positive response. The store's image in 1930, after modernization facilitated its competition with Philadelphia stores and Mansure and Prettyman.

The most striking characteristic of Mullin's overall sales is their stability and lack of variety over a thirty year period. Clothing and furnishing goods consistently made up close to one-half and one-fifth of the total sales, respectively. For a store that mainly served middle-class businessmen, this is hardly surprising. These two departments also had the largest sales totals throughout the period (see Table 1). The

Table 1: Sales in Percents, 1901-1930, with Department Breakdowns

YR.	SALES	CLTHNG	CUSTOM	FURNG	HATS	SHOES	MISC.
01	98	45	20	20	5	5	3
02	98	44	18	20	6	6	4
03	95	47	17	17	6	6	2
04	100	49	17	20	6	6	2
05	100	51	14	21	6	6	2
06	92	43	13	22	6	6	2
07	88	43	9	23	5	7	1
08	100	49	13	25	6	7	0
09	100	47	13	24	5	7	4
10	100	46	12	25	5	7	5
11	99	45	12	25	6	6	5
12	100	44	13	24	6	6	7
13	100	45	13	23	6	6	7
14	99	44	13	24	6	7	5
15	99	45	11	25	6	7	5
16	100	47	10	23	7	9	4
17	100	44	11	22	7	11	5
18	99	47	11	23	7	8	3
19	98	47	10	20	6	7	8
20	98	44	10	19	6	6	13
21	99	47	10	19	6	6	11
22	99	46	10	19	5	5	14
23	101	45	12	17	5	6	16
24	100	45	13	16	4	6	16
25	100	42	13	17	4	6	18
26	100	41	14	17	4	5	19
27	100	40	14	17	5	6	18
28	101	39	15	18	5	7	17
29	99	39	15	18	5	7	15
30	100	37	16	19	6	7	15

Note: "MISC." column for 1924-1928 includes basement sales.

remainder of sales categories reflect single-item departments, like the listings for shoes and hats, or include revenue from basement sales and all clothing repair work.

Despite the store's increased sales volume over the thirty-year period, records show that Mullin's were reluctant to buy custom-made clothing and bought quantities of furnishings, or accessories. Between 1901 and 1910, the store's total sales volume grew by almost 30 per cent. Despite store managers' predictions of an increase in custom orders, the actual custom sales declined from 20 per cent of total sales 1901, to 12 per cent in 1910. Although clothing sales fluctuated between 1900 and 1910, furnishing goods increased their percentage of total sales during this time. Furnishings sales increased steadily until 1915 stabilizing thereafter. Conversely, from 1913 until 1930, custom sales fluctuated and never became a significant part of Mullin's sales. Both of these patterns probably relate to the growing standardization of men's clothing, where one dark suit could substitute for another. The high furnishings volume suggests that accessories--shirts, collars, cuffs--were important in maintaining a professional appearance.

The furnishings category is important because of its volume. Customers spent very little money to buy large quantities of inexpensive items--cuffs, collars, shirt buttons, underwear. These purchases account for one-fifth of total furnishings sales. The goods in this department were small ticket items that retailed for low prices, often under \$2.00: hosiery, collars and cuffs, etc. These smaller accessories could be used to vary the standard business wardrobe without the expense of large-ticket purchases like suits and coat and pants sets. With a standardized wardrobe, smaller items became variations from the suit and tie routine. This thrift is not surprising, and it suggests that the common customer response to the store's ads and its stock was pragmatism.

Overall stability characterized Mullin's sales. Two high points, in 1920 and 1925, followed two major modernization at the store: the store addition built in 1919, and the 1924 change in advertising style. Although from 1901 until 1930, the overall sales figures were stable, there were two main periods of greater sales volume: 1916 to 1919 and 1925 to 1929 (see Table 2.) Before 1916, sales increased about \$10,000 per year, totalling between \$173,962 in 1901 and \$281,977 in 1915. A large increase in 1916 of over 40 per cent begins a

Table 2: Sales in Dollars, 1901-1930, with Department Breakdowns

YR.	SALES	CLTHNG	CUSTOM	FURNG	HATS	SHOES	MISC.
01	173,962	79,077	34,542	36,273	9,038	10,432	4,894
02	190,969	84,863	34,771	40,027	11,471	11,811	8,024
03	209,683	98,290	36,042	46,193	11,888	12,479	4,789
04	212,412	103,610	35,816	44,181	11,899	13,142	3,760
05	225,109	115,613	31,629	46,681	13,374	14,408	3,402
06	244,832	106,035	31,375	54,620	14,319	15,523	3,911
07	226,549	96,842	19,796	52,484	12,370	16,505	2,777
08	182,153	88,673	22,973	45,220	10,687	13,443	1,156
09	203,415	94,974	26,816	48,286	11,173	14,210	8,144
10	223,199	102,237	27,229	54,742	10,962	15,779	12,250
11	218,977	99,472	27,071	54,741	12,848	13,715	11,128
12	230,979	101,880	30,473	54,370	12,843	14,189	17,222
13	237,633	105,747	31,374	55,323	14,070	14,970	16,150
14	224,803	99,632	28,503	54,689	13,744	16,086	12,189
15	281,425	127,144	32,049	71,133	18,384	19,408	13,308
16	398,787	187,100	40,226	92,236	27,526	34,155	17,544
17	479,848	212,869	50,597	106,325	35,039	51,250	23,769
18	600,235	280,301	68,984	140,168	40,094	50,389	20,300
19	768,231	360,129	74,711	150,062	49,338	50,362	63,016
20	693,192	302,205	70,594	132,980	38,706	43,437	90,126
21	532,698	249,878	50,982	102,206	30,018	31,890	56,705
22	519,995	241,039	52,521	98,775	27,011	28,366	72,283
23	556,764	250,003	64,663	94,681	27,303	31,033	89,080
24	580,513	259,780	73,781	94,452	26,038	32,523	93,928
25	671,897	282,315	89,283	114,442	29,157	37,456	119,305
26	732,426	296,943	100,290	127,776	31,467	40,114	135,835
27	733,724	291,565	102,611	126,945	35,781	45,695	131,126
28	743,194	288,849	109,540	13,357	35,500	50,997	124,741
29	747,677	293,659	113,876	137,631	37,797	51,185	113,528
30	679,696	253,595	108,386	129,257	38,105	45,316	105,037

Note: "MISC." column for 1924-1928 includes basement sales.

three-year sales boom in all departments. From 1916 to 1919, store sales increased from \$398,787 to \$768,231, with increases in the sales of all departments.

According to Carol E. Hoffeecker's analysis of Wilmington's economy, 1919 and 1924 were retail high points. In Mullin's case, large sales in 1919 leveled off until 1925, when a second high volume of \$671,897 was reached. From 1925 until 1930, sales increased to the \$700,000 level, declining slightly in 1930 at the onset of the Depression.

Consumer behavior at Mullin's is revealed in the customer's own purchase accounts. Of the 204 individual account holders for which there are still records, one hundred and ten individuals lived in Wilmington, while the other ninety-four lived outside the city. Purchases are recorded by date, type of merchandise, price, method and amount of payment, and customer's address. Most accounts include notes about the customer's job, or a credit approval from the owner. In many accounts, Mullin's bookkeeper noted the customers' profession, downtown office address on Market Street or above Eighth Street, and home address.

The most common purchases are accessories--furnishing goods like shirts, underwear, socks and collar stays and shirts studs and cufflinks--not expensive

garments. Another consumer pattern is the semi-annual purchase of large numbers of clothing and accessories. Several mens' accounts were used by his wife and children. In some cases, family expenses are identified in the records for outfitting prep school and college students. Other large purchases may have been made by older men who were used to replenishing their clothing all at once. A moderate example is H.S. Wooten, a middle-class resident of 909 Vandever Street, who purchased a mid-level \$12.00 suit, hose, a hat, two ties, three collars, underwear, and shoes on one day for \$26.50.

Out-of-town customers were mainly from rural farming areas in Delaware, northern Maryland, or New Jersey. For example, L. Clifton Clark, who lived in rural Townsend, Delaware (494 inhabitants in 1910,) made twelve trips to Mullin's between February, 1918 and January, 1920. His most expensive purchases were of a raincoat for \$14.50 and a suit for \$15.00; while on all other occasions he bought items that cost no more than \$2.00.

The most obvious pattern among Mullin's customers was buying goods in quantity. Businessmen maintained their wardrobes by constant purchases of new, inexpensive accessories, which they bought in large quantities in

Mullin's furnishings department. Accessories sales outnumber all other garments in many accounts, reflecting the increased standardization of middle-class clothing. In the furnishings department, hosiery, collars, undershirts, and handkerchiefs came packaged together. In the clothing department, expensive shirts were sold singly and cheaper types were sold in groups, underlining the link between quantity and low prices.

For example, the clothing bought by S.H. Browne from 1918 to 1920 illustrates both quantity buying and the relationship between high end clothing and furnishings. Browne's high end clothing purchases, two overcoats (\$30.00 and \$50.00) and three suits (\$45.00 - \$60.00) were all single purchases that totaled \$235.00 in six trips. Browne's other purchases include seven buys of three or four collars at twenty-five cents each, six shirts (\$1.00 - \$4.85), three sets of hose, garters, two pajamas (\$4.00), five ties (\$0.75 - \$1.00), gloves (\$5.00), a hat (\$5.00), and an umbrella (\$2.50) for a total of \$50.18 over eighteen shopping trips.

Between 1918 and 1921, a wider variety of goods were purchased by an employee of the local bank (Security Trust Company), John H. Banks. One trip included a middle range suit (\$35.00) and overcoat (\$30.00), an expensive hat (\$4.00) and a variety of furnishings: two

handkerchiefs, two shirts, gloves, two ties, four hose, four collars, cuff links, and a belt (\$15.90). Most of the rest of Banks's purchases were either groups of furnishings or single buys of expensive suits. Banks represents the more lavish customer who purchased not only basic furnishing goods but also newer forms of clothing like BVD underwear and pajamas which were not likely to appeal to Mullin's older or conservative customers.

The record of Mullin's sales between 1900 and 1930 confirms that the store catered to a stable population of middle-class businessmen, purchasing their work clothes. While custom clothing and furnishings sales declined slightly in the later teens, the sale of mass-produced garments persistently made up nearly half of the store's sales. Given the economic characteristics of Wilmington during the period, this pattern is not surprising. Mullin's relied on a fashionable image conveyed in its advertising to maintain its share of the local market.

The relationship between advertising, product sales, and consumer behavior needs to be understood within the context of recent scholarship on retailing.

Analysis of brand-name product advertising by historians like Daniel Boorstin, Roland Marchand, Michael

Schudson, and Jackson Lears considers the reality constructed in ads to be a crucial part of the appeal of brand name advertising to the consumer. All four scholars see department stores as a new part of American consumer experience, where free and unlimited access to displayed goods promised every citizen the same visual experience of new, stylish objects.

The ads used between 1900 and 1930 by Mullin's promoted the store in two ways: first, as the home of value for the shopper's dollar and, second, after 1924, as the place for stylish, new fashions. The change in the store's motto and image after 1924 may have been an attempt to increase declining custom sales and diversify its clientele. The new image, however, helped the store compete with Mansure and Prettyman. Dropping the slogan, "Mullin's Home Store" in 1924, Mullin's adopted a sleeker advertising style that featured merchandise illustrations (often provided by the manufacturer) that emphasized the garment's high style instead of its low prices. After 1924, all mascots used in Mullin's ads were replaced by streamlined men. However, even though the store's ads emphasized stylish, new, high-end items--fur-lined coats, evening coats, and golfing clothes--these items did not sell any more frequently.

While Mullin's offered goods in a range of prices, its customers were conservative buyers. High-end stock featured in ads rarely sold. Mullin's prices varied widely between furnishing goods selling for under three dollars (hosiery) to clothing available in a wide range of prices. Hickey-Freeman suits made from imported fabrics were advertised by Mullin's as high-end, expensive goods priced up to \$75.00, while Mullin's topcoats sold for up to \$125.00. In the 1920s, Mullin's used Hickey-Freeman product drawings and copy in its ads. In 1924, "Knit-tex", another coat manufacturer, also supplied illustrations used in Mullin's ads. The coats were medium-priced at \$30.00. In 1922, Mullin's custom department advertised custom, or made-to-order suits and overcoats at "\$45 and up." Manhattan shirts, also mid-to-high-end garments, sold in the early 1920s for between three dollars for those made of cotton and ten dollars for silk shirts. Despite the frequent use of expensive items in ad illustrations, customers did not respond by buying them.


Between 1914 and 1920, Mullin's ads contrast sharply with those of other Wilmington stores. Instead of full page, illustrated ads run by competitors like Crosby and Hill, Mullin's ads were small, approximately between 1/16th and 1/32d of a page, and easy to miss.

Lippincott's, another Wilmington store, used large ads accompanied by line drawings of merchandise, a technique Mullin's adopted after 1924, when it redesigned its ads. While other menswear store ads were a jumble of visual information and copy stressing the latest fashionable styles, Mullin's conservative ads emphasized the store's more encyclopedic, durable stock.

Mullin's used four types of ads in Wilmington's Every Evening newspaper between 1914 and 1920: announcements, sale notices, seasonal ads, and questions about style (Figure 1).³⁷ Mullin's advertised "bathrobes, house coats, dressing gowns, sweaters, mackinacs, rain coats, umbrellas, canes, assorted boys' wear, and fur lined overcoats."³⁸ Mullin's ad copy emphasized leisure clothing rather than the businessman's work wardrobe. This style was the standard late-nineteenth-century ad form, which Mullin's used long after other Wilmington stores. Mullin's ads included old-fashioned promotional gimmicks, for example, in 1914 "any purchase of boy's goods, of \$5 and \$10 cash sales in

³⁷ Every Evening, March 4, 1915.

³⁸ Every Evening, December 19, 1914.



For
Going Away
 or
Staying at Home
 Why not be comfortable?
Thin Suits
 Genuine Palm Beach, \$15.
 Pure Mohairs, \$15 and \$20.
 Blue Serges, \$20 to \$40.
 Serge Trousers, \$4 to \$8.
 White Flannels, \$5 and \$10,
 special sale, 35.
 White Duck Trousers, \$2
 and \$3.
 B.V.D. and Athletic Under-
 wear
 Shirt Suits.
 Straw Hat Suits.

MULLIN'S HOME STORE
 6th and Market



MULLIN'S HOME STORE
 6th and Market

Figure 1: Advertisements from Every Evening,
 July 19, 1920 and July 16, 1921

short pants, sizes 2 1/2 to 18 years, gets a free watch."³⁹

Mullin's ad captions from the 1910s promised that increased style, economic success, and popularity arrived along with the package of Mullin's clothing. The hyperbole of this 1915 ad exemplifies this strategy:

These are not human beings: they are fashion plates. THE EXAGGERATIONS help to show at a glance the main points of style. FOR YOUNG MEN who live on the live wire circuit here are the correct clothes.⁴⁰

Often these ads included shoppers who were not part of conventional definitions of leisured women: "wise mothers," and the lunchtime shoppers from nearby offices. While both sexes were targeted in ads, most of Mullin's customers were men.

Generally, the store tried to incorporate three ideas into its ads: quality, style, and value.⁴¹ The store's early slogan, "always guaranteed a good price" frequently appeared alongside merchandise price lists. Another early motto, "Mullin's Home Store," emphasized value rather than fashion.

³⁹ Every Evening, December 19, 1914.

⁴⁰ Every Evening, March 5, 1915.


⁴¹ Wilmington City directory ads have a simpler, abbreviated form of Mullin's ads with only the "Mullin's Home Store" slogan and the address, but store ads in the directories are neither illustrated nor long.

After 1921, the garments mentioned in ad copy reveal Mullin's efforts to change its image into a stylish store. Some ads are for function-specific clothing--tuxedos, formal dress--associated with upper-class leisure pursuits. Even in sales ads, the store emphasized the values available in stylish clothing.⁴² Mullin's tried to teach its customers how to dress stylishly. Despite this, most purchases continued to be business clothing and accessories. Stable sales levels in the 1920s point to continued sales of standardized clothing, and neither custom, clothing sales, nor individual accounts show increased sales of the stylish, high-end goods shown in ads.

When Mullin's dropped its slogans in the 1920s, it began associating its name with a visual style rather than a motto. This was in keeping with the ad copy of Philadelphia stores like Wanamaker's and Lit Brothers that advertised in Wilmington which focused more on style and did not use slogans. Mansure and Prettyman and Mullin's were the only two Wilmington stores to use this sophisticated style. For example, Mullin's 1926 ad (Figure 2) for Kuppenheimer topcoats uses a drawing and signature of film star Richard Barthelmess (as seen in

⁴² Wanamaker's first moved to Delaware in the early 1940s.

An Investment In Good Appearance



Every man should want a Topcoat like this -

Richard Barthelmess

Richard Barthelmess as "The Unknown Soldier"

"FAMOUS FIFTIES"
—sponsored by stars of stage and screen

Select your favorite model from this fine group of Kuppenheimer Spring Suits and Topcoats and note the difference it makes not only in your looks, but in your outlook on life. You will readily recognize the sterling quality which met with the approval of Richard Barthelmess and John Barrymore.

**Kuppenheimer
GOOD CLOTHES
\$50**

Jas. T. Mullin & Sons, Inc.
6th and Market
A Good Investment In A Good Coat

Figure 2: Advertisement from Every Evening, April 2, 1926

"The Amateur Gentleman") to promote the product as an "investment in good appearance."⁴³

Besides selling clothes and attracting sales, store ads tried to create an image that, for Mullin's, did not correspond to customer behavior and buying patterns. Instead of creating what Daniel Boorstin termed "consumer communities," bonding individuals together through their common purchases, Mullin's ads after 1924 established a luxurious image unrelated to consumer buying habits. The differences between the store's steady sales of furnishing goods and clothing and ads suggest a discrepancy between the store's promoted image and its actual function in Wilmington. The customers bought standardized business accessories rather than luxuries.

The discrepancies between Mullin's sales and its advertised stock challenge the assumptions of previous literature on the department store. Daniel Boorstin and others have assumed that advertising functioned only to stimulate sales of the items illustrated. However, as the case of Mullin's demonstrates, department store advertising had a number of purposes. Far from intending

⁴³ Every Evening, March 2, 1926, 8.

to sell many of the objects advertised, department store executives may have pictured appealing goods in order to enhance the prestige of their stores.

Despite the distinct advertising changes in the 1920s, Mullin's sales did not change dramatically before 1930. The store, having modernized its advertising style, continued to sell primarily business clothing. While part of the 1924 ad change may have been motivated by competition--the large Philadelphia stores like Wanamaker's began to advertise in Wilmington in the 1920s--Mullin's local, middle-class shoppers continued in their established buying habits. Mullin's image, as defined by 1920s advertising, as a modern, fashionable store, contradicts evidence presented by customer accounts and sales. These sources suggest that the store continued to sell the standardized, traditional clothing worn by middle-class businessmen since the late 1890s.

Mullin's stable sales from 1900 to 1930 are the main pattern evident from examining consumer behavior and sales at the store. The promising Wilmington market that attracted James T. Mullin from West Chester in 1880 proved to be composed of a reliable, steady group of customers. Despite dramatic changes in advertising style and content, Mullin's sales did not change markedly, except in 1924, which was a generally prosperous year in

Wilmington's retailing community. Even in the face of competition Mullin's faced from a local upscale specialty store, Mansure and Prettyman, and from large Philadelphia department stores like Wanamaker's and Strawbridge and Clothier, which began promoting their menswear departments after 1924, Mullin's sales remained stable. The ups and downs of store sales until 1929 were insignificant.

While Mullin's ad content and building changed, its sales growth did not. The store modernized its ways of dealing with customers, its stock, and its ads. One constant, however, was the number of middle-class businessmen from the management ranks of the Du Pont Company, Wilmington's banks, and the railroad-repair industry. The business culture of these male shoppers differed importantly from that of their domestic female counterparts. Men shopped for clothing that they needed in brief time periods. The average Mullin's customer did not have hours of leisure time in which to contemplate his latest shirt selections. Instead, as accounts show, he bought one or two accessory items to complete or round out his daily wardrobe. Thus, Mullin's role in Wilmington differs from that of a larger department store catering mainly to women shoppers because it was a specialty store. Unlike large department stores with

many departments, Mullin's had a ready-made, captive market of male customers from Du Pont and the manufacturers located in Wilmington. The modernized ads, interior, and new facade that accompanied the completion of the new wing in 1921 represent the store's attempt to attract new customers with the leisure time to use the clothes. Mullin's was not self-consciously organized to be a "democratizing" institution. The customer services offered by modernized department stores from 1890 to 1910 became a financial drain that larger stores eliminated in the 1920s even as Mullin's adopted some of those amenities.

By 1900, the core of Mullin's sales, suits and accessories, had become the standard daily business wear. Moving to an expanding business market in Wilmington in 1880 provided Mullin's with a built-in clientele, whose daily clothing needs proved to be unchangeable. In an effort to attract a variety of customers, Mullin's stock covered a range of prices. While expensive leisure clothes were features in Mullin's brand-name ads in the 1920s, it was small, inexpensive furnishings that sold in largest volume. The customers' accounts show that buying at Mullin's was not related to advertised large-ticket fashions, but to the standard middle-class, white-collar man's wardrobe, where one or two suits could be made into

a whole wardrobe with interchangeable shirts and accessories.

For these reasons, Mullin's role in dressing middle-class Wilmington businessmen can suggest something about how department stores function within a community. Unlike large stores in Philadelphia, Mullin's catered to a specific clientele without much leisure time: businessmen. These customers bought specific goods, generally foregoing brand-name luxuries for small purchases of low-end furnishings. In shopping this way--buying one or two items a trip with a few trips per month--the store-customer relationship is characterized by convenient buying, not by impulse buying prompted by ads for fashionable goods.

The contradictions between the store's early slogan, "Mullin's Home Store" and its late-1920s image point out the importance of individual case studies. The ads, sales, and merchandise at Mullin's discussed in this study show how the store functioned in its Wilmington market. Targeting a discrete audience helped Mullin's compete with larger stores and in the menswear trade with Mansure and Prettyman. Detailed examinations of the larger department stores sales patterns, advertising, and their customers' complex response to that advertising would correct the mistaken assumptions and

generalizations about consumers' behavior present in current scholarship on stores.

Customers at Mullin's were not easily duped into purchasing expensive items, nor did they buy many items at once. If, as the case of Mullin's suggests, no uniform customer experience existed across department stores, then the generalized portrait of these institutions as America's equal-opportunity marketplaces needs revision. The varieties of customer behavior indicate that Mullin's did not sell clothing to all of Wilmington, nor did it make itself accessible to everyone. Rather than removing class barriers, Mullin's maintained them. Thus the case of Mullin's argues for a reassessment of the department store as a "democratizing" institution.

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