“Selling is the heart of retail, and satisfying the customer is the heart of that.”

— Fred Lazarus Jr.

When Columbus first became the permanent capital of Ohio in 1816, it was about as far from a fashion center as you could possibly get. However, like many American cities during the 19th century, it grew and prospered, developing a strong area of commerce in the center of the city. The downtown area surrounding the Capitol building, in particular Broad and High Streets, was not only the center of politics but the city's commercial hub as well. All manner of wholesale and retail businesses catered to the needs of the growing population. The 'downtown' of all U.S. cities was also the social and cultural center. It was where everyone went to shop, conduct business, and play; the center of activity and the place to find the latest information and the most current fashionable styles of dress.

In its earliest years, the latest fashions in the capital city were available from a handful of merchant tailors and clothiers who produced and sold men's and boy's clothing, and another handful of dressmakers and dry goods merchants who provided women's fashions or the cloth with which to make them. The majority of establishments catered to the needs of the politicians and bureaucrats of state government and their families.

As ready-to-wear clothing began to replace custom made garments at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, merchandising and retailing practices of the products changed as well. This was the golden era of the luxury Department Store. Wholesalers, dry goods merchants and men's clothiers such as Marshall Field's in Chicago, R.H. Macy in New York and John Wanamaker in Philadelphia created vast retail stores in their cities. Columbus had its own large retail emporium in the guise of the F&R Lazarus & Co. store located on the corner of Town and High streets. Lazarus began as a small men's clothier in 1851 and by 1965, as part of Federated Department Stores, was part of the largest Department Store chain in the United States.

Retail clothing businesses flourished around Broad and High throughout the 20th century. Lazarus' competition as the capital's fashion leader took form as additional department stores located along High Street such as The Union, Morehouse-Martens, and The Fashion, and specialty boutiques along Broad Street, such as Mrs. Eugene Gray, Montaldo's, and The French Shop. Columbus' clothing stores gradually ventured beyond the downtown area, following the migration of their customers to suburban shopping centers and enclosed malls.

By mid century, Columbus' boasted 133 department stores and specialty clothing shops for both men and women, most of which were located within a few blocks of the State Capitol. The Lazarus store figured prominently in capital fashion, both in its sheer physical size which dominated the landscape of the center city, and its breadth of merchandise and services. Lazarus reached all walks of Columbus' citizenry from those in the Wedgewood Room buying designer merchandise to those in the basement hunting bargains. Columbus' Capital Fashion was certainly democratic.
Merchant Tailors and Dressmakers

Segregation is not a word usually associated with the clothing industry, however during the 19th century, men’s and women’s clothing dwelt in separate spheres. Prior to the middle of the 19th century, clothing production was predominantly custom made or made-to-order, not bought already-made off a store rack. Male tailors made men’s and boy’s apparel, which was sold by clothiers, merchant tailors, or vendors of ‘gent’s furnishings.’ Female dressmakers and milliners created gowns for ladies and girls. The fabric, fancy goods and notions necessary to create the clothing was available from local dry goods merchants such as Osborn’s, W. A. & J. C. McCoy & Co., and Sessions & Harris, or vendors of fancy goods and notions.

Lazarus, the store that was to dominate Capital City as well as its landscape, began as a small men’s clothier in a 20 x 40 foot room, catering to the needs of government officials who were exclusively male at the time. The store was established as Aaronson & Bro. Clothing Store (sic) in 1851 by Simon Lazarus, a recent immigrant from Germany, with his stepbrother B. Aaronson. When Aaronson moved to Philadelphia, Simon changed the store’s name to S. Lazarus.

The location of the first store was on High Street, in the middle of the block immediately south of the current Lazarus store. The United States Hotel, a popular stop on the National Road and in close proximity to the state capitol, was located where the current downtown Lazarus Store now stands. In those days of horseback travel, both man and horse could stay at the United States hotel for $1/night.

Although most fashion was custom made, there were some men’s ready-to-wear clothes available as early as the 1830s in ‘slop shops’ that catered to sailors who were not usually around for the length of time it took to make custom made clothes. The sailors kept their civilian clothes in ‘slop chests’ while at sea.

The perfection of the Singer sewing machine, a major technological development, was also a major boon to both the ready-to-wear and custom made clothing industries. In the 1852 city directory for Columbus Ohio, William Burdell advertised this ‘new way’ of making clothing by comparing it to the new and improved means of transportation, the railway, and the new means of communication, the telegraph.

The sizing standards developed for civil war uniforms also helped to advance the ready-made clothing industry, and once the war was over returning soldiers were in great need of civilian clothing. In an effort to capitalize on this demand, and to stay competitive, Simon Lazarus travelled to Rochester to purchase a better class of ready-made merchandise. The family attributes the survival of the business among numerous competitors at this time to this bold and risky maneuver of Simon’s as well as his policies for honesty and quality of merchandise. Simon had a ‘strictly one price’ policy for his merchandise, clearly marked on the goods. This was an unusual practice at the time when merchandise did not carry price tags as a rule. Prices for goods were bargained for back and forth between customer and salesperson. Simon may
have observed a similar policy at the Capital City Arcade, a wholesale manufacturer and retail establishment of men's and boys' clothing and furnishing goods.

The Columbus Branch of this Cincinnati store was based on 3 principles: 1) good genuine materials with good style and fit, 2) moderate lowness of prices, and 3) adhering strictly to the one price system.

Simon Lazarus' store experienced such growth that by 1868 he had seven salesmen working in the store in addition to his two sons, Fred and Ralph. Four years later, Fred and Ralph joined their father as partners in the family business, changing its name to S. Lazarus & Sons. In 1877, Simon died, and the name of the business changed to F & R Lazarus & Co.

The Lazarus store's growth was a reflection of the capital city's increasing population. In 1870, Columbus' fashion industry supported seven sewing machine agents, who supplied the 40 dressmakers and 27 tailors, along with the cloak makers, and 18 milliners. Of note at this time are two female tailors, Kate Lawrence and Mrs. Ingham, who seemed to have broken through the gender barrier.

During the 1880s the F & R Lazarus & Co. store became the biggest in Columbus and the largest in central Ohio. Fred and Ralph Lazarus were known far and wide as the 'square dealing clothiers.' The business extended for 100 miles around Columbus and was based on terms that continue to appeal to capital city consumers today—quality merchandise at low prices.

In 1887, Lazarus added a family shoe department. This was their first foray into providing goods for women and girls. Soon thereafter, Lazarus also sold ladies kid gloves. In 1896, Lazarus was the largest shoe store in the state. Ladies shoes sold for $2. and men's $3. Several Columbus and Ohio brides turned to Lazarus to purchase their wedding shoes at Lazarus, even if they weren't able to purchase their dresses there yet.

As the Capital City's population grew throughout the 19th century so too did the number of its dressmakers until it reached an all-time high of approximately 350 in 1895. One dressmaker listed in the 1885 Columbus city directory had a particularly pertinent name, Mrs. G. A. Finefrock. Her establishment was located on the SE corner of 1st Ave. and High Street in what is now the Short North.

While several established dressmakers were still located closer to the center of town in the 1870s, others were located in more residential areas including the newer immigrant neighborhoods around its periphery. Since women's clothes were not available at the F&R Lazarus & Co. store, the wife and daughters of Fred Lazarus had to obtain their clothes elsewhere. As many upper and middle class women did, they turned to dressmakers. Mary McCormick was the name
of the dressmaker that the Lazarus women patronized from 1878 until 1928. While the Lazarus's lived on fashionable E. Town Street, Mary McCormick lived at 165 Goodale, just north of the city center in a section of town then known as Fly town.

In 1890, Columbus boasted its own dress factory and dress cutting school at 100 N High St. It was run by a husband and wife dressmaking team by the name of Higgs. The Higgs' school lasted only a couple years, possibly affected by the depression of 1893 and/or the death of Mrs. Higgs. Whether the school helped to increase the number of dressmakers in Columbus to 350 by 1895 is uncertain, but by 1895 the school was no longer in operation and Mr. Higgs was listed as the sole ladies' tailor in town, a new category listing.

The store The Union first appears in Columbus in 1895 as one of 25 providers of gent's furnishings. While the directory lists an additional 22 clothiers, including a 'Jacob Schottenstein' (sic) at 64 E Long St., and 60 tailors, the numbers of providers of men's clothing is still far below the dressmaker listing of over 350. One of those dressmakers made two items in OSU's Collection, an evening bodice of black crepe and a silk chine dress. Her craftsman ship is exquisite, well-deserving of the artist's 'signature' on the bodice waistband.

D. Schaefer, Daisy, first appears as a dressmaker in the city directories in 1887. She resided with her family on the west side of Briggs St. between Beck and Sycamore streets just outside of present day German Village. She works on and off with Nettie Schaefer until 1907/8, and partnered with Nellie Schatzman in a shop in the YMCA building in 1894. The next year, Daisy had her own shop at No. 27 Columbia Block while still living on Briggs St. In 1899, she and Nettie move to 145 Cleveland Avenue, and have a phone number listing the following year. From 1907-1915, Daisy is listed without Nettie, and by 1915 has followed her fashionable clientele to E. Town Street.

By 1900, the number of dressmakers had declined sharply to a mere 125, while ladies' tailors had increased to seven. This does not mean that there were no new dressmaking business start-ups at this time, however. Kate Hoffer opened her dressmaking business in 1899 at 1409 N. High St. Her husband Frank was working as a barber. In 1900, the couple was living and working at 48 S. 5th St., and in 1901, the dressmaking business listing was under Frank's name. Dressmaking must have been a more lucrative business than barbering, because by 1902 Frank was listed as a tailor. By 1910 the business was located at 256 Oak St., while the Hoffers resided on fashionable E. Broad St. with Frank listed as a dressmaker.
The number of ladies tailors in the capital city had increased to 10 by 1905, reflecting the newer fashions for ladies suits and tailored coats. OSU owns a short black velvet coat with a Geo S. Beall Co. Cols. O. label. George S. Beall was the name of a Dry Goods Company at 97 N. High St. from 1885 until 1910. While cloak makers were initially listed with dressmakers earlier in the century, by 1890 they were found in dry goods stores. In 1885 Beall was one of 43 dry goods merchants in the city. In 1905 the store is also listed under the cloaks & suits heading along with Vance, later known as Vance-Winans and eventually as CC Winans.

By the turn of the century, another of F&R Lazarus & Co.'s eventual competitors appears on the scene. Bowland, Morehouse & Martens, another dry goods store, is listed at 130 S High St. By 1907/8 the name changes to Morehouse-Martens, and in 1912 a ladies' furnishings store, The Fashion, appears nearby on the northwest corner of State and High streets. Much later in the 20th century, these two stores will merge into Morehouse-Fashion, and later once again as The Fashion, located directly opposite the Lazarus store.

Lazarus was still exclusively a men’s and boy’s clothier in 1908 when the new listing of ‘Department Stores’ appears in the city directory. They were the largest men’s clothing operation in town, commandeering the first place listing under clothiers in an otherwise alphabetical order. However, the Lazarus family business was on the verge of a major change. The brothers Fred and Ralph had purchased a piece of property directly opposite the existing store on the northwest corner of Town and High streets, and were in the process of completing a new six floor building that was to sell ‘everything ready to wear’ including women’s fashions. When the store opened in 1909, the volume of sales almost doubled that of the previous year.
Everything Ready to Wear

Lazarus opened its new six floor building with ‘everything ready to wear’ on June 18, 1909. It was the ‘largest ready-to-wear concern in the midwest’ with 20 new departments mostly devoted to women’s and girls’ apparel and accessories. This relatively new option of ready-made women’s clothing provided a less expensive alternative to custom made dressmaker garments. This did not necessarily mean that the less expensive ready-made clothing at the new F&J Lazarus & Co. Store was of lesser quality, however. The costume room, which evolved into Lazarus’ French Room and eventually became the Wedgwood Room, provided high quality women’s clothing.

There was some concern with the new building that men would not want to shop in a store offering women’s apparel, especially since Lazarus had been exclusively a Men’s and Boy’s shop. As a result, the men’s merchandise was put close to the High Street doors, with a men’s upstairs floor accessed by a men’s only elevator. To this day, Lazarus men’s department downtown is still located on the ground floor, accessed by the High Street doors.

The new store was such a success that additional merchandise and departments were added in 1911 and 1914, and a bargain basement added in 1917. Separate skirts and shirtwaists, flounced wrappers and dolman cloaks, items all easily mass produced and therefore cheaper, were sold in the basement, which had its own separate entrance off High Street.

By 1910, there were four ‘department stores’ listed in the Columbus directory, the term first showing up in 1908. Lazarus was not so listed, however, until 1920, when there were 13 department stores in the city—3 times as many in 10 years. All except three of the department stores were located on High Street.

The Stores were:

Armbruster Co
The Boston Store
John M Caren & Co
Columbus Dry Goods Co
Nathan Danziger (one on Broad St, and one on Mt. Vernon)
The Dunn-Taft Co
The Home Store
John Katz (Broad)
Miller’s Fair (169 E Main)
The F&J Lazarus & Co
Morehouse-Martens
JC Penney
Z L White & Co

In 1915, Lazarus, The Boston Store, Z.L. White & Co., Morehouse-Martens and Carson Pirie Scott & Co. were listed among the 83 dry goods establishments instead of dept stores, as was Jacob Schattenstein’s (sic) at 1873 Parsons. The Union was listed under Men’s clothing and furnishings, they did not sell women’s apparel until the 1920s.

The number of ladies’ tailors steadily increased after 1905, reflecting the popularity of suits, caps and coats for women, including those for evening wear. OSU’s Collection owns a variety of tailored women’s apparel with labels from Max Pollatsek, Vance-Winans, Lazarus and The Fashion, which arrived on the Columbus retail scene in 1912.
Dressmakers continued to flourish alongside the department stores in spite of the availability of mass produced goods. In fact there were 254 listed in 1915. However, a new breed of store on the horizon, the women's specialty store, was about to have a major long-term effect on the dressmaking business.

Specialty clothing stores were a hybrid of high quality dressmakers’ goods combined with the convenience of ready-to-wear garments. In fact, several early specialty shops in the capital city started with a resident dressmaker in-house. MacDonald's Shop for Women, located at 50 N High, was one of the first of these shops to arrive on the scene in 1913. Mrs. Eugene Gray opened her first store in the Emporium building at 12-16 N. High St. in 1917. By 1920, she had relocated to 118 E. Broad Street, one of a few pioneers who began a trend that resulted in Broad Street becoming the premier location for both men's and women's specialty apparel.

In an interview from the 1950's, Norman Norell stated that, “Ready to wear improved greatly in the Twenties. The woman of small income could dress with much the same look as the rich woman.”

This is obvious when one compares the evidence found in OSU’s collection. Beaded dresses worn by women of middle class means and purchased at Lazarus look equally expensive as those from the upscale shops purchased by society women.

The number of specialty shops grew in the capital city during the 1920s while the number of dressmakers significantly decreased. The French Shop opened in 1923 in the Citizen's Bank building at 45-55 N. High, across from Macdonald's Shop for Women. Of the 28 'women's furnishings' stores, 15 of them were located on High Street and four on Broad. The three additional shops that joined Mrs Eugene Gray were: The Grace Doyle Shop (70 E), Margaret Sullivan and The Baccante Co. (106 E). By 1925 The French Shop moved to Broad Street and Madison’s had opened on High. In 1929 Montaldo's opened on Broad Street and Robert’s Cloak House opened on High Street. By 1930 Broad and High streets were tied for number of stores offering women’s apparel at six each.

The sons of Fred Lazarus continued in their father’s footsteps, expanding the store, its variety of merchandise and with that their impact on the people of the capital city and their fashion choices. A seventh floor was added to the 1909 building in the diamond jubilee anniversary year of 1926, as well as another entire building directly west of the store extending to Front Street.

During the 1920s, in response to the newly recognized needs of younger female customers, the F&R Lazarus & Co. store opened its Collegienne shops. One of the first Lazarus specializations for women, the Collegienne shops offered coats, suits, dresses, lingerie, shoes, and sportswear in junior sizes. In 1960 the Collegienne Shops' name was updated to Junior Circle. Home goods were added to the apparel and accessories merchandise during the decade as well, making the store more than just a clothing store, but a full-fledged department store.

Lazarus also premiered its popular Fall Style Evening in 1926. This event, which included live music, vaudeville entertainers, and book signings, introduced the new fashions for the season through style shows.
Lazarus in the 1930s had 122 departments under one roof, and in spite of the depression were able to increase sales through merchandising changes. On a trip to Paris in 1927, Fred Jr. noticed dresses grouped together by size rather than price, which was the current US practice. He realized that customers were able to find a wider selection of merchandise in their sizes and discovered that they frequently bought more expensive dresses than was their initial intention. When he brought this idea to Lazarus, it was of course a success. The use of dramatically arranging merchandise to have it veritably sell itself has continued to be a major sales promotion tactic to this day.

The introduction of the ‘Dollar housetop’—a shift with short kimono sleeves and matching fabric tie belt was a very popular item. Blouses, sweaters, jackets, and skirts, separates that offered more wardrobe options for less of an investment than dresses, were put out as open stock so customers could help themselves instead of depending on a salesperson. Merchandise was taken out of drawers and off shelves that were behind counters, and out from glass display cases. This not only made the merchandise more accessible, but eliminated the need for a large sales staff, which would result in greater profits for the store.

By the mid thirties, Columbus’ other major department stores, Boston Store, Dunn-Taft, The Union, The Fashion, Morehouse-Martens, and Moby’s were, like Lazarus, located on High Street. The specialty apparel shops were split between Broad and High with several dressmaker’s shops located on Broad Street as well. Smaller department stores, such as Danzigier’s and The Climax on Mt. Vernon and E. L. Schottenstein’s on Parsons were beginning to branch out into the neighborhoods nearest to downtown.
Columbus' major specialty stores managed to survive the economic depression of the 1930s, and although 1932 could not have been a good year to open a retail clothing business, Jane Rumberger's shop survived into the 1960s. The number of dressmakers grew during the decade as well. After a decline in the 1920s to numbers less than 100, by 1935 the numbers were up to 164. This may have been due to the lack of employment outside the home and women's turning to dressmaking to bring in some income.

During the war years, Lazarus demonstrated its patriotism by sponsoring adult education programs, wartime homemaker training—cooking, sewing, nursing—and recruiting stations for women marines and WAACs. It showed newsreels, and used the main corner window as a victory corner to sell war bonds and stamps via civic organizations and celebrities like Marlene Dietrich. Lazarus acted as a salvage station for old hosiery—nylon, silk, lisle, rayon and furs. The discarded furs were used to make vests for merchant marines in the Arctic.

Fashion was ready for a change after the serious years of WWII and its clothing restrictions. Hemlines dropped and skirts became fuller in reaction to the shorter straight skirts worn during the war. Lazarus also recognized a new market after the war, teenagers. In 1948, the sixth floor of the store was devoted entirely to America's youth, both male and female. There were 15 departments that ranged from 'tots to teens' all located on one floor to provide greater convenience for the consumer.

The first teen grooming course offered by Lazarus was about 1949. It was announced once, on a high school interest radio program and sold out from then on by word of mouth. It was taught by a former model and fashion coordinator and her assistants—as many as 6-8 classes per week for the six week course. The original cost was $3.50 for the course which included a hat box. The participants learned about etiquette, make-up, and exercise.

The decade of the 1950s was a bonanza time for fashion in the Capital in general. An all-time high of 159 apparel stores, compiled by counting the combined listings of department, men's and women's clothing and dry goods stores, and furriers, were listed in the Columbus city directory. Although the majority of stores were still located downtown, some stores began to branch out into the neighborhoods during this decade, following their customers. The Union had branch stores on Lane Avenue, in the Town & Country shopping center east of downtown, and near the University north of downtown. The Boston Store was located in Town & Country also, and The Fair had moved out on Cleveland Avenue to the Northern Lights shopping center. New to the fashion scene in 1950 was Cole of Columbus, a specialty store for women's apparel, located on the north side of town in the Beechwold neighborhood. The area around Broad and High streets downtown was no longer the only location in which to find the latest fashionable styles.

A few other changes took place during the 1950s. Morehouse-Martens and The Fashion merged, becoming Morehouse-Fashion. Mrs Eugene Gray finally closed her store in 1952, only to have Milgrim open in that location in 1953. The French Shop, Montaldo's and Jane Rumberger's were still located nearby, within a block of each other on Broad Street. Lazarus' French Room had recently changed its name to the Wedgwood Room and sold designer clothes by Maurice Rentner, Herbert Sondheim, and Howard Greer among others, but held the exclusive for Christian Dior merchandise.
In the 1960s, the trend to move out of downtown continued. The Union opened two more stores, one in the Graceland shopping center and another in the Northland Mall. Madison's had locations in the Town & Country and Kingsdale shopping centers as well as the Northland Mall. Lazarus had branch stores at Northland and Westland, and a little store called The Limited opened in the Kingsdale shopping center in 1963.

Fashion in Columbus had become a serious business, even for the department stores which carried a greater variety of merchandise. In a 1995 article for the Columbus Dispatch, James Flanigan wrote, “Apparel sales, especially women’s apparel, provide a very high percentage—typically 65%—of department stores’ business.”

The U.S. Fashion Industry recognized the importance of apparel retail sales in Ohio’s capital city, and with the help of the Columbus Dispatch newspaper, brought one of Fashion’s greatest shows to town. The 22nd Annual Coty American Fashion Critics’ Award Show came to Columbus in 1964. All the major department and specialty stores took part—Cole of Columbus, The Fashion (who had just changed their name back from Morehouse-Fashion in 1963), the F & R Lazarus Company, Montaldo’s, Sears, and The Union Company. June Wells Dill, the Dispatch’s fashion editor, introduced Eleanor Lambert the producer of the Coty Awards shows. That year, Geoffrey Beene was chosen as the best designer winner. Alice Crouthers, buyer for Lazarus’ Wedgwood Room, had several Beene garments from this time period that she donated to OSU’s Collection.

Gayle Strege - Curator

Acknowledgments:

Exhibitions do not happen without the hard work and dedication of many individuals and organizations. On behalf of the Historic Costume & Textiles Collection in the Geraldine Schottenstein Wing at The Ohio State University, I would graciously like to acknowledge the help and support of the following:

Frances Angiulo
Kathleen Busche
Mary Nancy Davis
June Wells Dill
Marshall Hood
Amy Jones
Harriet McBride
Brennan O’Neill
Daina Palermo
John Pryba
Andrew Reilly
Marianne Tomlinson
Joan Wernz
Lindsay York

The Friends of the Historic Costume & Textiles Collection
The College of Human Ecology
The Department of Consumer & Textile Sciences
The Ohio Arts Council
The Ohio Historical Society
Libraries and Archives
Kaufmann’s, A Division of the May Department Stores Company

Ohio Arts Council
A State Agency
That Supports Public Programs in the Arts

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Thank you for 53 Years of Service to the Capital City

Ed Potter
Mercedes-Benz