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Introduction

# The Retail District

## Woodward Avenue

When the city center moved away from the riverfront in the 1870's, Woodward Avenue became the center for retail shopping in Detroit. Scores of independent shops specialized in everything from groceries to artificial limbs, but most of the stores sold clothing and household provisions; a few larger concerns sold general dry goods.

Detroit, like other American cities, saw the rise of the department store in the 1880's. The cheaper factory-produced goods now available to everyone found a natural home in the selling factories that sprang up in the urban centers. Following the example of Victorian England and spurred by rising consumerism, competitive merchants occupied larger and larger spaces filled with more and more mer chandise so that floorspace had to be divided into departments. Merchants who combined the widest variety of merchandise with attractive display, efficient management, and large-scale buying became as wealthy as their industrial counterparts.



In Detroit, J.L. Hudson, a second-generation haberdasher, vied with Mabley-Goodfellow; Newcomb Endicott; and Elliot, Taylor, & Woolfenden for retail supremacy. Hudson's 1891 store at the corner of Farmer and Gratiot (*note the inverted Hudson's sign in the left middle ground*) in the heart of the retail district soon occupied the entire block, and by the 1950's J.L. Hudson Inc. was the third largest retailer in the country.

As the population moved to the suburbs in the 1950's, Hudson's built satellite stores at the new suburban shopping malls like Northland and Eastland, drawing customers away from downtown. The company maintained at the downtown location until 1983 when the store was closed for lack of traffic.

Despite a number of schemes for re-opening the building, it remained vacant from 1983 until 1998, a dark and highly-visible reminder of the decline of downtown. Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer called it "a millstone hanging around Detroit's neck", and the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) demolished the building with explosives on October 24, 1998, thw arting the plans of preservationists who insisted that the building should be redeveloped.

Still, Detroiters have a deep emotional attachment to the building, mainly because of Christmas memories centered around the store's holiday promotions that included elaborate disp lays and the annual Thanksgiving Parade. Hudson's merchandise was the quality benchmark for generations of Detroiter's, and a gift from Hudson's was a



special gift indeed. A trip to the downtown store was a special excursion, the pinnacle of which was lun ch in the top floor restaurant. Despite the emotional attachment, Detroiters overwhelmingly preferred the suburban stores, and the company couldn't make a go of it downtown. Following a wave of national retail consolidation in the late 1970's, J.L. Hudson 's merged with Dayton Stores of Minneapolis to form the Dayton Hudson Corporation that operates Hudson's stores today.



Smaller retail operations rode the wave of Hudson's success and decline. Shoppers drawn to the magnet of the downtown department stores also patronized smaller stores for specialized merchandise. The B. Siegel Co., which can be seen at the far right in the panorama photo, was directly across from the Hudson's building. Offering fine quality men's and women's clothing, the store gave shoppers an alternat ive to the mass merchandising of the the big stores. Siegel's also fled to the malls in the post-WW II era.

The S.S. Kresge stores, famous for their "five and ten cent" merchandise, started just a few storefronts north of Siegel's and offered the budget-minded shopper downtown frills at ordinary prices. The Kresge chain morphed into Kmart stores in the 1960's and eventually abandonned storefront retailing.



Jewelry stores flourished in dowtown as Detroiters' rising incomes allowed them to make purchases beyond the basic necessities. Seen in this photo are th e counters at Traub Jewelers. The mustachioed gentleman (*left*) seems very protective of his wares.



Today, the jewelers, furriers, and other high-tone stores are gone, replaced by independent merchants who offer a bizarre mix of wigs, discount jeans, and cheap shoes behind storefronts masked with steel bars and plywood.



The city tried to revitalize the area in the late 1970's with a plaza-style shopping area featuring planters, increased pedestrian space and *retr o-look* brick paving, but it did nothing to bring in shoppers who were flocking to recently-constructed, greenhouse-like suburban malls like Lakeside and Fairlane. While some criticized the city for not totally renovating the area as an indoor mall, the downtown Renaissance Center of the same era showed that even indoor shopping in downtown was unfeasible. Completed in 1977, the riverfront complex featured exclusive stores like FAO Schwartz, Godiva Chocolates, and Gucci Leather as well as many stores found in the suburban malls. Within five years however, these outlets moved out, done in by the reluctance of Metro-Detroiters to consider downtown as a shopping area.