

Hochschild Kohn & Co.

*Holiday
Greetings
1910*



Holidays

HOWARD STREET

when shopping in Baltimore was still an event

BY HOLLY LEWIS MADDUX

Once upon a time, around 120 years ago, there was no such thing as a shopping mall or even a department store in Maryland. Harried housewives trekked from one cramped and dingy retailer to another to shop for the family's needs: a dry-goods store for fabric, the millinery for a hat, a white-goods store for bedding, and so on.

They haggled with proprietors for a price and scurried on their way. Even if the stores had been pleasant, which they weren't—they were dark and cold and often short on choices—there was scant time to browse or to savor the shopping experience, for, by golly, there was butter to churn!

But then a succession of labor-saving inventions came into being. It all began with that small nugget of domestic convenience, the spring-clamp clothespin, in 1853, and snowballed from there. The carpet sweeper, first beheld in 1876, only to be one-upped by the vacuum cleaner in 1900, was all but trivialized by the arrival of the electric washing machine in 1906. By the time toasters appeared on store shelves in 1910, they must have seemed like the fine chocolate mint that follows a feast—which, by 1915, could be prepared in advance, thanks to the availability of home refrigerators.

What was a woman to do with all this saved time? Why, shop, of course. And women then, as today, were indeed responsible for the large majority of household purchases.

In the final years of the 1800s, entrepreneurs with the surnames Hutzler, Hochschild, Kohn, and Hecht, sons and grandsons of German Jews who had immigrated as early as the 1830s and begun their retailing efforts as peddlers of such items as pelts and cloth, built Baltimore's first department stores, and shopping became an altogether more pleasant experience. Hutzler's and Hoshchild and Kohn stood at the intersection of Howard and Lexington streets; Hecht's, originally known as the Hub, was a few blocks further south, but would eventually relocate to that intersection, too, which was widely regarded as the retail center of town.

Called "palaces" (indeed, even turrets rose from the Hutzler building), these emporiums were a far cry from the simple specialty stores that had preceded them. Shoppers were awed by their lavish reception areas, lavatories, changing rooms, restaurants, tearooms, and beauty salons, and by the new-fangled conveyances—elevators, escalators,

and complex systems of pneumatic tubes that moved payments and change—not to mention the electric lights and ventilation.

In these new "museums of merchandise," customers encountered fixed prices for the first time, as well as an unprecedented volume and variety of goods. Hecht's became famous for its home furnishings, Hochschild and Kohn for housewares, and Hutzler's for stylish women's apparel, though each carried all of these items, plus books, appliances, notions, toys, baked goods, and more.

At street level, panoramic plate-glass windows lined the crowded sidewalks and gave Baltimoreans their first view of "display windows." These afforded the retailers the opportunity to conduct a new kind of merchandising. Realistic mannequins were dressed in stylish outfits inspired by trends in Paris and New York, and arranged in happy domestic scenes enjoying the books, china, and shiny pots and pans that could be purchased in the stores. Passersby marveled and surmised that if they, too, could wear such outfits and own such lovely objects, they would certainly be happier, more confident people.





From top to bottom: Howard and Lexington streets teem with shoppers in 1941; Hochschild and Kohn, pictured here in 1903, once stood as a beacon of Baltimore retail; the scenes in Hutzler's display window, such as this one from 1947, lured customers with their portrayal of the good life.

The stores' newspaper ads became illustrated full-page spreads rather than the then-usual small block-typed sort. The concepts of glamour and fashion were born. No longer was it believed that the social ladder could only be climbed by hard work and personal integrity; through newly aggressive marketing, the idea was put forth that respectability could be bought—on credit, no less. The department stores, in fact, issued “credit tokens” that were later replaced by rectangular “charge plates,” which some Baltimoreans of a certain age still fondly remember.

Customer service was another innovation of these establishments, and it continued to be their hallmark for decades. Sixty-eight-year-old John Sondheim, a relative of the Kohns who began his career at Hochschild and Kohn in the 1950s, believes that the level of service offered then is rare today. “Nordstrom is the only department store in Baltimore where the customer service is still at the level of those old department stores,” he says, recalling the time a woman arrived in the Hochschild and Kohn housewares department with her years-old pots and pans and was permitted to return them for a refund.

“And sales clerks really knew their customers back then,” he continues. “I remember when an especially beloved women’s-wear saleswoman retired. Her customers were truly distraught, and one woman confessed that she’d never bought a dress from anyone else in her adult life.” In those days, sales clerks regularly kept notes on customers’ preferences and sizes, and scouted out their departments for appropriate selections to offer.

Shopping in the Hutzler, Horschchild and Kohn, and Hecht “palaces” became a favorite pastime of Baltimoreans. Eighty-year-old Kate Carol Chittenden, now of Towson, recalls taking the streetcar from her home to the

intersection of Howard and Lexington streets with friends. They agreed to “meet at Hutzler’s [vestibule] clock,” and, if they lost one another, to leave a note in a big book that had been placed below the clock before heading off in a flurry of shopping.

“After you purchased something, it was whisked away,” says Chittenden. “You wouldn’t see it again until the delivery truck showed up at your house later that day, and there it would be, neatly wrapped and bundled. We didn’t lug bags around back then.”

Shoppers made a full day of it and often combined a trip to Howard and Lexington with a movie and lunch. North Baltimore resident Marion Pokrass remembers taking the bus from her Washington Avenue home every Saturday in the 1940s while her mother worked. She’d window-shop before heading off to a movie at the nearby Keith or Century theaters. “Then I’d head over to the Hochschild and Kohn Tearoom,” says Pokrass. “I had to put on a hat and gloves, which I’d have in my purse for the occasion. It was fancy.”

Not only did the department stores introduce modern-day merchandising and advertising, luxury surroundings, customer service, fixed prices, one-stop shopping, and shopping on credit to Baltimore, they also played a major role in creating the idea of Christmas as a big-time gift-giving holiday.

By November, as the days were growing shorter and the weather colder, Baltimoreans were less inclined to venture out. A typical 19th-century homemaker put her stores in before the winter months arrived; besides, at the turn of the last century, it was still de rigueur to give an orange or a handful of nuts to a loved one at Christmas.

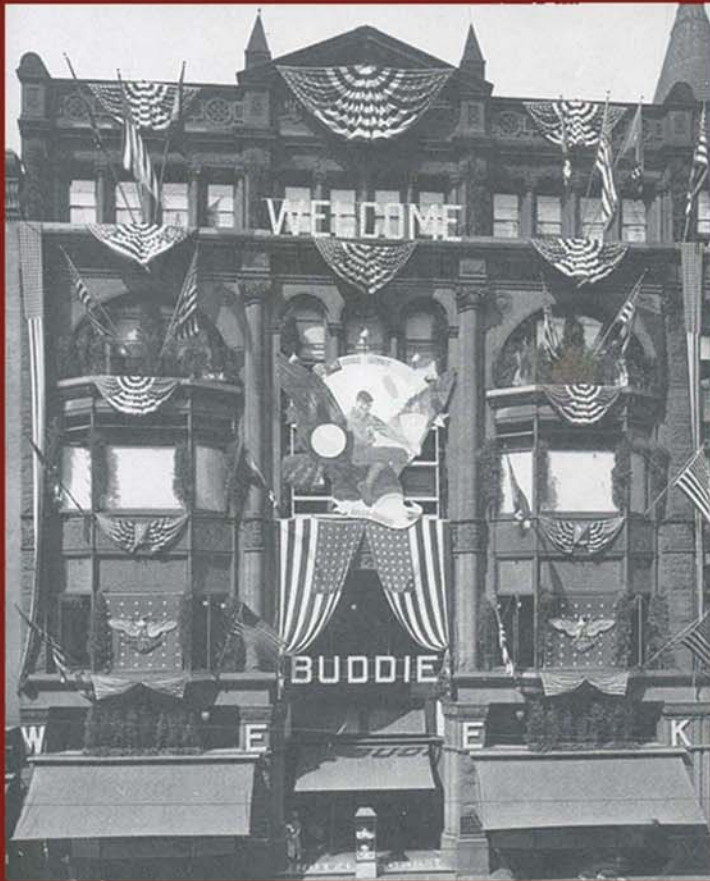
Then the department stores, which were increasingly able to secure large inventories of toys as factories began mass-producing them, started marketing

them for Christmas with their window displays, advertising spreads, elaborate Christmas catalogues, and even finely illustrated self-published children's books featuring, of course, the toy-department offerings.

By the 1930s, jolly old Saint Nick was making personal appearances in the stores; in 1933, Hochschild and Kohn upped the ante with the Toy Town Parade, which featured large inflated floating characters (a la the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade) and elves that danced through the crowds, mailboxes in arms, collecting children's letters for Santa. The parade became an annual Thanksgiving event and remained an institution until 1977, when it wound its way down Lexington Street one final time.

By then, the "palaces" were ghosts of what they had once been. At that point, their efforts were concentrated on branches in the suburbs, a trend that had begun in 1947, with Hochschild and Kohn's opening of the Edmondson Village store. A final blow had been dealt to the popularity of downtown shopping in 1968, when riots followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and suburban shoppers became fearful of venturing into the city.

Hecht's persevered until 1988, when it closed its downtown flagship store. Hutzler's shuttered its once-grand palace, turrets and all, the following year. •



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A circa-1920 Hutzler's boasts patriotic "Buddie Week" finery; Hutzler's once-thriving hub building, a retail mecca for generations of Baltimore shoppers.

