

The Filene's Complex

Study Report

As amended May 9, 2006



Boston Landmarks Commission
Environment Department
City of Boston

3.0 SIGNIFICANCE

The development of the current parcel at 426 Washington Street represents the growth of a retail establishment with significance at the local, regional, and national levels. Much more than a revered local business, Filene's embodies the visionary ideals of German immigrant, William Filene, and his sons, Edward and Lincoln Filene, whose progressive approaches to management and merchandizing that advocated for employee empowerment and co-operative relationships between vendors drew national attention and transformed the retail industry. The original purpose-built Filene's store at the corner of Washington and Summer streets comprising half of the parcel is further distinguished as the last major commission and the only work in the Commonwealth of nationally prominent architect and urban planner, Daniel Burnham. Expansion of the store through the 1920s resulted in occupation of the entire city block bound by Washington, Summer, Franklin, and Hawley streets by 1929. All but one of the buildings that predated the construction of the purpose-built Filene's store in 1912 were demolished to accommodate additions on Hawley Street in 1951 and at the corner of Washington and Franklin streets in 1973. The lone survivor at the corner of Franklin and Hawley streets is significant for its associations with the expansion of Filene's but also for its associations with its original tenant, the Jones, McDuffee, and Stratton Company, recognized as one of the largest American importers of glass and pottery in the country in the early twentieth century, in business from 1810-1955.

3.1 Historic Significance

Beginnings

The first iteration of the store that would become an internationally recognized retail giant appeared in the form of a small tailor shop, W. Filene & Co., Tailors and Drapers, just a few blocks away from its current location in 1851. William Filene, the store's founder, was born Wilhelm Katz, and emigrated to the United States from Germany in 1848. While Boston was home to the first Filene business venture, Salem was the location of his first strictly mercantile operation, which opened in 1856. As the Salem store slowly grew, Filene closed the tailor shop, and opened a wholesale house, enabling him to stock his Salem store at lower cost to himself, resulting in lower prices for his customers. Filene's enterprising nature led him to New York where he purchased a wholesale business in 1863, subsequently closing down his Boston and Salem operations. By 1869, however, an economic downturn sent Filene back to Massachusetts after his New York venture went bankrupt.

Lynn became Filene's next base of operation where the small women's apparel shop he opened, Filene's Pavilion, and later a second store selling men and boy's clothing, laid the foundation for the Filene's empire. The success of the Lynn stores enabled Filene to open a third store in Bath, Maine, Boston Bargain

Clothing Co., in 1875, a fourth store in Salem two years later, and finally to return to Boston at 10 Winter Street in 1881. A year later he opened the Guillaume Glove Store at 4 Winter Street. Filene sold his Lynn, Bath, and Salem stores shortly after the Boston stores opened to focus on the Boston businesses.⁴

By 1890, Filene had consolidated the Winter Street stores in a five story building at 445-447 Washington Street. The greatly expanded store specialized in women's ready-to-wear apparel and accessories, relatively new additions to a market largely dominated by custom-made clothing at this time. Marketing ready-to-wear clothing proved a successful gamble, as the Boston Daily Globe reported four years after Filene's initially offered the machine-made garments:

“The practice of buying ready-to-wear garments has been received with growing favor by women who exercise the greatest care in dressing according to the canons of good taste. Filene's were quick to see that the store which could offer the widest range of styles, the most complete stock from which to choose, and offer a succession of new styles and novelties in feminine apparel would be sure to appeal to the greatest number of women. And the business has been carefully organized to secure these results.”⁵

Because of the success achieved selling ready-to-wear apparel, Filene's adhered to the specialty house business model, marketing ready-to-wear garments for women and girls at first and later for men and boys, rather than expanding their merchandising efforts to include other goods. This business strategy distinguished Filene's from “departmentalized” stores which carried a variety of products, and fueled the success of the store for the next century.⁶

As significant to William Filene's legacy as his commercial success as a specialty house, was his approach to management. He regularly sought his employees' input on improvements to the stores' operations, inviting employees to his home weekly to facilitate these exchanges. In addition to engaging his employees as collaborators, Filene also endeavored to ensure comfortable working conditions by providing designated areas for employees to rest and to eat, a remarkable consideration in an age when employers rarely offered such accommodations.⁷ Filene extended this degree of consideration to his customers with whom he felt he shared a common interest. Providing quality goods at low prices served the customer while ensuring their continued patronage. This approach served him well, as documented in a local paper recording the expansion of the Boston stores, “Their business methods, always marked by sterling integrity drew customers and

⁴ Timeline drawn from the following sources: George E. Berkley, The Filenes. (Boston: International Pocket Library) 1998; Stacy Holmes, “A Brief History of Filene's” (Boston: William Filene's Sons Company) 1958, revised 1972; The Filene Book. (Boston: William Filene's Sons Company) ca. 1923.

⁵ “Boston's Great Specialty Store: Remarkable Growth in Size and Popularity in Five Years of Filene's,” *Boston Daily Globe*. November 27, 1904, p.44.

⁶ Eventually Filene's did expand their merchandizing efforts to include goods other than clothing.

⁷ George E. Berkley, The Filenes. (Boston: International Pocket Library) 1998, p.17-18.