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Marshall Field I -- Marshall Field's Department Stores



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Introduction

Marshall Field



Field in New York City studio, circa 1900

Picture of Marshall Field I -- Marshall Field's Department Stores

Born	August 18, 1834 Conway, Massachusetts, U.S.
Died	January 16, 1906 (aged 71) New York City, U.S.
Occupation	Founder of Marshall Field and Company
Spouses	Nannie Douglas Scott (m. 1893; died 1896) Delia Spencer (m. 1904)
Children	3, including Ethel Beatty
Signature	
	

Picture of Marshall Field I -- Marshall Field's Department Stores -- Life Stats

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[Wikipedia page for Marshall Field's Department Store](#)



Picture of Marshall Field's Department Stores

Marshall Field, (born Aug. 18, 1834, near Conway, Mass., U.S.—died Jan. 16, 1906, New York City), American department-store owner whose pioneering activities in retail merchandising were continued and extended into publishing by successive generations of his family.

Born on a farm, Field became at 16 an errand boy in a dry-goods store in Pittsfield, Mass., where he developed rapidly into an adept salesman. After going to Chicago, he was hired in 1856 by the mercantile house of Cooley, Wadsworth and Company (afterward Farwell, Field and Company), in which he attained full partnership. In 1865 he and Levi Zeigler Leiter (1834–1904), one of his junior partners, joined the merchandising firm of Potter Palmer (1826–

1902). When Palmer formally withdrew in 1867, the organization became known as Field, Leiter and Company and in 1868 rented from Palmer an ornate building on State Street to serve as their firm's department store. In 1881 Field bought out Leiter for \$2,500,000, changing the name of the firm to Marshall Field and Company. In an age of shoddy and unethical merchandising practices, Field instead emphasized customer service, stressing liberal credit, the one-price system, and the privilege of returning merchandise. He also introduced the department-store restaurant for shoppers.

Marshall Field is considered to be one of the greatest retailers of all time. He virtually created the modern department store, and he played a large role in Chicago's transformation from a small town to a major city. Field was one of the great American self-made millionaires of the nineteenth century.

A shy and hard-working man, Field's success in business did not guarantee a happy personal life. His first marriage, to Nannie Scott, ended in 1896 with his wife's death in France, where she lived without Field for many years. Field's son, Marshall II, died almost ten years later in a tragic shooting accident. Field's last joy in life was his marriage to long-time friend Delia Caton just a few months before his own death. Sometimes portrayed as lonely and unloved, Field found his deepest happiness in his store.

"If Marshall Field had anything to sell, he would sell it, if a customer came in; if a customer did not come in, he was not above going out and finding one." — Joseph Field, Marshall Field's brother

The Road to Chicago

Marshall Field was born on August 18, 1834, in Conway, Massachusetts. He was the third of six children. His parents, John and Fidelity, ran a farm just outside of Conway. When he wasn't working on the farm, Field took classes at a nearby school. He became expert at trading with the other boys for their pocketknives. At fifteen, Field began working as a clerk in a local store, after his father sold the family farm to Field's older brother Chandler. He realized he would never have a farm of his own and needed a new career.

At first Field did not seem cut out for retailing. His first employer told Mr. Field

that his son would never be able to run a store. Field returned to farm work for several years before leaving Conway to work at a store in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. He did better this time, easily memorizing the store's products and prices, and showing a flair for handling customers. After five years, Field's boss offered to make him a partner, but Field declined. He wanted to move west, and by the end of the year he had settled in Chicago, Illinois.

At the time, Chicago was a town of about eight thousand people, with rows of wooden buildings lining dirt roads that turned muddy in the rain. The town, however, was slowly becoming the most important city in the Midwest. Its location on Lake Michigan and the increasing number of railways leading to it made Chicago a center for trade. Field took a job with Cooley, Wadsworth and Company, the largest dry-goods store in the city. By 1860, Field was a junior partner in the company. Five years later, he and another partner at Cooley, Levi Leiter, went into business with one of their competitors, Potter Palmer.

His first year in Chicago, Marshall Field earned just \$400, which was an average yearly salary for the time. He slept in the Cooley store where he worked to save money. After he joined forces with Palmer and Leiter to form his own company, Field was worth more than \$250,000.

The Field Way

With his new store, Field followed the practices he had developed at Cooley. He and his partners rarely sold items on credit and paid cash for what they sold. These policies helped the store survive difficult times when business slowed. Field also looked for the best products available and dealt honestly with his customers.

In 1867, Palmer sold his share of the store. Field then brought his brothers Joseph and Henry into the business, which was renamed Field, Leiter and Company. The next year, the company opened a new store in a beautiful downtown building. An impressed reporter for the Chicago Tribune wrote that the store "looked palatial, fairy-like, and for all the world as if it had been brought into existence by some enchanter." The grand building, however, was badly damaged in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Field temporarily set up

business in a large barn, then opened a new store in 1872. Business grew again, as Field offered a wide range of goods, many of them imported from Europe. Later, the company set up its own factories to make many of the items sold in the store. Field's signature appeared on the label of many of the clothes, a sign to shoppers they had bought a quality product.

By the end of the decade, Field's partnership with Leiter grew tense. Field bought his share of the business in 1881, and the company was renamed Marshall Field & Company. Going into the 1890s, Field dominated the department store business in Chicago. He introduced several policies copied by stores around the nation, such as free delivery and an easy return policy. Field helped popularize the idea that "the customer is always right."

The company's growth came as Chicago was turning into an industrial center, and more people had money to buy the fine products Marshall Field's offered. Field especially catered to women, creating a pleasing shopping environment. The store was also a tourist attraction for people who had never seen a department store with such splendor.

In 1905, Marshall Field was the largest individual taxpayer in the United States.

Businessman and Philanthropist

As his wealth increased, Field became an important figure in Chicago. He was friendly with the city's other business leaders, including George Pullman (1831-1897), a maker of railroad cars. When Pullman's workers went on strike in 1894, Field suggested the Illinois National Guard be called in to break up the strike. Chicago labor leaders began calling the Guardsmen "Marshall Field's Boys." With his own workers, Field set high standards. His store clerks received less than the standard wage, but they were also rewarded with more responsibility. One new clerk, John Shedd, impressed Field with his intelligence and hard work, so Field promoted him. Shedd became president of the company after Field's death.

For the first part of his career, Field was not particularly active with charities, but starting in the 1890s he became more generous. He donated the land for the University of Chicago and also gave money to the school. In 1893, he gave \$1

million for a museum built for the Columbian Exhibition, a world's fair held in Chicago to honor the four-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to America. Today, the Field Museum of Natural History is one of the finest museums in the United States.

By the time Field died in 1906, his fortune was worth about \$150 million. Most of this was real estate Field owned in Chicago. In his will, he left money for the Field Museum and several local charities. Most of his money went into a trust for his grandsons, Henry and Marshall III. (The younger Marshall Field later used some of his wealth to enter the newspaper publishing industry.) Field had succeeded in business by following several simple rules. In 1896, he wrote some of them down in a letter, quoted in John Tebbel's book, *The Marshall Fields*. "Merchants who keep their business well in hand," Field wrote, "sell for cash ... keep good habits and give strict attention to business very rarely fail."



Picture of Marshall Field & Company Chicago

Another Biography:

(1834-1906)

Marshall Field and Company

Overview

Marshall Field, a pioneer in the retail industry, founded what grew to become the world's largest department store. His innovative ideas and readiness to explore new ways of servicing retail customers distinguished Field from so many other merchants. His motto, "The customer is always right," not only summarized his business philosophy, but also became a creed for all who entered the retail industry. His unwavering focus on customer satisfaction eventually made him a highly successful and respected merchant.

Personal Life

Marshall Field was born on August 18, 1834, and was the third of six children on a modest farm near the town of Conway, Massachusetts. His parents, John and Fidelia Nash Field, had roots there that dated back to 1630. Field attended the district school in Conway. While he was not a very good student, he excelled athletically; he was the fastest runner in his school. Early on, he exhibited a keen sense of business in trading jack knives with the other boys. Marshall Field was quiet and usually spent most of his time alone, however, a trait that he carried with him in later years. Field matured to become a man of few words, particularly in the home. When he did talk, it was about business. Field was reportedly addicted to work, as he had been since childhood, a value instilled in him early by his father. If he had any relaxation time, it too was filled with thoughts of improving his business.

Field's personal life included hardship and tragedy. He married his first wife, in 1863 at the age of 29. Nannie was the daughter of a wealthy ironworker from Ohio. However, she left him in the late 1880s to live in France by herself. She complained that her husband was so involved in his business that his continuing absence had driven her away and only apart from him could she find relief from her loneliness. Field and his wife never divorced. When Nannie died in Paris in 1896, he began a secret relationship with Delia Spencer, the wife of a friend of his. After Delia's husband died in 1905, she and Field were married.

In November of 1905, his only son, shot himself in the abdomen while preparing for a hunting trip. The elder Field was devastated and, at age 71, came down with pneumonia a month after his son died. He died on January 6, 1906.

Career Details

An unexpected closing of the main road that went by the Field farm is what would eventually lead Field to leave farming. Due to the change in property values, John Field sold the family farm and purchased a new piece of property, then turned it over to his son, Chandler, one of Field's older brothers. The life in farming that Field had come to expect, even if it had not been appealing to him, was now no longer in his future. So he searched for other options, first trying his hand as a clerk at a store. It seemed like an easy job, but at age 15 Field was seen as a miserable failure. The merchant told John Field that his son would never make it in the business world. Marshall was forced to return to his brother's farm and work as a hired hand. During the next two years working there, Field realized farming was not for him and he longed to be self-employed.

At age 17, with his brother Joseph, he took a job in a dry goods store in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Even into the twentieth century, a dry goods store was the name given to what is now known as a department store that offered a variety of clothing and household goods. This time Marshall knew he had no choice except to stay and work hard at making a career for himself. He remained at the store for five years, living above the store and learning the business. It was said that he was shy, but courteous, and hard working enough to make up for whatever natural talent he might have lacked.

After five years, his employer in Pittsfield offered him a partnership, but Field declined. He decided that the best opportunities for making a fortune were in the West. At that time, prior to the Civil War, the West included the territories west of Ohio. Rapid development and population growth offered endless possibilities for any merchant ambitious enough to relocate to uncharted territory.

Field left New England at age 22 and moved to Chicago, which was a young

city at the time. The city was rough, wild, and muddy. Yet, it was a city on the verge of becoming the center of the American Midwest and the hub of travel by rail, land, and water. It was there that Field decided to set up shop.

Upon moving to Chicago, Field obtained work as a clerk in a dry goods store called Cooley, Wadsworth and Company. It was the largest store of its kind in Chicago at that time. The small and serious Marshall Field arranged to live and sleep in the store, managing to save half of his small income by living this way. The man who came to be known as "silent Marsh," because of his retiring social manner, at this time he became obsessed to become a successful businessmen. By age 28, Field had risen to become a full partner in the company.

Field's consistently high level of performance at the store prompted another local entrepreneur, Putler Palmer, to ask that Field and his close partner Levi Leiter start a new business. This would be a new and full-range dry goods store in Chicago. Marshall Field, by the age of 30, had risen from a small store clerk to the co-owner of one of the largest department stores in Chicago in only eight years. In 1867, after two years of partnership, Field had arranged to buy out his partner, Levi Leiter and brought his two younger brothers into the business as partners.

Social And Economic Impact

The timing for Field's business ventures would seem all wrong. He started his partnership in the midst of the Civil War and calamities in Chicago soon followed. The fire of 1871 and the great financial panic of 1873, which impacted the financial stability of the entire nation, were challenges Field had to endure. He remained undaunted and unyielding to these forces, never veering from his goal of being a successful businessman. He worked day and night to rebuild and to refine his business. His efforts would eventually pay off, as he would ultimately create a giant department store that became world renowned.

Field decided to concentrate on retail sales and totally abandoned wholesale aspects of his business. In the meantime, the city was changing every day. A new middle class was emerging with money to spend. He also realized the importance of concentrating on women as his main customers and moved his

business to a part of town that was safe and physically accessible to women.

As a merchant, Field was responsible for many innovations. He introduced the one-price system, bought and sold for cash, and permitted exchange of goods. The reliability of his store was well known. Field knew how to capitalize on the latest business trends and tailor them to his needs. He adopted the idea of home delivery and offering an interior decoration department. Field established his store as one for people of good taste and employed European buyers, who brought back the finest china and furniture from Europe. His store was to be the standard against which all others would be measured. Field is given credit for re-inventing the motto, "The customer is always right." If an article was returned, for any reason, the customer's money was returned, as well. He was the first to display merchandise in the front-windows to draw pedestrians inside. He also opened a restaurant in the store and initiated free gift-wrapping for customers. It was also Field who started what some may say as the most significant innovation of all: The Bargain Basement. Because of his efforts, sales grew from \$12 million annually in 1868 to \$25 million by 1881 and \$68 million in 1906.

Field's business earned him millions in his lifetime. He was known to everyone in Chicago, and socialized with the very rich of the city. He had an enormous estate built on Chicago's prestigious Prairie Avenue. Through it all, Field still held onto the ways of his farming boyhood and had changed little: he was still quiet, socially shy, and known as somewhat reclusive. Interestingly, Field pushed the development of downtown Chicago, so that when he died, half of his fortune, estimated at \$100 to \$150 million, was in Chicago properties. He wished to make Chicago a great educational and cultural center and gave large sums to various institutions. He helped found the Art Institute, donated the land on which the first building of the University of Chicago was erected, and contributed \$1 million for the museum of the World's Columbian Exposition. This museum became Field's chief interest; in addition to gifts during his lifetime, his \$8 million bequest built the Field (later Chicago) Museum of National History. Even to the present, this museum remains a foremost tourist attraction and significant contribution to the city's culture.

Field refined and created the model department store. It was a complete store with elaborate displays, a variety of products, in-store cosmetics shops, dining areas, and of course the bargain basement concept. His customer-friendly policy, and the simple vastness of his store offering something for everyone, brought him a shopping center with great customer loyalty. This concept was copied by all who opened department stores in the United States and around the world.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, Marshall Field was known as a workaholic, never sitting idle for a day. His business style was to work constantly. He loved his employees who cared about business as much as he did, and promoted the ambitious and efficient ones to high ranks in the company.

Field ushered in new ideas and initiated whatever seemed to work in other businesses. He took trends and made them work for his store with always an eye to the customer. He created the feeling, without a doubt, that the customer was always right—which had become his company's most effective business strategy.

Chronology: Marshall Field

1834: Born.

1856: Moved to Chicago and worked as clerk at Cooley, Wadsworth & Co.

1862: Became full partner with Cooley, Wadsworth & Co.

1863: Married first wife, Nannie Scott.

1864: Joined with partner Levi Leiter to start own store.

1867: Bought out Leiter and brought two younger brothers into business.

1881: Company assumed name, Marshall Field and Company.

1906: Died.

The bulk of Marshall Field's estimated fortune of \$150 million was put into a trust fund for his grandson, who was 12 years old when his father, Marshall II, fatally shot himself. His grandson, Marshall III, caused society to talk when it

became public that he was going to donate his inheritance. He believed that inherited wealth should go to help ease social problems. Much of his money went into founding the Chicago Sun newspaper. Field's legacy would be transformed from one of wealth to one of promoting social justice—something Field could not accomplish in his own lifetime.

For More Information

Books

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<https://www.amazon.com/Biography-Marshall-Fields-Chicago-Tradition/dp/B000F6ZBYO>

Further Reading

John Tebbel, *The Marshall Fields: A Study in Wealth* (1947), is a family biography. An early company history is S. H. Ditchett, *Marshall Field and Company: The Life Story of a Great Concern* (1922). A popularized history is Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, *Give the Lady What She Wants! ... The Story of Marshall Field & Co.* (1952).

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