Ironically, Wanamaker's Department Store in Philadelphia, as a kindergartner taking the train with my mother.

Interestingly, Wanamaker's advertised heavily in Pottstown newspapers in the early 1900s, so a lot of Pottstonians must have shopped there by taking the train, a faster and easier trip than driving today.

The Wanamaker building, which is now a Macy's, was built in the day when downtown stores were designed to uplift and inspire customers with the most magnificent architecture their owners could afford.

John Wanamaker, the most influential merchant in American history, constructed in 1911 the most monumental commercial building in America, if not the world, across from Philadelphia city hall.

The gray granite masterpiece, designed in Italian Renaissance style, is 12 stories above ground and three stories below ground. The total floor area of the building is nearly 45 acres, although the structure's footprint is less than three acres.

Only the King of Prussia Mall and a handful of others cover more space.

The ground floor is divided into three courts, each with marble floors. The first three floors have fluted columns with Doric caps overlooking the courts.

The atrium in the center Grand Court soars seven stories, with the world's largest pipe organ, purchased from the St. Louis world's fair in 1909 and subsequently enlarged, at one end. Concerts are played daily. Wanamaker estimated as many as 25,000 people could listen to the music from the seven abutting floors.

There are 68 elevators in the building, 58 for passengers and 16 for freight. At one time, the second floor housed a great hall seating 1,400 people for concerts and otherwise used for displaying pianos. The crystal tea room, the largest restaurant in Philadelphia and now a private banquet hall, also seated 1,400 on the eighth floor.

Grand public buildings like Wanamaker's were open for all to enjoy — rich, poor, black, white. You didn't have to buy anything to experience their beauty and opulence. And you didn't need a car to get there.

The Wal-Marts of this world may have brought us cheaper merchandise, but at the cost of losing the beauty and intermingling that downtown stores brought into our lives.

Pottstown had its own modest version of Wanamaker's — the Bahr Arcade at High and Charlotte streets. The Wanamaker building, now partially open to the public as Macy's, is still with us. The Bahr Arcade was torn down in 1973 for a parking lot.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton