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06 Benson's Department Store

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Benson's Department Store

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When Jennifer Aniston and Owen Wilson ran up W. Gay Street during the filming of "Marley & Me," they ran right past a piece of West Chester history. Thanks to an email from a reader, plus a bit of additional research, here's a story about Benson's Department Store, which used to occupy five storefronts along the north side of W. Gay Street between Church and Darlington Street. Currently part of the space is called the "Benson Building" and houses Chester County Domestic Relations, while the rest contains the Mad Platter music store, Wright's jewelry store and one other.

There are still plenty of people in West Chester who remember when Benson's was the second-largest department store in the Borough, surpassed only by Mosteller's on the corner of Church Street, a half block to the east. Benson's was founded by Samuel T. Benson, who emigrated from Kiev before World War I, possibly to escape the aftermath of the 1905 Russian Revolution. He and his wife Nettie ended up in Philadelphia and moved to West Chester by 1914, the year that they opened a dress shop at 109 W. Gay Street. Samuel was assisted by his brother Albert until he went on to become a schoolteacher in Philadelphia for thirty years.

After World War I, Samuel began expanding his store. In 1920 he bought the store next door (now occupied by the Mad Platter) and combined the two buildings into one. During the good years of the 1920s and the lean years of the Depression, Samuel and Nettie raised a daughter and two sons, built a house on N. Penn Street, and owned what became one of the best-known stores for women's and children's clothing in the area.

One of their boys was Bernard, a 1939 graduate of West Chester High School. In 1941 he married his childhood sweetheart, Anna Dallen of 125 W. Chestnut Street, and two years later he enlisted in the US Army. He was wounded but survived while advancing with Patton's Third Army into Germany, and returned home to join the family business. He and his wife moved into the front apartment just above the store, and were living there on the night on March 25-26, 1949, when thieves broke into the store and stole over \$20,000 worth of clothing.



Samuel T. Benson



Bernard Benson, U. S. Army, circa 1945



L 1.7.1942
Mrs. Benard Benson, of West Chester, who before her marriage in Philadelphia Sunday evening was Miss Anna Dallen, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Dallen, of 125 West Chestnut street. L17

Anne Dallen Benson

Bernard and his brother Robert helped his parents manage the store through the 1950s, and in 1955 the founder and his wife moved to Atlantic City. In 1956, the sons embarked on an aggressive expansion program that started with a new facade for the front of the building designed by local architect Richard H. Peterman. He added new and larger display windows (24 and 17 feet wide respectively) featuring both indirect lighting and bullet spotlights, and surrounded by *Zourite* sheathing -- a "new alloy of aluminum in dovetailing panels."

Expansion of the store continued into the 1960s. During the summer of 1960, they bought the former Montgomery Ward Store at 113-115 W. Gay Street -- more than doubling its size -- and covered it with scaffolding so workers could integrate it into the Benson store. That same year, the Benson's added a men's clothing department, and the following

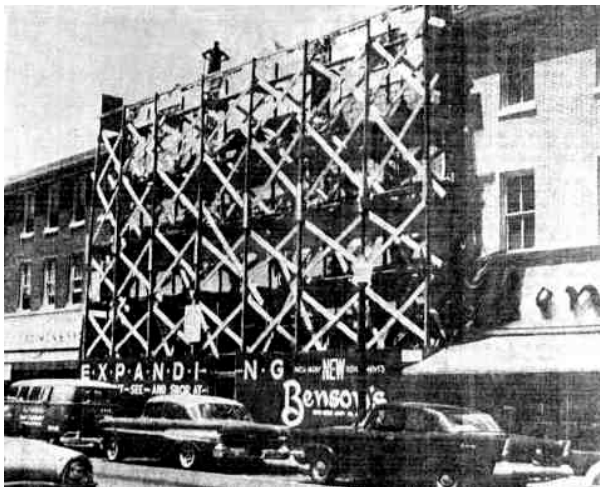


year they added a shoe department. In 1966 they provided space in their store for a "Carpet Exposition branch outlet" but the days of downtown department stores were already numbered thanks to the rise of the suburban shopping mall. Bernard sold the store in the early 1970s and became a realtor, while his wife Ann found work at the Prothonotary's office. Their daughter Elaine worked at the Norcross Greeting Card Company, and her daughter Allison provided some of the information used in this article.

Dress label



Benson's logo



Scaffolding covers the store in 1960



Advertising the 1960 reopening