

## Family Behind the Grocery House:

Life Story of William J. Merrall and His Family.

Historic Preservation Studio I, Fall 2020: Assignment 5, Ziming Wang.

### Introduction

The Merralls are among the upper middle-class families in New York who were interred in Woodlawn Cemetery. Most members of the family rest in the catacombs of a Greek Revival style mausoleum standing at 112-113 Chestnut Hill designed by architects Buchman & Fox.<sup>1</sup> The head of the family, William John Merrall (1831-1907), came to New York from England as a child; during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he established and expanded the firm of Acker, Merrall and Condit, one of the largest grocery houses in New York of the time, and turned it into a family asset in the 1890s.<sup>2</sup>

William John Merrall and his wife, Mary Elizabeth Merrall, had eight children in total – five sons and three daughters.

Basic information of the family is summarized as follows:

**William John Merrall**, grocer. Born in England in January 1831, died on March 24, 1907 at the age of 76 at his home on West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York.<sup>3</sup>

**Mary Elizabeth Merrall**, born in New York in March 1838, died in 1908 at the age of 70. Wife of William J. Merrall, daughter of William Beard.<sup>4</sup>

**William B. Merrall**, born in New York in c. 1861, died in 1910 at the age of 49. Son of William and Mary Merrall.<sup>5</sup>

**Albert Edward Merrall**, born in New York in December 1862, died in 1917 at the age of 54. Son of William and

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<sup>1</sup> Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: "Record of Interments" and "Registration of Interment (Merrall, William J)." See also, Columbia University Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, "Major Monument Records," in *Woodlawn Cemetery Records*, accessed Oct 2020, <https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/avery/da/collections/woodlawn.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Obituary" (Article; William John Merrall). *New York Times*, Mar 26, 1907. See also "Acker, Merrall & Condit. One of New-York's Most Notable Houses," *New York Times*, Jan 1, 1886.

<sup>3</sup> US Federal Census 1900, Enumeration District 468 (Manhattan, New York City), Page 4; Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: "Registration of Interment (Merrall, William J)." See also "Obituary" (Article; William John Merrall), *New-York Tribune*, Mar 25, 1907; "Obituary" (Paid; William John Merrall), *New York Times*, Mar 25, 1907; "Obituary" (Article; William John Merrall), *New York Times*, Mar 26, 1907.

<sup>4</sup> US Federal Census 1900, Enumeration District 468 (Manhattan, New York City), Page 4; Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: "Record of Interments." See also "Married" (Merrall-Beard), *New York Times*, Nov 11, 1859.

<sup>5</sup> US Federal Census 1870, New York City, Ward 9 District 8, Page 303; US Federal Census 1880, Enumeration District 170 (New York City), Page 4; Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: "Record of Interments"; see also "William B. Merrall Dead," *New York Times*, Jan 4, 1910.

Mary Merrall.<sup>6</sup>

**Caroline M. Merrall**, born in New York in December 1863, died in 1925 at the age of 61. Daughter of William and Mary Merrall.<sup>7</sup>

**Frank Acker Merrall**, born in New York in July 1866, died in 1913 at the age of 47. Son of William and Mary Merrall.<sup>8</sup>

**Charles Frederick Merrall**, born in New York in August 1867, died in 1936 at the age of 68. Son of William and Mary Merrall.<sup>9</sup>

**Walter H. Merrall**, born in New York in July 1872, died in 1932 at the age of 59. Son of William and Mary Merrall.<sup>10</sup>

**Mary A. L. Merrall**, born in New York in c. 1878, death year unknown. Daughter of William and Mary Merrall.<sup>11</sup>

**Grace E. Merrall**, born in New York in c. 1879, death year unknown. Daughter of William and Mary Merrall.<sup>12</sup>

The mausoleum was commissioned by the heirs of William J. Merrall after his death in 1907.<sup>13</sup> The connection between the Merrall family and the architects Buchman & Fox can be traced prior to William J. Merrall's death: in 1906, the architectural office designed a stable building for Acker, Merrall & Condit at 532-540 West 36<sup>th</sup> Street; they were also the architects of a 1904 warehouse leased by the company on 375 West 43<sup>rd</sup> Street.<sup>14</sup>

All of the family, except the two youngest daughters Mary & Grace, are interred in this mausoleum.<sup>15</sup> The family is listed in the Federal Censuses of 1860, 1870, 1880 and 1900, with the results giving a testament on how the Merralls grew from a young couple with a servant into a big family. In view that Mr. William J. Merrall and all his sons were in the grocery

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<sup>6</sup> US Federal Census 1900, Enumeration District 468 (Manhattan, New York City), Page 4; Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: "Record of Interments"; "A. E. Merrall's Funeral," *New-York Tribune*, Feb 6, 1917; "Obituary" (Albert Edward Merrall), *New York Times*, Feb 7, 1917.

<sup>7</sup> US Federal Census 1860, New York City, Ward 8 District 3, Page 832; US Federal Census 1870, New York City, Ward 9 District 8, Page 303; US Federal Census 1880, Enumeration District 170 (New York City), Page 4; US Federal Census 1900, Enumeration District 468 (Manhattan, New York City), Page 4. Comparing the records, there should have been a mistake in the birth month record of 1900: "Dec 1863" was written as "Dec 1873". See also, Woodlawn Cemetery, "Record of Interments."

<sup>8</sup> US Federal Census 1900, Enumeration District 468 (Manhattan, New York City), Page 4; Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: "Record of Interments"; "Obituary" (Frank Acker Merrall), *New-York Tribune*, Feb 3, 1913.

<sup>9</sup> US Federal Census 1900, Enumeration District 468 (Manhattan, New York City), Page 4; Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: "Record of Interments"; "Obituary" (Charles Frederic Merrall), *New York Times*, Oct 1, 1936.

<sup>10</sup> US Federal Census 1900, Enumeration District 468 (Manhattan, New York City), Page 4; Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: "Record of Interments"; "W. H. Merrall Dead; Noted Merchant," *New York Times*, Jan 17, 1932.

<sup>11</sup> US Federal Census 1880, Enumeration District 170 (New York City), Page 4; US Federal Census 1900, Enumeration District 468 (Manhattan, New York City), Page 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See Columbia University Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library Drawings & Archives, Architectural Drawings of the Merrall Mausoleum in *Woodlawn Cemetery Collection*.

<sup>14</sup> See "Stables," in *Real Estate Record & Builder's Guide*, Dec 15, 1906, page 998; "Real Estate Notes," in *Real Estate Record & Builder's Guide*, Oct 15, 1904, page 787.

<sup>15</sup> Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: "Record of Interments."

business, their obituaries often emerge as a news article in *New York Times* or *New York Tribune*.<sup>16</sup>

It's also worth notice that, there are some inconsistency among the census records. For example, William B. Merrall didn't show up in the 1900 census; a mistake could had happened in recording the birth year of Caroline M. Merrall during the 1900 census; there was ambiguity in the birth year of the two youngest daughters, Mary & Grace; the age of one of the family's Irish servants, Caffery Rigel, is inconsistent between two censuses.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Merrall was sometimes misspelled as "Merall" or "Morrell"; female family members were sometimes recorded by variants of their names. As no exact birth month was provided in censuses prior to 1900, birth-year information inferred by the ages recorded in earlier censuses may be slightly deviated.

## The Family Grocery

The primary profile of William J. Merrall and his family was that they were the owner of the Acker, Merrall and Condit company; Mr. William J. Merrall himself was a lifelong grocer, and at least four of his sons died in leading positions of Acker, Merrall and Condit.<sup>18</sup>

The roots of the company were in the workplace of young William J. Merrall, the T. & A. S. Hoppe grocery firm. Mr. Merrall started working in this firm in c. 1843, at the age of 12.<sup>19</sup> when T. Hoppe died in 1839, David D. Acker was chosen by A. S. Hoppe as his partner; after the death of A. S. Hoppe in 1851, Acker, Merrall and another partner John W. Condit co-founded Acker, Merrall & Condit in 1856, at 130 & 132 Chambers Street.<sup>20</sup>

Acker, Merrall and Condit began its expansion into one of the leading brands of wholesale grocery in New York City during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some of their major retail stores in Lower & Middle Manhattan are: the main

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<sup>16</sup> See Bibliography, "Marriage & Obituary".

<sup>17</sup> For Caroline M. Merrall's birth year, see footnote 7. The 1900 Census stated that Grace was born in Jul 1881, but she was already 1 year old in the 1880 Census. The correct birth year should be around 1879. Similarly, the 1900 Census states that Anna was born in Aug 1878, but by the time of 1880 Census she was already 3 years old; a slight conflict between these two records. Caffery Rigel was 22 in the 1870 Census, 40 in the 1880 Census.

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix: A Brief Chronicle of the Family, 1910-1932.

<sup>19</sup> "Obituary" (Article; William John Merrall), *New York Times*, Mar 26, 1907.

<sup>20</sup> "Changes in a Big Grocery Firm," *New-York Tribune*, Jun 19, 1892. See also "Acker, Merrall & Condit. One of New-York's Most Notable Houses," *New York Times*, Jan 1, 1886.

store, established in 1856, at 130 & 132 Chambers Street; branch store on Broadway at West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, established in 1870; branch store on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street at Sixth Avenue, established in c. 1880; branch store on West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street at Fifth Avenue, established in 1894; branch store on West 76<sup>th</sup> Street at Columbus Avenue, established in 1904.<sup>21</sup> Besides these stores, Acker, Merrall & Condit also acquired retailing spaces in Upper Manhattan, Brooklyn, Yonkers, etc.; by the year 1904, it had established 18 stores in the larger New York area.<sup>22</sup> The firm also had several other facilities, e. g. warehouses and a coffee roasting and tea packing plant.

Although initially a joint venture, Mr. Merrall eventually turned the firm into a family asset in the early 1890s. In 1891, after the death of Mr. Acker senior, Mr. Merrall filed a lawsuit against John W. Condit, trying to persuade him to retire from the firm.<sup>23</sup> In 1892, an agreement was made, with Mr. Merrall and his three oldest sons, William, Albert and Charles, buying up all the interests of the other two partners, John W. Condit and Charles L. Acker, son of Mr. Acker senior.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, his sons started to do business under him; during the census of 1900, all five of his sons were labeled as “grocers”.<sup>25</sup>

It’s interesting to find that, the home of the Merralls family actually moved along with the new branches of their grocery store. As new stores are being opened in the northern parts of the city, they moved northward as well. During the 1860 census, they lived at 580 Broome Street, in District 3 of Ward 8.<sup>26</sup> During the 1870 and 1880 censuses, they lived at 166 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street, in District 8 of Ward 9.<sup>27</sup> In 1890 and during the 1900 census, they lived at 129 West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, the place that Mr. Merrall stayed until his death.<sup>28</sup> Despite the assets that the family held, their lifestyle didn’t seem too lavish through the lens of census results, where only one or two Irish maids were attached to the family throughout the

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<sup>21</sup> “Acker, Merrall & Condit. One of New-York’s Most Notable Houses,” *New York Times*, Jan 1, 1886. See also, Claudie Benjamin, “Acker Wines, Then and Now,” *I Love the Upper West Side*, May 7, 2020, <https://ilovetheupperwestside.com/acker-wines-then-and-now/>; “Price Current 1904, Acker Merrall & Condit Company” (Advertisement Brochure), Appendix of *Waldorf-Astoria Segar Company against Walter J. Salomen and Acker, Merrall & Condit Company, Case on Appeal*, (New York: C. Q. Burgoyne, Walker and Centre STS., 1905), 8.

<sup>22</sup> For details, see “Price Current 1904, Acker Merrall & Condit Company” (Advertisement Brochure), 4, 8-10.

<sup>23</sup> “Partners Who Cannot Agree,” *New York Times*, Nov 23, 1891.

<sup>24</sup> “Changes in a Big Grocery Firm,” *New-York Tribune*, Jun 19, 1892.

<sup>25</sup> For example, William B. Merrall started doing business in 1877, at the age of 16. See “William B. Merrall Dead,” *New York Times*, Jan 4, 1910.

<sup>26</sup> US Federal Census 1860, New York City, Ward 8 District 3, Page 832; See also “Merrall William J. Grocer”, in *New York City directory 1860/61*, (New York: Trow, John Fowler, 1860), 595. New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/59b5b330-52be-0134-feef-00505686a51c>.

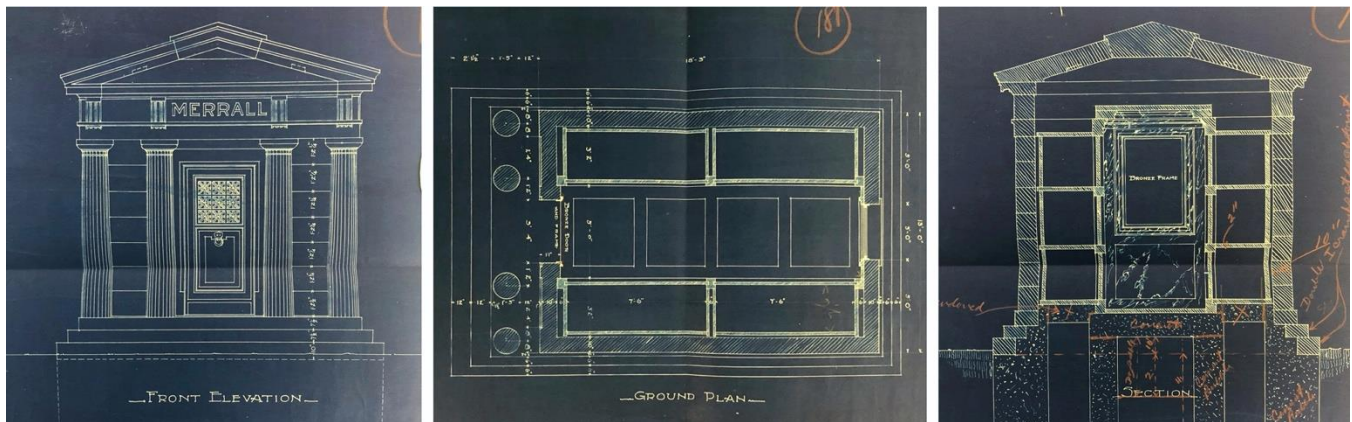
<sup>27</sup> US Federal Census 1870, New York City, Ward 9 District 8, Page 303; See also “Merrall Wm J.”, in *New York City directory 1870/71*, (New York: Trow, John Fowler, 1870), 877. New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/37dd46b0-58c9-0134-07e4-00505686a51c>.

<sup>28</sup> “Merrall Albert E. Grocer”, in *New York City directory 1890/91*, (New York: Trow City Directory Company, 1890), 863. New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/2091ce90-6e0c-0134-59db-00505686a51c>. See also Woodlawn Cemetery, Lot 11878: “Registration of Interment (Merrall, William J).”

decades.<sup>29</sup>

After the death of Mr. Merrall in 1907, the business of Acker, Merrall & Condit went on growing, reaching a scale of about 26 stores in 1918.<sup>30</sup> The firm was affected later by state regulations under the alcohol prohibition act, and after the death of Walter H. Merrall in 1932 as the president of the firm, the Kapon family took over control of the business.<sup>31</sup> In 1987, Michael Kapon brought the business to 160 West 72<sup>nd</sup> St, which is the only retail store in New York of what is now “Acker Merrall & Condit Wine Merchants”, or “Acker Wines”, currently directed by John Kapon; all of the former retail spaces no longer belong to the firm.<sup>32</sup>

Although the current Acker Wines shop is just a few yards away from Merralls’ former family house at 129 West 72<sup>nd</sup> St, the two places are only conceptually related. The family house of Merralls on W 72<sup>nd</sup> still exists, with the street floor now functioning as a cleaner’s shop<sup>33</sup>.



Drawings of the Merrall Mausoleum. Source: Columbia University Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library.

<sup>29</sup> In the 1860 census, Kate Killian; in the 1870 & 80 censuses, Caffery Brigel; in the 1900 census, Mary & Kate Foley. All of them were Irish females.

<sup>30</sup> Claudie Benjamin, “Acker Wines, Then and Now.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid; See also “Acker Wines,” accessed October 2020, [www.ackerwines.com](http://www.ackerwines.com).

<sup>33</sup> See: “129 West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street”, 1940s NYC, accessed October 2020, [https://1940s.nyc/map/photo/nynyma\\_rec0040\\_1\\_01144\\_0021a#19.5/40.7780966/-73.9796775](https://1940s.nyc/map/photo/nynyma_rec0040_1_01144_0021a#19.5/40.7780966/-73.9796775).



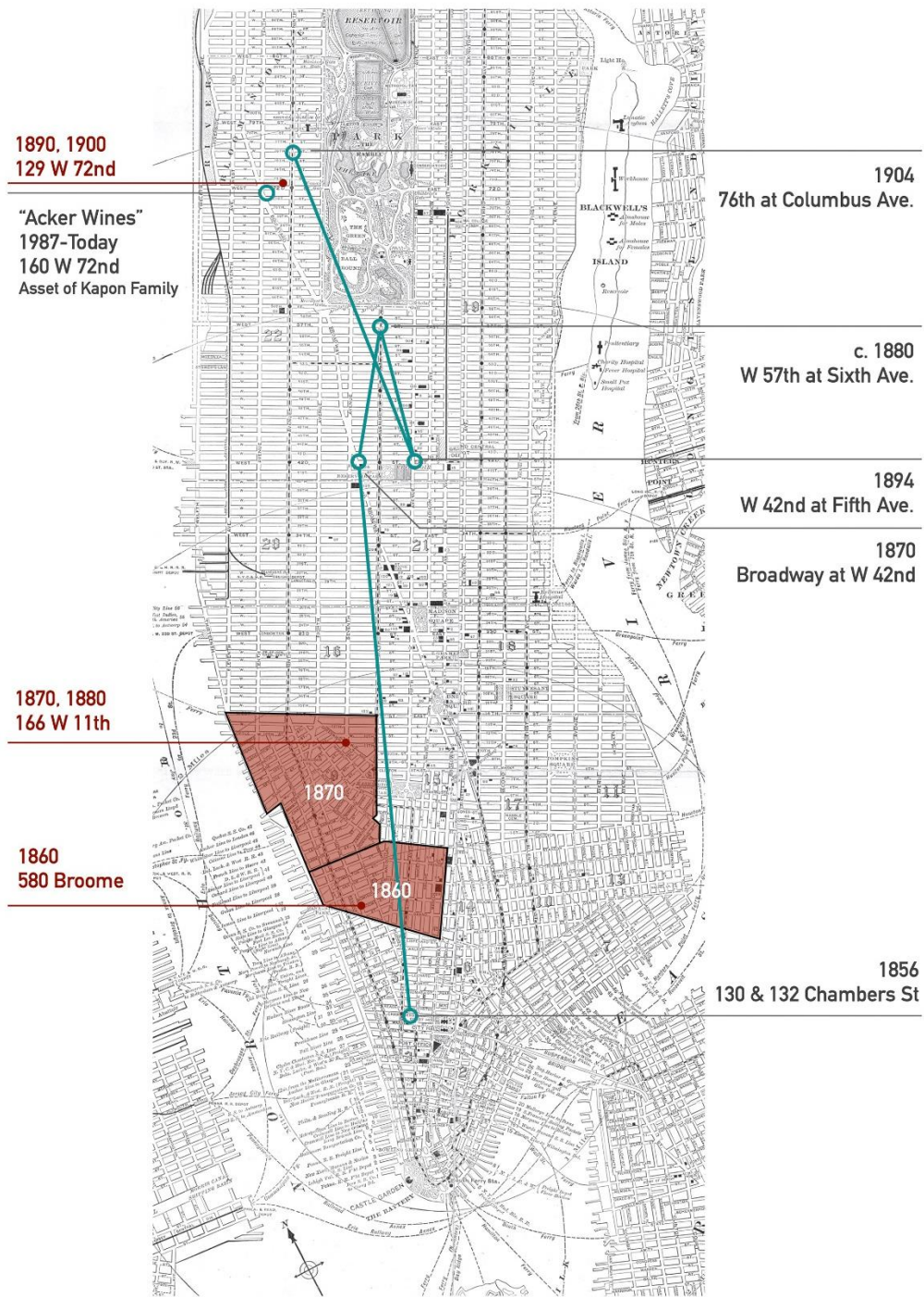
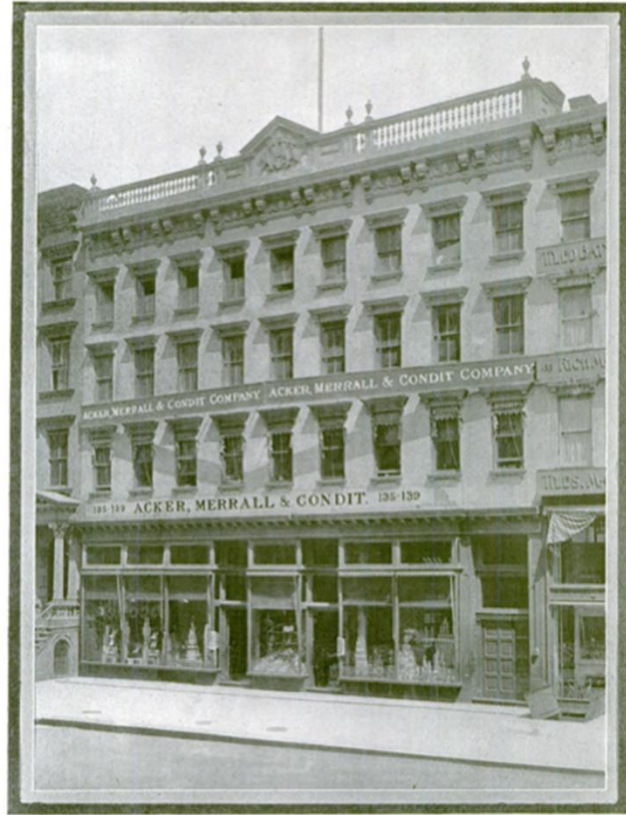
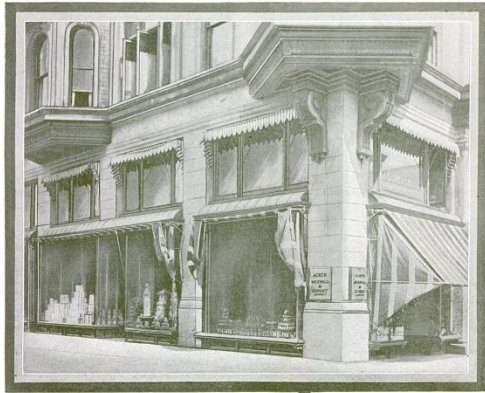
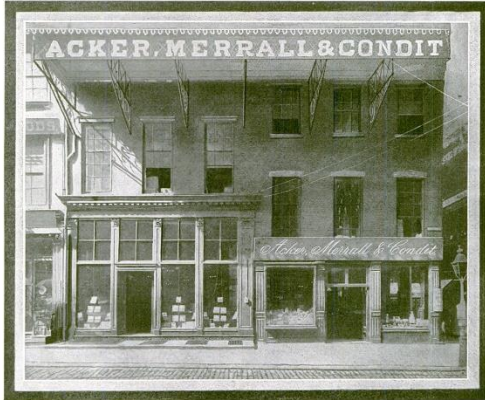


Diagram: Migration of the Merrall Family, 1860 - 1900. Source: Ziming Wang.

Red points and areas indicate the homes of the Merrall Family. Turquoise lines indicate the sequence of Downtown & Middletown retail shops. For details, see "A Family Grocery".

Drawing Based on *Map of the city of New York*, (New York, c. 1860).



Photographs of Acker, Merrall & Condit Stores.

Upper Left: "Retail Branch, Acker, Merrall & Condit Co., Chambers Street and West Broadway," *Price Current 1904, Acker Merrall & Condit Company* (Advertisement Brochure), 9.

Lower Left: "Retail Branch, Acker, Merrall & Condit Co., Fifth Ave. and 42d Street, New York," *Price Current 1904*, 37.

Right: "Retail Branch and Executive Offices, Acker, Merrall & Condit Co, 42d Street between Sixth Ave. and Broadway, New York," *Price Current 1904*, 5.

## Appendix: A Brief Chronicle of the Family

Below is a brief chronicle of the Merrall family, compiled by information extracted from Woodlawn inventory, censuses, city directories, newspapers, etc. Several stages can be concluded in regard to the development of the family and its business: in the 1840–50s, a story of immigration, marriage and business startup took place; in the 1860–70s, children were born, business was expanded; in the 1880–90s, the Merralls bought up the company, and continued their entrepreneurship; after 1900, following the death of Mr. Merrall, his sons took over the business, until the firm was finally in the hands of the Kapon family. Details are as follows:

c. 1840, William J. Merrall arrived in the US from England as a child.

1843, William J. Merrall started working for the T. & A. S. Hoppe grocery firm, at the age of 12.

1856, The firm of Acker, Merrall & Condit was founded at 130 & 132 Chambers Street. Partners: David D. Acker, William J. Merrall, John W. Condit.

1859, William J. Merrall (28 years old) married Mary E. Beard (21 years old), daughter of William Beard.

1860, During the Federal Census, they lived in District 3, Ward 8, at 580 Broome Street. Had a 30-year old Irish servant, Kate Killian. No children.

c. 1861, Their first child, William B. Merrall (son) was born.

1862, Their second child, Albert Edward Merrall (son) was born.

1863, Their third child, Caroline M. Merrall (daughter) was born.

1866, Their fourth child, Frank Acker Merrall (son) was born.

1867, Their fifth child, Charles Frederick Merrall (son) was born.

1870, During the Federal Census, they lived at 166 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street, in District 8 of Ward 9. Had an Irish servant Caffery Brigel, in her twenties. Five children: four sons, one daughter.

1870, A branch store of Acker, Merrall & Condit was opened at the corner of Broadway and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.

1872, Their sixth child, Walter H. Merrall (son) was born.

1877, Their oldest child, William B. Merrall (son, 16 years old) started doing business under Mr. Merrall.

1878, Their seventh child, Mary A. L. Merrall (daughter) was born.



1879, Their eighth and youngest child, Grace E. Merrall (daughter) was born.

1880, A branch store of Acker, Merrall & Condit was established on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street at Sixth Avenue.

1880, During the Federal Census, they continued to live at 166 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street, with Caffery Brigel as their maid. Eight Children: five sons, three daughters.

By 1890, they had moved to 129 West 72<sup>nd</sup> St, where William J. Merrall stayed until his death.<sup>34</sup>

1891, After the Death of Mr. Acker senior, William J. Merrall filed a lawsuit to compel his partner John W. Condit to retire from the firm.

1892, Mr. Merrall and his three oldest sons, William B., Albert E. and Frank bought up the company, making it a family asset.

1894, A branch store of Acker, Merrall & Condit was established on West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street at Fifth Avenue.

1899, The company's main store & warehouse on Chambers Street caught a fire.<sup>35</sup>

1900, During the Federal Census, they lived in the family house on West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, had two Irish maids, Mary & Kate Foley. William B. Merrall didn't show up in this census.

1903, Acker, Merrall & Condit underwent an incorporation under the demand of the secretary of state.<sup>36</sup>

1904, A branch store of Acker, Merrall & Condit was established on West 76<sup>th</sup> Street at Columbus Avenue. The firm had 18 stores in total.

1907, William J. Merrall died at the age of 76 in his home on West 72<sup>nd</sup> St.

1910, The oldest son of the family, William B. Merrall died at the age of 49, as Director of Acker, Merrall & Condit.

1913, The third son of the family, Frank A. Merrall died at the age of 47, as Vice President of Acker, Merrall & Condit.

1917, The second son of the family, Albert E. Merrall died at the age of 54, as Vice President of Acker, Merrall & Condit.

1918, Acker, Merrall & Condit had a total of about 26 stores.

1925, Acker, Merrall & Condit acquired a Madison Avenue corner building through a lease.

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<sup>34</sup> "Merrall Albert E. Grocer", in *New York City directory 1890/91*, (New York: Trow City Directory Company, 1890), 863.

<sup>35</sup> "Fire in Grocery Warehouse," *New-York Tribune*, Mar 28, 1899.

<sup>36</sup> "New Incorporations," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan 7, 1903.

1925, The oldest daughter of the family, Caroline M. Merrall died at the age of 61.

1927, Acker, Merrall & Condit acquired a 9000 sq. ft store space on Fifth Avenue through a lease.

1932, The youngest son of the family, Walter H. Merrall died at the age of 60, as “a noted merchant, President of Acker Merrall & Condit, also Vice President of Hery Maillard, Inc., and an Official of Real Estate Corporations.”

1936, The fourth son of the family, Charles F. Merrall died at the age of 68.

By 1940, management of the business had come to William Kapon, a partner of the firm.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Claudie Benjamin, “Acker Wines, Then and Now.”

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