



# Ferguson Has a History Museum

Ferguson has a Historical Society and a History Museum. We encourage any people reading this article to join in the conversation or as a member. Contact information is at the bottom of this article.

While the name is no longer prominent in most of America, many of you readers will remember the name, SEARS. SEARS is actually a shortening of the actual company name, Sears, Roebuck & Company. You may be asking what Sears, Roebuck & Company, an Illinois company, has to do with Ferguson. We will get to that later.



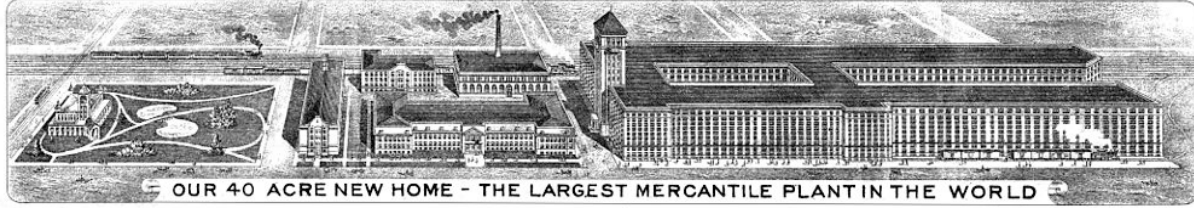
The story of Sears, Roebuck & Company (we'll call Sears in the article) begins with Richard Sears (left) and the creation of a mail order watch business in 1886. Mail order was important during this time, especially in rural America (and a majority of Americans lived in rural areas). Farmers and small-town people had little access to a large variety of products – they were limited to what a local general store might have. This could be especially true for African Americans living under Jim Crow rules. In 1892, Sears joined with a watch repairman,

Alvah Roebuck – hence the name Sears, Roebuck. In 1887 the company moved from Minneapolis to Chicago and issued its first catalog of watches. Catalogs were the internet of the day – the Amazon – of the day. By 1893 the company began adding non-watch items and by 1894 the catalogue contained over 332 pages. While Roebuck dropped out of the company, the name remained. In 1906, Julius Rosenwald (right) joined the company and the company incorporated with a public stock sale. Sears was the first major retail IPO.



# SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO.

WE SELL EVERYTHING BY MAIL ORDER ONLY. YOUR MONEY WILL BE PROMPTLY RETURNED FOR ANY GOODS NOT PERFECTLY SATISFACTORY AND WE WILL PAY FREIGHT OR EXPRESS CHARGES BOTH WAYS



BOUNDARIES: KEDZIE AVE HARVARD ST. CENTRAL PARK AVE. AND CHICAGO TERMINAL TRANSFER R.R.  
CABLE ADDRESS: SUPPLY CHICAGO  
DIRECT WIRE WITH WESTERN UNION,  
AND POSTAL TELEGRAPH CO'S.  
LONG DISTANCE PHONE KEDZIE 2500  
WITH PRIVATE EXCHANGE TO ALL DEPARTMENTS.  
OUR MAMMOTH CATALOGUE CONTAINS OVER  
100,000 ILLUSTRATIONS AND QUOTATIONS MAILED  
TO ANY ADDRESS FREE ON APPLICATION. THIS BIG  
BOOK NAMES THE LOWEST PRICES ON EVERYTHING  
WRITE FOR IT TODAY. WE CAN SAVE YOU MONEY  
ON ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BUY.  
REFERENCE BY SPECIAL PERMISSION.  
FIRST NATIONAL BANK CHICAGO.  
CORN EXCHANGE NAT'L BANK CHICAGO.  
NATIONAL CITY BANK NEW YORK.  
NATIONAL SHAWMUT BANK BOSTON.

In 1925, Sears opened its first retail store in the Chicago area. Most major retail stores located in city areas – but Sears focused in the out-lying areas. The focus was always on lower to middle class clients and farmers – people using streetcars or driving autos. The other change Sears made was to put items on open shelves unlike the general stores of the time where merchandise was behind counters. Self-Service! Sears also spared no money on their store architects, as Eliel Saarinen, a major architect of the era and father of Eero Saarinen – the Gateway Arch, designed many of the stores. Eventually Sears would create some of the best-known brand names: Kenmore, Craftsman, Diehard and Silvertone. 1931 saw the creation of the Allstate Insurance Company.



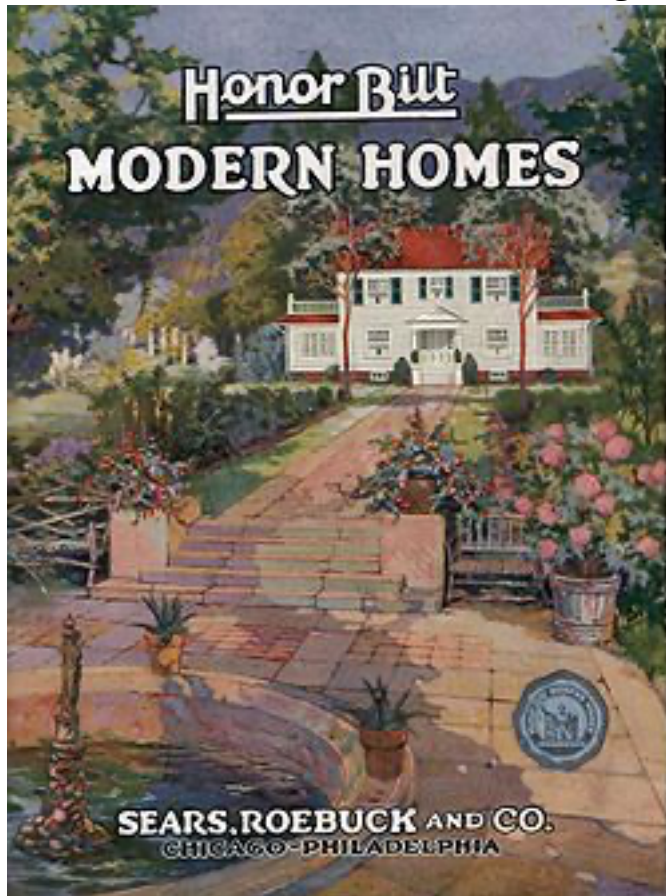
Of course, the mail order business was growing briskly over the years. In rural areas the Sears Catalog was second only to the Bible. The catalog had two uses. It was often placed in the outhouse where people had the time to read it – then use the page for toilet paper. Its pages were often placed under a parent's pillow when Christmas was arriving. It is important to point out that Sears was not alone in the catalog business – there were many others including Sear's major competition – Montgomery Ward.

Largely because of mail order, the company grew over the years and became the largest retailer in the world by 1980. Following 1980 business began to fade slowly over the years. The catalog ceased publication in 1993 and by

2023 there were only around 30 Sears stores left. You can still order on-line.

So - what does all this have to do with Ferguson. Sears catalogues, over the years, covered diverse items from basic tools, household items, farm supplies, automobiles – and yes – even houses.

below is a 1922 Modern Homes catalogue.



From 1908 until 1940 Sears sold pre-cut and pre-packaged homes – over 70,000 in North America. Over the years there were over 370 different designs. If you go to Wikipedia you can find more information about many of these homes along with images of them. Most of these home kits, or “Kit Homes”, were shipped by the rail then trucked to the location. Being a railroad city, Ferguson was a great place to build a “Sears Home”. A number of “Sears Homes” are in Ferguson. That’s the connection you may have been looking for.

In next month’s article we will look in more detail about “Sears Homes” and locate some examples in Ferguson. In addition, we will pass on information on how to tell if you have a “Sears Home”.

*Stories of historic Ferguson come from documents in the Ferguson Historical Society archives.*

**Membership in the Ferguson Historical Society is open to anyone** – the price is \$20.00 a year. If you are interested in joining or have any suggestions, questions, or items to donate to the Ferguson Historical Society, please contact Jerry Benner at [fjbenner@mindspring.com](mailto:fjbenner@mindspring.com). You are also welcome to visit the History Museum at 1064 Smith (behind the Community Center) by e-mailing the above address. Note: we will need to schedule a date for you, so ask well in advance.

***“The Ferguson Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the history of Ferguson Missouri. Membership is open to all sharing our interest.”***