

**STOREKEEPING IN ANTEBELLUM GEORGIA:  
A PRIMER FOR CONTEMPORARY RETAILERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Retailers in the 1990s face numerous difficulties. Newspapers have reported, on almost a daily basis, rollercoaster swings in consumer confidence, Chapter 11 proceedings, vendor threats to withhold merchandise from struggling merchants, and problems stemming from fluctuating currency exchange rates. In these circumstances, contemporary retailers may be tempted to consider the possibility that the retail business was somehow easier or less complicated in an earlier era. The experience of William Bostwick, however, suggests that the economic conditions of the nation and, in fact, of world affected retailers of the 19th century in many of the same ways as they do today. In addition, merchants of that earlier period worked hard to assemble appropriate merchandise assortments for their customers, and good relationships with vendors were then as now, essential to the viability of a retail enterprise.

Between 1830 and 1845, William Bostwick conducted a retail-wholesale operation in Augusta, Georgia. Bostwick was probably typical of many businessmen who facilitated the distribution of goods throughout the United States in the years before the Civil War. The histories of most of the middlemen involved in the interregional wholesale and retail trade during the antebellum period cannot be reconstructed because their business records have not withstood the ravages of time. Fortunately, however, the fifty volumes of the Bostwick Company's records have survived and are housed at Yale University. The collections -- which includes cash books, bill of lading books, stock inventories, journals, ledgers, and letter books -- are rich resources that describes in detail the day-to-day activities of Bostwick's operations. They provide important information about the development of retail and wholesale institutions in the United States, and they also allow insight regarding the ways in which retailing of the antebellum period was both similar and different from today's business.