Aaron R. Altmayer

A Biography

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Aaron R. Altmayer spent his years in Savannah operating a dry goods store, A. R. Altmayer & Co.
He came from New York around 1875 and operated his business in Savannah and in New York. After a number of years in Savannah, Aaron Altmayer sold his business to Leopold Adler and returned to New York.
To present the local biography of Aaron R. Altmayer for the years 1875-1895, I have gathered significant data from available resources. Mr. Altmayer's life seems to have been occupied with his dry goods business, both here in Savannah and in New York. While he was in Savannah, Mr. Altmayer operated his business on Droughton Street, he also undertook some business transactions, and he performed certain social and civic activities.

Before he came to Savannah, Aaron Altmayer was a dry goods dealer in New York with his brother, Mayer Altmayer, as early as 1857. The term dry goods stood for a variety of goods dealing with clothing in the 1800's, all of which would be found in a department store today. The location of his business in 1857 was on Cedar Street, the present-day area of Wall Street. He and his brother lived on Norfolk Street at that time, an area located on the lower East side of New York. In 1879, though, Aaron Altmayer held the business by himself, his brother having entered the hosiery business. His location had changed to 117 Chambers Street in Lower Manhattan and his residence was 659 Lexington Avenue, both of these locations representative of his prosperous business. By 1879 he had also established his business in Savannah.

Information concerning the opening of Mr. Altmayer's store in Savannah is scarce. The first mention of Aaron R. Altmayer was found in the Savannah Newspaper Digest for the year of 1875. Several times during 1875 his name was listed in connection with different New York cargo ships as a consignee. In 1876 a newspaper advertisement announced that he had reopened his "New York Variety Store" and it was located at 132 Broughton Street.

Another article, which was written in 1878, may also help to verify the year in which Mr. Altmayer opened his store in Savannah. The article was
an announcement placed in the Savannah Morning News on January 1, 1878, declaring his store a "cash payment only" business by alleviating all credit sales. In the article Mr. Altmayer reflects "...since our first opening three years ago."³

According to the 1878 article, Mr. Altmayer must have opened his store in 1875 and the shipments from New York for which he was a consignee to were the merchandise he was selling. The announcement in 1876 which stated that Aaron Altmayer had reopened his store may have been referring to a seasonal reopening of a sort which often occurred.

"Opening Day" and "Grand Opening" were used in many of Altmayer's advertisements, and these usually fell into a spring or early summer month and then again in the fall. Perhaps the 1876 advertisement was the beginning of his traditional spring sales. One such report which occurred in March of 1883 follows:

Yesterday was opening day at Altmayer's. A reporter visited the handsome store in the afternoon and found a crowd of ladies filling the spacious establishment from the front to the rear, and were blocking the entrance at times. Just inside the door a handsome floral arch was circled, and wrought in flowers were the words "Spring Opening, 1883". On either side were handsome designs in floral work, and the picture beyond was dazzling. The store seemed a mass of brilliant colors. Above the cashier's desk was a beautiful triple arch wound with ribbons. In the rear were displayed the elegant imported hats and bonnets in the richest Paris patterns. The display was one of the handsomest ever seen in Savannah. Through the afternoon and until evening the establishment was crowded.⁴

The article not only helps to exemplify the meaning to Altmayer's advertisements, but it also shows the taste he bore in decorating for the occasions and the extreme to which he went to draw in the public with
careful selection of merchandise and showy arrangements.

In Savannah, Mr. Altmayer was famous for his imported items, especially the hats and bonnets from Paris, and his collections of novelty items. On one occasion Mr. Altmayer displayed a collection of currency which was issued during the pre-Civil War Union. Another interesting endeavor of Mr. Altmayer's was a guessing contest he held in which one had to guess the correct number of buttons held in a window decoration of the DeSoto. The exact number was 106,932 and the winner received a gold watch. Without a doubt, his guessing contest was a vast success!

Despite his remarkable attractions, Aaron Altmayer was a man of business, and concerning his business activities, it is known that at one time prior to 1880 he had a partner, Mr. Hermann Cohn, who retired in January of 1880. There were no other announcements concerning a partnership as such, but in 1886, and until 1890, the business was listed in the Savannah City Directory as A. R. Altmayer and Leopold Adler.

Leopold Adler immigrated from Czechoslovakia and lived in New York before he came to Savannah. There he learned the retail business. The two men divided the business sometime around 1888, the same year in which Mr. Adler was married, a member of the Adler family said. Under their agreement, Mr. Altmayer kept the property on which his business was located, and Mr. Adler took over the business.

Aaron I. Altmayer & Co. was located at 135 Broughton Street from 1877-1885 and in 1886, the location probably being the same, was at the southeast corner of Bull and Broughton, according to the City Directory. From 1888-1890 the address was at 121 and 123 Broughton Street, the same time span in which
Mr. Adler was to have taken over the business. The first time that the business was found to be listed in Leopold Adler’s name was in the 1895 City Directory and the address of the store was still at 121 and 123 Broughton Street.

In 1884 Aaron Altmayer purchased some property (Lots one and two Hucks Tything, Percival Ward) from Meinhard Bros. & Co. for $50,000 dollars. Each of the two lots measured 60 feet wide facing Broughton Street and 90 feet deep, extending back to the lane which divides Broughton and State Streets. The lots were known as the Cuyler-Wayne property and they were purchased with the desired intention of building "a magnificent four story iron front brick building, with hydraulic elevator ...the first and second floors to be devoted to their retail trade and the remaining floors to other purposes."  

Work on the building was begun in February of 1885 at an estimated cost set at $75,000 dollars for the building alone and it was to have been completed by October 1 of 1885. A map of Percival Ward for the year 1888 showed Mr. Altmayer’s "block store" which occupied both of the two lots. The lots today are occupied by the J. C. Penney department store.

Another area of land, which Mr. Altmayer purchased was the western half of Lot six Hucks Tything, Percival Ward. The property was located behind his store on Broughton Street, and according to a newspaper article in 1890 "the price paid was about $24,000 dollars."  

The first record of this purchase appeared in the deed records on September 10, 1890. Stipulations were set for the payment of the land which was recorded at a payment of $1,500 dollars having been made at the time of the deal and $6,000 dollars remaining to be paid by January 1, 1891.
Seemingly the purchase was made from an Adelaide E. Lee. Later recordings were found in the deed records concerning the same piece of property, and it seems that certain matters had to be settled with a Stibbs family who were also connected with the western half of Lot 6.

There is a difference in the two recorded prices for the same piece of property. The first price of $24,000 dollars was from a newspaper article dated August 8, 1890 and the second price was from the deed records dated September 10, 1890. There may have been one or several events to have occurred which would explain the difference of the prices. Perhaps one of the two records made a mistake, the newspaper reporter or the court clerk who recorded the deed. Then again, since there is a month's difference in time between the two documents, perhaps Mr. Altmayer and Adelaide Lee renegotiated the deal, thus, settling for a lower price which was recorded in the deed records.

By 1891 Mr. Altmayer had decided to build a new building on the western half of Lot 6, replacing the buildings that were originally there. An article from the Savannah Morning News dated July 24, 1891 expressed Mr. Altmayer's intentions of constructing a "handsome three-story brick building in the site of the present old buildings fronting Bull Street" and the tenants listed as Livingston's drug store, Gardner and a tobacco store would occupy the new building. The present-day location of this building is 110-118 Bull Street. (Please note the photographs of the buildings for the two pieces of property on the following page.)

Among his business activities Mr. Altmayer was involved with a few business committees. In 1882 he was a member of the Citizen's Sanitary
LOTS 1 AND 2
AT CORNER OF BROUGHTON AND BULL STREETS
PRESENT DAY LOCATION OF
J. C. PENNY'S COMPANY

110 - 118 BULL STREET
AS IT APPEARS TODAY
Association. The desired goals of this association were to "improve the health conditions and thereby reduce mortality by procuring proper sanitation of their premises and prevent the spread of disease."  

In July of the same year, his name was among many on a list of merchants who were "desirous of giving their employees an opportunity for recreation" by closing their places of business at 6:00 p.m. during the months of July and August.  

October of 1882 showed Mr. Altmayer on a list of donators to the fund for the relief of yellow fever sufferers at Pensacola, Florida. Mr. Altmayer contributed $5.00 dollars.

During the sesquicentennial of the settlement of Georgia, a celebration which took place in February of 1883, Mr. Altmayer participated in the project which was sponsored by the Committee of Trades Procession.  

Prior to all of these events, one special occasion came on Christmas Eve of 1878 when Mr. Altmayer's store announced that dolls would be given to all the orphan children of Savannah who came into the store on that day.

Aaron R. Altmayer also participated in the wedding ceremony of Leopold Adler when he married Hannah Guckenheimer at the Mickve Ismeal Temple. Both Mr. Altmayer and his wife were listed in the wedding procession.

Aaron Altmayer's life would hardly seem complete without having been married. On May 23, 1883 Aaron Altmayer married Miss Blanche Bach of Louisville. After his wedding, he and his bride went to Europe and stayed there until September, during which he also "arranged for his fall importation of goods."
From the year 1884 until 1890 Mr. Altmayer was listed in the Savannah City Directory as a resident of New York. Although he was listed in the Savannah City Directory prior to 1884, often as a border at the Marshall House, he may have been out of the city a large part of each year on business, as he wrote in 1878 "... I myself will be absent ten months out of every twelve,...".\(^{15}\) After 1890, though, Mr. Altmayer was no longer listed in the City Directory. By 1890 Mr. Adler may have been operating the business so Mr. Altmayer could have returned to his New York Business.

In 1895 Mr. Altmayer made three of his children, Viola, Ciel, and Marvin, shareholders of $100.00 dollars of stock in the Central Railroad and Banking Company of Georgia. He was the official guardian of the shares and he had been granted permission to move the stock to the Mercantile Trust Company under the Thomas and Ryan Reorganization Plan.\(^{16}\)

Aaron Altmayer had a total of four children, their names were Marvin, Ciel, Viola, and Clarice. Their years of birth are not certain but some of their ages were given along with some other pieces of information concerning their minority in Aaron Altmayer's Will and Testament.

The youngest, Clarice, considered a minor in the Will, was described as "an infant over the age of fourteen."\(^{17}\) Had Clarice been between the ages of 14 and 16 in 1907, when the Will was written, she could have been born in 1893 or 1895. If her year of birth was 1895 this would explain, perhaps, why Mr. Altmayer did not list her name, also, with the other three in the shares of stock.

Marvin Altmayer, his only son, was still a minor in 1907. In January of 1910, however, Mr. Altmayer added a codicil to his Will which released the
previous executors he had listed in his Will and declared his son, Marvin, and his wife, Blanche, as the sole executors of his Will. This could imply that Marvin had reached the age of 21 by 1910. Assuming he became 21 in 1910, his year of birth may have been around 1889.

Of the other two daughters, Viola and Ciel, Ciel was listed in the 1907 Will as Ciel A. Schlesinger. Perhaps Ciel was the oldest among the four children or she simply may have married first. Later, however, in 1912, when the Will was being processed in court, she had a new name, Ciel A. Stern. Also, by the year 1912, both Clarice and Viola were married. They were listed as Clarice A. Blumenthal and Viola A. Levy.

Aaron R. Altmayer died at the age of 70 on March 29, 1910 in New York, residing at 30 West 85th Street. After his death his real property was given the estimated value of $10,000 dollars as well as his personal property. The property which Mr. Altmayer owned in Savannah required an administrator according to Georgia law at that time; therefore, Mr. Leopold Adler was appointed the administrator by the Altmayer family.

In an interview with members of the Adler family, I was told that there is a descendant of Mr. Aaron Altmayer who lives in Mobile, Alabama and he still holds the deed to the property on Broughton Street where the store, J. C. Penney, is located.
NOTES

1 Trow's New York City Directory, 1857 and 1879 from the private collection of Franklin M. Garrett, Historian.


3 "Ipso Facto", Savannah Morning News 1 Jan., 1878, p. 3 col. 5.

4 "Spring Opening", Savannah Morning News 20 March, 1883, p. 4 col. 2.

5 Interview with Lee Adler, Savannah 25 July, 1981.

6 Interview with Sam Adler, Savannah, 13 July, 1981.


9 Savannah Morning News 8 August 1890 p. 8 col. 1.

10 Savannah Morning News 24 July 1891, p. 8 col. 1.

11 Savannah Newspaper Digest 1882, p. 520.

12 Savannah Newspaper Digest 1882, p. 69

13 Savannah Newspaper Digest 1883, p. 90.

14 Sunday Morning Telegram 20 May 1883, p. 4 col. 2.

15 "Ipso Facto", Savannah Morning News 1 Jan. 1878, p. 3 col. 5.
16 Viola Altmayer, File 194, Chatham County Probate Court Record, microfilm.

17 Aaron R. Altmayer, Will and Testament, Chatham County Superior Court Records.

18 New York Times 1 April 1910 p. 11.

19 Interview with Lee Adler, Savannah, 24 July 1981.
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"Altmayer Marriage", Sunday Morning Telegram, 20 May 1883 p. 4 col. 2
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Personal Interview with Sam Adler, 13 July 1981, Savannah
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"Sale of the Cuyler-Wayne Property", *Savannah Morning News*, 15 May 1884 p. 4 col. 3

Savannah City Directory, Sholes, 1877-1895, Georgia Historical Society

*Savannah Newspaper Digest*, 1875-1895, Georgia Historical Society and Savannah Public Library

"The Opening at Altmayer's", *Savannah Morning News*, 20 March 1883 p. 4 col. 2

"The New York Variety Store", *Savannah Morning News*, 25 Nov. 1876 p. 3 col. 3