

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY	
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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Sears, Roebuck and Company Complex

AND/OR COMMON

Sears, Roebuck and Company Complex

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

925 South Homan Avenue

NOT FOR PUBLICATION 7

CITY, TOWN

Chicago

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

Illinois

VICINITY OF

CODE

17

COUNTY

Cook

CODE

031

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL <input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL <input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Sears, Roebuck and Company

(Contact: Mr. William F. McCurdy,  
Vice President for Public  
Relations.

STREET & NUMBER

Sears Tower

Mr. Rembrandt C. Hiller, Jr.,  
Mid-West Director Pub. Rels)

CITY, TOWN

Chicago

STATE

Illinois

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Recorder of Deeds Office, City Hall and County Building

STREET & NUMBER

118 North Clark Street

CITY, TOWN

Chicago

STATE

Illinois

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

Illinois Land and Historic Site Survey

DATE

1975

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

377

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Illinois Land and Historic Site Survey

CITY, TOWN

Springfield

STATE

Illinois

## 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Since its construction in 1905-6, the Sears, Roebuck and Company Complex, situated on Chicago's west side, has been symbolic of that company's dominance of the mail order industry. Four significant structures, all constructed of red brick and dating from the complex's completion, have survived. They are the five-story Administration Building which served as company headquarters until 1973 and in which Richard Sears, Julius Rosenwald, and General Robert E. Wood presided over the company during their respective administrations; the nine-story Mail Order Plant whose 3 million square feet of floor space, says Groner, "made it the world's largest business building at the time;" the six-story Merchandise Development and Laboratory Building which from 1906 to 1923 served as printing plant for the famous Sears catalogue; and the one-story Power Plant which provides heating and cooling for the entire complex.<sup>12</sup> Although these four structures have undergone some alteration over the years, they still retain most of their original architectural vitality. Taken collectively, they represent the oldest known extant Sears, Roebuck and Company headquarters and catalogue complex.

When Sears, Roebuck and Company was founded in 1893, the firm occupied rented quarters in the Globe Building in Minneapolis, Minn. After Sears and Roebuck relocated their company in Chicago 2 years later, they established their headquarters on West Adams Street. By 1896 the company's rapid growth forced another move, this time to a building at the corner of Fulton and Desplaines Streets. Soon, this structure, despite additions, was too small, and the company found itself forced to rent buildings throughout Chicago to house its merchandise. This in turn caused great inefficiency and made prompt filling of orders almost impossible.

In 1904 Sears, Roebuck and Company purchased 41.6 acres on Chicago's west side and commissioned the architectural firm of Nimmons and Fellows to design a plant. The Thompson-Starrett Company received the construction contract, and ground was broken on January 24, 1905. The proposed complex was "so large that they were compelled to ask the City Council of Chicago to close certain streets so that they might build over them."<sup>13</sup>

(continued)

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<sup>12</sup>Groner, History of American Business and Industry, 242.

<sup>13</sup>Cited in Harold M. Mayer and Richard C. Wade, Chicago: Growth of A Metropolis (Chicago, 1969), 231.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1905-present BUILDER/ARCHITECT Thompson-Starrett Company  
Nimmons and Fellows

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

In assessing Sears, Roebuck and Company in a recent history of American retailing, business historians Tom Mahoney and Leonard Sloane, noted that "no other company is as close to the heart of suburban and rural America. No company has been more astute in forecasting future social trends and adapting its operations to capitalize on them."<sup>1</sup> Between 1893 and 1954, principal founder Richard Warren Sears developed the firm's catalog into its principal selling instrument and made Sears, Roebuck and Company the Nation's largest mail order concern by 1900; President Julius Rosenwald insured continued success by placing an almost legendary emphasis on quality, by putting the company on a more sound financial footing, and by increasing efficiency and organization; and in the 1920's when the mail order business began to suffer due to declining rural population, low farm prices, increased mobility brought on by the automobile, and competition from chain stores, President Robert E. Wood opened retail stores and, by locating most of them away from downtown areas, anticipated the trend in retailing which led to the development of the modern shopping center.

Despite the fact that Sears, Roebuck and Company did not start mail order selling, its name has a magic aura to many Americans. In fact, according to historians Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, the company has "intrenched itself in the American mind, idiom, humor, and folklore to an extent unequaled since Paul Bunyan and probably unsurpassed in the commercial history of the nation."<sup>2</sup> In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, its famous catalogue, says distinguished historian Daniel J. Boorstin, served as "the Bible of the new rural consumption communities."<sup>3</sup> As such, say

(continued)

<sup>1</sup>Tom Mahoney and Leonard Sloane, The Great Merchants: America's Foremost Retail Institutions and the People Who Made Them Great (New York, 1974), 232.

<sup>2</sup>Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company (Chicago, 1950), 254.

<sup>3</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Democratic Experience (New York, 1973), 128.

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# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(See continuation sheet.)

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY \_\_\_\_\_

UTM REFERENCES

A | 1.6 | 44.123.0 | 4.6353.7.0 |

B | 1.6 | 44.123.0 | 4.6352.5.0 |

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

C | 1.6 | 44.063.0 | 4.6352.4.0 |

D | 1.6 | 44.063.0 | 4.6353.6.0 |

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

(See last page of description.)

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
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STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
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## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Ralph J. Christian, Historian, Historic Landmarks Project

ORGANIZATION

American Association for State and Local History

DATE

STREET & NUMBER

1400 Eighth Avenue South

TELEPHONE

615-242-5583

CITY OR TOWN

Nashville

STATE

Tennessee 37203

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL \_\_\_\_

STATE \_\_\_\_

LOCAL \_\_\_\_

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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CONTINUATION SHEET Sears & Roebuck ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE one

Seven thousand men were hired for the project, and each day 60 freight car loads of building materials were used. Eventually, 23 million brick and almost 15 million feet of lumber were consumed in the completing the project. By October 1906 the Mail Order Plant was complete, and on January 22, 1906, the company transferred its entire operations to the new facility. In later years, Sears added to the complex a merchandise manufacturing facility, a sunken garden, parking decks and lots, an automotive center, an Allstate Insurance Building, a distribution facility, a construction and display building, and numerous support structures.

Until 1973, when the 110-story Sears Tower, the world's tallest building, was completed in downtown Chicago, the Sears, Roebuck and Company Complex served as the firm's headquarters. Today, although located in a somewhat deteriorated neighborhood, the complex remains fully utilized and well-maintained.

Administration Building. This north-facing building is a five-story, I-shaped, red brick structure which measures 133 by 432 feet and sits on a partially raised full basement. The building has a one-story, off-center, rear addition and is capped by a flat, slate-covered roof which features skylights. Originally a two-story edifice when the Complex was completed in 1906, the building took on its present configuration around 1917 when three additional stories were added.

At basement level the building rests on limestone blocks which are set in poured concrete. Exterior walls feature brick pilasters which are interrupted on the first two stories by decorated white-painted stone courses. Pilasters on the upper three levels rise uninterruptedly to a white-painted stone course near the roofline. At its east and west ends, the building features projecting pavilions whose corner recessed columns add a decorative touch to the structure as a whole. At its west end the structure is connected to the neighboring Merchandise Development and Laboratory Building by a covered metal passageway. Windows are of the one-over-one wood sash variety, are set in rectangular surrounds, and feature white stone lintels and slipsills.

Probably the most notable exterior feature is the two-story pedimented entrance portico located near the center of the front (north) facade. Made of several varieties of marble, it has

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CONTINUATION SHEET Sears & Roebuck ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE two

Corinthian and Ionic columns on the first and second levels respectively, decorated entablatures, a carved marble balustrade, and a simple pedimented roof. On the first-story level three doorways are set in decorated surrounds and feature double wooden doors with glass panels and transoms.

Inside, the lobby features a white marble, grand staircase which provides access to the first floor. Alterations in this area have been very few, and the original marble floors and wainscoting remain in place. The rest of the building has been extensively altered, particularly in the office areas, and few original features remain visible. At present, the structure serves primarily as office space for Sears's Midwest Catalog Group.

Main Order Plant. Generally rectangular in its configuration, this nine-story, east-facing brick structure, which presently measures 310 by 1,260 feet, was the first building put in use at the Sears Complex. Its 3 million square feet of floor space, according to Groner; "made it the world's largest business building at the time."<sup>14</sup> The building consists of a rectangular-shaped main block with interior courtyard and two separate wings connected to the main block at its west end. The area between these two wings is filled by a hip-roofed train shed, which is connected to a spur line of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

The structure rests on a series of concrete caissons, some of which are 90 feet deep in the ground, and has an interior frame constructed almost entirely of wood. The exterior brick walls are pilastered and feature corbeling near the roofline. The plant is capped by a flat, wood roof covered with tarpaper. Most windows are of the one-over-one wood sash variety, are set in rectangular surrounds, and have stone lintels and slipsills.

The building's most notable exterior feature is a centrally located square-shaped, 14-story projecting entrance tower on its front (east) facade. Also built of brick, this structure differs little architecturally from the plant itself except on the 14th story, where a sandstone course sets off three windows and their ornate rounded hoodmoulds. The tower is capped with a high-hipped roof covered with red clay tile.

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<sup>14</sup>Groner, History of American Business and Industry, 242.

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CONTINUATION SHEET Sears & Roebuck ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE three

Despite the already gigantic size of the Mail Order Plant, Sears, Roebuck and Company enlarged it on four occasions between 1910 and 1916 by adding three merchandise annexes and a combination grocery building and box factory. Located at the west end of the plant, these structures differ from earlier ones chiefly in their greater use of windows. Since 1916 the plant's exterior has been little altered. In the 1950's sandstone facing was put on the first story of the front (east) facade and a portion of the north side, and in recent years tuckpointing work has been done on the tower. Also, a number of covered passageways have been added on the east and west facades and north side of the building connecting it with near by structures.

Inside, the plant has undergone little change. On the first floor near the tower is the original Sears retail store, first opened in 1925 and modernized in recent years. The tower itself is used chiefly for office space. Although modified somewhat, this section still retains original windows, radiators, marble toilets, and dark woodwork. In the order-filling area itself, little has changed except for replacement of outmoded equipment. Many of the pneumatic tubes, chutes, and conveyors in use are original. In all, there are almost 5 miles of chutes and conveyors and 12 miles of pneumatic tubing in use.

Merchandise Development and Laboratory Building. Originally, this L-shaped, six-story brick structure, located approximately 57 feet east of the Administration Building, served as printing plant for the famous Sears catalogue. When the north-facing section of the building was completed in 1906, it measured 96 by 288 feet and rose to a height of four stories. Three years later, a 114-by-192-foot rectangular addition was constructed on the south end, giving the building its L-shape, and around 1916 two stories were added to each section. In 1923 the company decided to stop printing its own catalogs, and the merchandise testing and development program, located until then on the 10th floor of the Mail Order Plant tower, took over the building.

This flat roofed structure has little exterior ornamentation except for two brick pilasters on its front facade and brick corbeling along the original roof line. Window treatment is mixed. In some sections one-over-one sash windows are set in rounded arches while in others they are set in rectangular ones. On its east side the structure is connected to the Allstate Building by

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CONTINUATION SHEET Sears & Roebuck ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE four

a covered metal passage way. Inside, the building has undergone extensive alteration.

Power Plant. Since its completion in 1905, this 114-by-230-foot, one-story brick structure has powered operations at the Sears, Roebuck and Company Complex. The building with its partially raised full basement rests on limestone blocks which are set in poured concrete. Exterior walls feature large, arched window and door openings, brick corbeling, and rectangular window openings near the roofline. The structure is capped with a crow-stepped gable roof.

Inside, the practical nature of the structure is belied by red tile floors and walls of white glazed brick. Boilers are located in the basement while the main floor houses a variety of equipment used to power the pneumatic tubing and elevators, provide water to the complex, and maintain a backup electrical system. Overall, this building appears virtually unaltered except for the addition of modern machinery.

Boundary Justification. The boundary of the designated area includes approximately 16 of the 41.6 original acres in the Sears, Roebuck and Company Complex and the first four principal buildings constructed at the complex. Not included are several other company structures that are of more recent origin and do not contribute to the national significance of the complex.

Boundary Description. As indicated in red on the accompanying maps [(1) U.S.G.S. 7.5' Series, Illinois-Cook Co., Englewood Quad., 1963, photorevised 1972; (2) Sears-AASLH Sketch Map, 1977], a line beginning at the intersection of Arthington Street and Spaulding Avenue and extending southward approximately 363 feet along the western edge of the right-of-way of Spaulding Avenue to a point on the northern edge of the right-of-way of the track of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad; thence westward approximately 1,977 feet along the northern edge of the right-of-way of the track of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to the eastern edge of the right-of-way of Central Park Avenue; thence northward approximately 344 feet along the eastern edge of the right-of-way of Central Park Avenue to the southern edge of the right-of-way of Arthington Street; thence eastward approximately 1,977 feet along the southern edge of the right-of-way of Arthington Street to the point of beginning.



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**CONTINUATION SHEET** Sears & Roebuck ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE one

Edith Heal and Louis E. Asher, a former confidant of Richard W. Sears, "the catalogue was required reading in millions of homes. More than that, it was juicy reading. It was a Dream book, a Wish book, and the whole family cried for it."<sup>4</sup>

Today, Sears, Roebuck and Company is the world's largest retail business with over \$11 billion in total sales. Although its name still remains synonymous with mail ordering, catalog sales today account for only 22 percent of the firm's total business.

Since its construction in 1905-6, the Sears, Roebuck and Company Complex, situated on Chicago's west side, has been symbolic of that company's dominance of the mail order industry. Four significant structures, all constructed of red brick and dating from the complex's completion, have survived. They are the five-story Administration Building which served as company headquarters until 1973; the nine-story Mail Order Plant whose 3 million square feet of floor space, says historian Alex Groner, "made it the world's largest business building at the time;" the six-story Merchandise Development and Laboratory Building which from 1906 to 1923 served as printing plant for the famous Sears catalogue; and the one-story Power Plant.<sup>5</sup> Although these four structures have undergone some alteration over the years, they still retain most of their original architectural vitality. Taken collectively, and represent the oldest known extant Sears, Roebuck and Company headquarters and Catalogue Complex.

<sup>4</sup>Louis E. Asher and Edith Heal, Send No Money (Chicago, 1942), 55.

<sup>5</sup>Alex Groner, The American Heritage History of American Business and Industry (New York, 1972), 242.

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CONTINUATION SHEET Sears & Roebuck ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE two

History

The development of Sears, Roebuck and Company can best be traced through the careers of three of its executives, Richard Warren Sears, Julius Rosenwald, and General Robert E. Wood. Each man made a vital contribution to the company at a critical juncture, and each left a lasting impact on its operations.

Richard Warren Sears, the principal founder of the company, was born December 7, 1863, in Stewartville, Minn., to James W. and Eliza A. Sears. The family was moderately prosperous, and young Richard received a good basic education before his father's business failed, forcing the youth to leave high school to seek employment. In 1878, shortly after his father's death, he learned telegraphy, and for the next few years supported his mother, sisters, and himself by combining this trade with that of railroad station agent. By the early 1880's, Sears was telegrapher and station agent in Redwood Falls, Minn., where he supplemented his income by exchanging lumber and coal for venison, blueberries, and other commodities provided by the local settlers and Indians.

In 1886 Sears got started on the road which eventually brought him fame and fortune. A Redwood Falls jeweler refused a shipment of watches from a Chicago wholesaler, who in turn offered to sell them to Sears for \$12 each. Since watches of this type usually retailed for \$25, Sears readily accepted the whole lot. He then wrote other express agents offering them watches for \$14 each. These sold quickly, and Sears obtained more from the Chicago wholesaler. Within 6 months he had cleared \$5,000.

Late in 1886 Sears left railroading and moved to Minneapolis, where he founded the R. W. Sears Watch Company. He continued to use express agents as a selling medium because they were bonded, thereby reducing his financial risk, but increasingly he began to rely on advertising in national periodicals as a means of reaching more potential customers. In 1887 Sears decided to move his business to Chicago because of its central location and splendid shipping facilities. Because he wished to assemble his own watches and also repair them, he advertised for a watchmaker and eventually hired Alvah C. Roebuck, a young Indianan, whose name was destined to be linked permanently with Sears'.

In 1889 Sears sold his business for \$100,000 and moved to Iowa to become a country banker. "But banking," says his biographer Edward A. Duddy, "was not exciting enough for his volatile

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CONTINUATION SHEET Sears & Roebuck ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE three

temper" because he "was by nature a promoter forever beset by new ideas."<sup>6</sup> Within the year, he returned to Minneapolis and founded the Warren Company, a watch and jewelry business. The faithful Roebuck returned to his employ, purchased the company from Sears for a brief period in 1891, and then promptly resold it to him when requested to do so a few weeks later.

On September 16, 1893, the Warren Company changed its name to Sears, Roebuck and Company and began to offer a much wider range of merchandise than watches and jewelry. A branch office was opened in Chicago because of that city's rail connections, and 2 years later the company moved there permanently. During the next 5 years, Sears, concentrating on the rural market, waged a whirlwind advertising and promotional campaign which enabled his company to surpass Montgomery Ward with sales of \$11 million by 1900. "Sears simply had to strike the rock of the rural mind with one of his magic advertisements or 'special offers,'" says distinguished business historian Edward C. Kirkland, "and a flood of orders, which clerks could hardly handle, gushed forth."<sup>7</sup>

Although Sears advertised widely in magazines and newspapers aimed at rural audiences, his principal selling tool was his catalogue, much of whose copy was written by Sears himself or by men trained by him. This book, says Boorstin, served as "the Bible of the new rural consumption communities."<sup>8</sup> As such, say Asher and Heal, "the catalogue was required reading in millions of homes. More than that, it was juicy reading. It was a Dream book, a Wish book, and the whole family cried for it."<sup>9</sup>

Another factor in the company's success was the close rapport it developed with its customers. Much of this was due to the liberal return policy and guarantee, the low price policy, and

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<sup>6</sup> Edward A. Duddy, "Richard Warren Sears," Dictionary of American Biography, Vol. VIII, Part 2 (New York, 1935), 540.

<sup>7</sup> Edward C. Kirkland, Industry Comes of Age: Business, Labor and Public Policy, 1860-1897 (Chicago, 1967), 270.

<sup>8</sup> Boorstin, The Americans: The Democratic Experience, 128.

<sup>9</sup> Asher and Heal, Send No Money, 55.

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the serviceability of its goods. Perhaps of almost equal significance, however, was the sense of warmth and concern that the company conveyed to its customers. For many years, all letters to customers were handwritten because of a belief they might be offended by a machine-made letter. Customers reciprocated by writing the company for advice on family problems, assistance in choosing a husband or wife, or simply to tell what had happened to them and their neighbors since their last order.

Shortly after the company moved to Chicago in 1895, Alvah C. Roebuck sold his share of the company to Sears for \$25,000. Although he remained with the firm a few years longer and eventually came back in the 1930's and 1940's to do promotional work, Roebuck never again had any voice in executive decisions.

Not long after Roebuck sold his interest, Sears brought Julius Rosenwald into the firm as a partner. Rosenwald, born August 12, 1862, in Springfield, Ill., to German immigrant parents, had received his business education in the clothing business. After coming to work at Sears in 1895, Rosenwald set for himself the task of trying to restrain the founder's grandiose advertising and promotional schemes, put the company on a sound financial footing, and improve service and product quality. He imposed the "Rosenwald Creed," described by historian Alex Groner as "made up of many principles of mass selling, each ending with the words 'but maintain the quality.'"<sup>10</sup> In addition, he was responsible for the construction of a new mail order plant on Chicago's west side, which led to greater efficiency in filling orders, and the floating of a stock issue, which made the company a public corporation and provided a needed infusion of capital.

By 1908, however, despite Rosenwald's exertions the company was in severe financial straits due to Sears' "profit-sharing" scheme whereby customers were given coupons which could be redeemed for expensive premiums. Opposed not only by Rosenwald but by men he had personally trained, Sears resigned as president. After a brief tenure as chairman of the board, he withdrew from active involvement in company affairs, eventually selling his stock for \$10 million.

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<sup>10</sup>Groner, History of American Business and Industry, 242.

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Rosenwald succeeded Sears as president, and the company soon prospered again. By 1910 total sales were up to \$40 million, and this figure was to increase to \$245 million in 1920 due in large part to unprecedented agricultural prosperity and the advent of parcel post in 1913 which sharply reduced shipping costs for mail order items.

During World War I, Rosenwald entered government service, leaving the company in less capable hands. When the 1920-21 depression severely reduced farm incomes, the company found itself overstocked and unable to dispose of its goods. The company avoided collapse only because Rosenwald lent it \$20 million from his own fortune. By 1922 Sears, Roebuck and Company was in the black again.

During the early 1920's Rosenwald and other company officials became increasingly concerned with the threat to mail ordering posed by the shift of population from the country to the city, the decline in farm incomes, the increased mobility provided by the automobile, and the spread of chain stores. The answer to this problem appeared to be retail stores, and to carry out such a program Rosenwald in 1924 hired Robert E. Wood, former merchandise manager for Montgomery Ward, as vice president. Wood, a native of Missouri and a 1900 West Point graduate, had ably assisted George W. Goethals in constructing the Panama Canal before leaving the Army in 1915 to launch a business career. During World War I, he had risen to the rank of brigadier general while serving as acting quartermaster general.

Under Wood's capable direction, the first Sears retail store opened on February 2, 1925, in the Chicago mail order plant, and other openings soon followed. He believed, says Emmet and Jeuck, "that most of the company's retail stores could be located in outlying districts which would offer the advantages of lower rentals yet would also, because of the great mobility of Americans, still be within reach of potential customers."<sup>11</sup> Thus, Wood anticipated the trend in retailing which led to the development of the modern shopping center.

(continued)

<sup>11</sup>Emmet and Jeuck, Catalogues and Counters, 673.

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In 1928 Wood became president of the company and in 1939 chairman of the board, serving in this capacity until his retirement in 1954. By 1964 his successful retail policy had enabled Sears to surpass A. & P. as the world's largest retailer. In 1973 the company's 837 retail stores, 12 catalog order plants, and 2,647 catalog and telephone sales offices reported total sales of almost \$11 billion. Although the company's name is synonymous with mail ordering, catalog sales today account for only 22 percent of the firm's total business.

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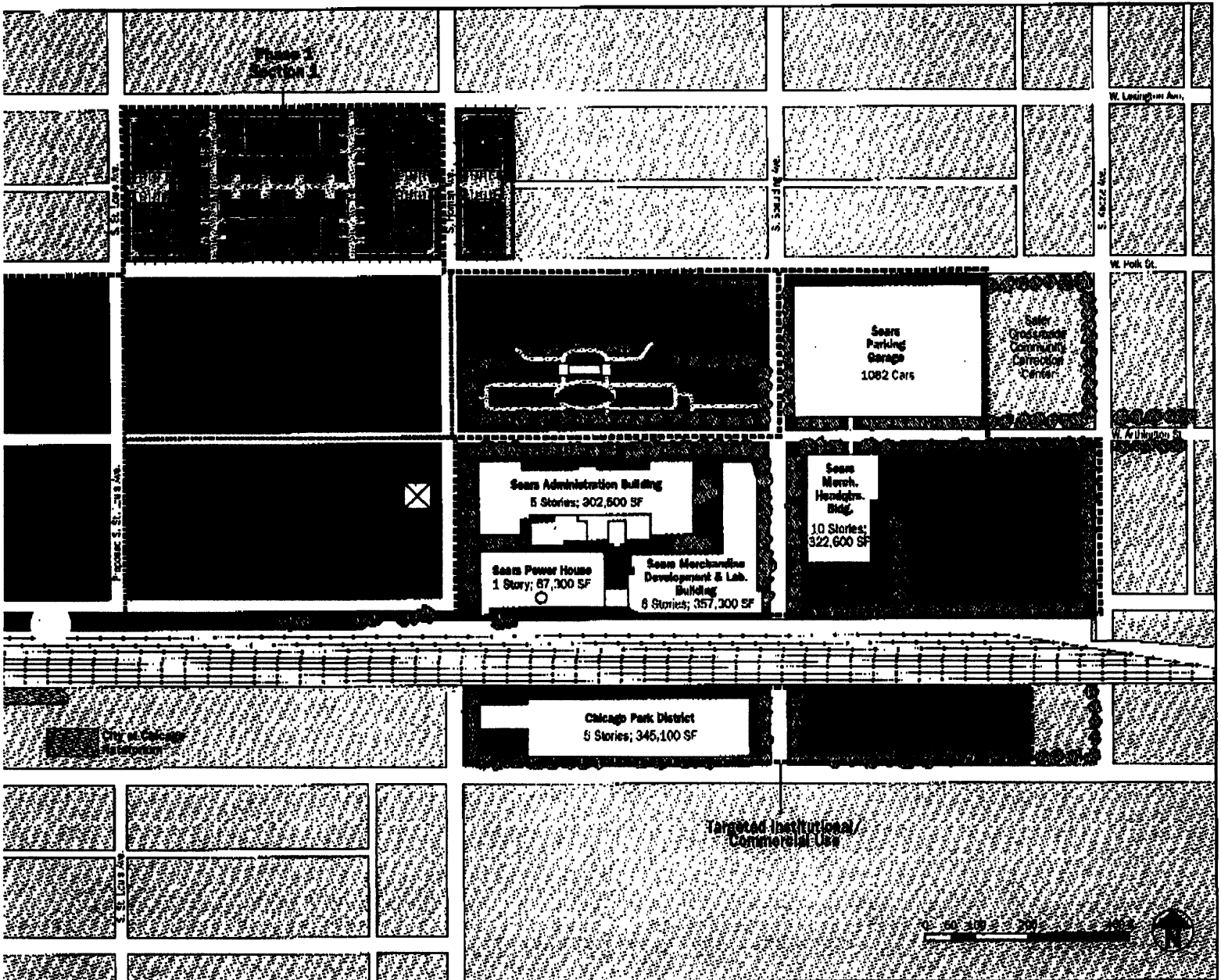
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**Key:**



APARTMENTS



DUPLEXES



TOWNHOMES



SINGLE FAMILY HOMES