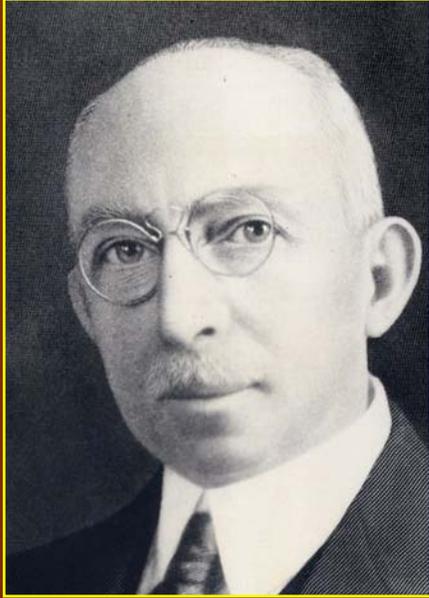


A common story tells how Macy's in Manhattan "stole" the Thanksgiving Day Parade from Bamberger's of Newark. But is it true?

Was Bamberger's Parade First?

Gordon Bond



Louis Bamberger

I had to admit it—I had fallen into the same trap I had criticized others for. Often, particularly with local history, urban myths, legends, folklore, and incorrect guesses get repeated enough times that they become historic “fact.” Such things become part of the cultural zeitgeist especially when they feed the community ego—a house old enough to have had George Washington sleep there, for example, becomes in the retelling one where he did. It’s something cool that makes it more special than just another old house.

That was definitely the dynamic at play when last November 2017 I shared a post on the Garden State Legacy Facebook page from that of Old Newark. It featured a clown-head float from the Bamberger’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, cited as from the 1930s. Do some Google searches and you will come across many assertions that the world-renowned Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade was begun—or even outright stolen—from Bamberger’s Department Store in Newark, New Jersey. Consider what’s on the Wikipedia page for the Macy’s parade: “In 1924, the annual Thanksgiving parade started in Newark, New Jersey by Louis Bamberger at the Bamberger’s store was transferred to New York City by Macy’s.”

New Jersey and New York have long been rivals of sorts—smug New Yorkers looking down their noses at this side of Hudson still raises the hackles of proud sons and daughters of the Garden State! So the notion that this beloved Manhattan holiday tradition was, in fact, thanks to *New Jersey* holds a special appeal to our beleaguered local pride. When I initially posted about it on the GSL Facebook page, I made special, and perhaps a tad snarky, note of this New Jersey connection.

Then the comments came. Several people asserted that this was urban myth—that the New York parade, in fact, predated Newark’s. I ended up taking the post down since I didn’t want to be perpetuating false information, but I also decided I would see what I could discover about the truth before the next Thanksgiving holiday in 2018.

Bamberger’s

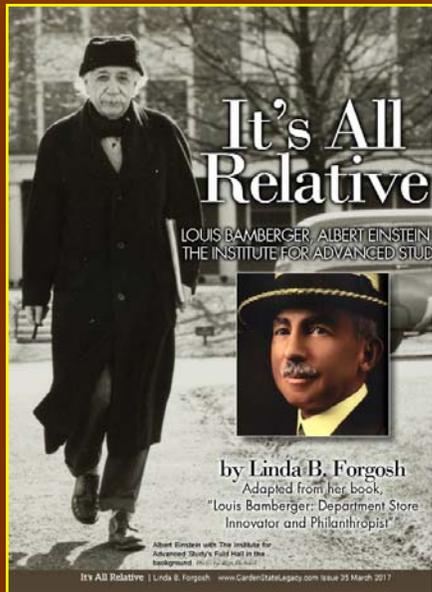
There are few names more integral to the history of New Jersey’s largest city than that of Louis Bamberger. He was born in 1855 in Baltimore, Maryland, to German-Jewish parents, Elkan Bamberger and Theresa Hutzler. He arrived in Newark in 1892, where he bought at auction a failing general goods store on Market Street. He renamed it L. Bamberger & Company and the following year took on Felix Fuld and Louis M. Frank as partners. Bamberger’s approach to business, excellent customer service, and positive employee relations were combined with his flair for promotion to establish one of the most successful and respected department stores of the era. Bamberger’s attracted shoppers from around the state



Bamberger's Department Store, Newark

and even drew well-to-do shoppers from Manhattan's notable stores. By 1912 Bamberger's was expanded into a city block-sized, eight-story, building. The clock mounted on the building at the corner of Market and Halsey Streets was used as an obvious downtown landmark to meet under. Louis Bamberger became a very wealthy man—in 1928, his store had become the fourth highest grossing department store in the nation with sales of some \$28-million.

Bamberger appreciated the symbiotic relationship his business success had with the City of Newark—the wellbeing of his enterprise was connected with the wellbeing of the community. His philanthropic efforts gave a cultured polish to the working class city, funding or donating to everything from public concerts, the Community Chest, and Beth Israel Hospital, to the buildings for Newark's YMHA, the Newark Museum, and the New Jersey Historical Society. In 1930 he



Bamberger biography author, Linda B. Forgosh, wrote an article for GSL about how he was instrumental in founding the Institute for Advanced Study and luring Albert Einstein to Princeton.

To read it, click on the image above or visit:

http://gardenstatelegacy.com/files/Its_All_Relative_Forgosh_GSL35.pdf

and his sister, Caroline Bamberger Fuld, gave \$5-million to establish the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and was instrumental in convincing Albert Einstein to come to the U.S. and perform his work there.

Aside from the normal advertising campaigns in newspapers, his store hosted events, exhibits, and classes, further integrating Bamberger's into the fabric of Newark's civic life. Among the more innovative promotions came in 1922 when the store obtained a license to operate a radio station out of the building to help sell radio receivers. Though it went through many changes in ownership and format, WOR, 710 AM, still operates out of New York City.

In June of 1929, R. H. Macy Co. purchased Bamberger's—whether he was knowingly prescient or not is unclear, but he managed to walk away from it a mere four months before the stock market crash that heralded the Great Depression. In keeping with his philanthropic spirit, when he sold the store, Bamberger set aside \$1-million to be divided among the 240 employees of his Newark location.

Though the Newark store was the only one in operation under his ownership, Macy's kept the Bamberger's name and opened stores throughout New Jersey as well as Delaware, Maryland, New York, and Pennsylvania. It remained a division of Macy's, headquartered in Newark, until 1986.

Newark's Parade

The idea that the Thanksgiving Day Parade originated with Bamberger's may have come from how it sounded like something he would have done—a combination of community spirit while also good public relations for his store. The idea that Macy's "stole" it from Bamberger's is likely rooted in the New Jersey and New York rivalry. Yet both are disproven by a most obvious means of initial research. Certainly had Bamberger's run a holiday parade there would have been promotions for it in local newspapers, including the *Newark Sunday Call*. Yet, there is no mention whatever of *any* Thanksgiving Day parade in Newark between 1900 and 1929, hosted by Bamberger's or anyone else.

Macy's first parade took place in Manhattan in 1924, five years before they acquired Bamberger's. The first Bamberger's parade in Newark happened in 1931, two years after becoming a division of Macy's. So while Newark did have a Bamberger's Thanksgiving Day parade, it was neither before New York's nor was it associated with Louis Bamberger himself.

It should be noted that neither New York nor Newark can lay claim to being "first" in the nation to hold a department store sponsored Thanksgiving Day parade. That distinction belongs to the other Garden State rival, Philadelphia. In 1920, Gimbels department store employees dressed up as clowns and cavorted



A giant cat balloon float pulled by a group of clowns through Newark during the 1933 parade.

Newark Public Library

down the street to herald the holiday shopping season. The same year as Macy's debut parade, Hudson's in Detroit also held their first. Both traditions continue today.

Regardless of who did it first between New Jersey and New York, the Bamberger's parade remained a much beloved holiday tradition for Newarkers between 1931 and 1957. One fond remembrance by Nat Bodian can be found on the Old Newark website:

<https://www.oldnewark.com/memories/downtown/bodianthanks.htm>

One of my warmest memories as a child growing up in Newark's old Third Ward, close to downtown Newark, was the Bamberger department store annual Thanksgiving Day parade. I recall edging as close as possible through the thick crowds to the Market and Washington Streets corner of Bamberger's where the parade would wind up. At that point, Santa would alight from atop a throne on a huge float and step onto the marquee on the Washington Street side of Bamberger's and wave to the cheering crowds



An undated video of a Bamberger's Thanksgiving Day Parade on YouTube can be found by clicking on the amove image or visiting:

https://youtu.be/iZpsZ_34Bpo

before entering the store to officially open the downtown Newark Christmas shopping season. For me, as a small child, the parade had everything . . . huge helium-inflated balloons—their restraining cords held by gaily clad Bamberger employees . . . circus clowns . . . stilt walkers . . . buccaneers . . . frontiersmen . . . Newark's mounted police squad. . . . fire trucks . . . military units . . . and floats on slow-moving trucks. As I recall the five-mile long line of march usually ended early enough so parade watchers could get home by noontime for the traditional Thanksgiving Day feast. Around 1931, the earliest year I can recall going down to the parade, from my home on Montgomery Street, an old newspaper report of that year's parade stated that the crowd for the 1931 parade was about 250,000, more than half the population of Newark. My guess is that perhaps a third to a half had come in from the suburbs. The parade that day, that had started on the grounds of the Carteret Academy in West Orange, followed a traditional parade route that was unchanged for many years: Down Central Avenue into Newark and at South Sixth Street into West Market, then down West Market to Market Street at the Essex county Court House. Then, down Market Street to Bamberger's, where it turned in to Washington Street to terminate at the Bamberger's marquee, Santa's stepping off point. A Newark Evening News account of that year's parade described the parade thus: "On the sidewalks and out past the curb lines, two wide lines of humanity were kept back by hundreds of policemen as good humored as the parade itself. At Washington and Market, almost all the street space was given over to the public." Further, continued the Newark Evening News report, "Upon arrival at the front door of Bamberger's, the giant 100-foot long dragon was allowed to soar off with the winds, as were the other helium-inflated figures.

Living Close to downtown Newark, I remember going to all the downtown parades, but the only one deeply etched in my childhood memories for its sheer joy, color, and excitement was the one put on by the Bamberger's employees on Thanksgiving Day that heralded the arrival of Santa to Bamberger's eighth-floor toy department, and the start of downtown Newark's Christmas shopping season.

Over its lifetime, the Newark parade proved to be worthy competition to its more famous neighbor across the Hudson. In 2011, NJ.com reporter Lisa Rose published a piece about the Newark Bamberger's parade.

https://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/11/gone_but_not_forgotten_a_time.html

Over the years, Jersey crowds applauded such celebrities as Abbott & Costello, Guy Lombardo, Walter Winchell, Janet Leigh, Emmett Kelly, Morey Amsterdam and Rin Tin Tin. In 1955, Newark glimmered on Thanksgiving Eve, as Bamberger's pioneered a whole new style of parade for an international broadcast on CBS and the Voice of America network.

Other tales from the Bamberger's parade—such as how the wind got the better of a 50-foot balloon toy soldier at the 1931 parade; how Bamberger's pioneered electric light effects on floats for a dazzling nighttime parade; and how Santa Claus locked his keys in his car (!)—can also be found in Rose's article linked above.

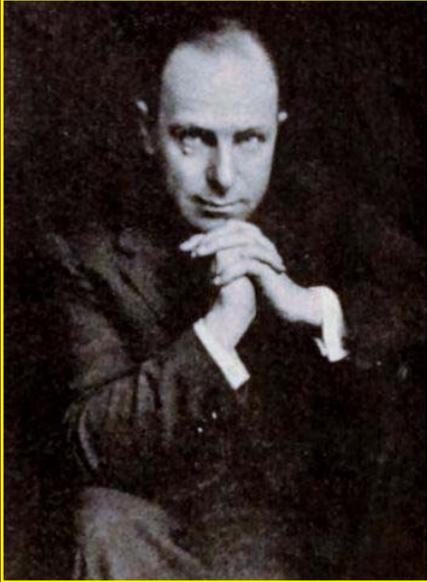
In terms of the relationship between New Jersey's parade and New York's, however, the Newark one benefited from the creative talent it shared with Macy's. Pioneering puppeteer Tony Sarg, who was responsible for creating many of the animal balloons for Macy's parade (as well as their elaborate animated holiday window displays), built sound into the animal balloons for Bamberger's parade. It was said the growls, grunts, gobbles, and oinks could be heard up to a half mile away!

The classic movie "Miracle on 34th Street," from 1947, did much to establish the place of New York's Macy's parade in America's holiday tradition culture. Yet, there is at least one important New Jersey connection. The sleigh float Santa rides in the movie, as well as a patriotic eagle-themed float, were both on loan from the Bamberger's Newark parade!

By the late 1950s, attendance was down at the Bamberger's event, as families preferred to gather around the television at home than stand out in the cold to watch a parade. In 1956, it was moved from Newark's streets to a circular track at Weequahic Park. By 1958, it was decided it was no longer worth it.

In some respects, the Bamberger's parade was another victim of Newark's reversal of fortunes in the second half of the century, brought on by deindustrialization, crime, and civil unrest. In 1986, the Bamberger's stores were rebranded as Macy's and Louis Bamberger's flagship store in Newark closed for good in 1991.

These days, Newark is seeing a growing resurgence, particularly with renewed investment in redeveloping the downtown. Perhaps one day its streets will once more echo with the excitement of a reimagined Bamberger's Thanksgiving Day Parade.



Illustrator and puppeteer Tony Sarg lent his creative talents to both Macy's and Bamberger's parades.

From Exhibitors Herald, September 17, 1921, posted to Wikipedia