

***Doggeries, Jungles, and Piggly Wiggles:  
Southerners and the Social Landscape of Food Shopping, 1840-1940***

This book traces the evolution of food shopping spaces and social practices in the South from the antebellum period through the 1930s. Historians have traditionally emphasized the role of the general store in the commercial landscape of the South, stressing in particular its rising importance in the late nineteenth century. By focusing on the variety of food shopping spaces and the evolution of food shopping practices, this study shows a greater complexity of commercial building and consumer choices in the region than heretofore recognized. My purpose here is not to explain Southerners' responses to the rise of a mass consumer society; rather, the goal is to evaluate the interrelationships among the changing social practices and the spatial and architectural contexts of food shopping to understand the variety and complexity of the commercial landscape in the region.

It is hardly a regional phenomenon to say that in an urban and small-town context, food shopping was a basic and often daily necessity of life. Yet the wide variety and evolution of food shopping spaces available to Southerners during this period demonstrates that satisfying this basic need was certainly far more complex than a simple trip to the corner grocery or the public market. In fact, not only did the variety of buildings and spaces designed for food shopping change significantly during this period, so did the shoppers. And many of the forces that shaped those changes clearly had a uniquely regional dimension.

To fully understand the complexities of Southern food shopping practices and spaces, the story begins in the antebellum era—a period when grocery stores were often saloon-like establishments that catered to the desires of its mostly male consumers, while, by contrast, travelers in the region noted the dominance of African American women as vendors and consumers of local produce at the public market. This social geography of food shopping changed dramatically with the evolution of the commercial landscape in the New South. The corner grocery domesticated food shopping expanding into middle class neighborhoods, though the same middle class white women who looked forward to a trip downtown to the department store often used their telephone to avoid a visit to the grocery store. Small independent groceries and chain stores offered business opportunities for Jewish and Italian immigrants. In this era of the corner store, grocery stores were the most ubiquitous commercial spaces in the cities and small towns of the New South. Dependence on African American consumers made small town groceries some of the most racially integrated spaces in the segregated South.

Not until the turn of the twentieth century did middle class Southern white women begin to go routinely to the grocery store to do their own shopping. This social turning point took place at the same time that grocery store interiors began to be significantly redesigned. Though it is taken for granted today

as commonplace, one of the most important turning points in the history of food shopping was the invention of self-service. Southern grocery entrepreneurs of the early twentieth century were among the leaders in developing the self-service store concept and redesigning commercial spaces to make the concept work. Their experiments in store design signaled not only a response to the rise of a mass market in food production and packaging, but also a cultural transformation of consumer practices at work in the region. When grocers redesigned their stores in the early twentieth century, they did so not only in response to the practical possibilities of new food packaging made available by the rise of mass manufactured food products, but also with new attention to the concerns of middle class white female shoppers. By the time Clarence Saunders opened his original Piggly Wiggly store in Memphis in 1916, one of the first successful self-service groceries in America, genteel white women had become the single most important targeted clientele for the advertisements of Southern grocers.