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## Mary Sachs: Two Types of Beauty in Harrisburg

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# Mary Sachs: Two Types of Beauty in Harrisburg

The narrative of Harrisburg's City Beautiful Movement presented by historian, William H. Wilson, and journalist, Paul Beers, among others, often focuses too narrowly on the term beauty, leaving other types of beauty out of the narrative. The narrative frequently focuses on men instead of women, policies instead of people, and external beauty rather than internal beauty. However, both types of beauty were crucial in Harrisburg's City Beautiful Movement.

## Poster and Research by: Robin Schwarzmann

### Who is Mary Sachs?

Mary Sachs was a Russian born immigrant, who came to America with her family at four years old. Sachs began her life in Baltimore, where she worked in a factory as a teenager. However, when she was 19 years old, the great Baltimore fire destroyed the factory where she worked. Seeking a new job, Mary Sachs moved to Harrisburg. There, Sachs worked her way up from being a stock girl to becoming a business owner. She has often been noted as one of Harrisburg's greatest business women and philanthropists. Sachs was also a devout Jewish woman who dedicated her life to serving others.

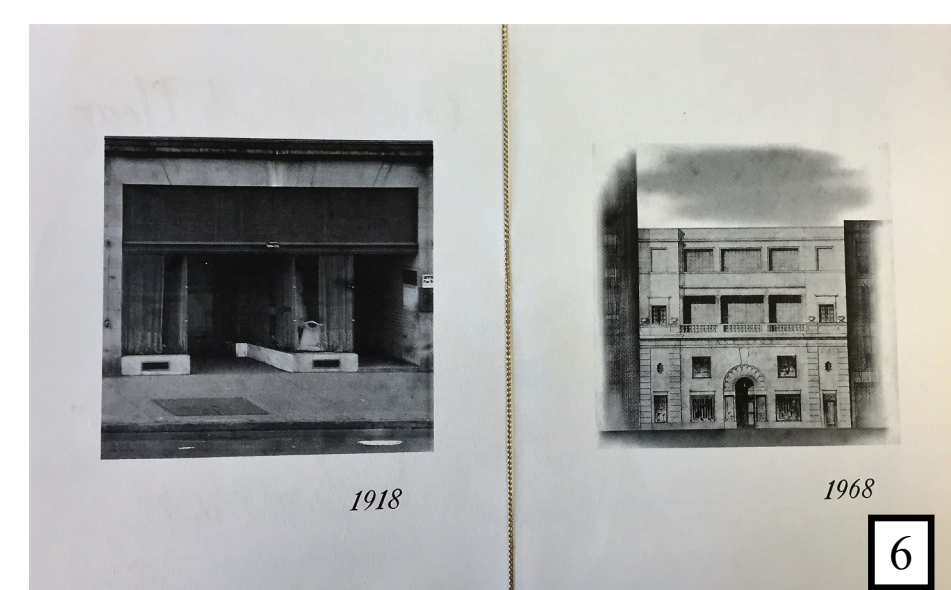


### Front and Center Beauty



Despite financial struggles at the beginning, Mary Sachs was able to open a successful clothing shop at 208 North Third Street, across the street from Capitol Park, in 1918. The building was an old house that she made into a charming, homey store. People from all over fell in love with the store. Unfortunately, this little shore burned down on February 11, 1931.

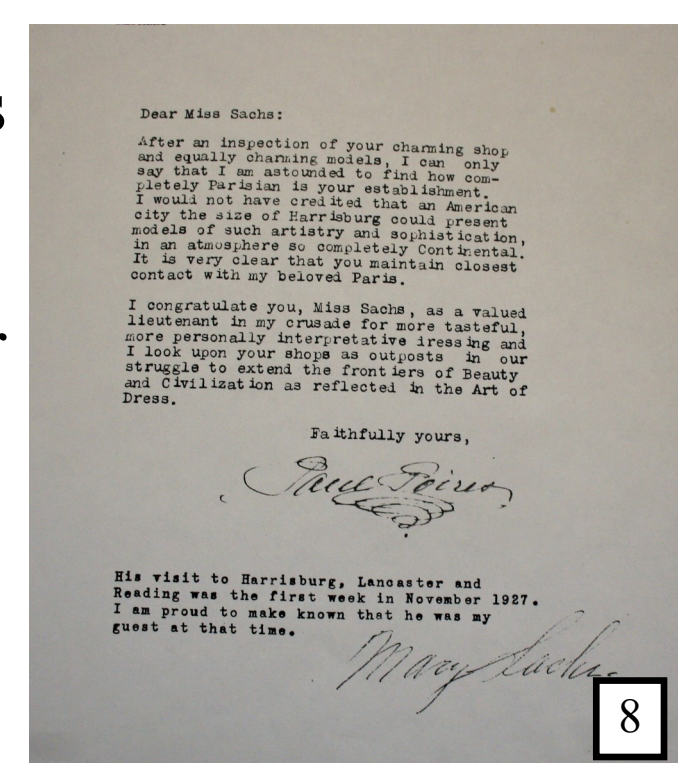
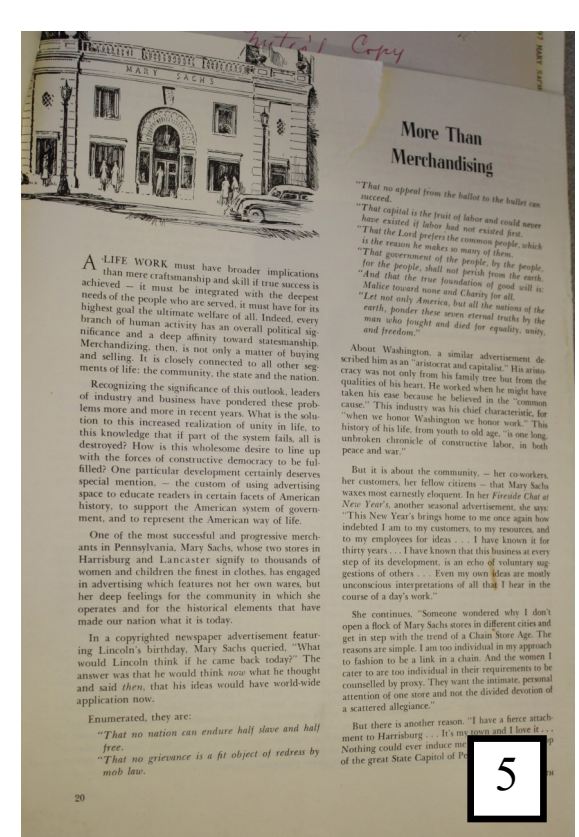
However, a new and better structure was built by the Lawrie & Green architecture firm and designed by a famous designer, Eleanor Lemaire. Mary Sachs' store was once again made beautiful for the City of Harrisburg after the fire.



In describing the kind of clothes the store sold, Mary Sachs noted that she presented "not stylish clothes, but simple, basic, beautiful clothes, clothes which derive their charm from good line and exquisite workmanship," (Congressional Record, 1958). Mary Sachs wanted good quality clothes to make the men, women, and children of Harrisburg look charming. She claimed she never followed the latest fads, but, rather, she tried to dress people in clothes they would feel comfortable going out in. She also tried to make sure the clothes flattered her customers. Therefore, she served shoppers from separate dressing rooms, so that it would be easier for them to find what looked best on them. For her, dress was an art form, and it was an art form that many citizens appreciated. The clothing lifted the whole community of Harrisburg up. Her clothing choices brought an air of sophistication to Harrisburg, thus turning Harrisburg into a more beautiful, vibrant, and attractive place to be.



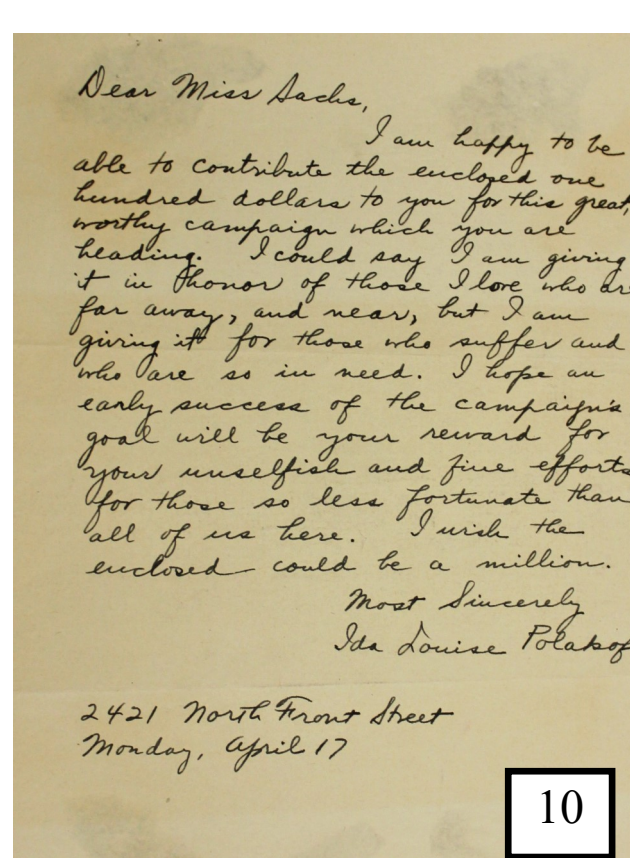
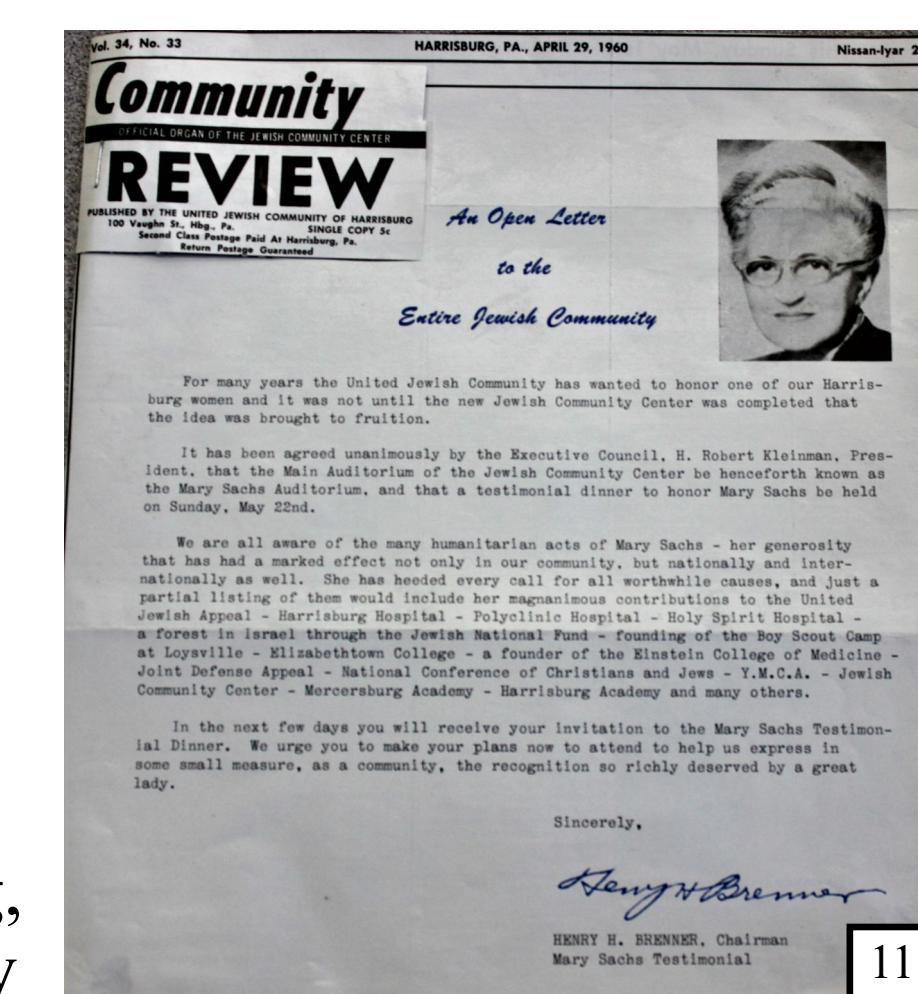
When asked in an interview about her store, Sachs stated, "I have a fierce attachment to Harrisburg. It is my town and I love it... Nothing could ever induce me to make a whistle stop of the great State Capitol of Pennsylvania" (*More than Merchandising*). Her love of Harrisburg is why she stayed and rebuilt after the fire. Her desire to rebuild the store is the "textbook" definition of beauty, physically making something look visually more appealing. The goal of City Beauty Movement was to make Harrisburg look more like other sophisticated cities around the world. Her store was successful in this because it has often been equated to the beauty of Paris. In the Congressional Record, a Paris designer is quoted as saying "Why talk about Paris shops and Paris fashions? You have what Parisians admire in your own towns." Likewise, a Paris gentleman wrote to Mary Sachs claiming "I would not have credited that an American city of such artistry and sophistication, in an atmosphere so completely Continental. It is very clear that you maintain closest contact with my beloved Paris." Sachs' clothing store was successful in bringing beauty to Harrisburg; however, Sachs' store was not the only way she promoted beauty in Harrisburg.



### Behind the Scenes Beauty



While beauty is often described as a physical thing, like Mary Sachs' store, beauty can also come from within. Mary Sachs was a philanthropist, who spent the better part of her life helping the poor. Much of her desire to help others stemmed from her Jewish faith. Mary Sachs' strong commitment to the Jewish faith is what drove her to help others in and outside of Harrisburg. She became chairman of the Jewish Relief Drive in Harrisburg. She also made contributions to various institutions including the Harrisburg Academy, Harrisburg Hospital, Jewish Community Center, Y.M.C.A., United Jewish Appeal, and more. She wanted to help bring the people of Harrisburg together. This unity is best seen though her work with the Boy Scouts Community. As she worked with Boy Scouts, she hoped to bring boys of different faiths and races together. Being from an immigrant family and a Jew, Sachs understood the struggles of others. She therefore, wanted everyone to feel like they had a home. She had found her home in Harrisburg and wanted others to feel that way as well. Her work to improve the lives of her fellow citizens caused a real change in Harrisburg.



With all the aid and work Mary Sachs was contributing, it inspired others to serve the community as well. Many offered to give generous donations to various causes that Mary Sachs helped organized. Ida Louise Polakof wrote to Mary Sachs, "...I am giving it for those who suffer and who are so in need. I hope an early success of the campaign's goal will be your reward for your unselfish and fine efforts for those so less fortunate than all of us here." Sachs inspired others to want to make a difference in the community. Of those donating, many were Sachs' Jewish friends but not all. Sachs influenced many people to lend a hand, which led naturally to improvement and change years after the City Beautiful Movement ended. Harrisburg's City Beautiful Movement touched not only building and architecture, but also people.

### Take Away

The narrative of the City Beautiful Movement frequently focuses on men instead of women, policies instead of people, and external beauty rather than internal beauty. However, beauty comes in many forms, not just in the physical forms of new buildings, streets, or parks. Rather, beauty also comes from the people who live there. Mary Sachs, a Jewish woman of humble origin, sought to make the city of Harrisburg more beautiful in both ways. First, Sachs owned and ran her own store, Mary Sachs Inc., which provided architectural beauty as well as beauty in clothing to the City Beautiful Movement. Second, Sachs was a well-known philanthropist who sought to improve Harrisburg through her interactions with her fellow citizens. Sachs' various efforts to promote beauty should not be overlooked, since both types of beauty were important to the narrative.



### Image Sources

- 1) Portrait of Mary Sachs. Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 1.
- 2) Portrait of Young Mary Sachs. Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 1.
- 3) "The Many Joys of Christmas." Catalogue from Mary Sachs. Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 4.
- 4) Photograph of a window display from Mary Sachs' Store. Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 4.
- 5) "More Than Merchandising" from the Commonwealth Magazine. Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 1.
- 6) "The Fiftieth Year." 50th Celebration of Mary Sachs' Store. Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 4.
- 7) "Miss Mary Sachs: The Merchant Princess" from the Congressional Record. Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 3.
- 8) A letter from a Paris Gentlemen. Dauphin County Historical Society, MG 706, Box 1.
- 9) "Not What We Give But What We Share." Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 3.
- 10) Letter to Miss Sachs. Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 3.
- 11) "An Open Letter to the Entire Jewish Community." Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 3.
- 12) Photograph in front of Mary Sachs' Building. Pennsylvania State Archives, MG 297, Box 1.