

FILENE'S

426 WASHINGTON STREET

EST. 1912

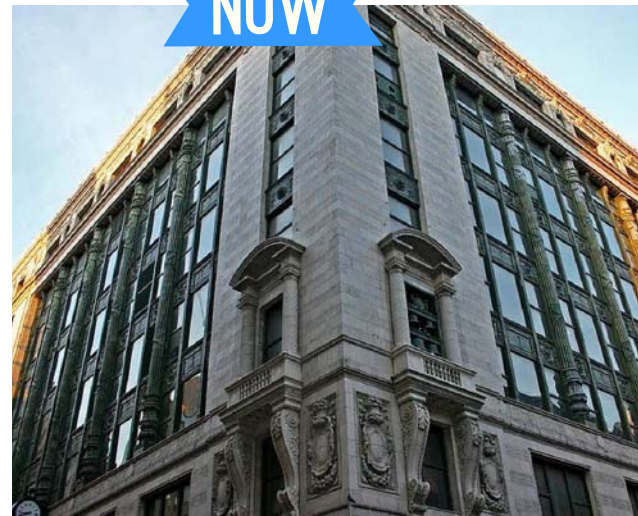
DANIEL BURNHAM, ARCHITECT

THEN



Courtesy of the Bostonian Society

NOW



HISTORY

Born in Germany, Wilhelm Katz changed his name to William Filene upon his emigration to the US in 1848. A peripatetic entrepreneur, Filene would move from Boston to Salem to Maine to New York and back in the mid-19th century. By 1890, Filene had consolidated his operations in a five-story building on Washington Street. He made a name for himself at the Washington Street location by selling ready-to-wear women's clothing – then still a relatively uncommon practice.

Filene's operations were expanded by William Filene's sons, Lincoln and Edward, leading to the construction of the building most readily identified with the department store at the corner of Washington and Summer Streets. Designed by prominent Chicago architect and city planner, Daniel Burnham, in conjunction with Boston firm Parker, Thomas and Rice, the Filenes building was purpose built to accommodate a wide range of amenities beyond the sale of men's and women's clothing. These included a barber shop and hair dresser, a restaurant, tea room, and a cafe. The building also allotted space for an employee cafeteria, roof recreation space, a hospital, library, and even a bathhouse.

Burnham brought his extensive experience designing other high-end department stores, including Marshall Field in Chicago, Wanamaker in Philadelphia, and Gimbel in New York, to bear on what would prove to be his last commission. The terra cotta façade allowed for a great level of architectural detail, while the building's steel frame and large windows provided for airy interiors. And, anticipating the shopping malls of the mid-twentieth century, the store was laid out as a sequence of shop-lined streets, as opposed to conventional aisles. A contemporary Boston Globe account marveled at the building, calling it "singularly suited to the interpretation of modern business ideals." On the day of the building's opening day, a remarkable 235,000 people streamed through the doors.