

## MSS. Collection #131

**Odell Hardware Co. Collection, 1882-1996 [bulk 1950s-1960s].  
2½ document boxes and 1 record storage box (53 folders), ca. 225 items.**

NOTE: The numbers cited in parentheses, e.g. 1:5, refer the researcher to the Series#:Folder# in which that name/topic will be found.

### INTRODUCTION

Odell Hardware Company was founded in 1872 and remained in business for over 100 years before being sold in 1995. This collection consists primarily of financial and legal documents, photographs, and printed material. Of particular note are an 1882 storefront photograph and an image of the interior around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also included are store catalogs, advertisements, minutes, and financial documents that shed light on the growth and operations of the company. Researchers interested in Odell Hardware Company, business history, or late 19th century Greensboro may find this collection useful.

**Arrangement:** This collection is organized into seven series and arranged within series by document type or subject. The series are: **Correspondence**, 1895-1992; **Financial**, 1882-1935; **Legal**, 1872-1912; **Minutes**, ca. 1920-1980; **Miscellaneous**, 1940-1959; **Photographs**, 1880-1979; and **Printed Material**, 1880-1990s.

**Provenance:** The bulk of this collection was donated by former employees of Odell Hardware Company. In February 1996, Carl Holliday presented items that he had retrieved from the company's storage vault, including account books, catalogs, photographs, miscellaneous printed material, and Charles Ireland's tax returns (1996.30.2). Randy Owens, who worked for the company for twenty-five years, donated the original deeds, additional financial documents, and the directors' minute book in February 2009 (2009.2.1). The 1925 catalog (1981.53.4; 7:7) and original invoices (2013.13.6-8; 2:5) were received from unknown sources, while the unused envelopes and 1954 sporting goods catalog were given by Melanie Knier, the owner of ReAligned (2020.18.1; 7:10-11). Nine additional photographs and the 1961 general catalog were donated by Nancy Jenkins; her father, J.D. (John Dameron) Jenkins, worked in electrical and plumbing at Odell Hardware from 1946 until about 1982 and also took some of the photographs in the collection (2023.17.1; 6:2-3, 6:12, 6:16, 7:9).

**Processing:** This collection was organized and the finding aid was prepared by intern Ava Freyaldenhoven in July 2020. The additional items were incorporated and the finding aid was revised by Archivist Elise Allison in September 2023.

## **HISTORICAL NOTE**

Odell Hardware Company was established in 1872 at 327 South Elm Street in Greensboro. It was founded by James A. Odell, his brother J.M. Odell and W.H. Ragan under the name "House of Odell" as a wholesale and retail dry goods business. In 1884, the dry goods department was replaced with wholesale and retail hardware supply. That same year, Charles H. Ireland was hired as a manager and the business was incorporated as "Odell Hardware Company." J.A. Odell moved to Durham in 1886 to develop the Durham Cotton Manufacturing Company. Two years later, he returned to Greensboro with capital to grow the business and once again became president.

By 1904, Odell Hardware was one of the largest companies of its kind in the southeastern United States. In 1912, James A. Odell retired and became chairman of the Board of Directors, a position he held until his death in 1930. After Odell's retirement, Charles H. Ireland, the treasurer and general manager since 1888, became president and served the company until his health forced him to retire in 1925. W.C. Boren Sr. of Pomona Terra-Cotta Company replaced Ireland as president, and Diffie H. Lambert became vice-president.

At its 50th anniversary in 1922, Odell Hardware employed 92 people between the wholesale brand and the retail store, not including company officers. It expanded from the South Elm location to a five-acre plot on Scott Avenue in 1933, with the new building providing three and a half acres of floor space. In 1946, Diffie H. Lambert was elected president and M.D. Stout became an officer. Stout had first been employed at Odell Hardware when he was thirteen years old and worked his way up to become vice chairman, secretary and treasurer, and director. The retail aspect of the company was terminated in 1942, and it became exclusively wholesale. Additions to the Scott Avenue building encouraged modernization, and by 1965 the structure had grown to 225,000 square feet, about five acres.

Odell Hardware modernized with pride through the mid-1900s. The efficiency of the wholesale warehouse became one of its prime objectives, and an IBM 360 Model 20 disk system was installed in 1967. In 1984, the company was bought by Genuine Hardware and the original name dropped, but the name and local ownership were restored in 1991. Between 1979 and 1995, the company went through four ownership changes before finally being absorbed by Orgill Inc. in December 1995. At that time, it was the oldest Greensboro business still in operation.

**Historical Sources:** The sources used to compile this historical note were primarily items in the collection such as company histories, newspaper clippings from the *Greensboro Record* ranging from the 1940s to 1990s, clippings from a 1957 publication entitled *Southern Hardware*, and a booklet published by Odell Hardware Co. around 1972 for its 100th anniversary. An article by Jack Scism announcing the return of the Odell name was also consulted (*News & Record*, June 24, 1991).

## **SCOPE & CONTENT NOTE**

The Odell Hardware Co. Collection consists of correspondence, financial and legal documents, minutes, company history, maps, photographs, and printed material. Items range from the company's beginning in 1872 through 1996.

The photographs form the largest series and date primarily from the late 19th century or mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. They include an 1882 storefront, as well as images of the offices and store floor that show the company in its early years. The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century photographs, like that of a merchandise show in 1967, provide insight into the modernizing company, while the financial documents, deeds, and minutes also illustrate the growth and operations of Odell Hardware. Researchers interested in Greensboro history or North Carolina businesses may find this collection useful in studying the impact of one of Greensboro's earliest businesses. Established just two years after Greensboro became a city, Odell Hardware was an integral part of the city's growing economy and culture.

## **SERIES DESCRIPTIONS**

### **1. Correspondence. 3 folders (3 items). 1895-1992.**

The correspondence includes both incoming and outgoing letters. The most interesting item is a 1992 letter from Maryellen Higginbotham to M.D. Stout regarding early company records (1:1). Higginbotham attached pictures of the houses of I.M. Odell, J.A. Odell, George Sergeant and Daniel P. Foust, as well as a 1902 map of Greensboro. Outgoing correspondence includes an 1895 letter from Treasurer Charles Ireland to W.E. Griffan of Bynum, North Carolina (1:2). A 1953 letter from company Secretary and Treasurer M.D. Stout to C.A. Pitts describes a Remington Arms Company fishing trip that Stout attended with attached photos (1:3).

### **2. Financial. 9 folders (39 items). 1882-1935.**

Financial documents consist of the tax returns of C.H. Ireland, account books, audit reports, insurance records, an inventory statement book, a plethora of invoices from 1882-1903, two stock certificate books from 1884 and 1920, and three Want books. A highlight of this series are the tax returns of Charles Ireland, which provide insight into the finances of an Odell employee (2:8). Of particular historical note, the invoices (2:5) and the account books (2:1) show what items customers were buying and how much they spent per visit. An insurance book for 1935 shows that the company had policies covering buildings, workers' compensation, forgery, and robbery (2:3).

### **3. Legal. 2 folders (14 items). 1872-1912.**

The legal documents consist of fourteen deeds that record the dates and locations of the company's land acquisitions in its early years.

### **4. Minutes. 3 folders (3 items). 1920s, 1976-1980.**

This series contains two minute books, one for meetings with the company directors (4:1) and another for annual stockholder meetings (4:2). The directors' minute book includes important decisions like mergers, resignations, amendments, and sales reports. The stockholders' minute book is split into two parts for Odell Hardware Company and Statesville Hardware

Company, which had the same ownership. Also included in the series is a 1929 contract establishing an annual stockholders meeting for Statesville Hardware Company (4:3).

**5. Miscellaneous. 2 folders (5 items). 1940s-1950s.**

This series holds miscellaneous items of two different categories. The first is typed material on the history of the company produced to honor an Odell anniversary, as well as typed employee biographies (5:1). The pieces written for anniversaries provide a great resource for the timeline of the company, while the employee biographies list important members of the Odell team and their contributions. This series also includes two undated maps of North Carolina in the context of land for special plows (5:2).

**6. Photographs. 18 folders (ca. 115 items). 1880s-1970s.**

The photographs encompass most of the history of the company and its employees. Of particular significance is an 1882 photo of the South Elm storefront (6:13). An image of the interior around the turn of the century shows the attention to detail and organization for which the store was famous. Other photographs show the company offices and a 1922 employee picnic (6:15). The majority of the photographs date from the 1950s and 1960s, and they include merchandise shows and retirement ceremonies for management. More formal photography consists of individual and group portraits through the 1970s (6:8-11). The construction of warehouses is documented along with finished warehouse interiors (6:16-18). Unique and insightful images show the company booth at the 1940 High Point Furniture Market (6:6) and the company bus (6:1), a dealer display service. The miscellaneous photographs include one of horses and carriages lined up in front of West Market Street Methodist Church and another of the Methodist Protestant Children's Home in High Point (6:7).

**7. Printed Material. 16 folders (44 items). ca. 1880s-1990s.**

The printed materials include advertisements, catalogs, envelopes, magazine articles, maps, newspapers and clippings, and stickers. The highlight of the series are the catalogs. Brand catalogs, some affiliated with Odell Hardware and others exclusively a single brand's advertising pamphlet, include sporting goods, outdoor furniture, and tire chains (7:4-5). Full store catalogs list everything offered by the company in a hardback book (7:6-9). Dating from 1880, 1925, 1961 and 1963, they illustrate change over time.

Articles from magazines and newspapers provide additional insight into the company. Several magazine articles from 1957 announce the retirement of five salesmen, while pieces from 1957 and 1965 focus on modernization of the warehouses to improve customer service and reduce operating costs (7:12). Copies of newspaper clippings from a discarded scrapbook discuss a lawsuit involving a company lawyer and dishonest sales of stock (7:15). Also of note are a 1915 almanac (7:3) and a set of stickers possibly used as price tags (7:16).

**FOLDER LISTING**

<b>Series</b>	<b>Folder</b>	<b>Contents</b>	
1	1	Correspondence	-- Higginbotham, Maryellen to M.D. Stout (1992)
	2	“	-- Ireland, Charles to W.E. Griffan (1895)
	3	“	-- Stout, M.D. to C.A. Pitts (1953)
2	1	Financial	-- Account books (1890s-1903)
	2	“	-- Audit report (1923, July-December)
	3	“	-- Insurance (1935)
	4	“	-- Inventory statement (1885-1925)
	5	“	-- Invoices (1882-1903)
	6	“	-- Stock certificates (1884-1920)
	7	“	-- Report of examination (1919)
	8	“	-- Tax returns (1917-1930)
	9	“	-- Want books (1927-1932, undated)
3	1	Legal	-- Deeds (1872-1899)
	2	“	-- Deeds (1902-1912)
4	1	Minutes	-- Directors (1976-1980)
	2	“	-- Stockholders (1920s)
	3	“	-- Stockholders -- Annual meeting agreement (1929)
5	1	Miscellaneous	-- Company history (1940s-1950s)
	2	“	-- Maps -- Tobacco plow (ca. 1940)
6	1	Photographs	-- Bus (ca. 1954)
	2	“	-- Employees at work (1950s-1960s)
	3	“	-- Events -- Ceremonial/officers (1950s-1960s)
	4	“	-- Events -- Company-wide/public (1950s-1960s)
	5	“	-- Events -- Merchandise show (negatives & prints, 1960s)
	6	“	-- High Point Furniture Market booth (1940)
	7	“	-- <a href="#">Miscellaneous (ca. 1890s-1920s)</a>
	8	“	-- Portraits -- Group (1950s-1960s)
	9	“	-- Portraits -- Individuals (late 1800s)
	10	“	-- Portraits -- Individuals (1950s-1960s)
	11	“	-- Portraits -- M.D. Stout (1970s)
	12	“	-- Products (1950s-1960s)
	13	“	-- <a href="#">Storefront (1882)</a>
	14	“	-- Storefront glass copy negative (1882)
	15	“	-- <a href="#">Store/Company culture (ca. 1880s-1922)</a>
	16	“	-- Warehouse -- Construction (1964-1965)
	17	“	-- Warehouse -- Exterior (1995, undated)
	18	“	-- Warehouse -- Interior (1956)

<u>Series</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	
7	1	Printed Material	<a href="#">-- 100th anniversary book (ca. 1972)</a>
	2	“	-- Advertisements/price lists (1880s-1890s)
	3	“	-- Almanac (1915)
	4	“	-- Catalogs -- Brands (1930s)
	5	“	-- Catalogs -- Brands (1963)
	6	“	-- Catalogs -- Full store (1916)
	7	“	-- Catalogs -- Full store (1925)
	8	“	-- Catalogs -- Full store (1954)
	9	“	-- Catalogs -- Full store (1961)
	10	“	-- Catalogs -- Sporting goods (1954)
	11	“	-- Envelopes (undated)
	12	“	-- Magazine articles (1950s-1960s)
	13	“	-- Newspaper (with centerfold advertisement, 1937)
	14	“	-- Newspaper clippings (1940s, 1992)
	15	“	-- Newspaper clippings -- Lawsuit (copies, 1940s)
	16	“	-- Stickers (undated)