Godfrey Dold: "Madison's Oldest Businessman"

by Devyn Sapper

For most of the nineteenth century, Americans – namely white Protestants – became immersed in Victorian culture. This included what Pamela Walker Laird explains as "ambivalence regarding the mix of abundance and poverty around them." Essentially, there was an internal struggle between succumbing to capitalistic materialism and traditional simplistic living. This struggle impacted much of daily life, including the values that were brought to people's business practices. For example, in nineteenth-century business culture, there was increased focus on moral character as a necessary feature of a successful businessman.[1] An example of this focus on moral character is the life and business of Godfrey Dold, a jeweler from Madison, Indiana. Beyond apparent financial welldoing, Dold's real success came from his reputation as a businessman of good moral character, being known for his industriousness, modesty, competitiveness, and initiative in his work and beyond.

Being consistent with the capitalist nature of America, there is no separating Godfrey Dold's success from his financial gains throughout his life. Dold was a jeweler in Madison, Indiana, a small town on the Ohio River.[2] According to his obituary in the *Louisville Courier,* Dold worked at his shop for sixty-one years (1858-1919), only retiring a few months prior to his death.[3] During this time, he amassed statistically impressive amounts of wealth. In 1860, he had $1,000 worth of real estate value.[4] This increased greatly as the business entered the 1870s. In 1870, Dold had $5,100 worth of real estate value.[5] This is significant because in 1860, 57% of free men did not own any real estate. Also, in 1870, only 20% of free men owned $2000 or more

[1] Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 103.

[2] 1860 United States Census, Madison, Jefferson County, Indiana, digital image s.v. "Godfrey Doles," *Ancestry.com.*

[3] "Oldest Merchant Dies," *The Courier Journal*, Sept. 14, 1919, 29, available at *Newspapers.com*, https://www.newspapers.com/image/118939091.

[4] 1860 Census, s.v "Godfrey Doles," *Ancestry.com.*

[5] 1870 United States Census, Madison, Jefferson County, Indiana, digital image s.v. "Godfrey Dold," *Ancestry.com.*

in real estate like Dold had.[6] Dold's real estate values through the years demonstrate the financial success that his business brought him.

Dold's final resting place also demonstrates his financial success. His tombstone at Springdale Cemetery in Madison is a multi-foot tall obelisk. His resting spot is surrounded by those of his family members, including his four daughters. His family's ability to afford a large plot at the cemetery alongside a significant tombstone for himself represents Dold's wealth.[7] Consistent with his life prior, Dold's death displays him as a financially successful businessman. However, Dold's successes in life cannot be reduced to his finances. Laird further explains that "wealth alone could not serve as the measurement of success for Victorian businesspeople."[8] Dold's success is best shown through his consistent moral character throughout his life.

By representing what it meant to be a morally sound businessman, Dold established a strong reputation for his business and more importantly, himself as the business owner. The main factors of Dold's good reputation in Madison were his industriousness as well as his modesty. In her book *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing,* Pamela Walker Laird states that the most important trait for businessmen of the time was their "willingness to work."[9] As mentioned earlier, Dold worked at the same shop in Madison for sixty-one years. This led to his being known as "Madison's Oldest Businessman."[10] He was known because he worked at his shop and maintained his business for what ended up being most of his adult life. This is important because in the nineteenth century, the reputation of a business was connected to the reputation of the business owner. Dold's owning a successful business made him look respectable. In his obituary, the *Madison Courier* reported that he did his job in an "effective and admirable fashion." By running a reliable business, Dold was characterized by the work he put out. While talking about his life, there was no disconnecting him from the work he put into the business. The second important aspect of Dold's character was his modesty. Laird also points out the importance of being frugal, which Dold demonstrated in his life. This can once again be shown in how long he worked and, more importantly, in his working at the same

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[6] Sarah McNair Vosmeier, "An Overview of Real Property Ownership, 1850–1870," Fall 2025, in possession of author.

[7] Godfrey Dold, grave marker, Springdale Cemetery, Madison, Jefferson County, Indiana, digital image s.v. "Gottfried 'Godfrey' Dold," *FindaGrave.com.*

[8] Laird, *Advertising Progress,* 104.

[9] Laird, *Advertising Progress,* 106.

[10] "Oldest Merchant Dies," *The Courier Journal*, Sept. 14, 1919, 29, available at *Newspapers.com,* https://www.newspapers.com/image/118939091.

store the entire time. Dold's own brother, Englebert, was a successful jeweler in Louisville, Kentucky.[11] Dold could have moved to the bigger city with his brother, but instead, he stayed in Madison to run his store and lead his family. Also, his obituary described him as soft-spoken and introverted, and yet, he never shied away from his obligations.[12] Quiet, introspective hard work is what made Dold's reputation in his community. Beyond his nature of hard work and modesty making him popular among his fellow Madisonians, it was his competitive nature that set his national reputation.

Two other key aspects of a successful Victorian businessman were initiative and competitiveness. These two are important to the increased valuation of the "middle-class heroics" – people who represented the best of the best of hard-working small businesspeople.[13] Dold solidified himself as one of those heroes, gaining himself national acclaim. The thing that brought him to the spotlight was the fact that he drilled a hole into a no. 7 cambric needle, the long way, and then threaded it. This led to Dold being featured in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, as reported by *The Metz Times* in Metz, Missouri.[14] Dold's motivations were reported by the *Los Angeles Times* in an article titled "Briton Couldn't Outdo This Man." Essentially, Dold had heard that an Englishman had achieve the same thing, and he was convinced that he could do it too.[15] It was this level of competitiveness that drew the nation's journalists to the story. *The Hanford Morning Journal* wrote that he had just wanted "to do that man one better."[16] Dold wanted to beat the English because he was competitive, and he took the initiative, even at seventy-five years old. He ended up being covered all around the country, with the *Los Angeles Times* publishing an obituary, for instance.[17] He was not a small businessman who only mattered among those who knew him personally. He was a representation of what a small businessman could be for the entire country. In these articles, they never discussed how much money he made. They discussed how he had been hard-working and competitive and yet incredibly modest. The

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[11] "Englebert Dold Dies After Short Illness," *The Courier Journal*, Aug. 16, 1903, 10, available at *Newspapers.com*, https://www.newspapers.com/image/1117697041/.

[12] "E.W. Hughes and Godfrey Dold," *The Madison Courier*, Sept. 13, 1919, 2.

[13] Laird, *Advertising Progress,* 104.

[14] "Brief Bits of News from Richards," *The Metz Times*, May 15, 1931, 2, available at *Newspapers.com*, https://www.newspapers.com/image/587988079/.

[15] "Briton Couldn't Outdo This Man," *The Los Angeles Times,* May 27, 1923, 60, available at *Newspapers.com*, https://www.newspapers.com/image/380342836/.

[16] "Could Split Hairs," *Hanford Morning Journal*, July 25, 1907, 6, available at *Newspapers.com*, https://www.newspapers.com/image/561940361/.

[17] "Briton Couldn't Outdo This Man," *The Los Angeles Times*, 60.

national articles prove that Dold's success is most shown in his moral character because that is what mattered enough to write about.

Money was not the only thing that made a successful businessman in the 1800s, shown by the fact that Dold's character was the factor that led most to his success. Through the way that people discussed his life and success, it becomes clear that it was not his finances that made him respectable. People all over the country discussed his personal moral character and that is what established his good reputation. Dold – through his industriousness, modesty, competitiveness, and initiative – was a representation of the great Victorian businessman of the 1800s. He was someone who worked in the middle ground of materialism and morality, wealth and virtue.

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