

The New York Times

Save Brooks Brothers!

The editor of “The Official Preppy Handbook” mourns the decline of a 202-year-old institution.

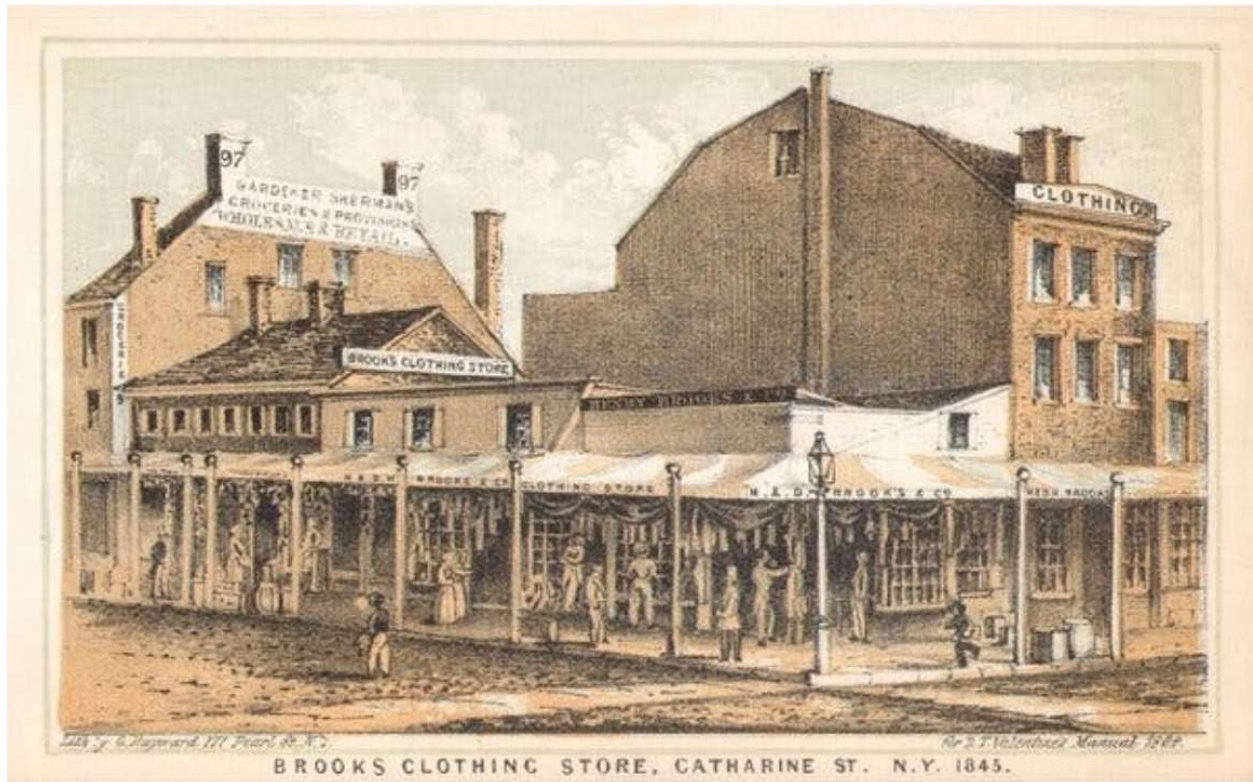
By Lisa Birnbach



When the bankruptcy filing of Brooks Brothers was announced this month, I received more condolence emails and texts than I had when my beloved dog Henry died.

The American haberdashery, with a pedigree matched by none, was in serious trouble. James Madison’s suits, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s wardrobe and the Union Army’s uniforms during the Civil War were all designed and made by Brooks Brothers. Theodore Roosevelt insisted the Rough Riders were outfitted by Brooks Brothers. Brooks Brothers made the black wool coat that Abraham Lincoln wore to his second inauguration. It’s not just a store. It’s a code, a reference, an historical record that is 202 years old. We can’t let it go without a fight.

Inextricably woven into the story of the United States is the story of this enterprising, sturdy and innovative company. Started by Henry Sands Brooks in 1818, it was continued after his death in 1833 by his five sons, and that is when H. & D.H. Brooks & Co became Brooks Brothers. The store, which first opened on Catharine and Cherry Street in what is now the Lower East Side, moved increasingly uptown over the years until 1915, when they built the big building that I love on n Madison and 44th Street.



Before the Brothers: Brooks Clothing Store on Catharine Street.

I particularly love the smell of the first floor: spicy, leathery, soapy, distinctive. When I was a little girl accompanying my father and brothers to get fall clothes, it smelled the same. How I wish that they would bottle it! I have asked many people at the store what they use to perfume the place, and they say it's the accumulation of the testers of cologne over the years that has blended this fragrance. (You could blindfold me and spirit me to 346 Madison Avenue and I would know exactly where I was.)

My parents shopped there. My grandparents shopped there. I imagine their parents did too, although I can't be sure. A famous story in my family: On their honeymoon, while in India, my grandparents traveled to Madras, in part so that my grandmother could buy some yards of that wonderful light cotton plaid fabric. They saw a fellow wearing a madras outfit, and my bold grandmother approached the gentleman and asked him where she could buy some material just like that. "Madam, I bought it at Brooks Brothers in New York," he answered.

Like real madras, made with vegetable dye which bleeds and runs, true authenticity in the classic clothing world is hard to find. I always think of the magentas and turquoises one sees around: delicious colors to be sure, but not part of the traditional palette that made preppy clothes distinctive. Yes we love bright colors; *certain* bright colors.



Plaid men: A window display at the Madison Avenue flagship store in the 1960s.

Brooks Brothers outlived the Great Depression, the 2008 recession, and worse for them, the advent of Casual Fridays. For a time there were seven branches of the store all around New York, out of approximately 250 stores around the country. Maybe that was too many. Certainly in the last few years things felt rich and glossy. After Claudio del Vecchio became the chairman and CEO, Brooks Brothers did some interesting things, like inviting designer Thom Browne to design a line for men and another for women. The collaboration was called Black Fleece. It included short suits for men. And chunky-soled brogues for women. Then Zac Posen came in to design the women's line. It felt prosperous and fashion-y. And it was. They outfitted the men of "Mad Men." And Tony Goldwyn. And Stephen Colbert.

In 2010 when my book “True Prep” was published, Brooks Brothers hosted a slew of parties for it, and my co-author Chip Kidd and I were outfitted splendidly. They made hundreds of tablecloths out of oxford shirting material! I traveled around the country with my book, to gorgeous stores in Los Angeles and Boston and Chicago that felt relevant. I was happy that for once my team was winning.



The author with Claudio Del Vecchio, at a store party for her book “True Prep.”

Look, it’s not all going away. They’ve announced that they are closing 51 branches. Fine; I don’t need the convenience of a store in my neighborhood. Comedian Rob Delaney tweeted from London that he was “genuinely upset as they make the best cotton boxers for guys with big asses and thighs.” Rob, don’t fret. You’ll be able to buy your boxers for a long time. In fact, the bankruptcy filing will not affect the overseas branches (about 250 stores around the world in 45 countries; 80 in Japan alone) whatsoever.

It’s the coronavirus’s fault, mostly. An abbreviated list of other retailers that have filed for bankruptcy protection or bitten the dust since January of this year: Pier One, Papyrus, Kroger’s, GNC, Chuck E. Cheese, Lucky Brand, Sur La Table, Muji, Neiman Marcus, Souplantation, J.C. Penney, Modell’s, J. Crew, True Religion. I am sad for them.

But Brooks Brothers for me is personal.

It's my look, my aesthetic, my belief in looking clean-cut and upright, it's that smell. It's enjoying the fact that the women's clothes fit actual women. It's the cotton-piped pajamas. It's my father's suits.

Maybe we should blame the bankruptcy on the perception that one buys suits at Brooks Brothers, and who wears a suit anymore? I get that. Everyone is wearing sweatpants or ugly shorts with a button-down shirt and tie for Zoom meetings or even a blazer. But that blazer, you will need again. And after being shut in with your sourdough starter and food deliveries, you will probably need a new size of blazer. And so you will probably want to simply replace the one you have at Brooks Brothers. But wait! Suits are but a small part of the entire Brooks Brothers's repertoire.



A page of casual looks from the high-prep 1980s.

May I remind you of the button-down shirts? They sell a ton of those, in heaps of sizes, from children to very large adults. If you're a student of history, you'll know that a shirt with a button-down collar came from sport. It was what polo players wore to keep their collars out of their faces. When it was adapted for work wear, it was bold and brave: "streetwear." (And of course it was the preferred shirt of President Kennedy.)

Today's polo shirts are the short-sleeved pique cotton tops we all have that were also intended for sport. Brooks Brothers's version with the sheep hanging from an imperial-looking ribbon has been manufactured since the 1960s, and for women since 1969. What about khakis? And leather slippers, and cable-knit sweaters and seersucker. Seersucker!

I'm told that after economic downturns in this country, people have chosen to dress up. What will that mean for men? I've already seen women quite dolled up to have a distanced drink or meal while sitting outdoors in what was a month ago a parking spot along a curb.

There will be weddings. There will be funerals. There will be — we hope — live operas, and theater, and premieres, and concerts, and fancy-dress parties. Even conventions. As long as there will be an America, there must be a place to dress us. Let it be Brooks Brothers. Thank you.