More than twenty years ago I began to learn about remarkable treasures in nineteenth-century art—advertisements that still shine with color and exquisite printing. Pretty women and children and cuddly animals populated many of the scenes, all splendid and bountiful. Although I enjoyed looking at these lovely images, the pictures that lured me onto this long adventure featured industrial images, motifs that clashed with my experience of advertising content. Factories and locomotives filled large posters and small trade cards; at other times they appeared in corner vignettes adorning complex prints or, in some advertisements, even as industrial scenes seen through the windows of fashionable homes. The mustachioed faces of business owners looked over their domains, and their names blazed across these vintage advertisements in large, opulent letters. Cornucopia and other symbols of plenty abounded, including images of the advertising manufacturers’ mansions.

Clearly, the businesspeople who commissioned these complex visual messages had a different notion of what they wanted to show the public than the people who create today’s advertisements. Yet when I searched publications on the history of advertising, I found no explanation for the riddle. Even more surprising, business and cultural historians had largely ignored these artifacts, focusing instead on the dark and densely worded newspaper and magazine advertisements of the period. Only occasional, unflattering comments about posters for circuses and patent medicines broke the rule. Art historians, on the other hand, had recognized these materials as the important output of commercial printers, the only large-scale communications producers who could offer printed color to the nation. Collectors and other antiquarians who wrote about vintage advertisements appreciated them for their beauty and nostalgic
interest. However, no one described the motivations behind those motifs of a century ago, except by a passing intuition or two. And nowhere could I find why, if those messages were so important to nineteenth-century manufacturers, did they all but vanish by the 1910s. Why are industrial images so rare now?

These questions sparked my adventure. I began by unraveling why the smokestacks and other motifs that seemed strange to me posed no riddle when they were created. I found that smokestacks and progress, mansions and success, new consumer technologies and social progress, industrialists’ portraits and their ambitions for cultural authority, all fit together as symbols and goals in the culture of mainstream business that I explored. When this culture changed, when advertisements proclaimed brand names rather than owners’ names, and advertising specialists rather than owners created commercial messages, the messages changed. The new advertisements promoted a different vision of progress—one driven by consumers’ purchase decisions as guided by the new marketing professionals, who also sought cultural authority for themselves and their work. My odyssey resulted in this book when I had accounted for the transition by which those earlier symbols of progress had lost their standing as commonplace. Solving that puzzle, in turn, explained something about how nineteenth-century U.S. business culture and commercial messages gave way to those of the twentieth.

As I look back on this adventure, I am filled with gratitude for the friends and strangers who have helped me on my way. The intellectual path led me to strangers; some of those strangers became friends who have shared and enriched my personal path beyond measure.

After several years of working alone, I discovered the benefits, both intellectual and personal, of other scholars’ fellowship. Bayla Singer encouraged me to enter a doctoral program to develop as a historian. Under the tutelage of Lori Breslow, David D. Hall, and my dissertation committee at Boston University—Joseph Boskin, Robert V. Bruce, Saul Engelbourg, Richard Wightman Fox, and Thomas Glick—I learned both the challenges and the gratifications of the academic life. Robert V. Bruce, in particular, opened up the world of business history to me. I especially value Joe Boskin’s guidance and support, then and still.

Bayla’s advice also led me to John M. Staudenmaier, S.J., who encouraged my thinking about advertising’s past as well as its present. His encouragement and help began at a critical time and have continued. John is often the invisible audience for whom I write. At his suggestion, I began participating in the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT), another turning point for me. The people of this organization welcomed me as they have so many other in-
terdisciplinary scholars, providing fellowship and intellectual stimulation with their productive eclecticism. My friendships and activities within SHOT have given me strength and ideas.

My friends have brought their affections and wisdom to me from many directions. Jeanne Johnson, Carole Levin, and Dolores Leal Owens have been with me for three decades, guiding and supporting me through personal and professional developments. Friends and colleagues who have shared my life in important ways in the last dozen years as the adventure expanded my world include Lindy Biggs, Lori Breslow, Amira Salinas Cranor, Colleen Dunlavy, Moya Hansen, Susan Lanman, Iola McMurray, and Terry R. Reynolds. Each of these people brings special blessings into my life.

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Although academic researchers increasingly appreciate material culture as a resource, they often underappreciate private collectors’ commitments to both the preservation and the study of historical artifacts. There are many ways in which I could not have conducted my research without access to private collections of vintage advertisements. (Unless otherwise noted, all illustrations come from private collections.) In particular, I would like to mention David and Bettie Briggs, Jack Golden, and Don J. Lurito, who provided knowledge, insights, and photographs to this project. David Cheadle shared some of his extensive research on trade-card history with me. The generosity of Jay Last and another, anonymous, donor has helped bring this book to publication. I deeply appreciate all of the ways in which the collecting community has encouraged and enlightened me.

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Advertising Progress