

PROJECT TITLE: The General Store: Where, When, and Why?	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

Primary Investigative Question(s) – What role did the General Store play in small communities during the “Age of Lincoln (1840-1865)?”

Contextual Essay

The idea of one-stop shopping can be traced back to the beginning of new towns and communities in America. General stores, also known as the dry goods store or the mercantile were popping up all over the country as settlers moved westward in the 1800’s. The location of the store near railways, crossroads, and waterways led to the success of the general store during the 19th century. In a time when our county was growing, so were the needs of new communities. A general store was often the first business established in the new area and this store facilitated the building of a community. It brought people together, allowed them to obtain needed items, and provided communication to the outside world.

In the mid 1800’s, settlers were growing most of their own food, making their own clothing, and producing necessary household items. The opening of a general store in the community allowed the farmer the opportunity to obtain items that he could not produce on his own. The business owner was careful to select the location of the store near a waterway. “In the states carved out of the old Northwest Territory, the western merchant located on or near a river and had a warehouse behind his store or at the nearest landing. He brought the crops in the fall and stored them until the steamboat came again in the spring, carrying the produce off to the river cities and bringing back the substantial of life that were not produced nearby.” (Carson, p. 23) The main intersection in the town also proved to be a profitable location for the storeowner. “If in due course the opening of roads and building of turnpikes brought a stage stop to his door, he was twice favored.” (Carson p.17) In later years, location near the railroad was

important for the transportation of goods to and from larger cities and markets. “By the Civil War, a complex transportation network allowed the distribution of an amazing quantity of goods across most of the country.” (Craig, Kaplan, & Petravage, p. 62).

The early economic system in the 1800’s was based on barter, credit, charge, and little cash. The farmer would make a weekly or monthly visit to the store with items grown or made on the farm to trade at the local general store. He would fill his cart with eggs, herbs, produce, fish, butter, and homemade goods with each visit to the store. The store owner could then use the items that were grown or made in his local community at the city market to make purchases to stock his shelves. Store ledgers from the mid 1800’s show us that some of the items that were bought at the General Store were not locally grown or made, but imported from other countries. These items included sugar from India, tea from China, coffee from South America, citrus fruits from Sicily and finer fabrics from Asia. “By mid-century transportation had improved to the point that merchants could easily travel twice a year to large eastern cities where a huge selection of dry goods, clothing and other items were readily available.” (Craig, Kaplan, & Petravage, p. 62). As the store owner received new items, he needed to record the price on each item. He often used a code on the item that allowed him to keep track of the how much he had put into each item. He often varied the price to the customer based on the type of payment the customer was willing to use. Credit customers were often charged a higher price than a cash customer or customer in good standing. “Frequently the code was based on the use of ten letters, no two alike, each representing a number from one to ten.” (Carson, p. 94) Records of store transactions were kept in store ledgers. “Because most of the store’s business was done on credit, customers’ names and purchases were often written down.” (Jones, R. & Roberts, B. p. 15) If the amount the farmer brought to the store was more than the purchase, a store credit was recorded in the store ledger. The store owner kept a separate page for each family in his store ledger. There were times when the needs of the farmer were greater than what he had brought to trade. The store owner then took on the role of the local banker offering the farmer credit until the next crop was harvested. The store owner may receive labor, handmade items, or lumber until the debt was repaid.

General stores provided many services to the community. Since the general store was usually located in the center of town, it often became the central meeting place. Community members visited the store for local news and gossip. The potbellied stove near the rear of the store was often surrounded with men who discussed the latest news, politics, and weather as they enjoyed a game of checkers. “The group around the stove also acted as a sort of informal press association which gathered, processed, and distributed the news of the community.” (Carson, 220) Broadside were often placed at the store to advertise an upcoming event, special sale, or news for the community. The store keeper himself informed

the locals of the current events, as well as news he learned on his latest buying trips to larger cities. He was their link to the growing nation. He was often the only one in town that subscribed to the city paper and customers looked forward to the reading about current events during their weekly visit. When telephones first arrived in the late 1880's, many general stores housed the only phone in the small communities. Most early general stores housed the community post office in a corner of the store and the store owner also served the role of postal clerk. "If the store was also a post office, that would exert a favorable influence on his business." (Carson, p.17) In small communities, the store owner may also serve the role of the banker, lawyer, and pharmacist.

The improved transportation system that allowed the acquisition of new goods to arrive at the general store also led to the decline of store during the late 1800's. The rail system that once allowed new products to fill the stores, now allowed travel to nearby cities and towns where selection and prices were better. As towns grew, so did the selection of items with specialty stores that grew up around the general store. The improved roads and rail system also meant more rural mail delivery. Families that once visited the store daily or weekly to pick up their mail, were now able to have it delivered right to their home. Beginning in 1872, mail order catalogues, such as Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck and Co. were able to provide customers with more selection, competitive prices and convenience of at home shopping. At the turn of the century, many general stores were forced to close their door to the increased competition. "National advertising had made the housewife brand-conscious. She no longer asked for "soap, flour, cornflakes, coffee," she requested brand named goods." (Johnson, p.125)

Annotated Bibliography

Carson, G. (1954). The Old Country Store. New York: Oxford University Press

Summary: Carson explores the general store from 1791-1921. It explores the many roles of the store owner, the acquisition of goods, the use of barter, credit and cash, and the decline of the general store with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The book features many primary source documents, quotes, and an extensive reference list.

Craig, P., Kaplan, S., & Petravage, C. (1995). Historical Furnishings Report: Building 34/35. : Harpers Ferry West Virginia: National Park Service

Summary: The document is a collection of research for the reconstruction of the Dry Goods Store at Harpers Ferry. The document includes a map of the town with the location of the store and why the

physical location of Harper's Ferry was a prime location for commercial enterprise. The map also includes a timeline of the 22 general stores located in Harpers Ferry from 1847-1865. A large portion of the report includes the inventory of 16 stores from 1853-1867. By comparing these inventories, Harper's Ferry National Historical Park was able to restore the Dry Goods Store to a close representation of the past. The document also includes many primary source illustrations that were used for placement of items, shelving, and inventory.

Johnson, L. (1961). Over the Counter and On the Shelf. New York: Bonanza Books

Summary: This document is a collection of over 100 primary sources to include broadside, ledger pages, maps, photographs, letters, flyers, cartoons all related to history of the General Store. In addition to the excellent primary sources, the book explores new inventions sold at the General Store, explanations of items introduced, and the history of imports to the United States.

Roberts, B. & Jones, R. (1991). American Country Stores. Chester, Connecticut: The Globe Pequot Press

Summary: The book is a collection of 45 country stores across the United States. The book contains many photographs featuring the interior placement of goods, advertisements, and furnishings. There are numerous oral histories and photographs from the past. The articles span the life of the general store from the Prentis Store in Colonial Williamsburg in 1740 to the introduction of the telephone, cash register, and gas pump in the early 1900's. This book provides a visual timeline of the General Store.

Stony Point Store Ledger, 1956-1959. MSS 11449. Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

Summary: Debit ledger for a store in Albemarle County, Virginia. The entries show a variety of perishable and nonperishable goods. Many foreign items, such as lemons, oranges, coconuts, Irish linen, and Jamaican rum were recorded. The ledger was beautifully written, organized and provided great details about each entry. The entries were organized by family name. By investigating the ledgers of each family, we are able speculate how the family may have lived, what they ate and even their occupation based on their purchases.