

General Stores A home-based lesson plan

Historical Background

Rural communities and small towns have relied on general stores, also known as country stores, for centuries. Often, a general store would be the only store for many miles. Sometimes the rural post office was located in the general store. These stores were informal community centers where people met to discuss local politics and other topics. Much like modern bulletin boards, there were wanted posters, auction flyers, election notices, and other items posted on the store's walls.



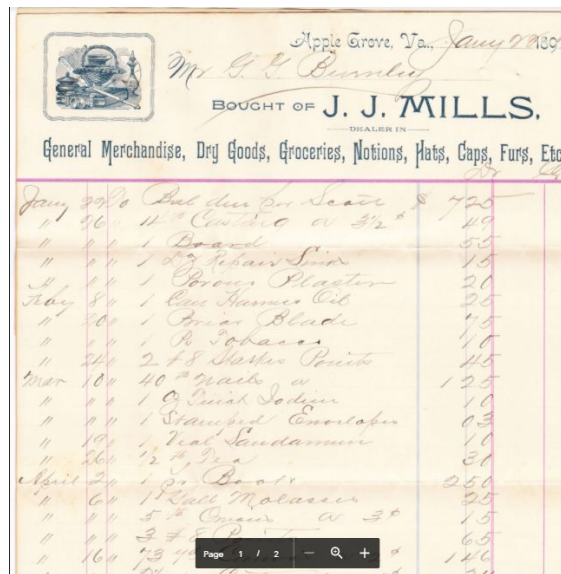
Kent's Drug Store, date unknown, Louisa, VA
Photo Credit: Louisa County Historical Society

A trip to the general store could be an all-day family outing! When a family arrived at the store everyone would go their separate ways. Parents looked at essential items like sugar, flour, coffee, salt, nails, chicken feed, needles and thread, etc. Boys and girls would look at toys and clothing such as harmonicas, marbles, dolls, hair ribbons, etc. If the children were lucky, their parents might buy them a piece of candy.

When it was time to check out, the shopkeeper would add up their purchases in the store **ledger** book. Back then, people did not always pay for the items they purchased right away. They might purchase items on their **credit** account to pay later. Or they might **barter** and give the shopkeeper items to cover the costs of the items they purchased. For example, someone might offer milk and eggs from their farm in exchange for purchasing flour and salt from the store. Bartering has a long history in Virginia. Native Americans used bartering to exchange

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goods and labor. It was not common for people to pay with money until the late nineteenth century when banks became commonplace.



General Store Receipt, 1897, Apple Grove, VA
 Photo Credit: Louisa County Historical Society

Some country stores used a crop-lien system. Farmers could make purchases at the store leading up to harvest time. Once the crop was harvested, the shopkeeper had a legal claim to some of the farmer's profits. Some of these stores might have started as a **commissary**, or plantation store. During slavery, commissaries provided food and clothing to enslaved people. After the Civil War, some commissaries became country stores where both white and black **sharecroppers** shopped for goods. If you worked at a mine or factory, you might be paid in money that could only be spent at the company's general store. These types of stores generally charged their customers high **interest rates** and the people that shopped there were often in **debt**.



"Good for 5 in merchandise" at R.P. Chaplin, Mineral, VA, undated
 Photo Credit: Louisa County Historical Society

Key Words

Ledger - A book which contained a list of customers and a running list of the items they purchased as well as information about payment.

Credit - A system that allows customers to obtain goods or services before payment based on the trust that the payment will be made in the future.

Barter - The practice of exchanging goods or services for other goods or services without using money.

Commissary - a store that supplies basic food and supplies to a certain group of people such as military members on a military base.

Sharecroppers - also known as tenant farmers, gave a portion of their crops to the landowner to pay their rent.

Interest Rates - A fee charged to customers on top of the cost of goods or services when the customer delays payment.

Debt - the state of owing money.

Activity: Play Shop!

Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to help your children learn how a 19th-century general store operated. Learning key words like credit and bartering will help them understand history and economics and will also help them practice their math skills. This game is similar to playing grocery store.

Supplies

- Scissors
- Glue or tape
- Pencil
- Calculator (optional)
- Coins
- Product Cards Template
- Store Ledger Template **There are two ledger templates. Younger children who are working on their addition skills should use the template with the price column only. Older children who are working on their multiplication skills should use the template with the price, quantity, and subtotal columns.*

Instructions

1. Print out the two templates. Cut out the product card squares and glue the product picture to its description and price.
2. To start, give the customer the eggs, corn, oats and potatoes cards. These are items from their farm that they can barter with for goods. The customer should also have some coins and perhaps a few dollars to pay in cash. The shopkeeper gets the rest of the products cards and the store ledger.
3. The shopkeeper should fill out their country store's name and their name as the owner.
4. The shopkeeper should place each of the product cards in front of them so the customer can see them. The customer will pick out what they would like to buy.
5. The shopkeeper will write down the transaction in their ledger. They should write the date of purchase, the customer's name, each product and the cost of each product. If the customer is buying more than one of the same item, either write the item out multiple times to represent multiple quantities (for those only using addition) or write the price and quantity (for those using multiplication).
6. Then, the shopkeeper adds up the total. They can add the total up on a piece of scrap paper, in their head, or with a calculator. Then they should ask the customer how they would like to pay. The customer can pay with cash, credit, or they can barter with the shopkeeper. Write the payment details under the paid by column. It is up to the shopkeeper to accept or deny the goods offered for bartering.

Optional Activity - Post Office

General stores often served as post offices for rural communities. A customer might be coming to the shop to purchase items and pick up their mail. Have your family members write letters to each other to be picked up during visits to the store. To use the letter template, cut out around the outer edge of the envelope (leaving the two sides connected). Write your letter on the blank side. Then fold the envelope in half and tape close with the envelope images facing outward. Write the name of the person the letter is for on the address block.

Optional Activity - Posters

Make your own posters to hang in your general store. Use the templates provided or create your own! Are there any family events occurring that you can market? Maybe you're having a movie night or take-out for dinner. Are there any news items you want people to be aware of? Maybe somebody recently had a birthday or got a good grade on a school project.