

The General Store

NYS Standards: CDOS 1, 2; MST 1, 3, 6; SS 1, 4

ELA Common Core Standards: SL 1, 2, 3, 6

Goal: The goal of this lesson is to give students an understanding of the similarities and differences between the economy and material culture of the early 19th century and the economy and material culture of today.

Objectives

- Students will demonstrate basic knowledge of the general store, its function, and what items were available there.
- Students will demonstrate understanding of the following concepts: cash, barter, and credit.
- Students will engage in mock purchasing and bartering.
- Students will demonstrate basic math skills.

Materials (documents can be downloaded from GCV&M website)

- General Store Role Cards (print and cut out cards)
- Updated Price List & Values for General Store Document
- General Store Image Cards (print and cut out cards)
- 19th-Century Jobs Document
- Paper and pencils

I. Background information:

- A. Ask: "What is a general store?" A store in a rural or small town that carries a broad line of merchandise in a small space. It was the main shop for a community so people from the town and surrounding areas would make their purchases there. It often sold staple food items and various household goods like hardware and sewing items.
- B. Ask the students to compare and contrast the general store to modern retail establishments.
 1. What kind of store has pretty much everything you might need? (Wal Mart, et al)
 2. What about other stores? How are they different from a general store? (more specialized; i.e. hardware stores, grocery stores, clothing stores, furniture stores, etc.)
 3. Why weren't there as many specialized stores in the 19th century? (there was not enough demand for a specific product so that a storekeeper could make a profit, at least in rural areas)
- C. Explain that general stores also served as the post office in some communities. It also was a place you could find out local news at
- D. Why was there a need for a store that had a bit of everything available? (without cars or planes, it was not practical to travel to cities or places where goods were produced--the store provided a central location where everyone in small villages and the surrounding countryside could shop and meet)
- E. Discuss how very early in the 19th century there would not have even been general stores (depending on locale). Simple trading posts, often as part of another business, like an inn or tavern were sometimes the best pioneers could hope for. Only as more people settled an area, could a businessman build a store and expect to make a profit.

- II. Making a purchase:
- A. "Imagine you are a corn farmer in the mid 19th-century. You and your neighbors have very little actual money. You wish to purchase some sugar and new tools. How will you afford them?"
 - B. Explain the scarceness of **cash**/currency in early America. There was no national currency until the Civil War. Before that states, cities, and even individual banks printed their own money--the further away you were from the source of the money, the less it was worth. Most people didn't have cash money on hand to use to purchase things.
 - C. Explain the concept of **barter**. This was the most common method of transaction. Families would trade what they had for what they wanted or needed from the store.
 - D. Explain the concept of **credit**. A distant relative of today's credit cards, credit was basically the storekeeper placing trust on his customers. He would give them what they needed, and they would pay with cash or goods when they could. Alternatively, the corn farmer above might "pay" with a large amount of his crop at harvest time and then apply that credit to items he needed at a later time.
 1. "Why might a farmer be unable to pay during certain times of the year like winter and spring? (nothing is growing so doesn't have anything he can use to "pay" the store keeper " "When could he afford to pay off his debts to the storekeeper?" (he was more likely to have produce to trade during harvest time)
 2. Sometimes the credit system would work the other way and be called a **tab**. The customer would bring in their goods and the storekeeper would determine the value. The customer could make purchases until this amount ran out.
 3. When men traded goods, they would get cash. When women traded goods, they would get a tab. This was a sign of gender inequality in the 19th century and the societal thought of the time that women were not as trustworthy as men when it came to money.
- III. Bartering activity (see below for an alternative activity): Pass out or assign role cards to students. Each of these cards lists a profession and the amount of cash and/or items the individual has available for barter.
- A. Say to the class, "You are no longer people of the 21st century...you are farmers, craftspeople, professionals, and citizens of the year 1850. And you have made the trip to the local general store to do some shopping!"
 - B. Have one student go first and read the role card aloud, announcing their role and what they have as available as bartering goods. A list of 19th-century occupations is provided explaining what each of those roles is
 - C. Using the price list, tell (or have student look) the approximate amount of money/value they could get for each item they have with which to barter. **
 - D. Using their pencils and scrap paper, everyone should do the math to figure out about how much money/value the student has with which to barter with.
 - E. Have student look around at the General Store Image Cards Market Price List and determine what they would like to purchase. Encourage them to consider what their character would most need or not need (farmer would be less likely to need vegetables; a carpenter would be likely to need nails).
 - F. Play the part of the storekeeper for the first couple transactions, but be sure the students are paying attention. "Many individuals started stores in addition to their primary profession, so be ready to take on the role of storekeeper." Feel free to tempt students to "purchase" expensive or luxury items or other items they might not necessarily need.
 - G. As you continue with Procedure IV, pass along information about the goods themselves, their uses, their origin, and availability whenever possible.

- H. Repeat the procedure for several more students, by assigning them different role cards.
- I. With particularly attentive or advanced groups, consider allowing a student to be the storekeeper after the first one or two examples.

****Bartering tips and options:** When making a purchase, see what they want and what they have (and are willing to trade).

1. Check the cost of the item to be purchased.
2. Check the **market value** of their currency and/or barter items. Feel free to adjust the prices as much as 20% based on the quality of the item (this was commonly done).
3. Do the math and figure out if a) he or she is owed change, b) he or she has just the right amount, or c) he or she is short.
4. If change is owed: men will be given cash change; women will be given a tab.
5. If the amount is just right (unlikely): no extra action needs be taken.
6. If he or she is short: this is an opportunity to be creative. If the person's profession is a stable and settled one (like farmer or blacksmith), then it is reasonable to extend a line of credit. If the person's profession is more itinerant (like musician or teacher), then credit can be refused and the customer sent away empty-handed!
7. Carefully note the transaction specifics in the "store ledger".
8. Have students take turns being the storekeeper. Assist them with the process and math.

- VI. A. "We have experienced how most people would purchase what they wanted or needed at the general store, but where did all of that stuff come from?"
 1. Much of the stock came from other people in the community through barter.
 2. Many goods were bought from wholesalers and commission merchants, often based out of cities or production centers. Storekeepers would take the goods bartered to them from their customers and sell them to the wholesalers or merchants in cities.
 3. Some producers would travel and sell their wares to general stores. The Shakers, for example, travelled in this manner to get their seeds, furniture, and other products in stores.
 4. Storekeepers would sometimes make trips to cities to purchase goods. Joseph Thomson, for example, travelled to Massachusetts once a year to fill his wagon with goods.
 5. Many goods in the store were imported from far-away places.

VII. Conclusion:

- A. Compare and contrast again the general store of the mid-19th century to modern retail.
- B. Some communities still have small general stores, though usually only in very rural areas. Most retail businesses are much more specialized in the 21st century. To see what one of these stores would have looked like, come visit us at GCV&M—you might even be able to buy a big sugar cookie at the Altay Store!

ASSESSMENT BASED ON OBJECTIVES

Was the student able to...

- Demonstrate basic knowledge of the general store, its function, and what items were available there.
- Demonstrate understanding of the following concepts: cash, barter, and credit.
- Engage in mock purchasing and bartering.
- Demonstrate basic math skills.
- Identify the place of origin for the items available at the general store.

PLAN FOR INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

Set up a “Classroom General Store” with small items such as pencils, erasers, stickers, etc., where students may purchase what they need with a classroom currency or barter with prizes and objects obtained or made by other means.

Research local, regional, or world trade during the 19th century.

Research the various occupations listed on the role cards.

ADAPTATIONS AND EXTENSIONS

***IV.** Alternative Bartering Activity (useful for “less-focused” groups): Pass out role cards to each student or a sampling of students (3-6), depending on the attention span of the group and the time remaining. Have students sit in a circle.

- A. Go around the circle and have students share their new “profession.” Discuss what that person, in a pioneer community, might have with which to barter. Then discuss what they might need from craftspeople or the store.
- B. Choose one of the roles as a “case study.” Perform process IV.D. to represent that individual’s transaction at the store. Be as brief as possible and move quickly around the circle.
- C. Repeat as many times as desired and as time will allow.