



Shop ‘Till You Drop: Learning to Barter at Home!



Arthur Burdett Frost (American, 1851–1928), *The American Country Store*, 1880–1920. Oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 42 1/8 in. Gift of the children of Mr. and Mrs. P.H.B. Frelinghuysen, in memory of their parents. 1963-1978.

In the 19th century, where could you find many of the practical and luxury items you needed for daily living? The general store, where people bartered for items or purchased items on account. They might have also picked up their mail, selected some patent medicines (now known as over-the-counter remedies), and socialized. At Shelburne Museum’s General Store the building also includes a taproom (or bar), and doctor’s offices. This bartering activity is similar to the program at the Museum’s store. You’ll create a basket of items you have and a list of the items you need. Your goal will be to trade the contents of your basket for the things you want to get at the “store”.

Goals

- Understand the concepts of buying, selling, and bartering.
- Gain understanding of inflation and the cost of items in the 19th century.

Vocabulary

Barter—the act of exchanging goods or services without money.

Fair trade—the act of exchanging goods or materials when the compensation (or payment) equals what is being traded. Today, fair trade commonly applies to giving farmers in developing countries the fair amount for the goods they are producing.

Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.Math.Content.K.CC.B.4 Understand the relationship between numbers and quantities; connect counting to cardinality.

CCSS.Math.Content.K.CC.C.6 Identify whether the number of objects in one group is greater than, less than, or equal to the number of objects in another group, e.g., by using matching and counting strategies.¹

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Background/ History

About the Building

The General Store (shown below) was constructed in 1840 in Shelburne Center, just north of the current Museum, where it served as the village post office for years. In 1952 the building was moved, intact, to the Museum on a specially laid railroad track. The first level recreates a late 19th century general Store while the surrounding rooms include the post office, barber, and tap room (or bar).

Bartering in the 1800s

In the early days of America, money was hard to come by. Coins were commonly made from silver and gold and were produced in England and Spain. With the great distance between European countries and North America, colonists found it hard to acquire money needed to purchase goods and supplies. Silversmiths began producing coins but still the supply was too small and the majority of colonists did not support banks either, so paper money was also in limited supply.

Bartering grew out of the lack of a sufficient physical money supply. Bartering was, and remains, a useful way to exchange goods when cash and coins are not available. Bartering is a term used to mean equal trade between two parties; however, there is one downside to bartering. The two parties themselves determine the relative value of the goods they are trading. This means that while a trade may be fair, for example a certain amount of potatoes for a certain amount of corn, a trade will not take place if one party is not interested in the goods offered.

More Resources

Historical USA Retail Food Prices, The Food Timeline, <https://bit.ly/FoodTimeline-SM>

Money vs. Bartering: Characteristics of Money, Youtube, <https://bit.ly/Bartering-SM>

Old Berwick Historical Society, <https://bit.ly/OldBerwick-SM>

Songs for Kids Homeschooling Economics Barter & Trade, Youtube, <https://bit.ly/SongBarter-SM>

The General Store at Shelburne Museum.



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ACTIVITY

For this activity, you will get to choose the materials you want to barter with depending on what you have in your house. Gathering everyday items makes it easier to trade.



Arthur Burdett Frost (American, 1851–1928), *The American Country Store* (detail), 1880–1920. Oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 42 1/8 in. Gift of the children of Mr. and Mrs. P.H.B. Frelinghuysen, in memory of their parents. 1963-197.8.

Suggested Materials

- Toilet Paper
- Potatoes
- Pasta
- Meat
- Eggs
- Sugar
- Flour
- Salt

Things to Keep in Mind

- Think about a selection of items to use in the bartering activity. Identify which items might have been obtained locally (apples, carrots, potatoes, butter, eggs, maple syrup, etc.) and which would have been brought here from elsewhere (tea, lemons, marbles, chocolates, etc.).
- Think about the value of local products versus imported products. What costs are associated with transporting products? For example, we now can buy lemons at every supermarket, but where are lemons grown, how do they get here, and what costs are associated to transporting a lemon to Vermont?
- BONUS: If several individuals are participating, have one be the shop keeper but, beware, the shop keeper can be tough to make a trade with!

To Begin

1. Divide the items into small piles so each person participating has goods to trade.
2. Make a list of the items in each individual basket, and a wish list of 3 items each person would like from other baskets.
3. Once lists are created, begin to trade items with each other. Remember the concept of fair trade—an item such as a lemon is more expensive, and worth more, than a single apple. Continue bartering until all the wish list items have been acquired. If a participant gets stuck, don't forget they can trade services! Sweeping the floor, mowing the lawn, weeding the garden, or picking vegetables are all tasks that need to get done and have value.