

SOHO Lesson Plan

Mercantiles/General Stores



Whaley and Crosthwaite General Store, 2017

The roots of the general store concept began in the 18th century and gained momentum as westward American expansion increased in the 19th century.

Residents and farmers in remote outposts often lived many miles from town and neighbors. It was necessary to make a monthly visit to the nearest town in order to stock up on supplies that could not be produced at home.

The general store provided a one-stop shopping experience (selling a wide variety of goods) when historically, most goods were procured from individual businesses specializing in one type of product in cities and more heavily populated areas. Another important aspect to the community as a whole, was that the general store was a gathering place to get news of the day, spend some time playing cards or checkers, and visit with friends and neighbors.

Before the general store concept of selling (or bartering) a vast variety of goods in one store became common practice, where did goods come from?

- Shoes and other leather goods were obtained from a cobbler
- Iron tools, hardware, and pans were purchased from a blacksmith

- Barrels for food, drink, and storage were purchased from a cooper
- Eating and cooking utensils, cups and plates were purchased from a tinsmith or silversmith
- Hats were ordered and purchased from a hatter
- Bonnets were ordered and purchased from a milliner
- Bread, cakes and pies were purchased from a baker
- Flour was purchased from a miller
- Meat was purchased from a butcher
- Stoneware crocks, vessels, pitchers, plates, cups and bowls were purchased from a potter
- Furniture was ordered from carpenters and cabinet makers

This meant walking from shop to shop, carrying a basket or pushing a cart, or using a wagon to procure necessities.

The mercantile, or general store concept, was a novel way to sell goods and became known as a symbol of American enterprise. Now, families could step into one shop and purchase a great variety of goods; with the advent of factories many goods could be mass produced and ordered by the shop owner. With the industrial age came more methods of food preservation, it replaced hand tools with power-driven machines, and concentrated industry in large establishments.

What are some of the changes brought on by the industrial age in terms of ready-made goods available in a general store?

- Glass jars to preserve fresh fruits and vegetables at home
- Tin cans were used for pre-packaged and preserved meats, vegetables, and fruits
- Shoes could be purchased ready-made instead of waiting for a custom-made order from a cobbler
- Bolts of cloth could be purchased instead of spinning and weaving cloth at home
- Furniture and musical instruments
- Paper goods
- Time! One stop shopping for convenience items was an immense timesaver

Goods that a shop owner could not order, could also be purchased or bartered for among members of the community who could provide fresh goods like churned butter, eggs, meats, fresh fruits and vegetables, or sewn articles of clothing.

When Thomas Whaley learned that he could make a fortune in California by way of providing goods to the individuals rushing there to pan or mine for gold (hence the term, Gold Rush), he hastily gathered a supply of goods from friends and family, including hardware from his family firm of Pye & Whaley, and boarded a ship called the Sutton on January 1, 1849, headed for San Francisco.

After enduring a harrowing 6 months at sea, when Whaley arrived he found a bustling port, quickly constructed canvas-covered wood frame dwellings and businesses, muddy streets, and a lot of competition.

Despite this, in a very short period of time, utilizing the goods he brought with him, Whaley:

- Opened a profitable general store
- Built a home on Rincon Hill in San Francisco
- Operated a boarding house in his new home, in which he made the beds and cooked two meals a day for his boarders, which helped recoup some of the costs of the building's construction

The great fire of 1851, set by an arsonist at a paint and upholstery shop on Montgomery Street in the business district, destroyed most of the business district, and all of Whaley's efforts.

After enduring a journey of six months at sea, building up a business and a home, what were your options if you suddenly lost everything?

- Return home
- Start over

What did 28-year-old Thomas Whaley do? He was a firm believer in the old adage, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again."

- He found new business partners
- He took the risk of starting over in an entirely new place, the small community of Old Town, San Diego
- He learned to speak Spanish as much of the community was Hispanic
- He offered lower prices to entice new customers
- He offered a larger range of products to a community that had little in the way of conveniences

How did the 19th century general store concept influence modern day shopping?

- "Convenience stores," such as 7/11 offer a small variety of immediate necessities
- "Big box" stores, such as Target, where all manner of services and items can be obtained in one place.
- Online stores/sites, such as Amazon, where anything can be ordered from one site.