

Little Britain Ledgers

An exciting view into the Pennsylvania backcountry can be found in the account ledgers and daybook of the Little Britain General Store, which are housed in the manuscript reading room at the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware. Little Britain, located in central lower Pennsylvania, Lancaster County (modern-day Quarryville), was a hub of activity at the turn of the nineteenth century. Scots-Irish immigrant farmers founded Little Britain Township, and the general store most likely served an area within wagon distance; it was connected, however, to a much wider world. There had always been a flow of goods between Philadelphia—one of the main exporters to the Atlantic world—and the surrounding countryside. The area now also had commerce with the emerging port city of Baltimore. Transporters sent agricultural products and raw materials—the largest exports were flour, wheat, and ironware—to the cities, and haulers brought city-made and European manufactures overland to country stores and mills. The store's ledgers, particularly ledgers A and B, which contain records from 1796 to 1800 and 1799 to 1803, respectively, and daybook, which covers some of the same trading years (1799–1803), provide a window into trade, economy, and everyday life in this area in the early years of the new republic.

Account books can be a valuable source for studying consumer practices, for they reveal the importance of credit in the early republic's economy and society. Book debt, as opposed to paper currency, was more common in this era of a developing nation and economy. The owners registered the goods and services traded through the business of the store in pounds (£), shillings (s), and pence (d). US dollars had not come into general use in trade books yet, but some people of the region did bring in dollars to credit their account. The ledgers show credit for the goods that haulers and merchants in Philadelphia brought to the store, but there are not corresponding manuscript sources that show the relationships between the owners and other businessmen or the quality and quantities of goods.¹

To add credit to their accounts, customers brought in produce and services as well as cash. An example of this can be found in a record from

¹ Colleen Frances Rafferty, "To establish an intercourse between our respective houses": Economic Networks in the Mid-Atlantic, 1735–1815" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2012), 265–67.

July 1799, when the store ledger credits Widow McCreary for five and one-half yards of tow linen. Most likely she or someone in her household made this fabric. Customers received credit on items such as peaches, bacon, leather, mowing services, calf skins, and homemade goods (candles, butter, coats, and breeches). The owners put up for sale necessities as well as luxuries such as ribbons and hair combs. Credit records show a trade in labor between customers of the store and neighbors in the region. Isaiah Brown, his son, and another man, Robert Love, all brought in cash for Brown's account. Isaiah Brown paid his account in smithing, in hops, and in "work in full"; in exchange, he purchased buttons, linen, and calico. The store also sold homespun goods that can be considered labor, such as "Jones' spinning."

Store accounts, for the most part, listed the debits and credits—recording date, item quantity, and value—for households, and most records are under the names of male heads of households. Women's names are rarely recorded as heads of household accounts, and in those rare cases, they always bear the designation of "widow." Women's names do appear in records of weeks or months of labor performed that credited accounts. A deeper look at such account books affords us a view of women in the community who traded goods, services, and work contracts on other people's farms. Similarly, we can get a glimpse of the lower ranks of society who did not have a household account but are still listed in the ledgers. For example, William Morrow paid cash into Job Haines's account but did not have an account of his own, Mackey McCullough only appears as a credit to an account, and Samuel McHesson simply received ten yards of linen from Alexander Ewing.

The ledgers of Little Britain's general store show the relationship between people and the land they worked. This hidden gem reveals networks of connections: labor was converted into credit; farmers interacted with townspeople; wagoners and buyers for the store encountered Philadelphia traders; raw backcountry rabbit, muskrat, and cat skins met finished foreign goods. The store's records reveal an interwoven web of domestically made goods and services traded for objects from throughout the Atlantic world.

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