

UP FRONT



MEADOWCROFT

By David Scofield, Director, Meadowcroft
Rockshelter and Historic Village

Whiskey Sales in Washington County

The Meadowcroft archival collection contains several 19th- and early-20th-century ledger books which reveal period business practices, the value of available goods and services, and a listing of customer names with their account activity. One ledger caught my eye recently in light of the exhibition, *American Spirits: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*. Locally acquired by Meadowcroft founder Albert Miller in 1981, the ledger primarily documents the sale of whiskey between the years of 1819 and 1844.

Although it predates Prohibition by a century, it provides rich historical information about the value of the whiskey as well as goods and services that were sometimes bartered in the transactions it records. Unfortunately, there is no mention of the proprietor who kept this ledger but, since there are several locally recognized names listed, we can confidently attribute this to Washington County. The fragile spine is cracked and the decorative marbling on the cover is worn and faded. Page 22 of the ledger carries the account of George Miller (1767-1839), the great-great-grandfather of Meadowcroft founders Albert and Delvin Miller. George Miller emigrated from County Donegal in Northern Ireland in 1794, arriving just in

time for the infamous Whiskey Insurrection when Western Pennsylvanians rebelled against federal taxation on whiskey production. Miller purchased a 190-acre tract known as “Levin’s Folly” in western Washington County. The apparent folly of Mr. Levin thrived as Bancroft Farm for more than two centuries under the Miller family.

George Miller’s account begins on July 26, 1820, with an entry explaining that a balance of \$4.37 for previous purchases of whiskey was “taken from past books” and now carried over into this book. During 1821, he purchased 12 more gallons at a rate of 50 cents per gallon. This amount would have provided Mr. Miller (if he drank alone) with about one and a half shots for each day of the year. In 1822 he purchased nine gallons, followed by only two quarts in 1823. The account then skips to 1829 when he purchased “2 Bottle fulls.” His balance due was almost always paid in cash, with the exception of June 1821 when he paid off \$3.00 of his debt with six bushels of rye.

The Miller account ends as “settled in full” on January 14, 1831.

It’s interesting that various other customers also bartered with bushels of grain or with their own labor to pay their whiskey debt. In 1820, James Hunter settled his account “By 11 bushels of rye” noted as being located “in Fowlers mill.” James Cunningham paid his account down \$1.12 in 1823 “By 1 ½ days Credling Otes” (harvesting oats using a grain cradle which is similar to a scythe but has a series of long, wooden, finger-like extensions parallel to the blade for catching the cut grain stalk). He again traded labor in 1825 for 50 cents “By 1 day breaking flax” (shattering the dried flax plant stem to facilitate separation of the long flax fibers used to produce linen).

Historical documents such as this provide valuable information about Western Pennsylvania life and commerce as we continue the work of piecing together a picture of the past. 

