

Supplying Life and Death: General Goods Stores in 19th-Century Upstate New York



Introduction:

Historical archaeology often imposes a separation between the realms of the living and the dead, when this boundary would have been much more fluid for the past people we study. My dissertation explores the role of class and gender in the conspicuous consumption and display of mortuary goods in rural Madison County, New York; this poster aims to present a more composite view of 19th-century purchasing practices, adding context to the trends seen in mortuary space by generating points of comparison.



Figure 1: Map of Madison County, NY

Results:

There is a marked difference in newspaper coverage of general stores compared to businesses catering to specific mortuary needs. For general stores that also carried mortuary products, such as mourning veils, advertisement strategies varied from town to town. Previous work led me to believe there might be a clustering of business activity in mercantile hubs, with death workers and general goods suppliers working alongside each other in most towns. This does not appear to be the case universally; instead, distance to other providers may have led to an uneven distribution of mortuary and general goods services across the landscape. In the large hub of Syracuse, there was a general store, dedicated mortuary providers specializing in undertaking services and mourning goods, as well as a separate establishment for grave monuments. In smaller towns, it is more likely that there will be providers specializing in one of the above, but not all three. Cazenovia, a village smaller than Syracuse but which played a significant role as a minor hub for nearby farming communities, is another area with a cluster of all three provider types. In smaller and more rural areas, there may have been an emphasis on ensuring that a general store was able to meet the basic needs of the community, while people were more willing to travel to neighboring villages to seek specialized death care on rare occasions.

Methods:

The Cazenovia Public Library hosts a large database of digitized, historic Madison County newspapers, which I have been systematically analyzing. For the period 1850-1900, I searched for newspaper entries matching search terms of “general stores,” “dry goods,” and “mourning goods.” I transcribed and recorded these entries, categorizing them based on their main content theme. I also recorded if advertisements were illustrated or repeated. When entries included a specific address, I mapped the location precisely in ArcGIS Pro. If no specific address was given but a town was listed, I placed a point in the town center to represent the presence of a general store. Previously, I used the same methods to create a database and shapefiles documenting the location of mortuary goods and services providers on the landscape. In ArcGIS, I created maps showing these combined datasets at local and regional scales to visualize the distribution of purchasing practices across the landscape.



Figure 2: 1892 Ad for Covell's store



Figure 3: 1897 Ad for ML Paul's Boston Store

Regional General Stores and Death Workers, with 1855 Railroad Network Overlay

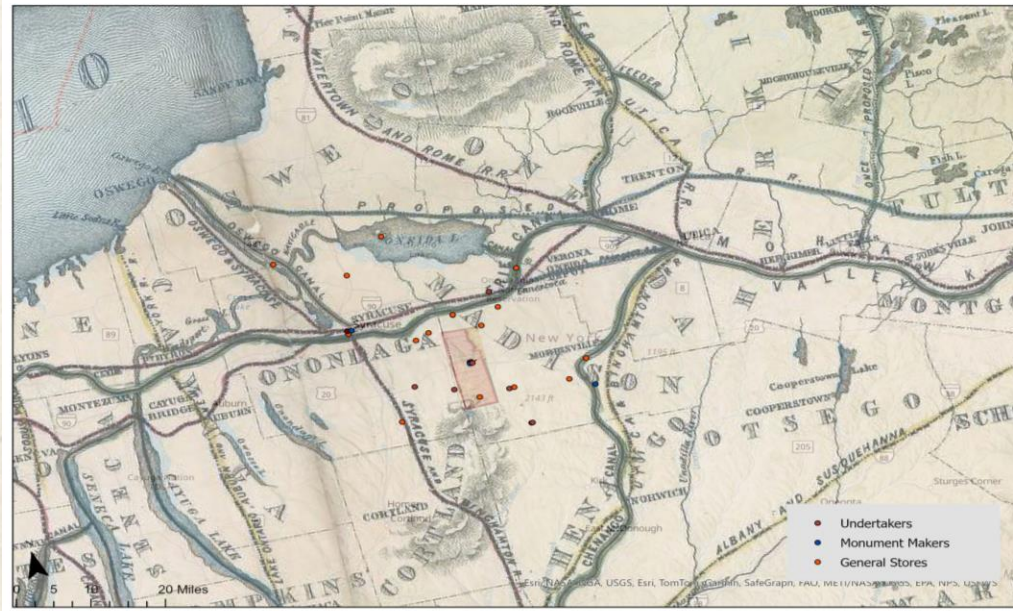


Figure 4: Regional Map of General Store and Death Worker Locations

Table 2: Newspaper Entry Content by Category

| Advertisement, Illustrated | Advertisement, Not Illustrated | Advertisement, Repeated | Informational Listing | Focus: Clothing | Focus: Household Goods | Focus: Farming Supplies |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 3% | 32% | 14% | 30% | 9% | 8% | 4% |

Table 1: Comparison of Death Workers and General Stores by Town

| Town | Number of Death Workers | Number of General Stores | Town Population in 1870 | Distance to Hub of Syracuse, NY |
|-------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Cazenovia | 13 | 2 | 1718 | 20 miles |
| Chittenango | 0 | 2 | 968 | 16 miles |
| Canastota | 1 | 0 | 1492 | 25 miles |
| Hamilton | 1 | 0 | 1529 | 50 miles |
| Perryville | 1 | 2 | 100 | 20 miles |

General Stores and Death Workers in the Village of Cazenovia, with 1859 Map Overlay



Figure 5: Cazenovia Village Distribution of General Store and Death Worker Locations

Conclusion:

At a time of shifting national social norms and rapid intensification of agriculture in the region, the choices made by 19th-century Madison County residents about how and where to buy the items needed for both daily life and the ritual commemoration of death reveals the influence of community values, personal preferences, as well as economic enablements and constraints. Further work is needed to understand the push and pull factors that led to this spatioeconomic distribution and what it meant for the lived experiences of past people. Using tangible sites of economic production and consumption as proxies for the intangible social relationships and interactions that would have manifested in these places, inter- and intra-village dynamics become increasingly complex. Future work will expand archival sample sizes and more robust spatial analysis to better understand the where and why of 19th-century purchasing practices.

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