

“Producerist Consumers?": Women, Men, and Consumption in Rural Lower Canada, 1830–1867

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Article abstract

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Abstract

Since at least the nineteenth century, work has been described as something done for pay—and the opposite of consumption. Earlier work on eighteenth-century Nova Scotia concluded that work and consumption were symbiotically connected. Most of the goods purchased needed female labour to be consumable (flour to become bread or fabric to become clothing, for instance). Those goods were paid with the product of men's labour (in services, kind, or cash). Women were consumers but consumed to produce, whereas men produced to consume. In Lower Canada, rural women also consumed to produce—but so did men who bought tools, nails, paint, or fodder, and all could be considered “productionist consumers.” Both men and women acquired goods that did not require further transformation (from shoes and hats to tobacco and books), but the majority of ready-to-use consumer goods were household ones, used by men, women, or children (blankets, curtains, mirrors, crockery, etc.). Although men, who held almost all the accounts, controlled transactions at the stores, these stores were full of goods normally used by women or inside the female space. The women may not have produced to consume, but they were still the buyers targeted by the storekeepers.

Résumé

Depuis au moins le XIXe siècle, le travail est décrit comme étant une tâche réalisée pour une rémunération—et l'opposé de la consommation. Des travaux antérieurs sur la Nouvelle-Écosse du XVIIIe siècle ont conclu que le travail et la consommation étaient liés de manière symbiotique. La plupart des produits achetés nécessitaient la main-d'œuvre des femmes pour être consommables (la farine pour devenir du pain ou le tissu pour devenir des vêtements, par exemple). Ces biens étaient payés avec le fruit du travail des hommes (en services, en nature ou en espèces). Les femmes étaient des consommatrices mais elles consommaient pour produire, alors que les hommes produisaient pour consommer. Au Bas-Canada, les femmes rurales consommaient également pour produire—il en va de même pour les hommes qui achetaient des outils, des clous, de la peinture ou du fourrage, et tous pouvaient être considérés comme des « consommateurs

productivistes ». Tant les hommes que les femmes se procuraient des biens qui ne nécessitaient aucune transformation supplémentaire (des chaussures et des chapeaux, au tabac et aux livres), mais la majorité des biens de consommation prêts à l'emploi étaient des produits domestiques, utilisés par les hommes, les femmes ou les enfants (couvertures, rideaux, miroirs, vaisselle, etc.). Bien que les hommes, qui détenaient la quasi-totalité des comptes, contrôlaient les transactions effectuées dans les magasins, ceux-ci étaient bondés de produits normalement utilisés par les femmes ou dans l'espace féminin. Les femmes ne produisaient pas forcément pour consommer, mais elles composaient la clientèle ciblée par les commerçants.

Studying rural consumption in interwar Canada through the eyes of the members of Women's Institutes, Donica Belisle has found that women actively participated in consumer markets. She noted, however, the tension inherent in rural consumption: rural women "valued the efficiency, beauty and cheer that new producer goods provided," but they also valued "thrift, home production and handicraft."¹ The Women's Institutes encouraged intelligent and responsible buying as well as efficient and economical production methods through exchanges of recipes and patterns, cooking and craft classes, and use of labour-saving devices.² Early twentieth-century rural women resolved the tension by becoming "producerist consumers."³ They consumed in order to produce. The same appears to have been true of their grand and great-grandmothers.

Elizabeth Mancke has depicted country stores' account books as useful sources not only to better understand the links between household and larger provincial, Atlantic, and even global economies, but also the nature of rural women's work in late eighteenth-century Nova Scotia. Household production, she argues, could not have taken place without market inputs. A great proportion of purchased goods required labour to be consumed, and therefore people consumed in the market to produce in the home. Consumption, for whatever end, was, however, not evenly distributed between men and women. This transforming labour was more likely to be the one of women, whereas ready-to-use goods were dominated by male clothing. On the other hand, store accounts were mostly settled with the products of men's labour, leading Mancke to state that women consumed to produce, and men produced to consume.⁴

Women consuming to produce complicates our understanding of female consumers—and of female labour. Consumers have been

gendered female since at least the early modern “consumer revolution,” accused by moralists of ruining their husbands and wrecking the nation’s balance of trade. Historians have been less judgmental, but still describe consumption as primarily a female activity. The “separate sphere” firmly placed women in the domestic, the non-producing or consuming, sphere. Women’s responsibility as homemakers gave them an opportunity to use consumption to express their tastes, construct an identity of their own, and even exercise power. Economists and governments soon declared that women could, and should, serve their family, the economy, and the nation through their responsible consumption (or by refraining from consumption in, for instance, times of war).⁵

Historians of women’s work, on the other hand, are aware that housewives could produce for household consumption or the market. In the early modern period, all activities of co-resident teams were considered “work.”⁶ As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, however, only activities generating an income came to be defined as “work.” The others were housework or care, which could not be given a value, and thus were outside the scope of national accounting. The challenge, for historians of women’s work, is to reintegrate those activities within the sphere of “work” and attribute to them a monetary value. Some define work as “activities with the specific purpose of making a living,” and, in the early modern period, both spouses were expected to engage in such activities.⁷ The “two-supporter model” was the dominant one. Other historians remind us that standards of living were dependent on women’s unpaid work in the household. Standards of living are often measured in terms of the ability to acquire a basket of goods, but, as Jane Humphries has asked, “who turned this basket of goods into a living, the food into a meal, the fabric into clothing?”⁸ One literature ends where the other begins. Each addresses either the consumption or the production dimension of women’s activities in the domestic sphere, but they do not link them. That women could engage in non-market production with the commodities they purchased has been overlooked.

It is easy to conceive that woman had to consume to produce in the late eighteenth-century British North American countryside, when ready-to-use goods were still rare. The early nineteenth century, however, saw a growing influx of increasingly cheaper consumer goods in urban and rural areas. Economic historians have argued that in the United States farmers produced more and more for the market, and

such increased commercialization led to an increase in consumption.⁹ Historians of American rural women have stood Mancke's statement on its head, hinting or stating bluntly that women produced for the market in order to consume.¹⁰

If nineteenth-century American women produced to consume, what did their Canadian neighbours do? Farming households produced more for the market there as well. Did women continue consuming to produce, and men producing to consume? In northwest New Brunswick, not only did some women produce for the market—and could consume as a result—but both sexes consumed to produce.¹¹ Was this a general pattern? We can revisit this question in a different Canadian province, using the books of Quebec country merchants before Confederation. These books show that stores looked like male spaces—but that a large proportion of the purchases were for women's use or for use in the female space of the household. Women indeed consumed to produce—but so did men (who bought tools, nails, paint, etc.). Both men and women acquired goods that did not require further transformation (from shoes to tobacco and books), but those represented a very small proportion of purchases at the store, and most of the ready-to-use goods were household ones (curtains, mirrors, candlesticks, dishes, etc.). Women also produced to consume, but in ways that were much less visible, and not necessarily mediated by the market.

The Places

The stores whose books are used for this study were located in three Quebec seigneuries: Saint-Roch des Aulnaies, on the south shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, downriver from Québec; Lotbinière, along the same river, but between Québec and Montréal; and finally, Argenteuil, northwest of Montréal on the north bank of the Ottawa River. Although relatively recently developed, Saint-Roch and Lotbinière were populated by French Canadians. On the other hand, in the first half of the century, Argenteuil was inhabited mostly by Loyalists, by a larger group of British immigrants (mostly Scots) who arrived after the War of 1812, and by their descendants. In the 1850s, French Canadians began spilling into Argenteuil from neighbouring Deux-Montagnes (to the east). In the period under consideration, the Argenteuil, Lotbinière, and Saint-Roch seigneuries numbered between 2500 and 4500 inhabitants. Villages (St. Andrew and Lachute) appeared early in Argenteuil, and as early as 1840, more than half the seigneurie's heads

of households were not farmers according to the census, whereas the populations of Saint-Roch and Lotbinière were still overwhelmingly made up of farmers.¹²

The Saint-Roch store was kept by Amable Morin between 1817 and 1847, after which it was taken over by one of his many nephews. Morin was also *notaire*, churchwarden, advisor to the nearby Collège de Sainte-Anne, farmer, apple grower, and eel catcher. The Lotbinière store belonged to the (de)Villiers family (first Jean Villiers, then from the 1840s, his son François-Xavier de Villiers, who was also a *notaire*). The store was in the hands of the family between 1819 and 1976 and did not close its door until 1983. The St. Andrew store was kept by Duncan Dewar, who opened a tannery in the early 1850s and subsequently reduced his retailing activities by narrowing the range of his inventory.¹³

The Sources: Account Books

Nineteenth-century storekeepers and their customers extensively used book credit. People bought what they needed when they needed, and had the purchase put on account. Payments were made when possible and also put on account. Transactions (purchases, payments in kind, cash, labour, or transfer to a third party) were entered as they occurred in a daybook, and then reported to a page in the name of the customer in a ledger. Every now and then, the accounts were settled, and the differences between debits and credits covered, or put back on account. The books can be extremely detailed, indicating who had purchased what on which day for what price and in what quantity. As no storekeeper had a monopoly, customers did not limit themselves to a single store.¹⁴ One therefore cannot draw too robust conclusions concerning individual consumption patterns from those documents. Yet there is no reason to believe some stores were preferred by one sex or another, as they all carried the same extensive range of goods.¹⁵

Account books, however, were private utilitarian documents used to keep track of debts due—and discarded or recycled when the information they contained was no longer needed. Their survival has therefore been haphazard, and what exists determines the places and dates one can investigate.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the corpus collected here is reasonably diversified. The dates chosen are the ones for which a book exists in most of the subsets. The corpus thus consists of Dewar's day books for 1840, 1852, and 1857; the (de) Villiers ledgers for 1830,

1840, 1852, 1857, 1862, and 1867 and Morin's day books for 1830, 1840, and 1847. Morin 1847 was added because that was the last year he operated the store.¹⁷

Methodology

All information about all the transactions in the target years was transcribed into an excel spreadsheet (date, name of the account holder, name of the person at the store when given, item purchased, unit price if given, quantity, total price) in the language of the document. Payments, loans, interests, transfers of debit or credit to another account, reports from previous years are also transcribed (but not used for this study). The different articles were then grouped into categories (fabric, hand tools, clothing, etc.) and distributed between production or consumption goods (with a residual "Other" category for unidentifiable or unclassifiable goods). Production goods were the ones used to make others (tools, seeds, etc.) or that needed to be processed to be used (fabric, leather, metal, salted cod, etc.). The classification is inevitably subjective to a degree. For instance, I classified staple food (flour, fish, meat, eggs, salt, vinegar, and saleratus, which all had to be prepared or were used to prepare other food) as production goods, whereas decencies and luxuries, such as tea, coffee, chocolate, sugar, and spices, were consumer goods (despite their usually not being used as they came out of the box). I also treated goods used for fishing and hunting as consumer goods, because one cannot tell who fished or hunted for pleasure and who did so to feed his family (although not many bought them anyway). Among household goods, pots and pans, laundry and cleaning tools and products, and various containers were classified as production goods. Crockery, cutlery, glassware, and household textiles—which can be quite fancy and accumulated way beyond one's needs—all forms of lights and lighting material (such as the newly invented kerosene), clocks, mirrors, and window blinds were set as consumer goods (see the list in appendix I). Consumer and production goods were further distributed between goods that were customarily transformed or used by men, by women, or by either (or by children). Since tasks were strongly gendered, doing so was not particularly difficult. Household goods, except cooking utensils, containers such as pails and boxes, and cleaning and laundry tools and products were treated as unisex; so were cultural and religious items (less violin strings, as it was the men who played this instrument),

and hygiene articles (less shaving material). Clothing was distributed between men's (pants, etc.), women's (shawls, etc.), and items that both wore (shoes, hats, gloves, etc.). Tobacco was coded separately; women as well as men used snuff, but it seems only men smoked. Alcohol was taken out of the breakdowns to make meaningful comparisons possible as Dewar never sold any and Villiers and Morin only in the 1830s and 1840s, until licensing rules changed. Almost all goods categorized as neither production nor consumption are treated as unisex.

With the exception of Villiers in 1830 and 1852, between 300 and 475 account holders charged purchases of goods (see table I). The number of account holders varied from year to year, but this does not seem linked to the economic climate of the moment. The lower numbers for Villiers 1852 may have been a consequence of the store being passed back and forth between father and son, as for a short period around that time notaires were prohibited from engaging in commercial or manufacturing activities. The average value of purchases put on account also varies across time and place, but it was usually around ten dollars per account holder in Lotbinière and Argenteuil and six dollars in Saint-Roch. The variations in their values also seem impervious to the province's economic situation, and in the early 1850s, at least, it would have been easy for farm households to spend between six and ten dollars at a store.¹⁸

Women as Marginal Customers?

Women had accounts at the store in their own name, but those represented a small proportion of account holders (between 5.3% and 11.7%) (see table I). In part, this is because accounts were normally held by household heads—and most household heads were male. One might have expected female account holders to be widows, as those were the typical female household heads. But this was not the case (See table II). Very few women were identified as such in the books; a few were identified as Mrs. or Madame, and the great majority by their first and last name. Good manners precluded referring to married or widowed women in this way; therefore the storekeepers either were disrespectful or those women were all single. They were the majority at the French stores in all years, and barely less than half at Dewar. Not all those female account holders were heads of household either. Some single women were described in terms

Table I. Proportion of Female Account Holders

	Morin store			Villiers store						Dewar store		
	1830	1840	1847	1830	1840	1852	1857	1862	1867	1840	1852	1857
N of acc. with purchases	296	403	394	194	382	250	351	389	319	376	478	400
N of female acc. with purchases	19	45	44	11	37	27	30	27	17	44	52	25
% women account holders	6.4	11.2	11.1	5.7	9.7	10.8	8.5	6.9	5.3	11.7	10.9	6.3
Value of all purchases, in \$	2110	2204	2248	1180	4915	1791	3569	4521	3738	4162	5074	4457
Value of purchases by female account holders, in \$	67	99	132	55	157	141	162	199	120	292	216	130
Value of the above as % of all	3.2	4.5	5.9	4.7	3.2	7.9	4.5	4.4	3.2	7.0	4.3	2.9
average \$ per purchaser	7.1	5.5	5.7	6.1	12.9	7.2	10.2	11.6	11.7	11.1	10.6	11.1
average \$ per female purchaser	3.5	2.2	3.0	5.0	4.2	5.2	5.4	7.4	7.1	6.6	4.2	5.2
Median \$ per purchaser	3.6	2.3	2.2	2.9	7.9	3.9	7.3	7.3	6.3	4.0	3.2	4.1
Median \$ per female purchaser	3.0	1.2	1.1	1.7	1.68	2.12	2.11	4.37	5.13	1.91	1.92	1.63

Table II. Number of Female Account Holders By Inferred Marital Status

	M30	M40	M47	V30	V40	V52	V57	V62	V67	D40	D52	D57
Widows	7	9	15	1	9	9	6	2	2	7	1	0
Mrs/Madame/Dame		4	4			1		1		11	25	14
Miss/delle		8						1		19	12	5
First name/last name or first name only	12	24	25	10	28	17	24	23	15	7	14	6

suggesting they were servants (“la petite Bourgot chez Melle Pelletier,” for instance). Those were women who presumably could have charged their employer’s account to the extent of their wages—but they were given an account under their own name. In addition, at Villiers at mid-century, some women were identified as schoolteachers. Typically, lay female teachers were young women living at home. The storekeeper letting them have an account in their name suggests he assumed those young women controlled their earnings; their salary did not go into the family’s common pot.¹⁹ Storekeepers therefore were willing to give credit to women as individuals—and even to otherwise dependent individuals. We do not know on what basis they let women—including single ones and other people’s servants—charge goods at the store in their own name, but, clearly, they did not object on principle to women doing so.

With a few rare exceptions, female account holders also charged consistently and significantly less than male ones (see table I).²⁰ There can be several reasons for this. Storekeepers may not have been willing to extend as much credit to them as to men, or women may have been more inclined to pay cash. Female-headed households may have been smaller than men’s, and their needs proportionally smaller; however, according to the census, this was not the case. A more likely explanation for the difference is the fact that a large proportion of female account holders may not have been household heads, and thus were purchasing only for themselves.

A Male Dominated Space?

Account holders were not the only people going to the store and charging their accounts. The daybooks indicate not only whose account was charged, but by whom (the ledgers do not contain this information). Those who charged another person’s account could be members of the household (wife, son, daughter, servant maid, hired hand, etc.), a relative (father, mother, siblings, niece, etc.) or another person whose relationship to the account holder is not given. Some of the latter may be identified by a full name, a first name, a relationship to another (“Joseph Pelletier’s little boy” for instance), or simply a nickname. People who charged an account that was not their own were more likely to be men than women—even wives of the holder. On the other hand, about 10% of accounts were never charged by the holder, perhaps because he or she was housebound.

Mancke has surmised that unrelated women who charged another person's account were subordinated to that person—they either worked for wages for him or were selling him services. There are other reasons, however, why a woman (or man) would charge an unrelated person's account for a purchase. Some women had not provided the account holder a service but sold his household some goods. Rural women produced merchantable goods from eggs and poultry to linen and clothing, and their exchanging those for credit at the store on their customer's account is no more a relationship of dependency than the one of the shoemakers who did the same. This was merely a way to circumvent cash flow problems. People also ran errands for each other while they were going to the store or the village. It is difficult to separate the purchases servants made for the household from the personal ones they charged on the account, which would be deducted from their wages. Charging another person's account may have reflected subordination, but also market or social relations.

The number of people mentioned in the books is significantly higher than the number of account holders. We cannot, however, make an accurate count of all those individuals, because they are frequently identified only in relation to the account holder (his wife/son/daughter/sister/father, "man," "boy," etc.). Account holders had only one father, mother or spouse, but could have several sons, daughters, siblings, or servants. In other words, there may then be more people going to the store than the number of nameless "sons" or "daughters" suggests. On the other hand, an individual may appear under different names at different times. Thomas Burwash's sister, who charged his account on July 10, 1840, for a bonnet, ribbon, and fabric, may—or may not—have been the same person as the Miss Burwash who had charged the Reverend Jones's account for a half pint of oil in February of the same year. No Miss Burwash had an account in her own name. We do not know how many separate individuals came to the stores, but we know how often a store account was charged—and therefore we can count those visits. Whether Miss Burwash and Thomas Burwash's sister were the same person or not, the store was visited twice by a woman.

The numbers do not suggest the stores were people magnets, unless people loitered around without buying. They were not open on Sundays, and so were not places where people congregated after church. Although some sold alcohol (Morin and Villiers until the late 1840s), they were prohibited from selling it by small measure and

appear to have obeyed the law: stores were not places where men went for refreshments. Between twenty-five (in 1830) and forty-three (in 1847) people on average visited the Morin store in a week to engage in some transaction (purchase, payment)—and between forty-nine (in 1840) and seventy-six (in 1852) visited the Dewar store. The difference may be due to the fact that a population of villagers has greater need for store goods (Dewar for instance sold bread, which Morin did not) (see table III). Visits were not evenly distributed across time. Morin saw between five and nine customers on most days; Dewar, between ten and nineteen. The stores were busier at midsummer and in the weeks preceding Christmas. It is unclear, however, what attracted unusually large numbers of people to the store on a few days in the year (up to thirty-eight people)—perhaps people flocked to the village for a funeral and took advantage of being there with the cart to shop after the service.

Although women were better represented among people who charged an account at the store than among those who had one, a minority of visits were by women, and never exceeded 20% (see table IV). Women favoured neither busy days nor low traffic ones; their visiting patterns broadly followed the ones of the entire population. Surprisingly, few accounts were charged by the holder's wife (between 13% and 23% of male held accounts—see table V). Mancke found that in Nova Scotia, slightly less than half the women charging another person's account were wives. As we cannot know how many individual women went to the store, we cannot tell what proportion of women were wives charging the family account. However, as visits by wives never exceeded a third of all visits by women, this was probably not the case here. Female-held accounts were also more likely to be charged by a male than male held accounts by a female. On the surface, stores were not female spaces.

But Catering to Female Needs and Desires

The small proportion of accounts charged by wives, however, does not mean that 80% of them never went to the store. We can easily imagine a man picking up baking soda or molasses, needles and thread, or even an umbrella for his wife while at the store. It is harder to imagine him buying the material to make a bonnet (fabric, lace, ribbon) or a gown (fabric and trimmings) or new ribbons, laces, trimmings, and buttons to refresh an existing one, especially as the selections on offer

Table III. Frequency of Visits

	Morin store			Dewar store		
	1830	1840	1847	1840	1852	1857
Average number of visits per week:						
by men	21.6	31.7	37.8	49.4	75.5	66.2
by women	3.3	7.7	4.3	11.8	11	14.6
all	24.8	39.7	42.6	62.4	86.2	81.5
Number of weekdays with:						
no visit	34	29	36	5	0	5
1 to 4 visits	152	92	62	24	14	15
5 to 9 visits	110	114	130	113	51	55
10 to 19 visits	16	74	80	160	190	189
20 visits and more	1	4	5	11	58	49
maximum number of visits in a day	21	31	31	30	37	38

Table IV. Number of Visits

	M30	M40	M47	D40	D52	D57
by men	1119	1648	1964	2569	3906	3137
including by male account holders	914	1115	1742	1875	3560	2633
by women	170	400	224	615	549	761
including by female account holders	44	99	145	119	171	111
including by wives	53	120	34	154	162	271
by unknown sex/institutions	1	18	27	28	29	339*
by all	1290	2066	2215	3246	4484	4237
% female visits	13.2	19.4	10.1	18.9	12.2	17.9

*This includes a large number of purchases “by your order” or “by book.” The name of the messenger is not given.

Table V. Accounts Charged by Wives

	M30	M40	M47	D40	D52	D57
% accounts charged by wife	13.0	18.0	7.1	17.8	15.1	22.1

were extensive. Buying for another person when taste is involved is a minefield.

Was Louis Dion really the one who selected 7 yds of bombaset at \$0.25 a yard, 2 yds of cotton at \$0.25 and 1 yd at \$0.22, 2 yds of lace at \$0.33, another 2 yds also at \$0.33, and 1/3 yd of a third type at \$1.30, as well as 1.5 yd of ribbon at \$0.15 while picking up some putty and graphite at Morin's in September 1830? A quarter of a century later, in 1857, and at the other end of the province, Felix Beaulieu charged his account at Dewar with 3 yds of checked muslin, 12 yds of factory cotton, 5 yds of print at \$0.16 and another 2 yds at \$0.50, 4 yds of white flannel, 2/3 yd of checked gingham, 9 yds of white lace at \$0.03 and 1.5 yds of the same at \$0.05, 1.5 yds of black cashmere, and some braid. The same year, Dr. Everett personally charged 3 yds of cloth, \$1.75 of Orleans, \$1.25 of linen, \$1.75 of canvas, \$0.75 of padding, \$10.5 of plaid, 6 yd of derry and 1.5 yds of print as well as two pairs of women's boots, one pair of shoes, one head dress, two corsets, some buttons, twist and sewing silk, and a broom. Were nineteenth-century farmers comfortable in the fabric and notion section of the stores? Did men really buy their wife's corsets and bonnets?

In all those cases, it is likely that the couple went to the store together. She chose what she wanted, and, with her husband present, the storekeeper entered the purchase as made by him, making her visit invisible in the records. Between half and three quarter of the visits to the stores resulted in a charge by a male account holder; therefore, a much greater number of women than identified may have accompanied men to the store. For instance, at the twelve stores, between 10% and 17% of the visits charged to a male-held account by the holder included fabric purchases. If we added those visits to the female column, the total number of female visits would at least double, and female visits would represent 20% to 30% of the total, rather than 10% to 20%. Taking into account visits when lace and other trimmings, bonnets, and women's shoes were charged would raise the number of female visitors even more.

Stores were male controlled spaces. Men held most of the accounts and were most of the visitors who charged purchases. But most of the goods put on account (in terms of value) were goods to be used or transformed by women, or used inside the home, in the female space (items to prepare and serve food, household textiles, clocks, mirrors, window blinds, lamps, etc.). The demand for those goods was more elastic than the one for men's goods, which were largely utilitarian.

Storekeepers appear to have been aware of the importance of female buyers—and possibly understood the concept of demand elasticity. Otherwise, why would they fill their stores with dozens of bolts of fabric and a multiplicity of lace, braids, ribbons, inserts, and buttons, not to mention creamware and Britannia cutlery? Fabric was one of the leading categories of goods sold in all the stores and at all the dates, and their inventories were impressive for small village shops. Morin offered about thirty different kinds of fabric; Villiers about forty; and Dewar about seventy. As those figures do not take colours, patterns (striped, checkered), use, or qualities as reflected in prices into account, the real numbers were at least twice as high. The selection of fabric offered also changed over time—either the storekeepers were keeping up with the demand—or were spurring it.²¹ Those goods were sold at a great variety of prices, and the cheaper ones were relatively inexpensive: at Villiers in 1857, calico sold for \$0.10 to \$0.20 per yd, ordinary cotton for \$0.07 to \$0.17; lace, braids, trimming, and other decorative material ranged from \$0.01 to \$0.10 per yd with the exception of some lace at \$0.25. At Dewar in the same year, decorative material started at \$0.02 and went up to \$0.25 for velvet trimming. Women could easily afford those with their egg money, as eggs sold for \$0.13 per dozen in season at both Dewar and Villiers. The storekeepers clearly viewed women as consumers—and not only of textiles, but also of the expanding assortment of goods such as wallpaper or the new kerosene lamps the industrial age was putting on the market. Men charging a housewares item to their account may have been the one deciding their household had to have it. The odds, however, are that women put the idea in their heads. Housewares, such as crockery, tablecloths, carpeting, window blinds, glassware, or mirrors were items used and displayed in the female space—not in the barn where men carried most of their activities. Housewares items were not necessarily expensive either. Dewar sold window blind material at \$0.21 per yd and carpeting at \$0.25 in 1857, teacups and saucers for less than \$0.50 per dozen, teapots for less than \$0.35, and a washbasin and ewer for \$0.48. Prices were higher at Villiers that year. His carpeting cost between \$0.30 and \$0.60 per yard, and his teacups started at \$1.10 per dozen, but one could get a teapot for \$0.20. His basins and ewers cost \$0.50 and \$0.90. He did not sell window blinds (unless under a different name). Looking glass was \$0.75 at Dewar but ranged from \$0.15 to \$0.75 at Villiers. Women could use those objects to express their sense of esthetics and project their family's social status. The

Table VI. Distribution of Purchases in Terms of Value

M1830	M1840	M1847	V1830	V1840	V1852	V1857	V1862	V1867	D1840	D1852	D1857
% of production goods in all purchases (based on \$ value- alcohol excluded)											
67.7	74.1	60.9	62.8	64.7	66.6	61.8	66.7	68.4	64.2	66.7	62.7
% of purchases coded female which were production goods											
94.3	95.6	96.7	99.2	95.7	93.6	98.9	98.7	99	95.4	97	97.5
% of value of all goods purchased represented by production goods coded female											
40.2	38.2	27.9	53	54.8	46.5	40.9	46.9	45	44.7	33.5	33
% of purchases coded female which were consumer goods											
5.7	4.4	3.3	.8	4.3	6.4	1.1	1.3	1	4.6	3	2.5
% of value of all goods purchased represented by consumer goods coded female											
2.4	1.7	1	.4	2.5	3.2	0.5	0.6	0.5	2.2	1	0.9
% of purchases coded male which were production goods											
82.3	93.5	90.3	89.3	80.9	89.3	93.12	89.1	91.8	96.1	93.7	94.5
% of value of all goods purchased represented by production goods coded male											
16.4	32.6	32.5	9.2	9.5	19.7	19.8	19	22.7	17.3	28.8	25.9
% of purchases coded male which were consumer goods											
17.7	6.5	9.7	10.7	19.1	10.97	6.9	10.95	8.2	3.9	6.3	5.5
% of value of all goods purchased represented by consumer goods coded male											
3.5	2.3	3.5	1.1	2.2	2.4	1.5	2.3	2	0.7	1.9	1.5

Table VII. % of Purchases of Consumer Goods Coded Unisex (Alcohol Excluded)

M1830	M1840	M1847	V1830	V1840	V1852	V1857	V1862	V1867	D1840	D1852	D1857
65.8	80.7	83.6	83.3	95.0	84.9	88.5	94.9	93.1	83.9	77.3	76.2

Table VIII. Unisex Consumer Goods as % of Total Value (Alcohol Excluded)

M1830	M1840	M1847	V1830	V1840	V1852	V1857	V1862	V1867	D1840	D1852	D1857
23.7	18.1	24.2	26.1	23.0	20.6	28.6	25.4	25.2	28.1	25.5	28.4

stores may have been male controlled spaces, but the shelves were full of a great variety of not prohibitively priced goods useful or attractive to women, and whose demand was potentially more expansive than for men’s goods.

Consumers or Producers?

Women nonetheless very much consumed to produce. With the exception of Morin in 1847, between a third to a half of all the goods sold in the stores were production goods coded female—and with the exception of Morin in 1847 again, the value of female production goods always exceeded the value of such goods purchased by males. The latter usually hovered around 20% of all purchases (see table VII). This did not mean that men were consumers whereas women were producers, however. The bulk of male and female coded goods were production goods, although the proportion was slightly lower for men than for women (80%–94% of male coded goods were production goods compared to at least 93% for female ones). Both sexes consumed to produce and at least two third of the goods purchased in all stores were production goods.

The remaining third were consumer goods and most were either non-gendered or used by a person whose sex is not identified—65 to 95% (in terms of value) could have been used by a male or a female (hats, shoes, gloves, but also crockery, glassware, household textiles, and caffeinated beverages)—see tables VII and VIII. For all practical purposes, consumer goods for the use of individuals were articles of clothing, or fishing and hunting equipment, and those accounted for small percentages of all purchases; clothing was never more than 10% of all purchases for instance—and the majority were for items that could be worn by either sex, such as shoes, hats, or gloves.²²

Were accounts settled with the products of men’s—rather than women’s—labour? It is not possible to answer the question because a large proportion of payments were in cash, not farm products or labour, or farm products that were not costed. In 1847, for instance, Morin acknowledged the receipt of sixty-two firkins of butter from twenty-five households (one from a widowed account holder)—but did not indicate how much he credited those customers for them. Perhaps he took them on consignment. But in addition, we should not forget that commodities usually considered the result of men’s labour often included female input as well. Women were in the fields and meadows

at harvest and haying time; they slopped the pigs and salted the meat after the men had butchered them. And the fruit of their labour may have affected activities at the store in indirect ways. Women raised poultry and collected eggs, milked cows, and churned butter, spun the wool from their sheep and knitted socks, planted and hoed gardens and picked up berries, and those commodities could be sold to neighbours, who, short of cash, would pay them by allowing a credit on their household's account—under a male name. And although women may have been merely consumers at the counter of the general stores, they were producers of goods for household or self-consumption once they left the store.

Conclusion

General stores were paradoxical places. They were part of the male economic sphere as men held the great majority of accounts and were therefore responsible for their settlements. They seemed to be male spaces, as men were the majority of those charging accounts. Yet they were full of goods to be transformed or used by women, or to be used in female spaces, such as mirrors and tablecloths. The stock of such goods on offer was not static either. Fabric inventories, for instance, changed over the years, suggesting sensitivity to fashion. New household goods such as kerosene lamps were quickly put on the shelf and adopted. The demand for goods used by women was potentially more elastic than the one for those used by males. There is a limit to the number of nails one can drive into a fence or how often one needs to buy a hammer, but the number of garments or creamware cups one can own is theoretically unlimited. And, of course, food is literally consumed as soon as it is produced or very shortly afterwards. Storekeepers were clearly aware of this and sought to take advantage of it. Inciting women to buy by offering a varied and ever-changing assortment of goods was a good way to generate a greater volume of sale—and higher profits. Country stores were as much “halls of temptations” as their urban counterparts.

Women consumed to produce—but they produced consumer goods—and so did men. Women and men went to the stores to acquire what was needed to produce meals and clothing for the family, well-maintained buildings and well cared-for horses, or intangible commodities such as cleanliness and respectability, which were enjoyed by all members of the household. The bulk of the ready-to-use articles

from the stores were for collective or undifferentiated use (crockery, household textiles, books, soap, medicine, but also food decencies like tea). “Consumers” in the stricter sense of the term were really households rather than individuals.

Most of the payments are likely to have been the result of men’s production and labour—either exchanged directly at the store or producing cash with which to settle part, or all, of the account. However, the lack of female-produced goods offered as payment at the stores does not necessarily mean women did not produce to consume—in the sense of earning the means to acquire other goods. On the one hand, they could have exchanged their production through other channels than the stores and earned their household credit on other people’s account; on the other, some of their labour was incorporated into the production of goods customarily coded male, and their hidden production legitimized the purchases they made under the cover of men’s names. Women did not produce to consume at the counter of the general store, but they certainly produced to consume outside the formal market. Women’s work, in the sense of the labour they expended into turning a basket of goods into a standard of living, invisible on the surface, is also indirectly brought to light through their transactions at the store.

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Appendix

Categories of goods sold at the stores	Production or consumption goods	Used/processed by male, female or neutral (non-gendered)
Alcohol	C	N
Animal feed	P	M
Care of horses	P	M
Clothing	C	according to the good
Construction	P	M
Culture, leisure, and religion	C	N, except musical goods coded M
Fabric	P	F
Fodder	P	M
Food	according to the good	N
Hand tools	P	M
Hardware	P	M
Household*	according to the good	according to the good
Hunting and Fishing	C	M
Hygiene	C	N, except shaving good, coded M
Leather	P	M
Maintenance of building	P	M
Medicine	C	N
Metal (sheets, bars, etc.)	P	M
Miscellaneous**	according to the good (mostly O)	according to the good (mostly N)
Notions	P	F
Seeds (field)	P	M
Seeds (garden)	P	F
Textile production (mostly dyes)	P	F
Tobacco	C	T
Wood	O	N

* “Household” are all the goods and products used inside the house, unless belonging to one of the other categories.

** “Sundries” and goods that cannot be clearly identified are classified as O(ther) and N(eutral).

Endnotes

- 1 Donica Belisle, *Purchasing Power: Women and the Rise of Canadian Consumer Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 122.
- 2 Belisle, *Purchasing Power*, 103–106.
- 3 Belisle, *Purchasing Power*, 16.
- 4 Elizabeth Mancke, “At the Counter of the General Store: Women and the Economy in Eighteenth-Century Horton, Nova Scotia,” in *Intimate Relations, Family and Community in Planter Nova Scotia 1759–1800*, ed. Margaret Conrad (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1995), 101.
- 5 Victoria De Grazia, “Introduction,” in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, eds. Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 1; Sheryl Kroen, “A Political History of the Consumer,” *Historical Journal* 47, no. 3 (2004): 709–36; Enrica Asquier, “Domesticity and Beyond: Gender, Family and Consumption in Western Europe,” in *Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Bettina Liverant, *Buying Happiness: The Emergence of Consumer Consciousness in English Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018); and Belisle, *Purchasing Power*.
- 6 Raffaella Sarti, Anna Bellavitis and Manuela Martini, eds., *What is Work? Gender at the Crossroad of Home, Family and Business from the Early Modern Era to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2018), 24.
- 7 Maria Ågren ed., *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 216 and 218.
- 8 Jane Humphries, “From the wings to center stage – women and economic growth” (Plenary session, World Economic History Congress, Boston, July 2018); Jane Humphries, “Women’s Work and ‘Respectable living” (Plenary panel, Invisible Hands: Reassessing the History of Work conference, Glasgow, May 2018).
- 9 Lee A. Craig and Thomas Weiss, “Agricultural productivity growth during the decade of the Civil War,” *Journal of Economic History* (1993): 527–48.
- 10 Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 211; Joan Jensen, *Loosening the Bond: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750–1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 87; Jeanne, Boydston, “The Woman who wasn’t there: Women’s Market Labor and the Transition to Capitalism in the United States,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (1996): 183–206; Sally McMurry, “American Rural Women and the Transformation of Dairy Processing, 1820–1880,” *Rural History* 5 (1994): 143–53; Sally McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying*

Families and Agricultural Changes, 1820–1885 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

- 11 Béatrice Craig, *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 207–8; Béatrice Craig, Judith Rygiel, and Elizabeth Turcotte, “The Homespun Paradox: Market-Oriented Production of Cloth in Eastern Canada in the Nineteenth Century,” *Agricultural History* 76 (Winter 2002): 28–57; Béatrice Craig, Judith Rygiel, and Elizabeth Turcotte, “Survival or Adaptation? Domestic rural Textile Production in Eastern Canada in the Latter Part of the Nineteenth Century,” *Agricultural History Review* 49 (2001): 140–71. See also Cynthia Wallace-Casey, “Providential Openings: The Women Weavers of Nineteenth Century Queens County, New Brunswick,” *Material History Review* 46 (Fall 1997): 29–44.
- 12 There were respectively 2,654, 2,501, and 2,596 inhabitants in the seigneuries of Saint-Roch, Lotbinière, and Argenteuil in 1831 and 2,158, 3,980, and 4,467 in 1861. Statistics Canada, *Censuses of Canada, 1665–1871/Recensements du Canada, 1665–1871* (Ottawa: J. B. Taylor, 1876), vol 4 includes the aggregate tables of the previous censuses.
- 13 Roland Martin, *Amable Morin : notaire de chez-nous : premier tabellion résident de Saint-Roch-des-Aulnaies* (La Pocatière, QC. : Société historique de la Côte-du-Sud, 1976); Cyrus Thomas, *History of the Counties of Argenteuil, QC, and Prescott, On.* (Montréal : John Lovell and son, 1896); Fonds famille François-Xavier de Villiers, P677, Archives du Québec à Québec, Québec, QC. (Contains an account of the origins of the documents.)
- 14 Small buyers were merely occasional customers, and presumably patronized other stores for the bulk of their purchases. For instance, in 1857, Michel Maillot from the neighbouring seigneurie of Saint-Jean Deschaillon, bought three books from the Villiers store and nothing else. Total cost: 46 cents. Moyses Lemay also came once to the store in that year, to purchase 15 lb of nails, for one dollar, and the blacksmith François-Xavier Jacques to buy $\frac{3}{4}$ lb of powder worth \$0.23. This also means that a store’s bigger customers likely made additional small purchases elsewhere.
- 15 According to the censuses, there were eleven general stores in Argenteuil in 1842, an innkeeper, two merchants, and a négociant (wholesaler) in Lotbinière, and six merchants and an inn keeper in Saint-Roch in 1831. And, of course, people could also patronize the merchants from neighboring seigneuries.
- 16 The Argenteuil books for instance survived because a member of the local historical society, walking his dog on the eve of garbage collection day, spotted a pile of old ledgers on the sidewalk. He took a look, understood what they were, and asked the houseowner for them. The

- houseowner had disposed of a bunch of the same the week before. (Story told to the author by the then director of the museum).
- 17 The Morin day books cover the entire period during which he ran the store, but the pre-1830 books do not seem complete. The usable Villiers books similarly start in 1830 and include almost complete series of ledgers to the end of the century and beyond. The Dewar books include daybooks for 1834–1842, 1852, and 1857. It was the existence of books for the Dewar store that determined the dates chosen. Dewar books: Carillon Museum, Saint-André-d'Argenteuil, QC.; Villiers books : Archives du Québec à Québec, Québec, QC., Fonds famille François-Xavier de Villiers, P677; Morin books : Archives de la Côte-du-Sud et du Collège Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, QC.
 - 18 Marvin McInnis calculated the value of the net agricultural output per male worker 15 years or older using the 1851 agricultural census; it was \$116 in Argenteuil County, \$111 in L'Islet County (where Saint-Roch was located) and \$93 in Lotbinière County. Marvin McInnis, "Agricultural Output and Efficiency in Lower Canada, 1851," *Research in Economic History* 9 (1984): 59–60. The net agricultural output is the value of farm production reported in the census less factors of production (feed and seed).
 - 19 Jean-Pierre Charland, *Entreprise éducative au Québec 1840-1900* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2000), 294: 78% of female teachers were under thirty and 34.7% under nineteen in 1851; p. 292: 88% of the women were unmarried and the majority lived with their family.
 - 20 Agnes Johnstone was responsible for a quarter of the purchases charged to female account holders at Dewar in 1840. She was the widow of James Kennedy Johnstone, claimant to the marquisate of Annandale in Scotland. Thomas, *History of the Counties of Argenteuil*, 154–5. Interestingly, she rarely went to the store in person, sending her sons instead.
 - 21 Béatrice Craig, "Quand la mode s'en allait aux champs. La consommation textile au Bas-Canada dans la première moitié du 19^e siècle," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 74, no. 3 (2021) : 5-30.
 - 22 Interestingly, only customers who spent little at the stores (fifty cents or less) show patterns slightly different from the ones in tables VII–VIII. (A greater proportion of the production goods were coded female and a smaller one coded male). Goods purchased by moderate to large spenders distribute in about the same manner irrespective of group.