

Material Culture on the Prairie

Theme: Human Interaction with the Environment

Habits of Mind: Understand the significance of the past to their own lives, both private and public, and to their society
Perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness

Focus: The study of material culture provides insight into the overlooked elements of the lives of past peoples. Briefly, the term, “material culture,” refers to any object—scholars refer to objects as artifacts—made by people. (See below for a complete definition of material culture.) An artifact may be smaller than a pinhead or larger than a skyscraper. Regardless of size, all artifacts have a story to tell, if you know the proper questions to ask of them. For example, an oil lamp used by a housewife on a farm during the mid-nineteenth century gives us a glimpse into the resources that were available to the people who used them, and helps us understand how people coped with their environment. That same artifact also sheds light on technology, manufacturing, and commerce and opens up for discussion issues related to the quality of life before rural electrification, as well as the role and status of the people who owned or used these objects. In this lesson, students encounter the inventories of two personal estates, one from a rural home and one from an urban household, both of which were located in Sangamon County, Illinois. These rich documents help us to understand how people lived on the prairie and in small cities during the early nineteenth century.

Objectives: Students will be able to:

1. Analyze primary source documents that list items found in both rural and urban households in Illinois.
2. Interpret the documentary evidence of how material culture affected life in early nineteenth century Illinois.

Illinois Learning Standards

16.D.3a Describe characteristics of different kinds of communities in various sections of America during the colonial/frontier periods and the nineteenth century.

16.D.3b Describe characteristics of different kinds of families in America during the colonial and frontier periods.

Procedures

1. Discovery

- A. Defining material culture. Material culture is the study of all physical artifacts, which have been designed by people to satisfy needs or wants, or to express an idea. The premise of this investigation is that these objects provide insight into the values, beliefs, and ideas of the people who made and used them. Material culture focuses on the day-to-day lives of average people.
- 1) Students bring to class one artifact from home that reflects their interests.
 - 2) Each student tells the class about their artifact and explains how it reflects their social role and status; the role of technology in making the artifact; and how the artifact might reflect their views on economic choices or political decisions they have made.

2. Going to Court: Documenting Material Culture on the Illinois Prairie.

- A. Background information for a rural case, *Bevans v. Brown* (1838), and an urban case, *McGraw v. Adams, et al.* (1843)
- 1) John Bevans was born in Maryland. He migrated to Woodford County, Kentucky, and then to Island Grove in Sangamon County, Illinois. After arriving in 1828, Bevans farmed his Sangamon County land until his death in March, 1837.
 - 2) James Adams was born in Hartford, Connecticut. He migrated to Oswego, New York in 1809, and then to Springfield, Illinois in 1821. He was an attorney and served as Probate Justice of the Peace. He died in Springfield on August 11, 1843.¹
- B. Read the two Lincoln Legal Documents. Define estate inventory. An estate inventory and a Bill of Appraisement list all of the objects in a personal estate of an individual who has died. The purpose of the inventory is to assess the value of these objects for the probate court. See the Glossary attached at the end of the lesson to define unfamiliar terms.
- Teaching Opportunity: There are some terms in the glossary that are not used today. No doubt these items are colloquial terms that were well known to court officials and local people of the day. What does the loss of these words from everyday usage tell us about these particular objects and the changes that occur in the material culture of succeeding generations?
- C. Students complete and review the guide, *Analyzing a Lincoln Legal Document: An Estate Inventory/Bill of Appraisement*.

¹John Carroll Power, *History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois* (Springfield: A. Wilson and Co., 1876).

- 3. You be the Judge:** Finding Evidence of Life on the Prairie and in Springfield.
- A. How do the objects listed in the two inventories represent the quality of life on the prairie and in Springfield? Which particular objects attract your attention?
 - B. Which household appears to have accumulated more wealth?
Teaching Opportunity: Ask students to locate on the worldwide web a price equivalency guide for the period. A price equivalency guide allows students to determine what an object from an earlier period would cost if it were purchased at today's prices. A good website for the nineteenth century is Robert Sahr's "Inflation Conversion Factors for Dollars, 1800 to Estimated 2010" (http://www.orst.edu/Dept/pol_sci/fac/sahr/sahr.htm). Students can also visit the *Columbia Journalism Review* (<http://www.cjr.org/resources/inflater.asp>) for a "dollar conversion calculator" that converts historical amounts into 1998 values. For example, \$2.00 in 1848 is equivalent to \$30.00 in 1998. Students can also use a calculator to add up the value of the objects in the respective inventories.
 - C. What inferences can you make about the education levels of the two families based on the materials they owned?
 - D. What do these items tell us about roles of the various people in the two households? Which items might have been used by men? By women? By children?
 - E. What kinds of objects were found in both households? Why might a rural and an urban household have the same sorts of objects?
 - F. Review the two case summaries. If these cases came to your court, what decisions would you make in each of the cases to ensure that all of the parties received equitable settlements?
- 4. Conclusion and Assessment:** Write to Learn. Students should review the Lincoln Legal documents in this lesson and write a narrative essay that describes a typical day in either a rural or urban household. The essay should have an introduction, make a key point about material culture in each paragraph, and draw a reasonable conclusion. Or, teachers may want to organize a shopping day in which "families" must outfit their new home/farm during the age of Lincoln. Using information in the plan, give students a budget and ask them to explain, as a frontier family, what problems they faced and what items they needed not only to survive but to enjoy life. For both assignments, consult the rubric to assess students' knowledge, reasoning, and communication skills.

Additional Activities

Illinois History Day Project Students will select an artifact from the past and describe its form and function. They will also describe how technological innovations may have rendered the artifact obsolete by replacing it with others that perform the same functions. Students might also discuss the value of maintaining older objects in the face of changing technologies.

An Inventory of My Room. Students choose one room from their home and write an inventory list of the materials found there with their monetary value. They will then describe in writing the form and function of selected objects.

Local Material Culture. Invite a member of a local historical society or museum to bring historical artifacts from their collection to show to the class and to discuss their use. Students should discuss whether particular artifacts would be found in a rural or an urban household or both.

Historical Site Inventory. Visit a local house or farm museum and identify household items or farm implements used in the nineteenth century. Have students look for items listed on the inventories in this lesson plan. Where does the museum display these artifacts (i.e. what room, out building, or area outside)?

Sources and Materials

Analyzing a Lincoln Legal Document: An Estate Inventory/Bill of Appraisement

Document 4-A: Estate Inventory, *Bevans v. Brown*, 1838.

Document 4-B: Bill of Appraisement, *McGraw v. Adams et al.*, 1843.

Glossary of Terms

Analyzing a Lincoln Legal Document: An Estate Inventory

Case Brief

Complete Case Name _____

Date of Document: _____

Whose names and titles are recorded on the document?

Where is the estate inventory taking place? _____

Synopsis: Summarize the Document

1. Based on the document's contents, what seems to be its purpose?

2. Organize the items listed in the document according to their uses around the home. For example, which items would be found in the living room? In the kitchen? Which items would be kept in a building or place outside the house?

Room: _____ Items: _____

Room: _____ Items: _____

Room: _____ Items: _____

Room: _____ Items: _____

Outside: _____ Items: _____

Thinking about Material Culture

1. Imagine that the household includes both parents and several children. List the objects that each family member would use most often for work or leisure.

father: _____

mother: _____

older boys: _____

older girls: _____

smaller children: _____

2. Identify objects that were used in farming or with animals.

3. Identify objects in the home that may have been made by hand.

4. Identify objects that were probably purchased in a nearby town or city.

5. List some of the objects that are still in use today in your home.

6. List some objects that are now obsolete, or no longer in use.

7. What objects are used today in the place of those objects?

8. Which objects had the highest monetary value? Which had the least value?

9. Which objects were designed to save labor or make life easier around the home?

10. Select one of the rooms or buildings outside the home (a shed or barn, for example) and describe what the local officials saw there when they conducted the estate inventory.

Synthesis: Material Culture and Illinois History

What evidence in the document helps you better understand issues of role and status regarding men, women, and children during the Age of Lincoln?

What evidence in the document helps you understand the patterns of daily life and the concerns of common people in both rural and urban Illinois households during the Age of Lincoln?

What evidence in the document helps you understand more about the major historical trends that shaped the history of Illinois?

What evidence in the document helps you understand the values, beliefs, and ideals of people who lived in Illinois when this document was written?

Document 4-A (transcription)

Bevans v. Brown et al.

Case Summary: John Bevans died leaving an estate with two hundred acres of land and some personal property. In his will, John Bevans stipulated that his wife Margaret Bevans should receive only a bed and bedding and some food supplies. Margaret Bevans renounced her bequest and asked James N. Brown, the executor of John Bevans's estate, to assign her dower. Brown refused, and Margaret Bevans retained Stephen A. Douglas and John D. Urquhart to represent her. She sued Brown and the heirs of John Bevans for her dower. John D. Bevans, one of the heirs, retained John Todd Stuart and Abraham Lincoln and argued that Margaret Bevans's renunciation was insufficient and that his father gave his mother two slaves, which she accepted in lieu of dower. The parties reached an agreement, and Judge Samuel H. Treat dismissed the case.

Estate Inventory

A full and perfect Inventory of the goods chattels and personal estate of John Bevans late of the County of Sangamon as presented to the undersigned James Smith James Barret and William H. McMillan appraisers appointed by the Probate Court of said County by James H. Brown administrator of said Estate, this the 27th day of March 1838.

	\$	cts
One Table	5	00
One Trunk and Chest	3	00
One Bedsted	6	00
One Bed and Furniture	20	00
Four Chains	2	00
Cupboard Ware	2	50
One Bedsted, Bed and Bedding	15	00
One Lot of Tin Ware	1	25
One Table Pan, and Si[e]ve		62½
One Coffee Mill, oven and Lid	2	25
One Flat Iron, Two pair of Hooks and Tea Kettle	2	00
One pair of And Irons, Tongs and Potrack	2	50
One Piece of Domestic Cotton Ten Yards	1	00
One Plough	4	00
One Plough		50
One Splitting Wedge, Ring, Wedge and Neb	1	00
One Lot of Bacon Five hundred and Sixty nine lb ^s	28	45
One Axe	1	25
Six Mill Bags	1	00
Seven Bushels and one half of Wheat	7	00

Twenty Six Bushels of Corn pot at home	7	20
Sixty Bushels of Corn	12	00
One Waggon	30	00
One Steer three years old	10	00
One Bay Mare	60	00
One Pided [<i>Pied</i>] Cow	12	00
One Red Cow and Calf	12	00
One Lot of Oats in the Shief	2	50
One Stack and a half of Hay	6	00
One Pot and Kettle	4	00
One Spade		37½
Three Slids [<i>Sleds</i>]		50
Five Barrels and one Cag [<i>Keg</i>]	1	00
One Waggon Sheet	1	50
One Frow		50
One Black Mare	50	00
One Steer three years old	10	00
One Red Heifer	8	00
One Speckeled Cow	8	00
One Red Heifer one year old	4	00
One Red Yearling Heifer	1	00
Twenty Seven Hogs in one Lot	32	75
Six Sheep	14	25
One Kettle	3	00
One Dry Hide	1	00
One Hogshead and Four Barrels	1	50
Timothy Seed	1	25
Two Weeding Hoes and Grubing Hoe	1	50
One Doubletree Singletree and Clivis [<i>Clevis</i>]	3	00
One Shovel Plow	1	50
One Saddle and two Bridles	19	00
One Blind Bridle	1	50
One Lot of Old Irons		50
One Pair of Hames		37½
One Cutting Box and Knife	3	00
One Wieving Sleigh		75
One pair of Sheep Shears and Shoe Hammer	1	00
One Pair of Steelyards and Axe		75
One Lot of Tools	2	25
One Log Chain	1	00
One Galon Jug		25
One Can of Tar		50
Two Chairs and one Bell	1	00
One half Bushel		75

Salt	1	50
One Rifle Gun	12	00
One Lot of Gear	5	00
One Gray Horse	85	00
One Span of Work Cattle	75	00
		<u>75 00</u>
		<u>\$617 77</u>
	Total	

Given under our hands and seals the day and year aforesaid

William H. McMillan	<u>L.S.</u>
Ja ^s D. Smith	<u>L.S.</u>
<u>James Barret</u>	<u>L.S.</u>

State of Illinois
Sangamon County

Sc[ilice]t

These are to certify all whom it may concern that the foregoing is a true copy of the Inventory and appraisment of the personal property of John Bevans dec^d of said County as appears from the papers on file in Sangamon Probate Court.

Witness my hand and private seal (no public seal having yet been provided) the law has authorized my private seal which is here substituted this 26th day of December 1838.

Seal

J. Adams P[robate] J[ustice of the] P[eace].
S[angamon]. C[ounty]

Document 4-B (transcription)

McGraw v. Adams

Case Summary: In his will, James Adams left his property to his two daughters and one son and appointed his son, Lucian Adams, as the executor of his estate. After both of James Adams's daughters died, James McGraw, the son of one of the daughters, claimed that his uncle Lucian Adams had failed to perform his duties as executor. McGraw wanted an account of Lucian Adams's executorship so that McGraw could receive his inheritance. James McGraw, by his father and guardian Charles McGraw, retained Abraham Lincoln and William H. Herndon and sued Lucian Adams in a chancery action for an accounting of his financial transactions. Lucian Adams retained Stephen T. Logan, John Todd Stuart, and Benjamin S. Edwards to represent him. Adams claimed that the settlement of the estate was more complicated than he had anticipated and was therefore taking more time. Lucian Adams had sold hundreds of acres of land and hundreds of town lots to Thomas Lewis. James McGraw added Lewis as a defendant and requested the court to void the sale. Lewis claimed that Lucian Adams was within his right to sell land as executor and filed a cross-bill against Lucian Adams and James McGraw to validate the sale. Judge Edward Y. Rice dismissed the original suit and cross-bill after Master in Chancery Antrim Campbell made an account of Lucian Adams's executorship and found it accurate.

Inventory

Inventory & Appraisalment of the goods chattels & personal estate of James Adams dec^d of Sangamon County state of Illinois appraised by A. Y. Ellis Philo Beers & Jacob Divelbiss on this 4th day of September 1843.

Description of Property	Valuation
1. Wooden clock	\$ 7.00
1. Sett chairs	5.00
1. " "	5.00
1. Writing chair	3.00
1. Work stand	4.00
1. Cherry Bureau	15.00
1. Cherry framed Mirror	1.50
1. Walnut Dining table	6.00
1. Doz common chairs	3.00
2. Office tables	1.50
1. Small writing desk	1.00
2. Cherry tables	3.00
1. Settee	5.00
1. Kitchen table	3.00

1. Safe	5.00
1. Silver watch	5.00
1. Work stand	2.00
1. Bed & Bedding	20.00
3. do " at 15 each	45.00
1. Sett Harness	25.00
1. Side Saddle	10.00
1. Box carpenter's tools	2.50
2. Common Bedsteads	2.00
1. Wash stand	1.00
3. Fancy post Bedsteads	15.00
15. Yds rag carpet at 25[¢]	3.75
25. Yds ingrain carpet at 40	10.00
1. sett silver table spoons	12.00
1. " " Tea "	5 50
1. Lot cupboard ware including Bottles & 2 lamps	20.00
1 Lot Kitchen furniture washing tubs, buckets &c	20.00
1 Lot Barrels jars &c in Seller	<u>7.00</u>
	273.75
1. Large chair	1.00
2. Stones	3.00
2. Venetian window blinds	2.00
2. " " "	1.00
1. Saddle	5.00
2. Pitch forks	1.00
1. [D]ouble waggon	60.00
1. Bay Horse	60.00
1. Buggy waggon	50.00
1. Single Harness & Fly trap	12.00
1. String Bells	1.00
1. Cutting Box	2.00
1. Dung Fork	.50
1. Half bushel	.25
1. Berkshir[e] Boar	4.00
1. Sow & 6 shoats	10.00
2. Cows & 1 calf	14.00
5 Qrs ruled paper	1.75
5 " blank "	1.00
1. Lot of Law & other books	40.00
towit	
9 vols American state papers	
2 " Sellons practice 1 vol Chitty on bills	

- 4 " Cranches Reports
- 3 " Espinarses Reports
- 4 " Dallas reports
- 1 " Gilberts Equity
- 1 " Land Laws
- 6 " Jacobs Law dictionary
- 5 " Laws of the U. States
- 1 " Remmington on Ejectment
- 1 " Gilbert on Wills
- 1 " Laws on pleading
- 1 " Pleadars assistant
- 1 " Gilbert on Evidence
- 1. " Sheridans Dictionary
- 1. " Adisons reports
- 1 " Montague on set off
- 4 " Burns Justice
- 1 " Roberts on Frauds
- 1 " Bullers Nissiprius
- 2 " Douglass reports
- 1 " Crowns circuit companion
- 2 " Maddocks chancery
- 1. " Breezes Reports
- 1. " Clarks assistant
- 1. " Johnsons Digest
- 2 " Hales pleas of the crown
- 1. " Harrison's Chancery
- 1. " Webster's Dictionary
- 1. " Christian Baptist
- 1. " Bible
- 15 " Journals of Senate, House Reps of Ill. & unbound miscellaneous books
- 1. Map of Ills
- 7. " Dicks works

We certify the foregoing to be a true Inventory & appraisalment of the personal property of James Adams deceased of Sangamon County as appraised by us on this 4th day of September 1843

Given under our hands & seals the day & year aforesaid

A. Y. Ellis
Jacob Divelbiss
Philo Beers

[*Endorsement*] State of Illinois
Sangamon County

I Noah W Matheny Clerk of the County Court for said county do Certify that the within is a true copy of the Bill of appraisment of the personal property of James Adams decd as the same appears of on file in my office

Given under my hand and seal of office at Springfield this 26th day of Nov 1853
N W Matheny cr

Glossary Of Terms

- artifact:** an object produced by human work, especially that remaining from a particular historical period.
- Berkshire:** an English breed of hogs, which are black with white markings on feet, face, and tail.
- chattel:** an item of movable property.
- clevis:** a U-shaped piece of iron with holes in the end through which to run a pin to attach one thing to another.
- cross-bill:** an action filed by a defendant in an ongoing suit against the plaintiff and/or the other defendants in that suit.
- doubletree:** a wooden crossbar on a wagon, carriage, or plow, to each end of which the singletrees are attached when two horses are harnessed side-by-side.
- dower:** a form of estate that provided for a widow's needs out of her husband's real and personal property.
- estate inventory:** a written list of property with assigned values compiled for taxation or inheritance purposes, usually upon the death of the owner of the property.
- frow:** a cutting tool with a blade at a right angle to the handle.
- hames:** two curved pieces on the collar of an animal's harness, to which straps are attached.
- hogshead:** large cask or barrel, usually holding from 63 to 140 gallons.
- ingrain carpet:** a reversible carpet made of wool, which has been dyed before being spun into yarn.
- inventory:** a list of items of property owned by an individual or a business.
- keg:** a small cask or barrel, usually holding from 5 to 10 gallons.
- lot:** a set of objects or a number of things.
- material culture:** the study of all artifacts designed by people to satisfy needs or wants, or to express an idea.
- neb:** a projecting end or point.
- piebald:** an animal covered with patches of two or more colors.

qrs.: quartos; paper folded twice to form four leaves or eight pages.

rural: characteristic of the country, of country people, or of farming.

scilicet: “to wit”; that is to say.

settee: a small sofa with a back and arms.

shoat: a young, weaned pig.

singletree: a wooden bar swung at the center from a hitch on a wagon, carriage, or plow and hooked at either end to the horse’s harness.

span: a team of two animals used together.

steelyards: a portable weighing device, consisting of a horizontal bar with a hook for holding an object to be weighed on one end and a sliding counterweight on the other end.

timothy: a type of grass grown for hay.

urban: characteristic of the city or of city people.

yearling: a one-year-old animal.