The Court Archive:
Supreme Court's Office Supplies

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Today, we may have the Staples Easy Button or Office Depot to obtain office supplies, but how did the Supreme Court of Illinois get office supplies in 1851? What supplies did the Court even need? A recently uncovered page from an account book from a Springfield store shows exactly what the Supreme Court used and how much it paid for those supplies.

The Birchall and Owen account book for the Supreme Court contains the purchases from January 1851 to January 1852 with the Court spending a total of $214.26 during that year. The Birchall and Owen drug store and book store was located on the south side of the square in Springfield, just across Adams Street from the Capitol Building, which housed the Supreme Court when it met in Springfield. Thomas J.V. Owen specialized in the pharmacy side of the business, while Caleb Birchall managed the book, stationery, and binding part of the business. They began their partnership in 1847 and separated amicably in 1855 so that Owen could operate his own pharmacy and Birchall could sell office supplies and maintain his book bindery.

Most certainly, the Court from the 1850s would be astounded at today's iPads, printers, and electronic equipment that are necessary for the Court to operate. However, one constant remains between today and 1851: the need for paper. Both were important commodities in the 1850s since there was no other form of long distance communication other than the U.S. Mail (the telegraph was in its infancy). Not surprisingly, the highest cost was for paper and envelopes.

Throughout the year, the Court purchased nearly 10,000 sheets of paper of varying size and quality. One ream (500 sheets) of letter paper cost $4.50 while a higher quality paper cost $7.25 per ream. (Most surprisingly, the actual cost of paper today is about the same as 1851 with a ream of paper costing anywhere from $4 to $8 at any office supply store. However, factoring in inflation, the 1851 price for one ream of paper would be $130 in today's money!) Paper alone accounted for $110 of the Court's 1851 purchases, which was more than half of the entire year's total bill. The Court also purchased nearly 3,000 envelopes of varying quality for a cost of $17 over the course of the year. Paper and envelopes together constituted 60 percent of the total annual bill.

The other 40 percent consisted of pens, quills, oil, ink, memorandum books, candles, lamps, wax, and sand. The Court purchased pens by the gross (1 gross = 12 dozen). However, a pen in 1851 is not a pen in 2019. The pen was the steel tip, or nib, that soaked up the ink for writing a line or two on paper. The quill was the staff, and a person would attach pens onto a quill. Pens needed to be replaced often because the steel would wear away causing poor ink flow onto the paper.

Sand is another seemingly odd commodity by today's standards. Sand was typically used to help ink dry. After a court clerk, for example, would complete a letter, or copy court orders into a docket book, he would use a shaker to shake sand onto the paper to expedite the drying of ink. Particularly with docket books, the ink needed to be dry before the clerk could move onto the next page or else the wet ink would transfer to the previous page.

Lard oil was used for interior lighting. Lard oil, a by-product of animal fat rendering, was a cheap, but dirty, method of lighting a room. Lamps and oil produced better light than candles. Most of the lard oil was purchased by the Court in December when sun light disappeared in the afternoon but also because the Court was in session beginning in December, meaning longer work hours for the clerks and justices in town.

Material culture is the study of objects produced by humans. These objects help historians to understand periods of time and help to inform what people used, how they obtained what they used, and why they used them. Learning about the Court's material culture helps us to understand how the Supreme Court operated in the 1850s.